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Around the Kitchen Table: René Heredia Remembers

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RENÉ HEREDIA[1]
Personal friend of Paco de Lucía

This portrait of the relationship between René Heredia and Paco de Lucía is a synthesis of three interviews I did with René Heredia and his niece, Andreána Cortés-Heredia, director of the Colorado Institute of Flamenco, in January of 2024. The interviews were preparation for our international symposium on Francisco Gustavo Sánchez Gómez, "Paco de Lucía" (1947–2014) titled "Paco de Lucía and the Americas," which took place at the CUNY Graduate Center on March 7, 2024. René was a close friend of Paco's and his stories about their friendship are wonderful, but they can best be appreciated in light of René's long life in the flamenco world.

Born in Los Angeles in 1939 to a flamenco and Gitano (Roma, Kalé, so-called "gypsy") family, René joined the company of Carmen Amaya (1918–1963), one of the most illustrious and revolutionary dancers of flamenco's history, in 1957, and arrived in Spain in 1959 as someone who knew the playing of Agustín Castellón, "Sabicas" (1912–1990), who in America had developed a virtuosic solo way of playing flamenco that the Spanish guitarists were hungry to learn. All this, and more, before he settled in Denver, Colorado and met Paco in the early 70s.

Los Angeles, California

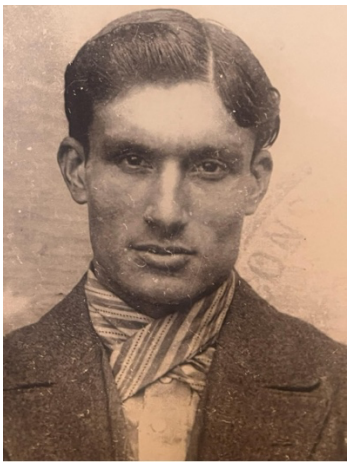

Fig. 1. René Heredia's father Enrique. Courtesy of René Heredia.

[1] This is René Heredia's (1939-2026) very last interview and public statement. While we were preparing this issue focused on Paco de Lucía's and the Americas, René passed away. We would like to dedicate this special issue of Diagonal to his memory.

René Cortés Heredia was born in LA on January 27, 1939, to a Gitano and flamenco family. Rene's mother Enriquetta was from Córdoba, his father Enrique was from Granada. Enrique was a *fraguero*, an iron worker, who had spent ten years in North Africa – he spoke Spanish, English, French, and Arabic (see figure 1). He played the flamenco guitar, while Enriquetta was a *cantaora*, a flamenco singer. Arriving in New York in 1919, they traveled to Chicago, a city where they knew there were Gitanos. Enrique opened a bakery with an Italian, but the mafia, "*la mano negra,*" demanded protection money, and when Enrique refused to pay, they blew up the bakery. So, the Heredia family left Chicago, traveling first to Texas, and then to California, where they settled. They loved Los Angeles because it felt very colonial Spanish, and the weather was beautiful. Enrique made beautifully intricate wrought iron designs, window grills, gates, and furniture, which were popular in Hollywood. He made an ornate, seven-foot-tall wrought iron lamp, and named it "La Giralda," after Sevilla's iconic tower. And therein lies a family tale: movie star Vincent Price (1911–1993) offered $20,000 ($234,000 today!) for the lamp, but Enrique refused to sell it. Instead, he gave it to José Amaya Amaya, "El Chino" – Carmen Amaya's father.

Enrique and Enriquetta had eleven children: seven boys and four girls. All the girls, Zoraida, Fátima, Sarita, and (named for the eldest Amaya sisters) Carmen Antonia Leonor, plus three of the boys, Almanzor, Enrique (Andreána's father), and René, the youngest boy and the tenth child, became professional flamenco artists.

René started playing the guitar when he was ten and playing for his sisters at thirteen. "That's all we did," he recalls, "play the guitar and dance and rehearse and dance and rehearse and dance…" They did shows at the Los Angeles Philharmonic, at the Wilshire Ebell, and supper clubs from the Casa Madrid to the Matador to El Cid on Sunset Boulevard, alongside the strongest artists on the scene. The Cansino family was in LA, and Margarita Carmen Cansino, "Rita Hayworth," had become a big Hollywood star. But in contrast to the Cansinos' classical Spanish bent, LA also had a strong flamenco contingent (Mora, 2023). By 1952, Antonio Garcia Matos, "Antonio Triana" (1906–1989), a distinguished dancer who had partnered Amaya, had settled there, and his daughter, Luisita Triana was beginning to perform. Pepita Sevilla, who had danced with José Greco, Pepa Funes, and Panamanian Genaro Gómez were there as well, along with guitarists including Jerónimo Villarino, a student of Sabicas, and Vicente Gómez, who played in many famous movies, such as *Blood and Sand* (1941) (Gamboa 2017).

From Amaya in the 1940s to *Flamenco Puro* in the 1980s, the Heredias were famous for having huge flamenco parties, because Enriquetta would cook up a storm and feed everyone. "Paco would stand in the kitchen and have long conversations with my *abuela*" (grandmother), Andreána remembers. Guitarist Carlos Montoya (1903–1993), nephew of the foundational flamenco guitarist Ramón Montoya (1879 – 1949) and who, like Sabicas, would become a soloist, was also an old friend of the family. "He'd come to our house, and my mother would cook Spanish rice with chicken, and he'd eat with us and talk about gossipy stuff." Then, "he'd play and blow us all away, and when it was time for him to do a concert at the Wilshire Ebell, we'd take him in our car and drive him to the concert."

Carlos Montoya was clearly an important influence for the young René, but regarding his biggest influences, René says "I am a disciple of Sabicas and Mario Escudero." Mario Escudero (1928–2004) was one of the finest guitarists of the new generation, a soloist as well as accompanist. He

toured the world from a young age with the major figures of the 1940s and 50s, from Carmen Amaya to José Greco, and was one of the early flamenco artists to settle in the US, where he did much to introduce the art form to new audiences. Mario (and Sabicas) would be a significant influence on Paco as he developed his playing (Pohren 1992, 76, 117-19). René knew Mario "back in 1956 when he was with Greco. He was twenty-seven years old or so then." "We went to see Greco, and we became friends," René recalls. "It was very hot that summer, so we all went out to the beach together, to Santa Monica beach." Mario "was handsome and young and playing up a storm."

Fig. 2. Sabicas and René in San Francisco, 1964. Courtesy of René Heredia.

But the earliest and perhaps most significant influence on René was Sabicas (see figure 2). Sabicas had played with Carmen, from her earliest days in Spain well into the 1950s. The Heredias had met Sabicas in the early 1940s, when Amaya spent time in Hollywood. She'd been cut out of Lena Horne's *Panama Hattie* (1942) because she couldn't repeat her footwork to dub herself, but she spent time in LA performing, making records, and several other films (Goldberg 1995, 239-49). Enrique went backstage at one of Amaya's early concerts in LA to introduce himself to Carmen's father, saying "I'm a Gitano de Almería." El Chino embraced him and they became like family, calling each other "*primo*," cousin.

The warmth of the Heredias made Sabicas call them "my second family." When in LA, he'd come to the house every afternoon and Enriquetta would feed him *pucheros* and other beautiful Spanish dishes and he'd play the guitar all day long. "I'd sit there with my mouth open!" René recalls. Sabicas "was so natural, he had his own unique sound, and impeccable technique of arpeggio, *picado*

(picking), and *pulgar* (playing with the thumb)." He improvised, changing things all the time. "Sabicas was a *genio*," a genius, René said:

> He'd be playing really difficult things, and he'd be talking to you, having a conversation! And he played the piano! *Rondeñas* and *seguiriyas*, and he didn't know any music! Then, he'd lay the guitar face down on his lap and play *soleá* on the sixth string. He'd use a match box with a rubber band to play *sevillanas*! And he'd play *bulerías* with the guitar behind his head.

"Sabicas was a real gentleman too," René adds, "always dressed to the nines," with "a four-carat diamond ring for his ties, and an eight-carat ring for his finger. He was a real Gypsy! Even though he was from Pamplona."

By the time Sabicas came to the Huntington Hartford Theater with Carmen Amaya in the later 1950s, he was an established soloist. "He would do four solos in the first part and play one piece for Carmen, and in the second part he would do another four solos and play another piece for Carmen." He played older and newer flamenco forms: "*seguiriya*, *soleá*, *colombiana*, *garrotín*, those kinds of things." René would study his records: "33 1/3… there was no way to slow it down… I would spend hours trying to figure out what he was doing." It wasn't formal training, but when Sabicas would come to the house, "he'd say, 'okay, now play for me, let me see what you've learned.' And I'd play for him and he'd tell me, 'No, no, that's not down there; you have to play this over here.'"

Carmen Amaya and Spain (1957–1961)

Fig. 3. Carmen Amaya, 1941. J. Willis Sayre Collection of Theatrical Photographs, JWS17738, S-A-326, University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections.

The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) laid waste to the country, foreshadowing the ruination of World War II – like Jews, Roma were also victims of Hitler's genocide. When war broke out in the summer of 1936, Carmen and the rest of her company escaped Valladolid for Lisbon and, from there, to Buenos Aires, where she brought her entire family, and joined forces with her friend and principal collaborator, Sabicas (Goldberg 1995, 193–211). Already a rising star when the war broke out, Amaya was the first Gitana flamenco dancer to achieve international stardom; she looked and sounded very different from her predecessors (see figure 3).[2] Brought up in a flamenco family, she improvised as a "native speaker" of flamenco's ancient codes; and yet she was a creative force, an innovator who added dynamic and theatrical dimensions to flamenco that pulled it into the mainstream of concert dance (Goldberg 2024). An instant sensation wherever she toured, her presence on American stages marks a before and after in flamenco history, blasting a new image of flamenco music and dance to the forefront of popular culture, gaining immense celebrity and generating shock waves throughout the flamenco world. With her mother and father, brothers and sisters, as well as other artists including Sabicas, his brother Diego Castellón, and their parents – eighteen in all – Amaya toured South and Central America until impresario Sol Hurok brought her to New York in December of 1940 (Bennahum and Goldberg 2013, 80-121).

René recounts, "she was making $2000 a week back in those days," $47,000 today! She and Sabicas were going to get married, René says, but Amaya's father, El Chino, and brother Paco were opposed, "because in the Gypsy tradition if you marry then your husband controls everything. And they didn't want to lose that money and have Sabicas control it." Because "Carmen was making $2000 a week but they would pay her $200," spending the rest on partying and living large.

By the 1950s though, much of the original company had left. Amaya had married a non-Gitano, Juan Antonio Aguero, a guitarist "with light eyes and a manly face" from a wealthy family of Santander. Aguero was a friend of guitarist Mario Escudero, and he played but also now managed the company (Goldberg 1995, 258-60, 266-67). Sabicas, though, was still with her.

In 1950s LA, Amaya sold out at the Huntington Hartford every night. The company now included Paco's wife "La Chata," Paco's sons Diego and Curro Amaya with his wife Olga Fernandez, Carmen's youngest brother Antonio Amaya, Goyo Reyes and his partner Pepita Ortega as dancers, and guitarists Aguero and Paco Amaya, and Sabicas and his brother Diego Castellón. Filling out the concert program, Alfredo Speranza played piano, Lucero Tena played castanets, Pepita Llacer sang ballads and popular songs, and the *cantaor* was Domingo Alvarado (Goldberg 1995, 272, 274-75).[3]

Amaya did a month-long run at the Huntington Hartford in November 1957, and when that contract ended, having no other immediate work, they rested and stayed in LA at the Mark Twain hotel. But Sabicas was eager to work as a concert solo guitarist, like Carlos Montoya. And so, after decades of working together, he told Carmen "*Mira, me voy a ir*" (Listen, I'm going to leave).

"What are we going to do?" Amaya asked. "We must have another guitarist!" Curro, her nephew, was a good friend of René's; they had known each other from when they were little. And

[2]Bennahum and Goldberg 2013.

[3] Domingo settled in New York.

so Curro said to Carmen, "I know a guitarist who knows all Sabicas's material. He's from the Heredia family." And, René recalls, Carmen "knew my family because she had been to my house having dinner with my mom and everybody, so she knew who we were, so she said to Curro 'well, tell him to come and see me.'" And so, the next day, seventeen-year-old René Heredia went to the Mark Twain hotel to see Carmen about working with her company.

When he arrived, René recounts, Carmen "was in a huge king-sized bed – a little, dark, black thing, with the covers up to her chin. All you could see was her face, and she was watching Walt Disney funnies." "She loved cartoons," René explains. When she was a child of five or six years old, "Carmen Amaya was always dancing in the streets of Barcelona and her father El Chino would play the guitar for her." "They'd put a *boina* [cap] on the sidewalk and people would throw a *peseta* in there, and that's how they made money to eat that night." Carmen Amaya "barely had a childhood," René says, "because when she was a child she was always dancing." She told René to sit down and get his guitar out, to play various flamenco forms: *seguiriya*, *soleá*, *bulería*. "I would do a snippet of each," René recalls. "She kept saying, 'now do this, now do that.' So, once I played for her, she said, 'fine, report tomorrow.'"

Fig. 4. Carmen Amaya, Diego Amaya, Ricardo Manzano, and René Heredia, ca. 1962. Courtesy of René Heredia.

"I was in the midst of greatness," René says. "I was a teenager; it was because of my family." The first show he did with Carmen Amaya was in Palm Springs, at the Chi Chi Club. They toured all through the southern part of the United States, Tijuana, El Paso, Miami, and then Santo Domingo, the Virgin Islands, all the Caribbean (see figure 4). They were performing at a five-star hotel in Havana

at the end of 1958, when Carmen came in and said, "we have to go, we have to go, we have to go!" "Why?" René asked. She answered, "no, we have to go, pack up your things, let's go." And René asked, "what about the contract?" She said, "we're breaking the contract." When Castro's forces entered Havana on January 1, 1959, "he put machine guns on all the banks and all the casinos, and you couldn't get your money out." Andreána recalls that her father Enrique was performing with José Greco in 1958. "They left Cuba just before Batista got snagged – they literally ran to the airplane and took off just as Castro was entering Havana." Other flamencos caught in the revolution weren't so lucky, she says: "they got arrested and jailed, and it was very hard for them to leave the country after that."

Carmen and Juan Antonio flew directly to Madrid, and they put the rest of the company on a 1929 Spanish steamer called La Covadonga. "We went from Havana to the Canary Islands," René recalls. "It took us seven days, and then from there we went to Algeciras, from Algeciras we took the train to Madrid."

They started rehearsing at the old studios on the calle Amor de Dios to go to Russia. But Franco told Carmen, "You can't go to Russia, that's a communist country, and if you go, you're going to lose your passport. Carmen said, 'well I'm not going to do that.'" And so in January, 1959, instead of going to Russia, the company went to Paris, to the Champs Elysées, for a month. René turned twenty-one on the train from Madrid to Paris. They set out on a difficult tour of France and North Africa, in the middle of which Amaya made a special (yet exhausting) trip to Barcelona on February 14 to attend the inauguration of a fountain raised in her honor in the Somorrostro, the shantytown right by the ocean where she was born (Goldberg 1995, 294–95).

They arrived in London during Easter week for a March 28 debut at the Westminster Theater near Buckingham Palace where, due to spectacular critical and popular response, their season was extended through May 23. "When we were in London," René remembers, "she got thirteen curtain calls!" She would dance for twenty minutes without stopping. "And she had a cot just offstage and when she'd get offstage, she'd just flop down on that cot."

The company was in these later years, Teresa Martínez de la Peña explains, "conceived in the classical mode, in the line which [Antonia Mercé, "La Argentina"] created" (Martinez de la Peña 1991, 6). A mix of Gitano and non-Gitano artists, it included both classically trained and flamenco trained dancers (*bailarines* and *bailaores*), as well as a concert guitarist, Pepe Motos, and a pianist, possibly Angel Curras, who had been musical director and "brilliant conductor" for Antonio Ruiz Soler's company in 1955 (Soler 1974). The guitarists were Heredia and Aguero, and possibly Juan Doblones. Rafael Ortega (Manzanita's father) was the *cantaor*, possibly joined for some performances by Antonio Nunez Montoya, "Chocolate." The large company also included "half a dozen buxom, uninhibited young girls," featuring Carmen Mota, Isidoro Lopez "El Mono," Zoilo Gomez, possibly Carmen Mota's partner Joaquin Robles, and possibly a jota dancer, Cecilio Bueno.[4]

After this long tour, Carmen went back to Madrid and stopped working. "Juan Antonio said he couldn't pay us," René recalls, "not even a per diem. I said, how are we going to live? We must pay

[4] Jota is a folk dance originating in Aragón and Valencia.

the pensión, have money for food, and he didn't want to pay us." Juan Antonio was getting rid of everybody so he could have total control of Carmen," René says. "He'd give her a vitamin B12 shot every day." Amaya wasn't sick, René continues. "She was still in her powers; she was still dancing up a storm. But when she reached menopause, her body changed and that's when she finally got sick, her kidneys gave out on her."

The doctor told her when she was really young that she had really tiny kidneys, and they didn't have dialysis machines then, so that the only way she could continue was to dance every night – dance, dance, dance, so that all those impurities could come out of her pores. And Carmen used to sweat up a storm – that's how she stayed alive. That's why she danced so much, and hard! But she got menopause, and her body changed, she got infected, and she started getting really puffy. They wanted to give her the *Medalla de Oro Flamenco* [Flamenco Gold Medal] and she was in bed sick and said, "*pa qué quiero esto ahora?* [What do I want this for now?]"

René thinks that Aguero refusing to pay the company in between tours was "really incorrect." He remembers that when they were in London, Juan Antonio controlled everything, including sending money to his dentist brother Esteban Aguero, at the same time he'd often say to the artists, "Here's some of your payment, I don't have all of it but I'll pay you the rest later." And so, when they stopped in Madrid because they didn't have any work, Juan Antonio said to the artists, "I can't pay any of you." "Little by little," René recounts, "Juan Antonio started getting rid of all the people." Company members "Goyo Reyes and Pepita Ortega, Curro and Olga, Domingo [Alvarado], they all finally left. The only one who stood with her was [her nephew] Diego. He would do *palmas* [clapping percussion] and a step or two *por bulerías*."

René had no choice but to leave:

> …because we didn't have any money, barely enough to last a week! So, you either waited till Carmen found another job, or you got up and started looking for work yourself! So that's what I did. It was out of necessity, not because I wanted to leave Carmen. I loved Carmen! She was our hero in my whole family! My sisters and my father and all of us…Carmen Amaya was our hero!

"Carmen never rehearsed," René recalls. "She'd have everyone else rehearse…she'd direct them, but I never saw her rehearse or warm up." She would simply "come into the dressing room, put her religious things on the table, put on her make up and then go out and dance and blow everybody away." "Playing for her was like floating on a cloud," he continues:

> Because her *compás* [rhythm] was so perfect, all you had to do was to follow her, not make any mistakes, and just kill yourself doing *rasgueado* [flamenco strumming technique]. The ring finger on my right hand used to bleed every night because I'd use my ring and pinky to save the nails on the other two fingers; I'd strum down with the ring and pinky and up with the thumb…real fast!

"Carmen had tremendous force," René recounts:

> I remember when we were in Santo Domingo she was dancing, and she would always test the floor to see where the bad sound versus the good sound was…well Carmen was doing an

> *alegrías* and she was doing *escobilla* [footwork], and at that time I'd stop playing the guitar and play *palmas* in threes as she did incredible footwork, with incredible *compás* [rhythm], incredibly Gypsy… and the floor started splintering! From the power of her footwork! That was in Santo Domingo toward the end of 1958.

In total, René "worked with Carmen for at least three or four years," and in Spain he also worked with other legendary artists, like Antonio Montoya Flores, "El Farruco" (1935–1997). He tells the story of touring Spain with *cantaores* Antonio Fernández Díaz, "Fosforito" (1932–2025), Roque Montoya Heredia, "Jarrito" (1925–1995), and Juan Varea Segura, "Juanito Varea" (1908–1985). "We toured all of Spain, and in Sevilla we did our last concert, and all went to the dressing rooms, and they came and told us 'we can't pay you; the promoters stole all the money and split!'" Now what? "Fosforito said, 'all I have is jewelry,' and Jarrito had a little bit of money in the bank." Fosforito sold his jewelry, and with that and Jarrito's bit, they were able to get back to Madrid.

René also toured in Spain with Antoñita Moreno, "a beautiful woman from Sevilla very famous for *saetas*" (traditional Holy Week songs), and did a movie, *Balcón de la luna* (1962) with Paquita Rico (1929–2017), Carmen Sevilla (1930–2023), and Lola Flores (1923–1995). "They called me because I was tall!" René continues, "I am playing a 1927 Santos Hernández [a leading flamenco guitar maker] that belonged to Andreána's father Enrique."

In Sevilla, René met the legendary *cantaora* Pastora Pavón, "La Niña de los Peines" (1890–1969). "I was walking toward La Campana, and she was sitting outside having coffee. And someone said, '*¿Ves esa señora? Es la Niña de los Peines*' (Do you see that woman? She's La Niña de los Peines). "And I walked up to her and introduced myself and said '*te tengo muchos recuerdos de Sabicas*' (I have many regards for you from Sabicas). And she said '*¡Oh! ¡Sabicas! ¡Sientate!*' (Oh! Sabicas! Have a seat!) And when René was in Madrid, he met guitarist Manuel Gómez Vélez, "Manolo de Huelva" (1892–1976), in an important flamenco venue, the Villa Rosa. René invited him to have a cognac and coffee "and I told him who I was, and that I was a disciple of Sabicas, and he remembered: '*¡ah, sí, Sabicas!*' (Oh yes, Sabicas!)." Manolo de Huelva "had his right index finger with polish on it, no others, but only that finger," René recalls. "And I said '*¿por qué tienes esmalte en este dedo?*'" (why do you have polish on that one finger?) And Manolo de Huelva answered, '*por una cosa nueva que se llama rumba, están tocando rumba*' (for a new thing that is called rumba, people are playing rumba these days). It would have been early 1959, René recalls. "At that time the rumba was going to start becoming very popular."

René also accompanied legendary dancers like Eduardo Serrano Iglesias, "El Guito" (1942–2025), Mario Maya (1937–2008), Pedro Jiménez Cerreduela, "El Tupé" (1935–?), and Francisca Sadornil Ruiz, "La Tati" (b. 1945) at early Madrid *tablaos*, flamenco clubs, such as Torres Bermejas. "They were buddies of mine," René recalls. "We all hung out together at the Café Carretas, in front of a beautiful theater… and we all had our handmade suits and ties… not like today!" The patriarch of the legendary "Habichuela" guitarists, Juan Carmona Carmona, "Juan Habichuela" (1933–2016), was at Torres when René was there. "Juan and I hit it off right away," René recalls, "and he would say 'show me that *falseta* [guitar melody]!' because of course I had a whole bunch of stuff from Sabicas."

In Spain in the early 1960s, "Sabicas was a legend, but nobody had ever heard him play," René recounts. A lot of the old men knew his playing from the 20s and 30s, but when Sabicas's *Flamenco Puro* record came to Spain in 1959 "it just blew everybody away." "Sabicas was the king of the guitar – no one could touch him," René says. "They all said 'Juan Serrano… Pepe Motos …'" But "Pepe Motos said to me one day, 'the only competition I have on the guitar is from Mario Escudero' and I said 'no, no, you're wrong, you have to confront Sabicas.'" "Juan Serrano was really strong," René continues, "an up-and-coming star in the guitar – this is way before Paco – and when he got to New York and saw Sabicas play, he said '*yo soy un botones al lado de Sabicas*'" (I am a bellhop next to Sabicas). That is, because of the fractures created by the Spanish Civil War, Sabicas's revolutionary flamenco work happened outside Spain, for foreign audiences. And it reached Spain from the US, at least in part in the hands of René Heredia.

Paris (1962–1964)

"I had a girlfriend in Nice," René recalls, "so I went to see her." "From there," he continues, "I went to Paris, and in Paris I had a room right in front of Saint-Michel… I could see Notre Dame every day through my window." He was running out of money and couldn't speak very good French. "I knew just a few words, but I had my guitar!" He tells the story:

> One day I was walking down the street on the Left Bank, and I was walking by a *boite*, a little club, and the door was a little bit open, and I could hear guitar music! So, I stopped and opened the door a little, and I saw a guy playing the guitar and a little girl dancing, and she was dancing *alegrías* and the guitarist was a guy who was basically a classical guitarist trying to do flamenco. I could see that he didn't understand how the format of *alegrías* works. So, I walked in, and the lady who was watching them rehearse had her back to me, and when she heard me come in, she turned around and saw that I had a guitar in my hand. She asked me if I knew how to play the guitar and I said "yes." And she asked "who did you work with?" And I told her I worked with Carmen Amaya, and she said, "Oh! Get your guitar out!" And she told the other guy to get off the stage… let René get on the stage! I asked the girl what she was going to dance and she said '*alegrías*,' and so she danced and I just followed her… it was nothing for me to do that! And the lady said, "Good! Report this afternoon to work!" I was lucky I found a job right away… I remember I had no money left!

Actually, René became friends with the classical guitarist whom he had replaced, a Gitano named Antonio Francisco Sena. He would go to Sena's place in the mornings to drink coffee and pick up some of Sena's classical guitar material. And Sena "wanted me to teach him all the stuff by Sabicas, because that was all new back then!" "So, we were trading back and forth, and passing the afternoon together and drinking, because he was a Spanish Gypsy from Barcelona, and I'm Gypsy, so we were really good friends." Andreána adds that Sena was a student with a distinguished lineage: he had studied with Catalonian classical guitarist Emilio Pujol Villarubí (1886–1980), and Pujol was a student of composer and classical guitarist Francisco Tárrega (1852–1909)! A classically trained Gitano guitarist was unusual in those days. Sena's nephew, Andrés Batista (b. 1937) plays both classical and flamenco.

René Returns to the US (1964)

René had been away from home for many years, and he missed his family; by 1964 he was back in the US. He performed at Los Angeles venues from the Casa Madrid and El Matador to the Purple Onion, Cosmo Alley, and the Insomniac. One of his first jobs was in San Francisco, with Rosa Montoya, Carlos

Montoya's niece and Ramón Montoya's granddaughter, and Ciro Diezhandino Nieto (1932 – 2020), who by 1959 had been performing in Antonio Ruiz Soler's company. Rosa and Ciro came to the US in the early 1960s, and in 1964, they founded the Tablao Ciro's Mesón del Flamenco in San Francisco (Gamboa 2017, 62).

René was playing for Ciro and Rosa Montoya in San Francisco when Mario Escudero called him. Mario had been working at the Poche in San Gabriel for five years, and he was going to retire and buy a home in Sevilla. He told the owner that the only one who could replace him was René, but René was committed to the San Francisco job. And so, Mario extended his contract until René could arrive.

After a while, Vicente Romero, a Mexican flamenco dancer who had danced with Pilar López, called René and said "René, I have enough money to pay you now." And so, René put Andreána's father Enrique in El Poche and traveled to Romero's native Santa Fe. By 1967, he had traveled to Denver, where he and Vicente worked with Lydia Torea, who had danced with Greco, and Miguel Gálvez, a Gitano singer from Las Cabezas.

"I was at the Playboy Club in the Sherman St. Grand Hotel," René recalls, "and I was up at the penthouse, and some girlfriends of mine were going to the Colorado Women's College." "They were doing a skit, and they invited me to come see it," he continues, and while there he ran into a friend, and told him he needed a photographer for an album he was recording. And my friend said, "Oh I know a wonderful photographer! I'll have her call you." And Candace Bevier called. She had a BA in literature from Kansas U, and was now studying film and photography at the University of Denver. "When she met me," René recalls, "she said that she wanted to do my photography work for the album cover!" They settled in Denver and were married for thirty-four years, until Candy's death in 2016. She was the official photographer for Paco in the US, and "when Candy and I got married," René adds, "Paco played for my honeymoon. Paco and I were real close, we loved each other a lot." "It was time to settle down," René remembers. "I had been traveling with two suitcases and two guitars for twenty years. And I wanted to be in a city where I could get on a plane and do concerts in other cities. So that's why I chose Denver."

Paco Arrives in the US (1963)

By the early 1960s, and in large part due to Carmen Amaya's impact, flamenco was very popular in the US. You could see it in theaters, but also on television – René's sister Sarita appeared on Groucho Marx's *You Bet Your Life* in 1960. And in October 1965, René did the Ed Sullivan show with friends from Spain: Worlds' Fair headliner, Manuela Vargas, guitarist Juan Habichuela, and *cantaores* Jarrito and Fosforito. Flamenco also appeared in clubs from New York to LA, funded by Hollywood stars from Desi Arnaz to Cesar Romero.

One of the biggest flamenco stars, and one of the biggest influences in the US flamenco scene, was José Greco (1918–2000) (Greco 1977). Tall, handsome, Italian-born, his family moved to Brooklyn when he was ten. He studied flamenco alongside a young Jerome Robbins, soon to become a famed choreographer, in New York before getting his big break: he was asked to join the company of renowned dancer Encarnación López Júlvez, "La Argentinita" (1898–1945). He accompanied her to Spain after her premature death in 1945, where he continued to perform with Argentinita's sister, the equally renowned Pilar López (1912–2008). He founded his own US-based company in 1949 and

toured the world for decades. As a celebrity appearing in film, TV, and the concert stage, Greco was tremendously important in popularizing and promoting flamenco in the US. And one of the most important aspects of Greco's company was the major Spanish artists he introduced to international audiences, from Matilde Coral (b. 1935) and Rafael "El Negro" (1935–2010), to Farruco, to Paco de Lucia.

Once heard in Spain, Sabicas's record *Flamenco Puro* (1959), René recalls, "blew everyone away, including Paco." Paco played in the school of guitar legend Manuel Serrapí Sánchez, "Niño Ricardo" (1904–1972), but no one had heard how Sabicas had been developing the flamenco guitar since he'd left in 1936. René was playing at the Circo Price in Barcelona with Niño Ricardo, when someone played the Sabicas album. "When [Sabicas] would do that real fast *picado por soleá*, Niño Ricardo would say, '*¡óle!*'" in his dark, cancer affected voice, René recalls. "Sabicas was so clean and so fast, and had such a beautiful sound, Paco said, that 'I didn't know you could play the guitar like that.'" René recounts that Paco said, "'I would go to sleep and play one of Sabicas's records and hope one day I could play like that.'"

By 1962, Paco and his brother José Sánchez Gomes, "Pepe de Lucía" (b. 1945), sons of Antonio Sánchez Pecino, who worked as a trader by day and a musician by night, and Luzía Gomes, a Portuguese immigrant who had settled in Algeciras in the 1930s, became known as "Los Chiquitos de Algeciras" ("The Kids of Algeciras"). Their first big break was their triumph in the international flamenco contest in Jerez that year. Pepe won first place, and a prize of 30,000 pesetas. Thirteen-year-old Paco was playing the guitar, but he was so young there was no category for him to compete in, so they gave Paco a special award and 15,000 pesetas. Their father Antonio saw this as seed money for a trip to the center for flamenco work: Madrid. When they arrived, René recounts, "they would get up every morning looking for work, in bars, washing dishes… not flamenco playing, just regular work!" But little by little the news got around in Madrid about this young kid who could really play the guitar.

René recalls one such anecdote. Paco was at the Domingo Esteso guitar shop on Gravina 7, off the Gran Villa. Esteso (1882–1937) was a luthier, trained under Manuel Ramírez, and his nephews, Faustino, Mariano and Julio Conde, continued the tradition, changing the name of the brand to Conde Hermanos. Esteso's flamenco guitars are now world-renowned for their physical lightness combined with strong volume and sound-projection. One day at the shop, René met Paco's brother Ramón Sánchez Gómez, "Ramón de Algeciras" (1938–2009). "He was in his navy uniform, and he had one foot on the chair, and he was playing the *zapateado* of Niño Ricardo." René asked Faustino and Mariano, Esteso's nephews, "who is that young guy playing?" "He is a kid that has just arrived from Algeciras," they answered. "He plays really well!" René said, and the nephews agreed. Later, Paco went to the Esteso shop. He was playing a mediocre guitar, so Faustino went into the back where the really good guitars were and gave it to Paco. "*¡Prueba esta guitarra!*" (try this guitar), he said. And Paco loved it: "*¡qué bonita, qué bien suena esta guitarra!*" (how pretty, how good this guitar sounds!). And, sensing Paco's manner and amazing technique, Faustino said, "I'm going to give it to you." "Paco already had all the technique," René remembers. "He had it all. Like Sabicas. He could do *arpeggios*, *picados*, *trémulo* [the rapid repetition of a note], *alzapua* [a strumming technique using the thumb], he could do everything." The consequence of this gift was that everyone hearing Paco play would ask him what the guitar was, and so "all the guitar players wanted to get a Conde Romanos so they could play like Paco. Their sales went through the roof! And that's how Paco paid back Faustino for giving him the guitar."

In 1963, Greco contracted Los Chiquitos de Algeciras, though really he was only interested in Pepe, the *cantaor* (Pohren 1992, 67). But Paco's father told Greco, "Well if you take Pepe you have to take Paco too." And Greco answered, "I don't want Paco, I already have two guitarists." "So, they worked it out," René says, "such that Pepe would go first then Paco would come. A month went by and Paco's father hadn't heard anything." Finally, their father called Greco and said, "send Pepe back, because you promised to take Paco and you never took Paco so send Pepe back!" So, Greco finally gave in. Young Paco was third guitarist in the group, with Ricardo Modrego and Manolo Barón (Zatania 2024). "They were paying him $100 a week," René continues, "more money than Paco ever earned in his life, at that time. They would cook in their room to save money. When he got back to Algeciras, he gave his dad $1000 [over $10,000 today]."

At one point on this first tour with Greco, the company was performing at the Greek Theatre in Los Angeles. In Griffith Park, the venue "seats 10,000 people," René recounts, "and Greco would sell it out every night for two weeks." One day, René continues, "Ricardo Modrego got sick with a bad cold and fever, and Greco told Paco, 'You're going to have to do the solo.' And Paco played *Malagueña* and blew everyone away, and that's how Paco started to be a soloist." Paco and Ricardo Modrego would go on to record two albums, one in 1964 and one in 1965.

Once Paco got to New York, René recounts, someone told Sabicas, "There's this young kid who plays really well." And Sabicas, being a real flamenco aficionado, said, "where is he?" And they said, "he's here, in this hotel." Accompanied by Domingo Alvarado (1930–2020), a *cantaor* from Jerez who Carmen had brought to sing for her in 1955, *cantaor* Pepe Segundo, and by guitarists Mario Escudero, Juan Serrano, and Julio de los Reyes, Sabicas went to the hotel at one in the morning. "Which is, you know, flamenco time," René observes, "and they banged on the door. And they said, 'Paco, Paco wake up! Sabicas is here!'" Mario described the scene: "the somewhat chubby, shy boy in short pants was stretched out on the bed reading comics." Paco's colleague with Greco, Manolo Barón, asked him to play a little, "and Paco obediently, timidly, picked up the guitar and asked, 'What should I play?' 'A little *bulerías*, son' answered Barón" (Zatania 2024). René picks up the story:

> And they got a guitar and put it in Paco's hand – he was half asleep – and they wanted to hear him play, because everyone was saying what a great guitarist this young boy was. They could tell right away that this young boy was exceptional! Sabicas told him to play a little bit *por seguiriya*, a little bit of this and that…

When that music began to sound, Mario said, *cantaor* Pepe Segundo "laughed nervously, but the three guitarists were visibly shaken and could only manage a muffled 'shit… shit'" (Zatania 2024). René picks up the story again:

> … and when he finished, Sabicas said, "well you play very well and if you study, you're going to become a great guitarist." He said he could see right away that the guy had tremendous faculties. But then Sabicas told Paco, "But if you really want to get known, you have to play your own music; you can't imitate other people's music." At that time Paco was playing all of Niño Ricardo's stuff, because that was his mentor. His brother Ramón was playing it – all the guitarists at that time were following Niño Ricardo, because he was the top dog in Spain at that time. Sabicas wasn't there; Sabicas was in the New World: Argentina, México, New York… Sabicas didn't go back to Spain for like thirty years! He was afraid they would throw him into the army. And Franco was at the height of his power. Paco told me, "I didn't know if he

> told me that because he saw that I wasn't playing any of his music, or because he wanted to give me good advice about learning how to play my own music." But Paco told me that when Sabicas said that, that when he got back to Spain after the tour with Greco that he stopped playing anything that belonged to Niño Ricardo.

Paco stopped playing for 6 months, René says. He asked, "'what were you doing all that time, Paco?' Paco said, 'I was thinking. I had one little *falseta* that I made up, and then I had another little *falseta*, and pretty soon I had enough for one solo.'" That is, René says:

> Paco started to create… actually, Sabicas awakened Paco's spirit of composition. Before that, Paco was a copier, like most of these guitarists today all copy Paco. Paco started creating, and since he had such ability and such facility, he started creating his own style. Pretty soon he had enough for one song, two songs, enough for his first record.

Paco's debut solo album is *La fabulosa guitarra de Paco de Lucía*, 1967. The cover is a photo of Paco holding the guitar, "and he's real young," René says. "He's got his hair combed straight back, and he didn't have long hair then, he had short hair." "When that record came out," René continues, "it just blew everybody away. All the young guitarists, because it's a really fine record, and it's *flamenco puro*" (pure flamenco).

"Entre Dos Aguas": Paco and René Meet (1973)

Fig. 5. Paco and René, Albuquerque, 1976.
Photo by Candace Bevier. Courtesy of René Heredia.

In 1973, the rumba "Entre Dos Aguas" in Paco's album *Fuente y caudal* became a huge hit. Cuban rumba is not flamenco, René explains, but "it's very commercial, and they played it in all the discotheques in Madrid, it became very famous, very popular – it made Paco a star." And so even though "he didn't want to get interviewed, because he was very shy," René explains, Paco started

developing a public presence, doing all sorts of interviews and television appearances. He came to the US for a concert tour.

René got a call from the University of Denver to host Paco when he came to Denver. "They didn't know who he was," René laughs, "but I did!" (see figure 5).

I went to the airport to pick him up. I brought a bottle of *manzanilla* [sherry], and we gave each other an *abrazo* and I told him who I was. And he said, "I know who you are!" And I said, "how do you know me?" And he said, "because I found your coat hanger!"

It turned out that after playing with Carmen Amaya at the Westminster Theater in London, Greco, with Paco playing, had followed them into the theater. And Paco discovered René's coat hanger in the dressing room.

It was winter, and Paco asked René if he had an electric blanket; "so Paco got into my bed! And I slept on the couch." And in the morning over breakfast "Paco would play new things for me, asking, 'how do you like this?'" René answered, "*es muy bonito*" (it is very beautiful), but Paco answered, "well, in Spain they all criticize me."

And wherever he'd go, Paco would find a guitarist and tell them to "play these chords in a rumba rhythm." Sol Hurok invited Paco to New York to do a showcase for presenters, and Paco invited René and Candy. "He would call me and say, 'René, come on over here and we'll have a laugh!'" René played the base rhythmic accompaniment for the rumba. "He says," René recalls, "'I want you to come play rhythm guitar, and here are the chords.'" "And Paco did all the improvisation, based on those chords." "The basic melody," René continues, "is 'Fly Me to the Moon.'" Paco "took that melody and flamencoized it," adding "parts where he improvises, and does real fast scales, and then *alzapua* and *pulgar*."

"When I met Paco," René says, "he was twenty-six years old and he was already playing incredible stuff." "He was more flamenco then than he was later on, but he was already starting to change the format of the left hand," René explains, "and incorporating new sounds, basically they were new chords that hadn't been incorporated in flamenco before." "Because flamenco was incarcerated in this backbone of Am – G – F – E" (known as the Andalusian cadence), René continues, "and Paco broke that format." "Now these guys play this kind of jazz and bossa nova chords, you don't know what the hell they're playing!" "Sabicas told me not to go out of the circle of flamenco and still come up with something new – that is what's hard." But Paco went out of the circle.

A Lifelong Friendship

Paco began to travel in the broader musical circles outside flamenco. From "Entre Dos Aguas" he went on to make many revolutionary developments which are fundamental to flamenco today, from his work with Camarón to his trio with John McLaughlin and Al Dimeola. But he never lost his connection to the flamencos. This photo was taken at a thanksgiving dinner at Mario Escudero's New York place in 1983 or 1984 (see figure 6). They made a paella with beer instead of water. "Sabicas is talking about the guitar," René explains, "and Paco is intently listening."

Fig. 6. Sabicas and Paco in New York at Mario Escudero's house c. 1983, photographer Candace Bevier. Courtesy of René Heredia.

Fig. 7. René and Paco c. 1973, photographer Candace Bevier. Courtesy of René Heredia.

And René and Paco's friendship never faded (see figure 7). "He'd call me from Canada, from Montreal," René remembers. "We had long distance conversations all the time, talking and joking. We were friends and we would tell stories to each other; there was no competition, it was just friends. We'd talk about a lot of stuff, not just guitar. "This was taken in the apartment of a woman who was a friend of my wife Candy," René recounts, on the 1973 trip to New York. "Paco and I are sitting on the couch and Paco is drinking tea, and I'm talking to him about Sabicas. He loved to hear me talk about Sabicas." Andreána adds that Paco came through one last time just before he died and you could just see, between these friends for forty years, the laughter and the joy.

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