

# Nougat

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## Magazine

Flamenco Fusion is some of the most exciting and engaging music on the world music scene. Alma Gitana (Gypsy Soul), a Lexington-based fusion band, is gathering recognition for their fine blending of flamenco with Middle Eastern music and jazz influences. Their excellence has emerged from their musicianship along with the teaching and encouragement of established flamenco artists. "Being musicians from outside the culture of flamenco, we are striving to learn the music as deeply as we can," said Stuart Waldner, the lead singer and founder of the band. "That means having as much contact with and exposure to the Flamenco artists that come from the music's homeland in Andalusia, Spain."

## Gypsy Soul

Story and Photo by Campbell Wood

One supporter of Alma Gitana is Alfonso Cid, an internationally known singer of traditional Cante Flamenco and a native of Seville, Spain. "I'm really impressed with what I've heard of Alma Gitana's music," wrote

Cid in response to an e-mail inquiry. "I'm really amazed at how musicians from other cultures embrace Flamenco and make it part of their lives. That makes me feel proud of being a person from Andalusia, and it's amazing that the music from where I am makes such a big impression on such good musicians. These guys from Alma Gitana really care and are doing a great job on introducing Flamenco to bigger audiences."

Waldner traveled to the "Big Apple" with other members of the band to attend concerts across the city during the 2007 New York Flamenco Festival. He met Cid during that trip through the flamenco guitarist, Arturo Martinez, who has been a friend and teacher to Alma Gitana. Cid coached Waldner in techniques of flamenco singing.

Alma Gitana is getting recognition from other quarters, as well. The group was featured last year at the Jazz Factory in Louisville as part of the Adelante Latin Jazz Festival. "Alma Gitana provides a fascinating mix of gypsy jazz and rhythmic precision that entranced the audience," said Ken Shapero, owner of the Jazz Factory. "This is a band that takes care of business." To see the band one need only travel as far as downtown Lexington where they usually appear at Natasha's Cafe once a month.

The group grew from the ensemble of three: Stuart Waldner, vocalist and percussionist, and Bob Elliott and Duane Corn, both guitarists. Later Waldner would propose that they expand and form a flamenco fusion band, but starting in 1999, they were part of Jalaos Flamencos, playing traditional flamenco accompaniment for flamenco dance performances. These days the band is accompanied by flamenco dancers only on special occasions, like for their recent show at the Thoroughbred Theater in Midway, where they were joined by dancers Chandra Nair and Jennifer Laughlin, both of Mecca Studio in Lexington.

During a recent Alma Gitana show at Natasha's, Waldner introduced a flamenco instrumental piece that prominently featured Elliott's guitar work. He remarked that without Elliott, the band would not be.

"My Dad went to a flamenco show, made friends with the musicians and brought them all home for a party," recalled Elliott. A late night of live music, dancing and jovial spirits kept the young boy, who was supposed to be in bed sleeping, riveted to the upstairs banister where he peered down and listened. "For a boy growing up in rural western Kentucky, it was sure exotic and foreign sounding," said Elliot.

Years later, having rediscovered one of his father's flamenco records, Elliott shifted his priority away from playing folk and rock on his guitar. He connected with virtuoso flamenco guitarist Rene Heredia, a "true gypsy" from Sevilla, Spain, who had taken up residence in the U.S. Elliott continues making annual trips to Colorado to study with Heredia.

After some solo public shows on flamenco guitar, Elliot invited Waldner to join him on percussion. Waldner, an accomplished percussionist, had been a musical gypsy himself, gathering experience with various styles in the world of drumming, from rock and jazz to hand drumming in the West African styles of Mali and Senegal to traditional Irish and Scottish percussion.

"When Bob asked me to play percussion, he gave me recordings to listen to," said Waldner. "I was blown away by the rhythmic complexity of flamenco." Waldner now plays percussion for Alma Gitana on a variety of



instruments, but most prominent is the cajón, a drum box originating in Peru that has been widely adopted into flamenco music over the last 30 years.

Next to join was Duane Corn. He had met Elliott at a flamenco guitar workshop. When he moved to Lexington in 1999, he saw Elliott and Waldner play and was eager to join. Corn brought highly skilled guitar technique to the group. He had trained in classical guitar (also becoming a member of Lexington Guitar Trio). Corn also plays the laud, a stringed instrument of the Spanish folk tradition, known to some as the Spanish mandolin.

In early 2004 George Wakim joined the band bringing another strand of exotic sound with the Middle Eastern music of the oud, a stringed instrument that is the ancestor of the Renaissance lute. The oud has a fretless neck that allows for the playing of micro tones and pitches that slide into one another, Arabic style. Wakim also brings Arabic style violin and singing, as well as tabla playing. "I had seen George play at Mayfest," said Waldner. "I thought right away that he'd be great to have in our group. He came to a rehearsal and has been with us ever since." Wakim's roots in Middle Eastern music come from his upbringing in Lebanon. When hearing him play, he's so good, it's surprising to consider that he's self taught on all of the instruments he plays. He also crafted his own violin, having studied instrument building with the late J.B. Miller of Lexington.

Scott Stoess later in 2004 joined Alma Gitana. His masterful playing of the fretless bass blends into the music's weave giving it a foundation and providing a good groove when called for. Stoess first became known in the Lexington music scene as a member of the 1980s band, Velvet Elvis. He has since played freelance, and has recorded with Patrick McNeese.

Occasional guest artists include Reid Jahn on soprano and tenor sax, David Farris on percussion and Nick Radina on timbales and percussion.