

**Flametal: Negotiating Tradition, Cosmopolitanism and the Tensions of
Hybridity**

Abstract:

Initially a 19th-century genre, flamenco's characteristic dance and simple guitar accompaniment currently reflects the stylistic aesthetics of such diverse global influences as hip-hop, rock, jazz, Indian music and more. Consequently, today's flamenco performers and teachers are stewards of a rich tradition as well as members of a larger, more cosmopolitan performance community.

The San Francisco Bay Area band Flametal exemplifies this cultural plurality and brings together two seemingly disparate music traditions: flamenco and heavy metal. Through ethnography and music analysis, I explore how band members experience and conceptualize points of musical and cultural convergence between both genres. I show how they forge a "third space" (Bhabha) within which they are free to explore the musical potential both genres offer. In this liminal space, band members come face to face with their multiple musical and cultural identities and create a transvalued hybrid that controverts dominant binaries like pure/impure and authentic/inauthentic.

Situating Flametal within a larger context of cultural circulation between San Francisco and Seville, Spain, I expose a dialogic relationship that created (1) a tradition of flamenco in San Francisco and (2) an impetus towards a "new" flamenco in Spain. Inspired in part, by the "hippie" movement of the 1960s, Spanish flamenco artist's exploration of new musical and textual terrain set a precedent for experimentation and musical fusions. With band members' regular artistic exchange with Seville performers and instructors, I show Flametal to be both a product of, and an actor within, a transnational and cosmopolitan flamenco complex.

Introduction:

- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ToNW0pmfDRw&feature=player_embedded
- I'm going to play about a minute of a video and give you a chance to hear and see some of what I will be talking about.

Flametal (people and vision):

The Bay Area band [Flametal](#) has a unique lineup: an electric guitarist, an electric bassist,¹ a drummer, a flamenco guitarist, and when performance space permits, one or two flamenco dancers.² The band just completed a two-album contract with the Bay Area independent label Powerslave Record, which caters exclusively to the hybrid music market in Japan.³ In addition to the two Flametal albums, *The Elder* (2007) and *Master of the Aire* (2008), bandleader and flamenco guitarist Ben Woods has several self-produced albums of classical and flamenco guitar music, and he accompanies flamenco dancers every week at several tapas restaurants in Fullerton and Long Beach, CA. Likewise, the other band members make their living performing and recording regularly with a variety of Bay Area bands that play a range of music from hip hop to jazz to classic rock.

The name Flametal fuses the words flamenco and metal from the shared letters “m” and “e.” This simple gesture also represents the band’s musical philosophy: the musical fusion of flamenco and heavy metal music. To quote their official web page:

“Flametal is neither flamenco nor metal in the simplest of terms. Rather, it's the best of

¹ In the video there are two bass players. Their first bassist, Uriah Duffy, is currently on tour with Whitesnake. When the video was made, Flametal had two bass players: Uriah and Angeline Saris.

² Not all of the clubs Flametal performs have the floor space needed for dancers (personal communication with Ben Woods, January, 2009).

³ In 2007, Ben and then bass player Uriah Duffy, currently touring with Whitesnake, did a two-week promo tour of Japan to support *The Elder*. With an office in California and Tokyo, Hide Maeda, owner of Powerslave Record, asserts that the Japanese market is better equipped to market hybrid genres than the American market (personal communication, March 2009).

both worlds, enhancing each other's rich beauty and dark decadence”

(www.flametal.com, accessed 4/6/09). As an accomplished metal guitarist and professional flamenco guitarist, Ben Woods serves as a conduit between both worlds, translating and synthesizing the folklore, imagery and musical vocabulary of both genres into a unique hybrid, unburdened by essentialist binaries.

Issue:

Hybrid flamenco styles and subgenres are routinely denied equal footing with conventional practices within flamenco discourse. Arguably, the oft-heated debate over flamenco hybridity vs purity finds its academic roots in an 1881 publication by folklorist Antonio Machado y Alvarez (“Demófilo”). In his annotated collection of flamenco songs, Machado y Alvarez argued that although flamenco song was “a modern, artistic hybrid of Andalusian and Gypsy provenance...he speculated that these hybrid modern forms evolved from a primitive Gypsy music, which had become so Andalusianized that it no longer resembled its earlier forms” (Lou Charnon-Deutsch 2004: 204). This speculative assertion that a forgotten Gypsy music predated flamenco immediately bifurcated the genre and established an evaluative hierarchy in which an imagined ethnic origin was to become a hegemonic force. Periodic revivalist efforts, continued marketing campaigns, and an imaginative literary tradition that Romanticized flamenco's *gitanismo* (i.e., a Gypsy ethos) all hinge, in part, on a 19th century folklorist paradigm that prejudiced a metaphor of purity over hybridity.⁴

⁴I believe this takes the focus away from cultural and transnational flow of influences thus ignoring how flamenco stays viable and avoiding the question: how do hybrids carry on tradition?

Proposal:

For this paper, I draw from post-colonial discourses that dispute the notion that any culture or identity is pure or essential (Meredith 1998: 2). In his book *Cosmopolitanism*, Kwame Appiah flatly states that, “cultural purity is an oxymoron” (Appiah 2006: 113). He defends this statement by illustrating many examples in which practices we regard as traditional were once innovations founded in complex, and often global, cultural exchanges.⁵ Flamenco, I argue, is one such example. Further, I will show how Flametal’s particular brand of flamenco reproduces many of the values and musical aesthetics of both conventional flamenco and heavy metal in ways that reinforce the emotional power of each genre.⁶ Forged in a theoretic “third space” where they are free to explore the musical potential both genres offer, Flametal creates a transvalued hybrid that controverts dominant binaries like pure/impure and authentic/inauthentic.

Flamenco & Heavy Metal

This notion of purity is encoded in two common systems for classifying flamenco forms and styles [slide]. The first categorizes song forms by their perceived “emotional depth.” *Cante jondo* (deep song), typically reserved for forms associated with *gitano* “purity,” expresses gitano hardships, tragedy, and angst and stands in contrast to *cante grande* and *cante chico*, both of which express the lighter side of life but differ in musical characteristics such as meter, mode, and tempo (Papenbrok 1990). Alternatively, flamenco repertoire has been divided into *cante gitano*, *cante andaluz*, and *cantes*

⁵ For example, the “textiles most people think of as traditional West African cloths are known as java prints, and arrived with the Javanese batiks sold, and often milled by, the Dutch” (Appiah 2006: 107). Appiah’s book has many such examples and thus underscores Bhabha’s notion that hybridity allows for “new structures of authority” to emerge from the negotiation and translation of cultural syncretism.

⁶ More accurately, I want to use the term *vernacular cosmopolitanism* to address the simultaneous existence of the “local, rooted, [and] culturally specific...with the translocal, transcendent, and universalist” (Werbner 2006: 496).

folklóricos aflamencados (Molina and Mairena 1971). The first two distinguish between music forms believed to be developed either by *gitanos* or to come from Andalusian folk repertoire. This third category refers to popular music, from in or outside of Spain, played in the style of flamenco.

In both systems, the centrality of *gitanismo* is clear. In the first, the forms closely associated with uniquely *gitano* suffering and which are the most musically intricate belong to the *jondo* (deep) category while those that express common human sentiments are placed on the lighter side of the spectrum. In the latter system, all forms with a *gitano* association are distinguished from non-*gitano* folk and popular forms. In this way, musical characteristics such as meter, mode, melody, and text, take on a secondary function in classifying flamenco repertoire.

Heavy metal, like flamenco, refers to both a music genre and culture. As a genre, with many diverse styles, heavy metal is distinguished from other popular music by loud and distorted instruments and vocals, virtuosity, and fantastical imagery. With songs structured primarily around dissonant guitar riffs, the phrygian mode, uncommon time signatures, and “growling” vocals, Flametal's brand of heavy metal most resembles its speed metal subgenre. Characterized by some as a more fundamentalist sect of metal, speed metal underscores the dominance of musical and visual tropes of power and heavy metal's preference for virtuosity, loudness, and speed.⁷ Robert Walser writes, “the frequent use of the Phrygian mode; faster, sometimes frantic tempos; and a vocal style that is rough, percussive, and nonvirtuosic makes [speed] metal darker than other metal - angrier, more critical and apocalyptic” (Walser 1993: 157-158). In the following analysis, I examine

⁷ Deena Weinstein (1991) writes that unlike “lite metal” bands like Poison, Def Leppard, and Van Halen (and countless others) who “minimize the themes of chaos and the apocalyptic battles between good and evil,” speed/thrash metal “underscores continuities with the heavy metal code rather than alterations in it” (47-48).

Flametal's hybrid music vocabulary, their imaginative blend of visual and textual tropes, and consider what role they play in overall flamenco discourse.

Flametal Analysis:

Concept albums are rare in flamenco due in part to the conventional nature of flamenco lyrics in which loosely related couplets are strung together to create vignettes of social events and personal experiences.⁸ Flametal's debut release, *The Elder*, is a concept album following the tradition of speed metal concept albums, in which dark tropes of the occult, destruction, power, and death are told against the backdrop of loud and fast heavy metal. The story line is a loose adaptation of *Dante's Inferno* and the 1988 movie *Pumpkinhead* – Ben's "all-time favorite" horror movie – (personal communication with Ben Woods, March 16, 2009).⁹ In the movie, the hero invokes a demon to avenge his son's untimely death only to regret his actions when he loses control of the demon. *The Elder* [slide with copla of Red Cobblestone] tells a similarly ominous tale of imminent death and a witch with uncontrollable demonic power prowling the cobblestone streets of southern Spain.

The debut performance of *The Elder*, on [Halloween 2005](#), included two flamenco dancers, actors, and a narrator. The tag line on the poster reads: "Provocative dancers, a 300 year old witch, and the Bay Area's only flamenco/metal band woven into the web of evil." The advertisement on San Francisco City Guide's website lures its readers through sex and power: [show quote]

Witness the dark and elegant sensuality of flamenco, with spine-crushing, flesh-shredding metal brutality. Celebrate the upcoming DAY OF THE DEAD with this world-class coven of musical shredders and the evil and seductive FLAMETAL

⁸ Paco Peña's "Misa Flamenca" (Nimbus Records, 1991) and some flamenco-rock albums from the 1970s are notable exceptions.

⁹ *Pumpkinhead* is a 1988 Stan Winston/MGM film in which the protagonist "invokes the demon Pumpkinhead to avenge his son's death at the hands of big-city bikers" (http://www.mgm.com/title_title.php?title_star=PUMKINHE, Accessed 4/3/09).

dancers! Benjamin Woods' wicked amalgam of Metal and Flamenco wrought on the forge of duende (<http://www.sfstation.com/flametal-halloween-with-the-evil-and-seductive-flametal-dancers-e12350>, accessed 4/22/09).

The conflation of sexuality and violence, the combination of which contradicts most societal norms, is a common trope in heavy metal (Walser 1993: 138). Flametal's dancers, seen [here](#), are portrayed as sensuous characters with murderous tendencies. Their outfits of long and flowing skirts, strategically torn to reveal fishnet and bare flesh, are themselves a hybrid of flamenco and heavy metal fashion and style. In their 2005 theatrical performance, they combined traditional folkloric dances, such as Sevillanas, seductive posturing, and simulated murder.

The first track on Flametal's *The Elder* uses rhyming couplets to introduce the album's evil protagonist [**show lyrics**]. In this way, dark tropes, which are characteristic of speed metal, are delivered through a conventional lyrical style that is commonly used in flamenco. The witch's ascent from the netherworld is metaphorically anticipated in the opening music. Over the initial falsetta, we hear a distorted and sustained tone of the electric guitar rising slowly in pitch. First, it is paired with flamenco's primary percussive instrument, *palmas* (traditional clapping) followed by heavy metal's primary percussive instrument, the drum set. The ominous and indefinite tone that starts in the low register rises in pitch and clarity, finally culminating in staccato powerchords marking both the witch's arrival and the full musical union of flamenco and heavy metal [**track 1 @ 0:33**].

In Flametal's hybridity, the distinguishing characteristics of both flamenco and heavy metal appear together as equal musical elements, one never dominating the other or treated as incongruous elements. In this next example, we hear the electric guitar play

a slight variation on the Andalusian cadence: Am, G, F, E (iv, bIII, bII, I)¹⁰ while the flamenco guitar plays extensive falsettas as the primary solo instrument [**CD 1, track 1 @ 0:59**]. This arrangement, with the electric guitar playing a supporting accompaniment to the acoustic guitar solo, is somewhat of a role reversal in speed metal in which guitar solos are most commonly played by a distorted electric guitar.¹¹ In Flametal however, the flamenco guitar is not relegated to playing only a supporting role. An admitted goal of the band is to show that “the nylon stringed acoustic guitar can be heavy as hell” (from a press release, quoted on blabbermouth.net, accessed 4/6/09). Their success at achieving this is evidenced by audience reaction. At a recent show, the audience responded with enthusiastic applause, whistles, and loud shouts of approval every time the flamenco guitar was the featured solo instrument: the more virtuosic the solo, the more enthusiastic the audience response.¹²

Compatibility between flamenco and heavy metal is also found in the percussiveness of common rhythmic figures. In this next example, the blistering fast rasqueados (strumming patterns) of the flamenco guitar are seamlessly integrated with a loudly punctuated heavy metal figure, against the backdrop of interlocking flamenco palmas. Later, the same rasqueado is used as the background accompaniment for a new riff played on the electric guitar [**Bruja Tortura at 0:52**].

¹⁰ Peter Manuel (1989) makes a strong case for understanding this progression not as i, bVII, bVI, V but as iv, bIII, bII, I. As he argues, E is the tonal center in many related Mediterranean musics that share this progression. Melodic phrases, strengthened by rhythmic cadences, resolve to E rather than create the feeling of further resolution.

¹¹ **Time permitting (ha) play the section of “Bruja Tortura” at 2:28.** The flamenco guitar plays the accompaniment while the electric guitar solos over the Phrygian progression.

¹² At *El Rio* in San Francisco on 3/28/09.

Embodying Contradiction:

In a recent paper titled “The *Contra* Gesture and the Value of Opposition in Spanish Flamenco”, Steve Mullins argues that a “quality of contrariness” is evident in flamenco rhythms, harmonies, and body posturing (Mullins 2007: 2). This “contra” gesture, as he calls it, is a highly valued aesthetic that establishes “a proper flamenco feeling” and demonstrates a performer’s artistic savvy (ibid.). Musically, Mullins locates the contra gesture in the lively syncopation of the 12-count rhythm and in the characteristic non-chord tones used to embellish consonant harmonies [**show *compás*, example of *contratiempo* and typical chordal embellishments**].¹³ Mullins argues that “much of the development of modern flamenco harmony can be seen as a search for more ‘contra-chords’ [and that in this way,] modern flamenco is a natural continuation of the flamenco tradition” (ibid., 12).¹⁴

Flametal band members each expressed how they fully embrace this idea of being contradictory. As electric guitarist Brian Spalding puts it, “it’s totally being at home and probably contradictory in certain ways to what you should be doing in the music” (Brian Spalding, personal communication, 11/22/08). Spalding and Thomas Perry, the band’s drummer, both identified Flametal’s contradictions in terms of meter, harmonic dissonance, the use of acoustic instruments,¹⁵ and gender.^{16,17}

¹³ Peter Manuel’s analysis of these non-chord tones shows that they are most commonly produced by playing the open strings on the guitar along with the fretted harmony. He suggests then that, “the chordal vocabulary itself has arisen in inextricable connection with the guitar, rather than developing as an abstract harmonic repertoire along the lines of Western common practice” (Manuel 1986: 56).

¹⁴ Henry Spiller offers a similar definition of tradition: “what qualifies music as traditional is not how old it is, but rather how well it teaches, reinforces, and creates the social values of its producers and consumers... Truly traditional music, then, exploits new resources, acknowledges new requirements, and responds to new situations. Traditional music provides a place for people to try out new approaches to the existing values, to experiment with new ideas and to synthesize the new with the old” (Spiller 2004: xix).

¹⁵ It is safe to say that it is difficult to obtain the same volume and proper distortion that is valued in speed metal with acoustic instruments. Because of this, Flametal has to “win over” audiences who are unfamiliar with their sound. Looking the part of a heavy metal guitarist: long hair, jeans, black shirt, “metal stance”, etc. helps “sell” the nylon string guitar but ultimately it is Ben’s virtuosity that seals the deal.

Most of Flametal's songs are in flamenco's 12-count cycle. As Ben states, "I was sick of seeing four ugly dudes on a stage boring me with their predictable 4/4 riffs" (Ben Woods in www.sputnikmusic.com/album.php?albumid=7899, accessed 4/22/09).

Flametal's fans seem to appreciate this as well. After their final song at a recent show, one audience member loudly thanked the band for playing music that did not conform to the standard 4/4 meter. One song, Cuatro Caballeros, a Sevillanas, is entirely in three and therefore lacks any alternation between triple and duple meter contradicting the conventions of most heavy metal songs.¹⁸

In speed metal, the preference for the Phrygian mode and frequent harmonic dissonance helps distinguish it from conventional and lighter styles of heavy metal.¹⁹ Although diminished tonalities are common fare in speed metal, conventional flamenco-style dissonance opens new harmonic possibilities that band members find exciting (Brian Spalding, personal communication, 11/22/08). In this example, the harmony at the end of the first phrase is an F major triad with the addition of the open B and E. This conventional harmonic embellishment in flamenco is very unconventional in heavy metal whose modal and neo-classical harmonic progressions favor chromatic dissonances.²⁰

[play the opening of "Bruja Tortura" and show how it uses open-stringed non-chord tones and diminished runs]

¹⁶ The issue of gender in both heavy metal and flamenco is too complex to be covered here and is therefore the topic of a separate paper. Angeline Saris, the band's bass player, seems comfortable as the only woman in the band but admits that some audience members seem uncertain how to react to her presence on stage (Personal communication 2008). Mullins also discusses the contra gesture as manifesting in gender roles.

¹⁷ We can also add: hair length, dress code, volume, vocal style, and horror themes as other areas of contradiction to societal norms and mainstream popular music.

¹⁸ In separate email correspondences, Brian states that he thinks of the songs in 3/4 and Thomas as quarter-note triplets over 6/8 which ultimately allows him to go back and forth between 6/8 and 3/4.

¹⁹ See Walser 1993 and Berger 1999.

²⁰ If time permits: I argue that the bII chord in flamenco has dominant function and the addition of non-chord tones on this harmony adds to the sense of tension right before its release to I (E).

Conclusion

I began today's paper with a video of Flametal playing a traditional flamenco *buleria*, *Anda Jaleo, Jaleo*. Recorded by Garcia Lorca in 1931, the song has been interpreted many ways: as a folk song collected and (re)harmonized by Lorca; as a staged dance popularized by the Spanish dancer La Argentina in the 1940s; as a song of political resistance by the Republic Army during the Spanish Civil War; as a vibrant *buleria* in post-Franco Spain (Thomas 1995); and now as a flamenco/metal hybrid. Known to Ben as an anonymous popular refrain with no clear translation other than that of a general rallying cry, Flametal's *Anda Jaleo, Jaleo* is re-harmonized and interpreted, albeit unlike Lorca, according to heavy metal aesthetics and with a menacing tone [**show lyrics**].

I wield the axe, to spread my sin
Using the noise as a weapon
Die by Phrygian
Anda Jaleo Jaleo

My first reaction to Flametal was that this was a flamenco hybrid that really pushed the boundaries of what can be accepted as flamenco. However, similarities abound. Flametal draws equally from flamenco and heavy metal to organically create a compelling hybrid that puts two distant cultures in dialogue with each other. Thinking back to Appiah's vision of cosmopolitanism, i.e., a rethinking of our worldview in such a way as to allow us to "live together as the global tribe we have become", I resolved to examine flamenco hybridity as a process of trans-cultural communication (Appiah 2006: xiii).

The cultural dialogue that exists between the Bay Area and Spain dates back to the early 1960s when David Jones, a.k.a. David Serva, [**slide**] studied guitar with famed

Morón guitarist Diego del Gastor.²¹ At a recent San Francisco show, nephew Juan del Gastor had this to say: “We were kept ignorant under Franco, and they exposed us to a new way of thinking. The Americans became ambassadors for Morón toque. They brought the culture of the world and its music to us and we gave them our art, our flamenco Gitano” (Nagin 2008). This exchange continued through the cultural revolution of the late 1960s in which San Francisco’s “hippie” culture is credited for influencing lyrical and musical shifts in Spanish flamenco. **[slide]** Performers such as Lole y Manuel began singing about peace and love alongside conventional tropes of suffering and persecution and bands like Triana integrated rock instrumentation with flamenco rhythms and vocal style.

With one of the largest and most active flamenco scenes in the country, Bay Area performers maintain vibrant relationships with performers in Spain. In one recent example, Flametal and Pellizco, a hybrid flamenco group from Seville, exchanged recordings via email in a light-hearted “one-upsmanship”, each provoking the other’s sense of creativity and adventure (personal communication, Ben Woods 2009). The full extent of the relationship between Bay Area and Spanish performers exceeds the scope of this paper and is the subject of my forthcoming dissertation. For now, I contend that Flametal, and similar performers in and out of Spain, are best understood through the metaphor of hybridity, which underscores the fluidity of cultural and ideological exchanges.

Hybridity as an analytic tool is a central feature of post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha. In an interview, Bhabha asserts that:

...the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity...is the ‘third space’ which enables

²¹ Jones was introduced to Diego del Gastor by fellow aficionado Don Pohren (Nagin 2008).

other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom (Rutherford 1990: 211).

The “received wisdom” of conventional flamenco would have us dismiss Flametal as stylistically and culturally impure and inauthentic. I argue, however, that Flametal's music and significance cannot be adequately understood by a binary approach such as pure/impure. Instead, the hybrid metaphor helps us understand contemporary flamenco as an ever-transforming transnational genre that evolves through global interactions. The hybrid’s “manifest lack of an essentialized or fixed identity [should be, as Katheryn Mitchell suggests] celebrated as a process rather than a thing; its inherent resistance to fixed binaries causes it to remain in a perpetual state of flux” (Mitchell 1997: 260). The power of Flametal, and other flamenco hybrids, is that it operates in a ‘third space’ where “cultural meaning and representation have no ‘primordial unity or fixity’” (Meredith 1998: 3). Unburdened by essentialist binaries and boundaries, Flametal is able to create a style that unites more than it divides. In his vision of a new genre, Ben Woods conflates visual, rhythmic and harmonic elements of both flamenco and heavy metal in ways that obscure the boundaries of both while reproducing many of the values and aesthetic principles that are deemed essential to each.