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NOVEMBER 2015 | ACOUSTICGUITAR.COM

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METAL FLAMENCO



VINCE TRUSPIN

With flamenco arrangements of heavy-metal classics, **Ben Woods** explores the 'perfect marriage' of two genres

By Pat Moran



**'FLAMENCO IS NOT
LIKE CLASSICAL
GUITAR OR
FINGERSTYLE.
IT UNLEASHES
A BURST OF
VIRTUOSITY.'**

BEN WOODS

“When I first heard flamenco guitar,” Ben Woods says, “I thought it sounded like acoustic speed metal.”

At the time, Woods, who crafts flamenco arrangements of heavy-metal tunes on Cordoba, Godin, and Ortega nylon-string guitars, was playing death metal on electric guitar, and sharing a house with fellow musicians when he hit upon his fusion of Pantera’s pyrotechnics and Paco de Lucia’s precision.

It was a flash of inspiration—aided by a drug addict.

“We didn’t know our new roommate was a junkie until I came home and found my electric guitar and all my speakers gone. He had stolen them, and I never saw him [or the gear] again.”

Finding a Spanish guitar in the house, Woods continued to practice metal runs on it. “That’s when I thought, ‘This sounds like Spanish stuff I’ve heard.’”

While researching Spanish guitar, he discovered flamenco. “I didn’t know about it until I needed to seek it out.”

Woods planned to transfer acoustic techniques back to metal once he bought a new electric guitar. That idea was discarded when Woods fell under flamenco’s sway.

At first, the self-taught guitarist gained proficiency by listening to records and copying what he heard. But that approach “hit a wall,” says Woods, who commenced years of intensive study under American-born flamenco master Marcos Carmona.

“I learned the rasgueado—the stroke that fans out: pinky, ring, middle, index finger,” he says. “I learned the compas, all the different rhythmical forms in flamenco. I learned all of the tonalities, which [flamenco players] do in two different keys.”

Spanning 20-plus years, Woods’ studies included a trip to southern Spain, where he soaked up flamenco culture.

“I’m still learning,” he says. “I could spend my whole life learning.”

One realization took hold of his imagination: music theory for metal and flamenco are similar, Woods says.

“The harmonic minor scales and the Phrygian mode [present] in metal are also in flamenco,” he says, adding that flamenco, like metal, boasts aggressive playing. “Flamenco is not like classical guitar or fingerstyle. It unleashes a burst of virtuosity.” Woods says fusing flamenco and metal is “the perfect marriage.”

Woods put that musical marriage to the test. Moving to San Francisco in 2004, the Seattle native formed the flamenco metal band FlamenMetal.

Releasing an album, *The Elder*, in 2005 and touring Japan, the combo consisted of

amplified acoustic flamenco guitar, electric guitar, bass, and drums, playing “the proper bulerias, seguiriyas, soleares, and fandangos.”

Onstage, the lineup boasted two or three flamenco dancers. In addition to providing color and spectacle, the dancers were key to the music, Woods says. “As percussionists, professional flamenco dancers are better than a lot of rock drummers.”

The dancers also supplied authentic palmas, “clapping with traditional flamenco rhythms,” Woods says.

FlamenMetal proved too wild for flamenco aficionados, and too experimental for metal fans. After five years and two albums, the band folded, but Woods kept the name alive to brand further projects.

Moving to Los Angeles in 2010, Woods recorded a flamenMetal set by himself. That album’s title, *Heavy Mellow*, pointed the way forward. With guitarist Luis Villegas and percussionist Mike Bennett on cajon, Woods formed the trio Heavy Mellow. Specializing in flamenco and Spanish guitar versions of the players’ favorite heavy metal tunes, the trio continues to gig in Southern California.

Woods also connects with audiences through solo shows. Though he concentrates on flamenco forms, “once in awhile I’ll stick in a Dio song,” Woods says. “Out of everyone, there’s at least one guy in the back who throws up the heavy-metal horns when he recognizes the tune.”

After a successful spring 2014 run, Woods rejoins classical guitarist Thomas Zwijsen this fall for the Master Guitar Tour, which takes the nylon-string power duo to Europe. “[Thomas and I] formed a friendship based on mutual respect,” Woods says. “We know how to [craft] creative arrangements, which stay true enough to the original tunes so people can recognize them.”

Woods’ whirlwind of activity is augmented by the completion and publication of his instructional book, *Metal Classics for Fingerstyle Guitar*, as well as the online release of two new self-recorded albums—*FlamenMetallica* and *FlamenMetal Priest*, which showcase flamenco arrangements of songs by Metallica and Judas Priest, respectively.

To capstone his industrious year, Woods is returning to his original plan to bring acoustic technique to electric guitar.

“The album, called *Electric Flamenco*, will use what I learned playing flamenco, but on electric guitar, playing with the fingers and with no distortion,” Woods says.

Though this approach might rile some flamenco fans, the guitarist is undeterred.

“When you get right down to it, you have to use the instrument to its full capacity.” AG

Ben Woods with
flamenco dancer
Arleen Hurtado