Rafael De Carmen

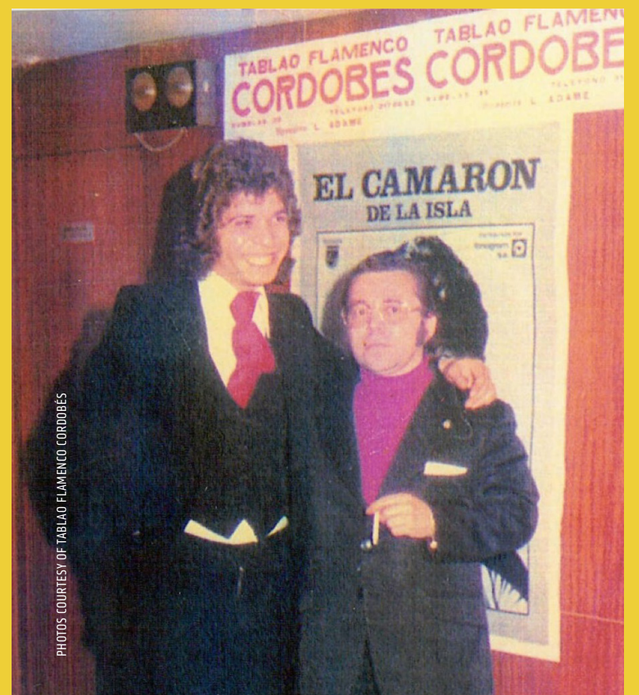
Chocolate, Farruco Y Otros (Saludo)

FLAMENCO RESISTANCE

Spain's most famous dance fights for survival in the modern world

by Judy Cantor-Navas

Eva la Yerbabuena



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TABLAO FLAMENCO CORDOBÉS

Israel Galván

“Flamenco is very difficult. The rhythms are very complex. A tablao is a university that all flamenco artists have to pass through. You have to see it as a school, not just a place where the tourists go.”

Pepe Motos
teacher at Taller de Músics

ON A THURSDAY NIGHT AT THE Flamenco Tablao Cordobés on Barcelona’s central Rambla boulevard, the scene is exactly what a visitor to Spain might expect.

In a low-lit, cave-like, whitewashed room, its low ceiling arched and its wide wooden stage framed by mosaic tile, two guitarists and two singers sit on high-backed cane chairs. Dancers take alternating solos: two women in long, tight-bodiced, flounced dresses and fringed shawls and a slim male counterpart in snug black slacks and ankle boots. Over the next hour, the quick-fire tapping of heels and handclaps contrast with the keen of a singer’s voice that’s been marinated for a lifetime in the deep corners of the soul. It’s the sound of what’s often called the Spanish blues.

This postcard scene has taken place here four times a night, seven days a week for 50 years, uninterrupted before COVID-19, which shut down the Tablao Cordobés for 14 months. After a year-and-a-half, tourists, who numbered around 20 million in Barcelona the year before the pandemic, have trickled back to the city and to their requisite flamenco experience. Nightly sets at the Cordobés club last fall were down from four to two, and by law were no more than 70% full, performed for a masked audience. As of December, customers also were required to show proof of vaccination at the door.

Located on an unassuming second floor on the most famous and frequented strip in Barcelona, Tablao Cordobés is named for the champion bullfighter Manuel Benitez Pérez, “El Cordobés.” A modern renegade who shook up the Spanish tradition, El Cordobés’ face was as familiar as those of The Beatles to Spain’s early television audiences.

By the combined virtues of its name, performance space, and adjoining restaurant serving pre-show dinners, Flamenco Tablao Cordobés brings together the Holy Trinity of Spanish stereotypes — flamenco, paella, and bullfighting. These 20th-century tokens fueled a tourism industry that, by 2019, was responsible for more than 12% of Spain’s gross domestic product.

Today, in an era of increased awareness of animals’ rights and outcries about the cruel nature of the bullring traditions, bullfighting has been all but canceled in many parts of the country, and a proposal to ban it altogether is moving through the Spanish Congress. In Barcelona, a bullring that once held 15,000 spectators was converted into a shopping mall years ago.

As for paella, it’s still considered by a majority of foreigners to be the national dish of Spain, albeit in a country whose culinary traditions are as rich and disparate as its autonomous regions and languages. It remains a star on the nightly menu at Tablao Cordobés, but in today’s era of foodie awareness, the allure of the ubiquitous Valencian yellow rice dish has faded for the culinary curious traveler.

To outsiders, the show at the *tablao*, or flamenco club, could similarly seem outdated, a kitschy relic of the poor, repressed country romanticized by Ernest Hemingway and glamorized by Ava Gardner in the 1950s, when both were known for frequenting tablaos on their night crawls in Spanish cities.

“Tourism is really what allows tablaos to exist,” Flamenco Tablao Cordobés managing director Maria Rosa Pérez acknowledges. She hurries to add a caveat: “But that doesn’t mean flamenco is for tourists.”

As she speaks, Pérez’s eyes are scanning the room, registering the customers arriving for a show-and-dinner (79.50 euros; around $90) or show-and-cocktail (45 euros; $50) package. For the past 16 years, she’s run the family business, after taking over from her father, a guitar player, and her mother, a flamenco dancer.

“There’s a prejudice about flamenco tablaos today that does not correspond with reality,” says Pérez. The tense set of her mouth suggests the constant battle she wages for the entertainment at the tablao to be more widely acknowledged as art.

“It’s like Picasso,” she reasons. “If you go to the Picasso Museum [in Barcelona], 90% of the public are going to be tourists. But no one would dare to call into question the quality of Picasso’s work.”

Joining the Circle

Under his stage name Niño de Elche, Francisco Contreras Molina is at the vanguard of flamenco. An iconoclast who purposefully ignores traditional boundaries, he’s just as likely to perform a sound poem at an electronic music festival or create a museum installation as to dance. In a recent indie film, *Canto Cósmico (Cosmic Song),* he appears carried like a saint through the streets by a procession of naked followers.

Like many elements of flamenco, Niño de Elche has been subject to both dismissive criticism and reverent praise, though rarely indifference. As flamenco has evolved over two centuries, it’s been accompanied by constant debate, about its origins, its definition, and, always, its authenticity.

“Flamenco is a very controversial

expression that defies logic," Niño de Elche says.

The paradoxical nature of flamenco finds its supreme manifestation in the tablao. It's a place where a notoriously difficult-to-master musical form is presented as easy entertainment; a venue where flamenco, whose unadorned display of emotional release is definitely not for everyone, is presented for everyone. As Pérez puts it, a venerable tablao like the Cordobés is a tourist attraction where the music is not touristic.

The tablao showcases flamenco in its essence: dancers performing on a wooden stage (originally just a plank, or *tabla,* laid on the floor, from which the tablao got its name), interacting with guitarists and singers sitting or standing in a U-shaped formation.

The consistent format and purity of form has made the tablao a sacred artistic space within the often-factioned flamenco world. A crowded room that's common ground for traditionalists and experimentalists, even forwardly unconventional artists like Niño de Elche.

"Playing in a tablao was a very important process in my artistic career," he says. Now 37, he has performed regularly in tablaos across Spain for almost a decade. "In the tablao, I was able to understand the logic behind classical flamenco and its composition, and ways of singing, playing, and dancing on the stage that I've been able to take with me and experiment with in my work."

Dancer Karime Amaya is flamenco royalty. Her great-aunt was Carmen Amaya, who danced barefoot in the streets of Barcelona's seaside ghetto as a child. Carmen Amaya's fame grew from the 1930s until her retirement due to illness in the early '60s; she died in 1963. She is considered one of the greatest flamenco dancers of all time.

Raised in Mexico, Karime Amaya has been dancing professionally since age nine; while still a teen, she was tagged as an artist to watch on the international flamenco scene. She has since performed in theaters all over Spain and abroad. But most often she can be seen dancing at the Tablao Cordobés.

"For me, a tablao is as important as any theater," she says. "The tablao is a space where you have the opportunity to keep your practice active and develop your art; it's a place that inspires improvisation. We do so many shows, you're working every day, so in order not to fall into a monotonous routine it's important to improvise."

Tablao Cordobés is where Pepe Motos, a singer-songwriter, guitarist, and cajón player, got his start both professionally and personally. Now 51 years old, Motos moved to Barcelona from Madrid when he was 8, after his father died. His mother, a flamenco dancer of Romani (gypsy) heritage, was offered a permanent place in the Cordobés lineup by her brother, Luis Adame (born Luis Pérez), owner of the tablao.

The tablao became a home to Motos, just as it was for María Rosa Pérez, his first cousin, who would sit at the bar doing her homework after school. Motos remembers the long evenings he spent in the artists' dressing room, playing with his toy cars on the floor accompanied by the beat of his mother's feet on the stage.

But it wasn't long before Motos put down his toys, took up the guitar, and began playing at the Cordobés himself.

"Little by little, the time comes for you to join the circle," he says. "It's just something that happens naturally."

Against the Tide

Adame remembers the 1950s and '60s as the golden age of the tablao — "the big flamenco boom."

"I had the luck to be able to perform in all of the important tablaos of the time as a guitarist," he says.

In the mid-20th century, the tablaos were benefiting from Spanish cities' recovery from the country's civil war and World War II. Flamenco had first gained its place in popular entertainment for the Spanish audience as part of the variety shows at 19th-century Café Cantantes. By the end of the 1800s, there were 74 of those "singing cafés." Then, with an attraction at the 1929 Expo in Barcelona, where a young Carmen Amaya danced, flamenco became an exotic calling card for Spanish culture around the world.

In 1971, Adame and his wife, Irene Alba, arrived in Catalunya on tour with their small dance troupe. They were subsequently booked to perform at Tablao Flamenco Cordobés, which had recently been opened by a young businessman who owned theaters on the Rambla, a promenade that in its best years was lined with theaters and music spots. As Adame's daughter Maria Rosa points out, "Tablao Cordobés is part of the history of Barcelona."

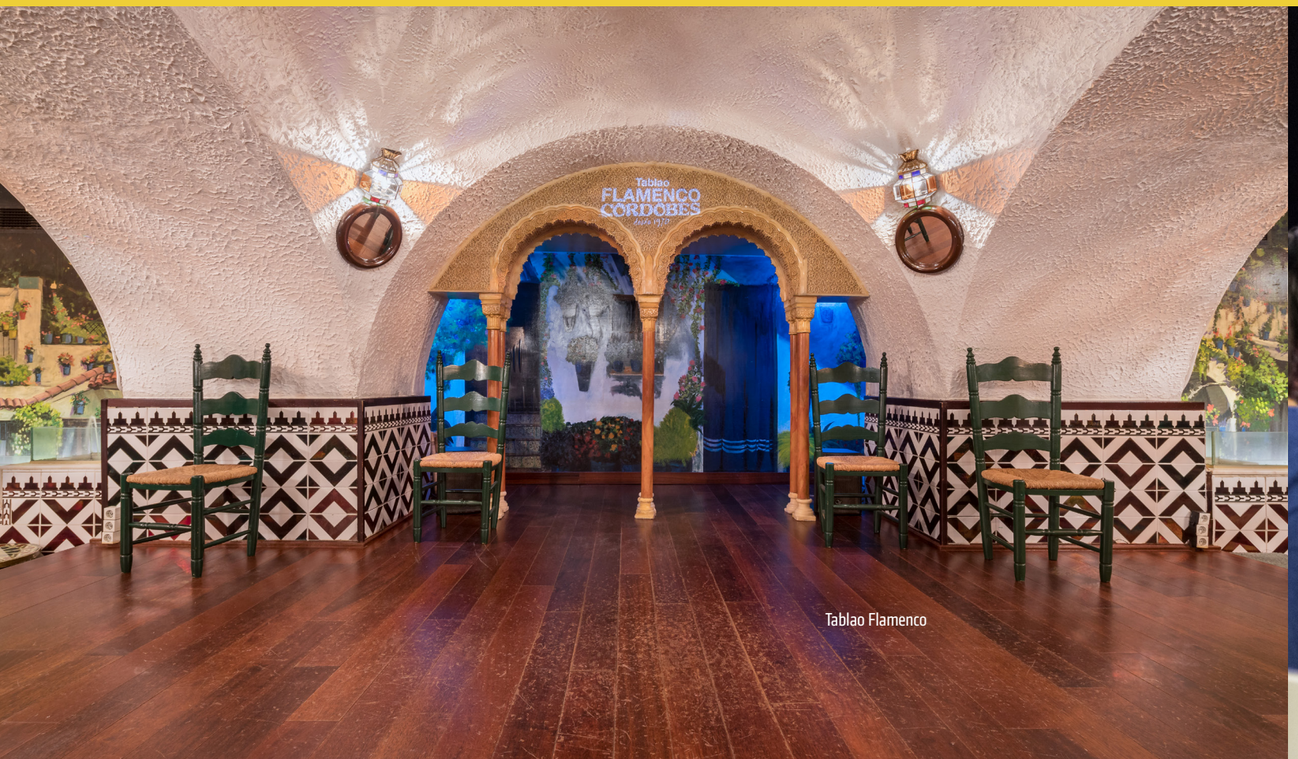
Adame accepted an offer to oversee the entertainment at the Cordobés, but as it turned out, the timing for running a flamenco tablao wasn't great.

By the 1970s, at the end of dictator Francisco Franco's 36-year reign (and even more so after his death in 1975, which opened the door to democracy), the once-celebrated tablaos fell out of sync with the times in Barcelona. The Franco regime had outlawed the Catalan language in public spaces and severely repressed its culture, and Adame and Alba had arrived just in time for a backlash against all things Castilian.

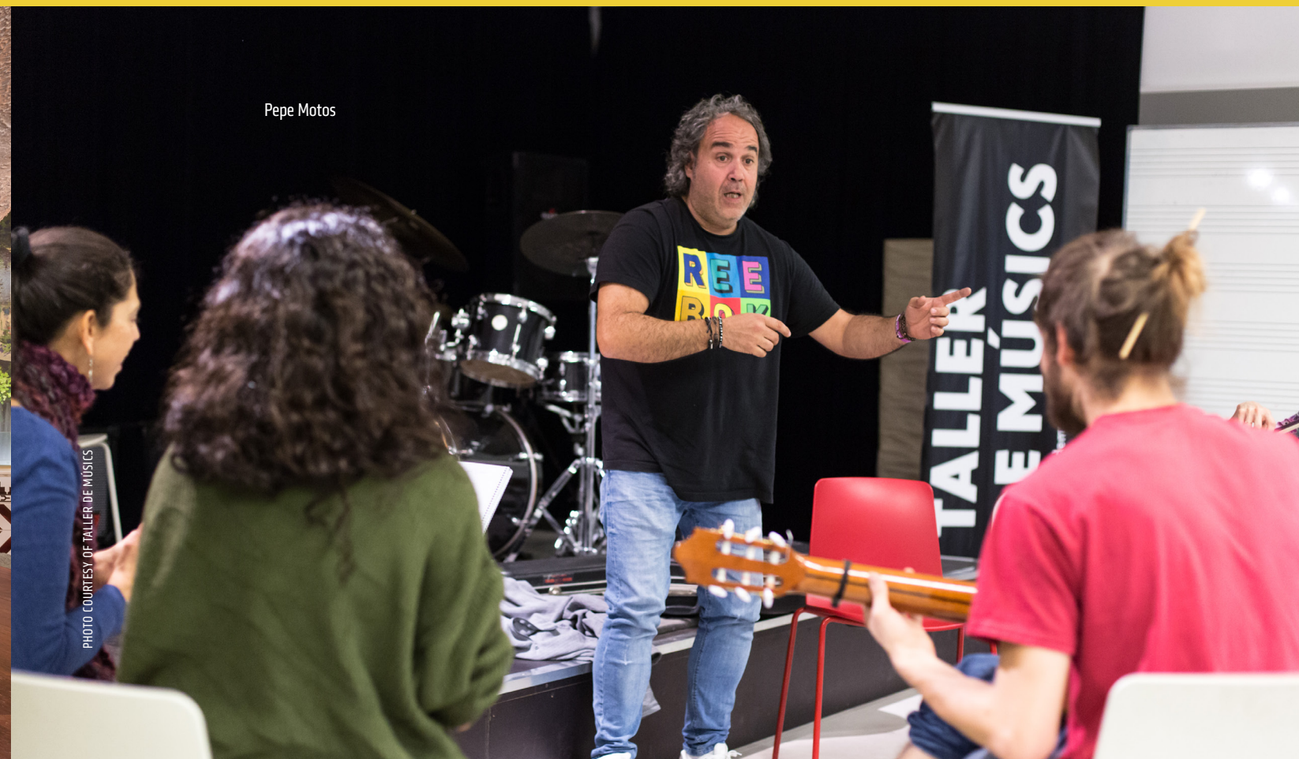
"It was a very socially turbulent time," Adame explains. "It wasn't an easy time for something that had that Spanish tinge. We were going against the tide." Along with freedom in downtown Barcelona came decadence, what Adame refers to as the attractions of a "sin city."

"We were able to turn our negative situation into a positive one," he says. Adame's idea was, essentially, to preach to the converted. If he could book the most renowned flamenco artists to perform at the tablao, he could attract committed flamenco fans.

"We had three glorious years during which I borrowed from the bank in the winter to be able to contract [popular flamenco artists like] Chocolate,



Tablao Flamenco



Pepe Motos

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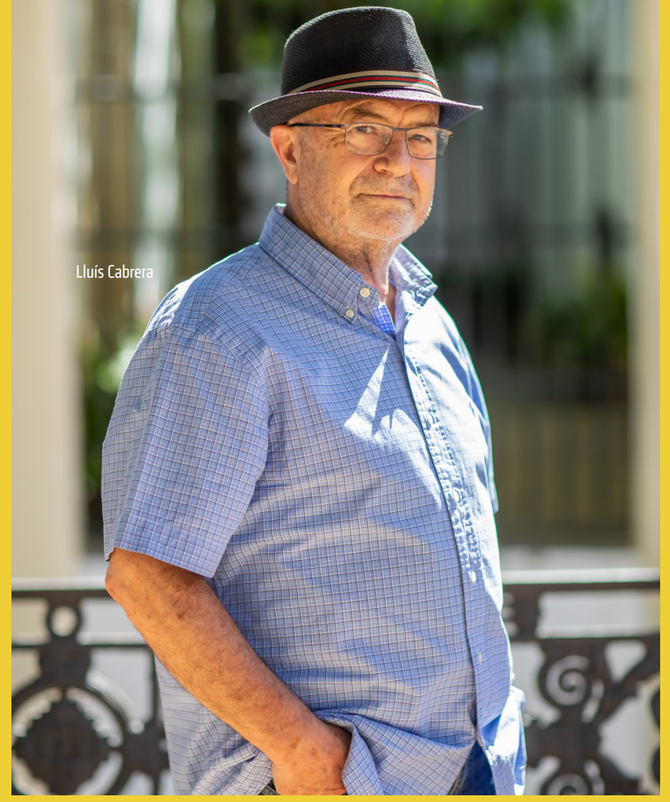
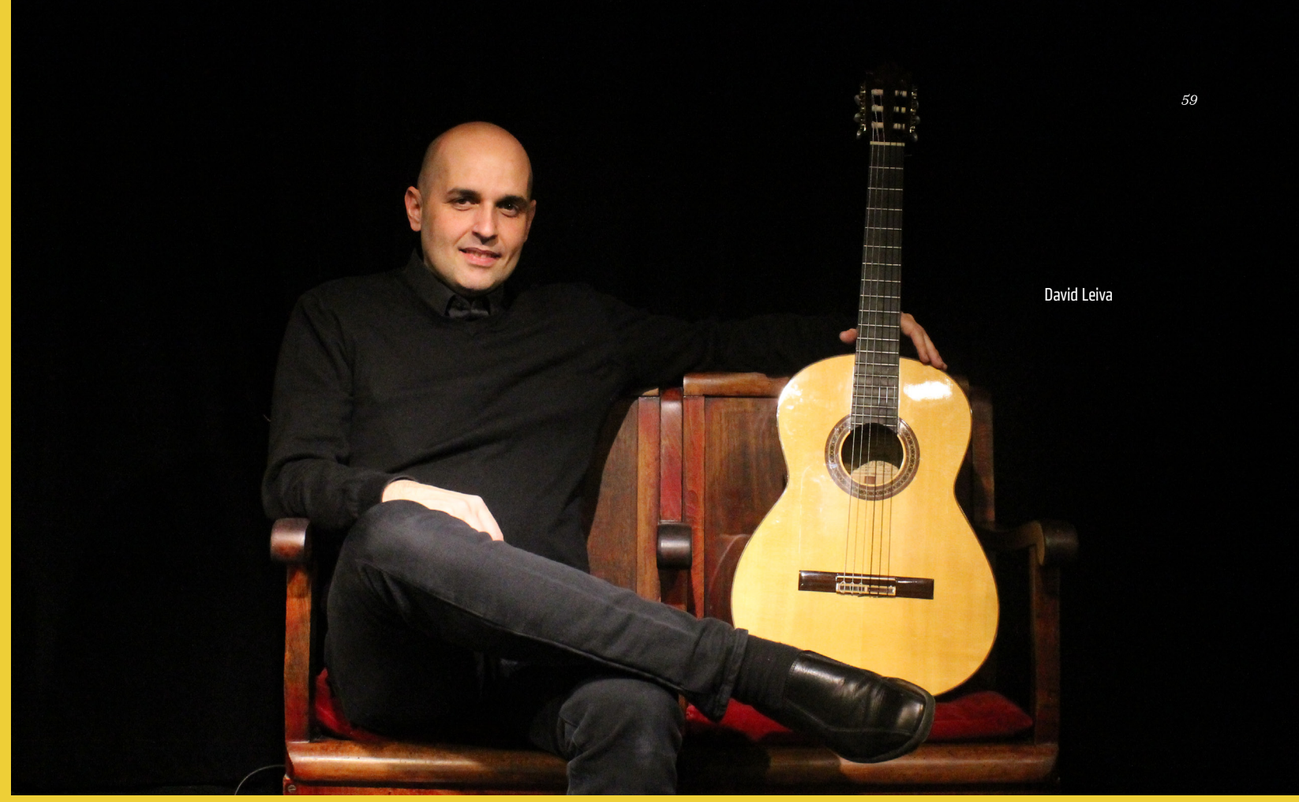


Lluís Cabrera



David Leiva

Camarón, Farruco, Lole y Manuel ... I remember such great parties, with the artists I had there, the parties would last all night long. We never went to bed before eight in the morning. I'd give the money back to the bank in the summer, when we made more money."

Although the awakening in Spain had begun to attract intrepid travelers, there was not enough tourism then to support the tablao year-round.

"Our clientele was from the gypsy world," Adame emphasizes.

Historians trace the Roma peoples' presence in Barcelona to the 15th century, but it was in the 20th century that the city's gypsies were acknowledged as a significant part of the population. They were marginalized by both Barcelona's white residents and its government.

In the 1940s and '50s, a new wave of immigrants from Andalusia arrived to the city. They made their homes in makeshift communities, like the rows of shacks on the city beach called Somorrostro, where families gathered for Sunday meals and impromptu flamenco on the sand.

In the 1960s, the city began relocating the residents to newly built projects. But it was not until the years leading up to the Barcelona Olympics in 1992 that the city would undergo a mass "cleanup" in which the seaside community was razed to make room for a grand, foreigner-friendly boardwalk, and other struggling neighborhoods were gentrified.

"The gypsies who live in Catalunya saved us," says Adame. "Thanks to them and the artists we booked, the great flamenco artists of the day, the tablao survived."

'Learn by Living'

When Lluís Cabrera was a teenager working in a textile workshop in Barcelona, the radio would often be tuned to a morning flamenco show. Cabrera was captivated by the music of Enrique Morente, the poet and singer who's been described as the Leonard Cohen of flamenco.

Cabrera had immigrated to Barcelona from a town in southern Spain with his family when he was 9 years old.

"My parents came because we had no future whatsoever," says Cabrera. "The same as the thousands of Andalusians who came here in the '50s and '60s. Like the majority of people in Andalusia, they were rural people, poor people. They came here because as the losers in the civil war, they couldn't get work. They couldn't continue to harvest wheat for three pesetas a day. It was almost slavery, like a feudal society. Almost a million people had to leave Andalusia. And we came here and we stayed here."

Cabrera did not come from a gypsy family. And he was not a flamenco musician, but he was a fan. He founded a peña, one of the many neighborhood flamenco social clubs that existed in Spain at the time. The Peña Enrique Morente was also an activist group, advocating for social change, the rights of the working class. They offered free Catalan classes to immigrants and engaged neighbors in the art of protest.

In 1978, with Franco dead and the urgent need for dissent removed, Cabrera and some of his cohorts opened a music school.

From the beginning, the Taller de Músics centered on jazz — for Cabrera and his friends, the sound of freedom — but it also included flamenco in the curriculum. It was a radical notion at the time.

"Some artists gave dance and guitar classes in their homes [but] nobody dared to teach flamenco within an academic music environment," Cabrera explains. "Flamenco was seen as a mystery, something that ran in your veins.

"But what if someone wants to learn flamenco guitar or voice or dance and they are born outside of a family within the flamenco tradition?"

The Taller de Músics is a short walk from the Tablao Cordobés, on a pedestrian street where young artists frequently walk by carrying guitar cases and the school's professors congregate at the corner cafe.

"We want the students to learn by living," explains guitarist David Leiva, a guitarist and the head of the flamenco department at Taller de Músics, where students have included current Latin music phenomenon Rosalía. A school-run music club is across the street. "They have to get in front of the public as soon as possible."

It might seem that a forward-thinking music academy would turn away from the tablao, even deride it as an archaic institution. But it's actually the opposite. Among its other classes, the Taller de Músics offers formation in tablao performance, even setting up classrooms to mimic the traditional tablao setting.

"We teach everything about the tablao," confirms Leiva. "The singers and the guitarists can learn how to accompany a dancer. The tablao is necessary in order to put into practice what you learn at school."

Pepe Motos, a longtime teacher at the Taller de Músics, says the students learn like he did in his early days at the Cordobés, by listening and playing. "I might have them practicing *palmas* [hand claps] for three hours."

But while Leiva and Motos stress that there is a method for learning flamenco, they also emphasize that there is only so much to be taught in a classroom.

"When we're talking about traditional guitar, dance, and singing, there are secrets that you have to go to a tablao to learn," Leiva says.

"Flamenco is very difficult," adds Motos. "The rhythms are very complex. A tablao is a university that all flamenco artists have to pass through. You have to see it as a school, not just a place where the tourists go."

Preserving and Persevering

During the summer of 2020, a series of dire headlines appeared in the Spanish media:

"Flamenco tablaos on the point of extinction."

"The coronavirus mutes flamenco tablaos."

"COVID-19 puts the future of flamenco at risk."

In February 2021, the news came that Villa Rosa, Madrid's oldest and best-known tablao, would close its doors for good. Earlier in the pandemic, the owner of Casa Patas, another legendary flamenco venue in the capital, announced it was shutting down. A third of Madrid's 21 tablaos — which collectively took in one million euros in

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TALLER DE MÚSICS

“The tablao is a space where you have the opportunity to keep your practice active and develop your art; it’s a place that inspires improvisation. We do so many shows, you’re working every day, so in order not to fall into a monotonous routine it’s important to improvise.”

Karime Amaya
professional dancer

2019 — did not survive the pandemic.

In Barcelona, El Palacio del Flamenco, the city’s largest tablao, where Karime Amaya and countless others jump-started their careers, is closed; its owners are attempting to sell the business that once supported a cast of 16 artists and 24 house employees.

In the global crisis for live music wrought by the pandemic, flamenco has been hit particularly hard. Spain imposed extensive restrictions on live music for many months that made it impossible for indoor venues to operate.

“Don’t forget that a tablao is a small closed room,” says Tablao Cordobés’ Pérez. “We will be among the last to really come out of the pandemic. In order to survive we’ve had to go into debt, and we’ve lost all of our savings. We’ll see what happens. We really don’t know how this is going to evolve.”

Even if the Cordobés and other tablaos had been able to open their doors, it’s unlikely there would have been any customers, at least until July 2021, when Spain reopened to foreigners.

Existing as a tourist attraction may not always be the best for the tablaos’ artistic reputation, but the fact is that flamenco tablaos as they are conceived today, and have been for decades, cannot exist without tourists.

“Tourism, thank God, has put food in the mouths of flamenco artists,” says Motos. “Who’s going to go see a flamenco show on a Monday night? Manolo from the neighborhood isn’t, he has to work in the morning. But Johan, who’s on vacation from Germany, is going to pay his 70 euros, eat dinner at the tablao, see the show, and then go back to his hotel.”

“The immense majority of flamenco artists make a living from tablaos,” says Pérez. “Ninety or 95%. Apart from a select few who have support from a record label or have made it to the international festival circuit, the tablaos give the artists the financial base that they need, that economic independence that allows them to put together their own shows, travel to a festival, or take artistic risks.”

It’s really not a stretch to say that if Spain’s tablaos were to close, many flamenco artists would not be able to keep performing. “If we lose the tablaos we’ll lose the only way that exists today to live flamenco daily and totally,” says Luis Adame.

For now, the Adame family is doing what it’s always done: putting on a good show. Seven days a week, two shows a night, even if capacity is down to 70 spectators.

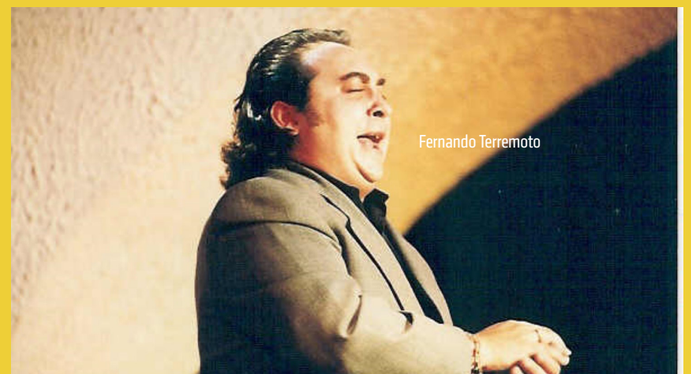
And they’re lucky to get that many. “There’s a lot of uncertainty,” says Karime Amaya, who for months was giving classes on Zoom to dance students to bring in some income. “But we’re working.”

“This show is a way of energizing everyone,” says Pérez, as another night begins at the Cordobés. Waiters carry trays of red wine to a smattering of couples and groups of friends spread around the room at small tables in front of the stage for the 8:15 p.m. show, where Amaya will dance in a polka-dot dress with a ruffled train. “It’s saying, we are okay, we are hanging on, we are here.”

The show is called *Flamenco Resistance.* ■

Flamenco singers Fernanda and Bernarda de Utrera accompanied by Tablao Cordobés owner Luis Adame (right) on guitar.

Manuela Carrasco



Fernando Terremoto

La Susi