

The Chicago Music Authority



Las Guitarras de Espana *Ido y Vuelta*

By Darryl Cater

Las Guitarras de Espana hopes to capitalize on two of the world music phenomena that have turned old world and third world musical styles into big business for mass American audiences: the rollicking multicultural flamenco of the Gypsy Kings and the Cuban rhythms of the Ry Cooder's Cuban filmed fiesta *Buena Vista Social Club*.

The band's energetic mix of those styles, along with other Latin, Caribbean, Middle Eastern and African influences, makes for a lively, unusual listen even when these skilled Chicagoan musicians lack some of the pop polish of those million-sellers.

Like the Gipsy Kings, this band sometimes filters their multi-ethnic influences through modern American forms like R&B jazz and gospel, and even a bit from the blues (unlike the Gipsy Kings, there's no electronic keyboards or pop radio balladry). But those modern influences are mainly embroidery on an album whose heart is in the traditional styles of other cultures.

The foundation of Las Guitarras de Espana's style is flamenco, that distinctive Spanish rhythmic (clap clap!) form that has been around for so long nobody is quite sure exactly where it came from. Flamenco is generally associated with southern Spain in general and Andalusia in particular, but its creators might well have been gypsies who may have wandered there from as far as India.

By the time Flamenco reached Las Guitarras de Espana, it picked up various other connotations and subgenres like a rolling snowball picks up snow. The album's title, *Ido y Vuelta*, which means "round trip," or literally "gone and back," is, according to the band's liner notes, used by flamencos to describe musical forms that have "gone" from Spain to the Caribbean and Latin America and then "returned" to Spain.

Curmudgeonly purists sometimes complain about American musicians appropriating the styles of other cultures and then raking in money that might otherwise have been made by those cultures' own musicians. But flamenco's global history should silence any cynics who might be inclined to pass over Las Guitarras simply because they're based in Chicago. The Gipsy Kings themselves, musical emissaries of flamenco to the world, got their start in France.

For newcomers to the style who wish to learn from the band, the liner notes provide very brief encapsulations of each track's musical origins: "Tu Amor: a flamenco rumba with Cuban rumba influence," "Cha Cha Cha: a traditional cha cha cha written for our friend from Havana," "Conciencia: a rumba flamenca form with a rhythm and blues influence"... The tracks range from a funky bass-heavy R&B rumba to contemplative classical guitar to a traditional 12-count flamenco instrumental colored by dreamy use of the Middle Eastern oud and tabla.

The core of the band is formed by guitarist Carlo Basile (MA, classical guitar, Northeastern Illinois University), percussionist Doug Brush (Rose Polenzani, The Weird Sisters) and singers David Gonzalez (a native of Veracruz Mexico) and Patty Ortega. Those regulars are joined by quite a few other musicians, including Colin Bunn (formerly of Andrew Bird's Bowl of Fire, now fronting Los Hombres Perdidos), Julie Goldberg and Jennifer Trowbridge.

© 1999-2003 The Morrissey Group, Inc. All Rights Reserved