

RALPH ELLISON

LIVING WITH MUSIC

RALPH ELLISON'S JAZZ WRITINGS

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dance movements with religious passion. In *Sweet Little Jesus Boy*, the song "The Holy Babe" is a Negro version of an old English count-rhyme, and while enumerating the gifts of the Christian God to man, Mahalia and Mildred Falls, her pianist, create a rhythmical drive such as is expected of the entire Basie band. It is all joy and exultation and swing, but it is nonetheless religious music. Many who are moved by Mahalia and her spirit have been so impressed by the emotional release of her music that they fail to see the frame within which she moves. But even *In the Upper Room* and *Mahalia Jackson*—in which she reminds us most poignantly of Bessie Smith, and in which the common singing techniques of the spirituals and the blues are most clearly to be heard—are directed toward the afterlife and thus are intensely religious. For those who cannot, or will not, visit Mahalia in her proper setting, these records are the next best thing.

FLAMENCO

*"Flamenco," Ellison's first published music essay, evokes his debt to Ernest Hemingway: the sweat-on-wine-bottle detail, the strings of independent clauses, the deadpan tone that is nonetheless full of passion. Like Hemingway, Ellison uses the occasion of the journalistic piece, in this case a review of new recordings of flamenco music, to make his own statement about life and art. Here the concern for spiritual values within the context of secular art and the conviction that art's power derives significantly from its connection with ritual define Ellison's perspective as a music writer here and throughout his career. Note particularly his sense of flamenco as an attractively hybrid music of Spain, "which is neither Europe nor Africa," he writes, "but a blend of both": flamenco, a form that rhymes with other world musics, particularly the blues. Note, too, Ellison's emphasis on the inextinguishable power of the artist-as-hero. In an interview contemporaneous with this piece, Ellison said of the Spanish dancer/musician Vicente Escudero (celebrated here) that he "could recapitulate the history and spirit of the Spanish dance with a simple arabesque of his fingers." In an intensely charged scene in *Invisible Man*, Ellison presents an old Negro woman who sings "a spiritual as full of weltanschmerz as flamenco." First published as "Introduction to Flamenco," this piece was written for the Saturday Review, December 11, 1954.*

Recently in Paris in Leroy Haynes's restaurant in the Rue de Martyrs, where American Negro fliers and jazz musicians bend over their barbecue and red beans and rice in an attitude as pious as that of any worshiper in Sacre Coeur, which dominates Montmartre above, a gypsy woman entered and told my fortune. She was a handsome woman, dressed in the mysterious, many-skirted costume of the gypsies, and she said that I was soon to take a journey, and that I was to find good fortune. I said jokingly that I had had good fortune, for after dreaming of it for many years I had been to Madrid.

"You went when you should have gone," she said, peering at my hand. "Had you gone earlier you might have found death. But that is of the past. I speak of good fortune in the future."

"There I heard real flamenco," I said, "and that is a good fortune I shall never forget."

"Flamenco," she said. "You understand flamenco? Then you must go see Escudero. You must hear Pepe el del Matrona and Rafael Romero."

"I've heard of Escudero," I said, "but who are these others?"

"You will see," she said. "You will see and hear also."

"This is real good fortune," I said. "I thought Escudero was dead."

"Not dead," she said, holding my hand over a damp spot on the tablecloth, "only old. But to see *bim* is a little more than to take a walk. The fortune of your hand comes after a journey over water."

She then offered, for a further consideration, to tell me other things, but this was enough. I was amused (for sure enough we were flying home two days hence), my wife and friends were laughing that I had submitted to having my palm read, and the knowledge that the legendary Vicente Escudero was dancing again after so many years of retirement was enough good fortune for any one day.

So that evening we saw the old master in the full glory of his resurrection. Dry, now, and birdlike in his grace, Escudero is no longer capable of floor-resounding vigor, but conveys even the stamping fury of the Spanish dance with the gentlest, most delicate, precise, and potent of gestures and movement—reasserting in terms of his own medium a truth which Schumann-Heink, Roland Hayes, and Povla Frijsh have demonstrated in terms of the art of song: that with the great performer it is his style, so tortuously achieved, so carefully cultivated, which is the last to go down before age. And so with the singer Pepe el del Matrona, who at seventy-four is able to dominate the space of even the largest theater with his most pianissimo arabesques of sound.

But more important here than the inspiring triumph of artistic style over time was the triumph, in this most sophisticated of Western cities, of Cante Flamenco, a folk art which has retained its integrity and vitality through two centuries during which the West assumed that it had, through enlightenment, science, and progress, dispensed with those tragic, metaphysical elements of human life which the art of flamenco celebrates. Certainly Escudero and Matrona draw a great deal of their vitality from this tradition that contains many elements which the West has dismissed as "primitive," that epithet so facile for demolishing all things cultural which Westerners do not understand or wish to contemplate. Perhaps Spain (which is neither Europe nor Africa but a blend of both) was once more challenging to our Western optimism. If so, it was not with pessimism but with an affirmative art, which draws its strength and endurance from a willingness to deal with the whole man (Unamuno's man of flesh and blood who must die) in a world which is viewed as basically impersonal and violent; if so, through her singers and dancers and her flamenco music she was making the West a most useful and needed gift.

I haven't yet discovered the specific nature of the gift of fortune which my gypsy promised me, but until something

better appears I'll accept Westminster's new three-volume *Anthology of Cante Flamenco*, which has just won the Grand Prix de Disque, as the answer. Escudero isn't in it, but members of his entourage are: Pepe el del Matrona, Rafael Romero, and the great flamenco guitarist Perico el del Lunar, who along with eight other artists present thirty-three excellently recorded examples of flamenco song style.

Cante Flamenco is the very ancient folk music of the Andalusian gypsies of southern Spain. Its origins are as mysterious as those of the gypsies themselves, but in it are heard Byzantine, Arabic, Hebraic, and Moorish elements fused and given the violent, rhythmical expressiveness of the gypsies. Cante Flamenco, or *cante bondo* (deep song, as the purer, less florid form is called), is a unique blending of Eastern and Western modes and as such it often baffles when it most intrigues the Western ear. In our own culture the closest music to it in feeling is the Negro blues, early jazz, and the slave songs (now euphemistically termed "spirituals"). Even a casual acquaintance with Westminster's anthology reveals certain parallels, and jazz fans will receive here a pleasant shock of recognition. Soon to be released free to those who purchase the *Anthology* is a forty-page booklet containing the text of the songs and a historical survey of flamenco literature written by Professor Tomas Andrade de Silva of the Royal Conservatory at Madrid.

Like Negro folk music, Cante Flamenco (which recognizes no complete separation between dance and song, the basic mood, the guitar and castanets, hold all together) is a communal art. In the small rooms in which it is performed there are no "squares" sitting around just to be entertained, everyone participates very much as during a noncommercial jam session or a Southern jazz dance. It can be just as noisy and sweaty and drunken as a Birmingham "breakdown"; while one singer "riffs" (improvises) or the dancers "go to town" the others assist by clapping their hands in the intricate percussive manner called *palmada* and by stamping

out the rhythms with their feet. When a singer, guitarist, or dancer has negotiated a particularly subtle passage (and this is an art of great refinements) the shouts of *¡Olé!* arise to express appreciation of his art, to agree with the sentiments expressed, and to encourage him on to even greater eloquence. Very often the *Anthology* side containing the *cantes con baile* (dance songs) sounds like a revivalists' congregation saying "Amen!" to the preacher.

Flamenco, while traditional in theme and choreography, allows a maximum of individual expression, and a democratic rivalry such as is typical of a jam session; for, like the blues and jazz, it is an art of improvisation, and like them it can be quite graphic. Even one who doesn't understand the lyrics will note the uncanny ability of the singers presented here to produce pictorial effects with their voices. Great space, echoes, rolling slopes, the charging of bulls, and the prancing and galloping of horses flow in this sound much as animal cries, train whistles, and the loneliness of night sound through the blues.

The nasal, harsh, anguished tones heard on these sides are not the results of ineptitude or "primitivism"; like the "dirty tone" of the jazz instrumentalist, they are the result of an esthetic which rejects the beautiful sound sought by classical Western music.

Not that flamenco is simply a music of despair; this is true mainly of the *seguidillas*, the *soleares*, and the *saetas* (arrows of song) which are sung when the holy images are paraded during Holy Week, and which Rafael Romero sings with a pitch of religious fervor that reminds one of the great Pastora Pavon (*La Niña de los Peines*). But along with these darker songs the *Anthology* offers all the contrasts, the gay *alegrías*, *bulerías*, *sevillanas*, the passionate *peteneras*, lullabies (*nana*), prison songs, mountain songs, and laments. Love, loneliness, disappointment, pride—all these are themes for Cante Flamenco. Perhaps what attracts us most to flamenco, as it does to the blues, is the note of unillusioned affirmation

of humanity which it embodies. The gypsies, like the slaves, are an outcast though undefeated people who have never lost their awareness of the physical source of man's most spiritual moments; even their Christ is a man of flesh and bone who suffered and bled before his apotheosis. In its more worldly phases the flamenco voice resembles the blues voice, which mocks the despair stated explicitly in the lyric, and it expresses the great human joke directed against the universe, that joke which is the secret of all folklore and myth: that though we be dismembered daily we shall always rise up again. Americans have long found in Spanish culture a clarifying perspective on their own. Now in this anthology of Spanish folklore we have a most inviting challenge to listen more attentively to the deeper voice of our own.

RICHARD WRIGHT'S BLUES

This early essay, written about the time Ellison was starting Invisible Man, offers an important assertion of the compass of Richard Wright's cultural inheritances, including his international modernist reading and his debt to the local language and perspectives of the blues. It is also a seminal statement of Ellison's philosophy of the music—defined in terms of existentialist endurance as well as tragicomic wisdom—and about how the blues can influence the forms and strategies of writers and other artists who are not musicians. At the time of this essay's publication, Ellison and his literary mentor Wright were very close friends, as their correspondence (much of it available in the library at Yale University) testifies. For a fuller picture of Ellison's complicated, changing views of Wright, see also Ellison's "Richard Wright and Recent Negro Fiction" (Direction, Summer 1941) as well as "The World and the Fug" and "Remembering Richard Wright" (both in The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison). "Richard Wright's Blues" first appeared in The Antioch Review in the summer of 1945.

If anybody ask you
who sing this song,