

This month's articles | [Workshop](#) | [Spain](#) | [Strength](#) | [Martha](#)

## Stress Free Bulerías

### La Meira returns to Atlanta for a bulerías workshop

When La Meira comes to Atlanta Aug. 20-21 to teach bulerías, dance and guitar students will be treated to 8+ hours of flamenco the fun way. American-born Meira spent years studying and working in flamenco in Spain. She learned from great teachers and by osmosis of sorts. Now, she's sharing her knowledge with flamencos in America with her straightforward, simple method.

La Meira taught bulerías to Atlantans last year, never uttering the words 12-3-6-8-10. She passed on "silly steps" and serious ones, reflecting the capricious nature of bulerías. Now, she'll do it again, but in a new format.

La Meira's classes will be four hours long each day. Dancers, don't fear. This doesn't mean you'll be on your feet the whole time. You'll dance half the time and play palmas the other half of the time, learning new rhythms to support your friends who are grooving with La Meira. Guitarists will have a separate class with Meira before the dancers arrive, to shore up chords and other necessities.

The workshop is focusing on bulerías for two reasons. First, it's just so much fun! You can express yourself in eye-popping desplantes or clown around with some creative marcaje. Second, it's the end to much used palos such as alegrías and soleá, making it a necessity for the flamenco repertoire.

Registration is open now for the workshop. Information about signing up and other details can be found online at [flamencoclasses.com/workshop](http://flamencoclasses.com/workshop).

[Back to top](#)



**La Meira**

## Spain: I Put Myself Here

### **Julie Baggenstoss says a flamenco adventure in Spain has its highs and lows.**

So everyone wants to know, how was Spain? After three trips to Seville to study flamenco, I want to give the most honest and personal answer to that question. Spain was difficult. Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining. The fact that it was hard made it more fun in ways, but it also made me want to just quit at times.

My first days of flamenco study in Seville have always been brilliant. Locals walk to work, while I walk, no, skip to class, with a strong café con leche seeping into my blood. I immediately throw myself into a hectic schedule of multiple daily classes, knowing if I wait, I will talk myself out of it.

In class, I hardly notice that the studios are so packed that other dancers are only 2 feet away from me. The small Spanish air conditioners really stand no chance against the heat generated by Mother Earth and the 30 men and women stomping together in the room. No one complains, because we all know our time in Spain is precious and we need to make the most of it.

My eyes sparkle and my skin glows with the thought that I am in Spain studying flamenco. My mixture of classes takes me to studios around town for classes led by powerful dancers such as Soraya Clavijo, Pilar Ortega and Manuela Reyes. My classes range from beginner to advanced levels. It's a mixture that's sure to bring strong challenges and new ways of looking at things that I already know. Most of all, I hope my classes will stretch me to the next level. I purposely get in over my head so that I can come out a better dancer, with a new branch and an extra foot of height.

That optimism dies when my confidence usually crashes by the end of the first week. A tiring schedule that doesn't sync with Spanish restaurant hours leaves me exhausted. Difficult steps that I stumbled over earlier still cause me trouble and I start to wonder what I am doing in Spain. The dancing is out of this world, but the opportunity to put it into my body is passing me by. What's wrong with me?

I tell myself I could get the steps if the teachers would just slow down. But, hey,

#### JULIE'S FLAMENCO NOTES

Selecting flamenco dance classes in Spain takes a bit of skill and a bit of luck. There are a handful of studios that employ great teachers. Finding those studios is just a matter of looking around and asking here and there. Finding a great class that fits your schedule is where luck comes in. Don't book classes ahead of time, as teachers notoriously cancel when performing opportunities arise.

#### RECOMMENDED SEVILLE TEACHERS

Manuel Betanzos & Soraya Clavijo, @ [La Academia de Flamenco Manuel Betanzos](#)

Pilar Ortega @ [La Escuela Flamenca de Juan Polvillo](#)

Manuela Reyes @ Arco de Triana, C/Rodrigo de Triana, 20

[More Studios](#)

this is Spain. The beginner class is not for beginners really. It's for people who already know flamenco and would like to begin studying it in Spain. The intermediate class is for dancers who can move their feet quickly, turn on a tight axis and tackle complicated marking steps. Advanced students pick up moves after the teacher shows them only once, and the footwork is faster than fast. So, who is going to slow down?

As my doubts increase, I decide that I am the one who needs to slow down. I make a friend or two in class and spend some time talking. We admit to each other bit by bit that we're having trouble, and discover everyone is fuzzy on that one part of choreography; we're all having trouble communicating in Spanish; we wish they'd put a little less garlic and olive oil in the food; and still, we really love the fact that we're in Spain, even though we're getting our butts kicked.

Knowing I am not alone gives me new energy come Monday morning. And, thus the second week of study begins. "I put myself here," I remind myself as I go for that difficult step again. "This is my choice."

Eventually, I get it and with new clarity see for the first time lots of ticklers around me. No one is counting anything in class. Steps are presented in rhythms, with no explanation of compas. If you want to find the 10, you're on your own. Flamenco definitions are about as reliable as the Spanish I studied. One teacher's llamada is another's remate, and her remate is another's contestacion. And, desplante? No one is even talking about desplantes! Throw out my flamenco notebook along with my Spanish dictionary! It's a wonder I was able to get the easy steps, let alone struggle through the difficult ones.

And then, it happens. The teacher walks up to me and tells me I am doing something wrong. He explains the problem and helps me correct it. I hold back tears of joy, likely brought on by exhaustion. The light shining through the studio window creates a glow and all students seem to disappear from the room. "I am in Spain studying flamenco and the teacher just taught me something," I tell myself. "Now, if I could just get him to come over to me about three or four more times before I leave!"

And, thus I turn the corner. My confidence is back. The rest of the classes come and go without a hitch. Movements become second nature and I find myself dancing. My mind and my body have time and space to truly enjoy the moment. I even notice the teacher is singing that "Triana, Triana" tangos letra por alegrías!

Somewhere in the euphoria of flamenco moves, I begin to realize the best part about studying this art in Spain is that in the end, I am studying myself.

I think of the trips as personal tests of just how far I can go. Fly across the world, navigating cancelled flights? Retrofit footwork into compas so I can pack it up and take it home to Atlanta? Dissect fast, marbly Spanish to understand class material and waiters? Overcome city maps with mislabeled street names? Realize that I won't be able to learn everything and feel good about leaving something for next time? Yes, I can do this and more.

The tests remind me of my accomplishments. They provide a brilliant path for me to realize again and again how much I do not know and how much I want to know. And when I become overwhelmed with my list of flamenco wants, I am comforted to know that Spain is going to be there. What I do with it is up to me.

[Back to top](#)

## A Student With Her Teacher:

### An Interview with Martha SidAhmed, Part III : Marta in Ohio and Atlanta

By Rebecca Money Johnson

**R:** So how long were you in Spain?

**M:** I was just there for a summer.

Toward the end of that time I was at a point where I really couldn't absorb any more. The last juerga had all these great artists from Moron and in addition, this great singer Juan Telega, who was one of the legends in the development of cante. He was singing and I could hardly absorb that he was there. That's when I knew it was time to go home and just get some distance from this and take a breath. That's just

me. There are people who say "Oh, I'm in it and I'm never leaving." But for me, I've always had to have a removal time. Get myself out of it and breathe fresh air and just absorb everything that I've taken in because it was just overpowering at that point - up all night, all day, all night, all day, with juerga. You go out into the morning and you're in a café drinking little copas de anis...

**R:** woe...

**M:** (laughing) yes... and then... coffee or chocolate. And then everyone is saying "o.k., where do we go next?" And I would think "I just have to go to bed!" (laughing)

**R:** So was that the summer after college?

**M:** I never finished college.

**R:** Oh, I thought you had.

**M:** I just punked out with flamenco (laughs).

**R:** I love you for that!

**M:** I felt guilty about that for years.

**R:** But you know, you are so brilliant, I would have never guessed that.



Martha SidAhmed in 1974.



**Martha SidAhmed in 1975.**

**M:** Well, my family is so educated and I felt I was a big disappointment. And, it was just flamenco street smarts after that! But you know, I just had to go. I had just gone to college for one year, and all I could think about was flamenco. I could hardly concentrate on college. It was just obsessive. But I got back, and Sid and I, who had already been seeing each other, married and started a family and moved to Ohio. I was busy with the kids but I was still thinking flamenco. I can't remember how much I was doing then but I would listen to it and dance at home. There was no one teaching it there. I thought I

wasn't qualified but I didn't know what else to do - I needed to stay involved. I thought - I have a few things I can show somebody, so do I have the guts to call myself a teacher and start classes? Then I was contacted by a studio in Cleveland that was teaching Spanish dance so there were some aspects of flamenco that I could share with them.

**R:** And teaching is learning...

**M:** It sure is, it sure is. I really had to focus on not just showing a move but examining point of origin in the body. I danced completely different then. My style of dance has changed over the years from my process of teaching and then taking class and more teaching and taking class - distilling things and making decisions about what things to let go and what new things to incorporate. You have to be willing to let go of what's familiar and comfortable and take on something temporarily difficult or awkward because you know that's where you want to be. I never had a mentor and had to work a lot on my own. Somewhere in all this discarding and coordinating and merging you kind of develop your own style. It's not a conscious thing, you know... "I need to develop my style today!"

**R:** And there is this pressure to do that prematurely.

**M:** And as an artist, Rebecca, you know all the years it takes to get there. You don't wake up one day and suddenly say, "I've arrived! I have my own style!" It's when people start giving you feed back like "you dance nothing like that other person, your style is completely opposite of this" And of course, my first reaction was "uh oh!"

**R:** (laughing) Yeah, Isn't that weird how our first thought is always "does that mean I stink?"

**M:** (laughing) Then you think, well, someone has noticed a difference there and that's a good thing. It doesn't mean it's bad or good, it's just different. It's again, coming back to the music, coming back to the music. What is that saying to you, and how do you want to move with that? And the only way you can do that is first from taking tons of classes with tons of different people and imitating those different people, even if you think, "this is not me!" or "this is not my dance" or "I don't feel comfortable in that" or "I don't think I'm a Soleá person" You don't even know that much to know to make those decisions! How do you know if you don't try? You have to make the effort and put yourself through that

hard process of "why doesn't this feel like me?" and get to the root of what it is: "o.k., this is what I need to solve, right here. Why am I uncomfortable with this? This movement feels silly to me, but there's this little core in it that I like. Let me take that piece and maybe borrow this little something else I saw. There, that feels better. Actually, that feels pretty good! Hey! That doesn't look bad either! O.K., that's what I'll do!" But it takes such tiny little steps; and you don't realize you are developing a style. It's an internal process that involves weighing yourself with the music. You have to try the extreme responses - a huge llamada with a lot of footwork. You have to try the subtle responses - just walking in and doing a shoulder or head turn. Or just standing there and doing the nothing. All of these different things feed into you as a dancer and a growing artist and the stripping away of the "me" from it, removing the ego. And in doing that, somehow, you start to build confidence - which becomes your ego again, but a different ego built from the strength of who you are becoming through this wonderful art. Flamenco teaches us so much about ourselves. And it's an ongoing process - constantly feeding and giving away and feeding and giving away, exposing yourself, taking risks.

**R:** Which is so much a part of life - and what we learn in flamenco helps with so many things.

**M:** It absolutely does. If you are in a new situation and you are asking yourself "can I do this?" You then remember how you developed yourself in ways that were totally surprising and astonishing to yourself in flamenco, so, you tell yourself, "I can do this, too!" And it gives you a little piece of "that thing" that flamencos are born with, which is just knowing they're born from greatness. It's a wonderful thing to carry with you - just feeling total confidence in who you are and what you're doing with no doubt about your path.

**R:** Well, I think that is why compas is so analogous to "collective memory", you know? It's knowing who you are - and with compas you know its going to be there...

**M:** It's totally astonishing when you hear compas and your whole body just gets totally riveted in that direction. You could be shopping in Macy's or on a bus somewhere and you hear that rhythm and say "what is that? Who's doing that?"

**R:** Or you even find yourself tapping out a compas. Like lately, I find myself tapping out Bulerías all the time, now... and the windshield goes and you find something in between the movement...

**M:** (laughs) tangos...

**R:** So, in Ohio, how long were you there until you started teaching?



**Martha SidAhmed performing at Centennial Olympics Park in Atlanta.**

**M:** We moved into a neighborhood which was developing out of old farmland. We were the third house on the street and the Temos moved into a little "L" street that was just off of ours. I remember the first time I saw Marija - it was at Christmas, and she was about three years old, at the door with box of Temo's chocolates. She had this big furry hat wrapped all around her head and she looked like a little Christmas elf. She was the same age as my son Stefan and they became best friends. Joan (Marija's mother) and I really started connecting when the kids were going to

Kindergarten. We would meet and chat at the bus stop and I learned about their rich heritage of Greek, Albanian, and Serbian background. When I was in college I was into a folkdance performing group and fell in love this music and dance. And then Joan said she couldn't believe there was a flamenco dancer right down the street from her, that she had always wanted to learn flamenco. Joan invited me over one afternoon and we just danced *kolos* (Balkan line dances) for hours in her living room. We really gelled and our families have been very close ever since - one family, basically. Marija was sort of swept into that when I decided to start teaching dance. She was in the children's class and Joan would come to the adult class. Joanne is a wonderful dancer, too - very rhythmic and musical. And her husband Larry too. And that's how it all started.

**R:** You are so fortunate to have had all of that in your community.

**M:** I know, yes.

R: So, the group in college, was that a folkloric group?

**M:** Yes, it was. We learned a lot of Eastern European dances. Joan once said to me once... "just play a weird rhythm for me and I'm your captive!" That was always me too.

**R:** Wow! I love that!

**M:** Joan really opened that door for me again. We would go up to Cleveland where there was a huge population of people from that part of the world and they'd have these big tamburitza conventions and competitions. After the performances we would go to the ballroom afterwards and dance all night with these great bands. The next morning, you could not move your legs the dancing is all off the ball of the foot and your calves get such a huge workout. I just wasn't used to that after all those years of flamenco which is so different. (laughs)

**R:** I love that!

**M:** It was just great stuff. When I hear or see that music... there was some guy that came into Atlanta when we first moved here. He came here from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh; which has always had a huge cultural program for Balkan art and a big performing company of dancers, musicians, singers, the Duquesne University Tamboritzans, or Tammies for short. But he came down here and I took his workshop and it was just great.



**R:** Are there a lot of violins?

**M:** Violins, drums, bagpipes - but very wild sounding bagpipes - different kinds of flutes and horns. Accordions - big time accordions! And to compare the different ways (the Balkan artists) would play these instruments would be like comparing flamenco guitar to other guitar playing. This stuff is really complicated. The rhythms! You hear them and you just can't sit still... complicated patterns and stamping. Of course the women would be our own line doing a more modest style. Then the men's line would do these amazing things stamps and kicks and leaping into the air and landing on their knees... and I would think "I want to be in that line!"

**R:** So, when did you leave Ohio, when was that?

**M:** We came here in 1979 and of course, there was no flamenco in Atlanta. Probably that year or the next I started dipping my toe in the water trying to find a studio... I didn't know her at the time, but Purita Silver who was from Madrid, was teaching Spanish dancing and some flamenco through the Cuban Club.

**R:** Where was your first teaching venue here in Atlanta?

**M:** I was teaching at Dance Circle in Buckhead because it was literally the only studio that said, "yes, we love flamenco, come and teach here."

**R:** Is it still around?

**M:** I don't think so - it was on East Andrews. I started teaching there, and the owners of the school knew a flamenco guitarist, Vincent Messina who was from New York. Vinny and I got together and worked up some venues which we did for a while. Then I met Olga Baer, a lovely energetic Mexican woman who had created a non-profit Hispanic arts group named Casa Cultural. Through her, different opportunities came. We even brought Paco Peña to Atlanta. We were trying to think of how to get to N.Y. to see him and then Olga said "Oh, Marta, let's bring him here!". Through her organization we were able to get a grant and then we built the whole thing from the ground up. He played at the Walter J. Hill Auditorium in the old High Museum.

**R:** How was the crowd?

**M:** It was pretty good! We were about - filled. We had a reception afterward at the Don Juan Restaurant which was still in existence then. It was a day long affair. I set up an interview for him with Yvonne del Wright, who had a show called "Latin Atlanta" And George Petsch at the Atlanta Guitar Center organized a huge guitar workshop. That's how the day started. I am so grateful for the networking in those days - Olga, Yvonne, Purita, Edith Moritz who taught Spanish at Westminster, Lino Dominguez who had just started Mundo Hispanico, Juan Ramirez of the Atlanta Virtuosi... so many creative and generous people who loved and supported flamenco.

*And we are so fortunate that over the years, Marta was an integral component in slowly and patiently educating our city regarding Flamenco; consequently helping to create the Flamenco community that we presently enjoy. There is a lot of wisdom in Marta's experiences. And so I took great pleasure in revisiting her thoughts as I was transcribing this interview. Now they are archived and here for you, too, as you grow in your dance. Please look for a final installment next month when an excerpt from this interview will be offered, giving a few of*



Marta's opinions on *getting the most from classes and workshops*. Read part one and two in the [jaleolé.com archive](#) and visit next month for the conclusion of its series.

[Back to Top](#)

## Strong enough for flamenco?

**Gloriela Rosas' fitness column on jaleolé.com.**

**By Gloriela Rosas**

As you experience the power of flamenco dance, you start to realize the physical effort it demands of your body. You learn that good posture, strong core, legs and arms are so important for your body to perform a move at its best.

To achieve all this, let's continue with our short exercise routines to obtain stronger abs, arms and legs. Do these exercises at least four times a week for 15-20 minutes and soon you will see a difference in your performance. And, why not? Your look!

**Hamstring stretch** (a ball and a towel can be used): Lie on your back on the floor. Make sure your entire back has full contact with the floor (tip: pull your belly bottom down towards your spine) and the back of the calves resting on the ball or the floor. During the motions, keep the tailbone in contact with the floor.



Place the towel across the arch of one foot. As you keep the tailbone anchored on the floor, slowly straighten the leg into the air. Hold for about 50 seconds. Breathe normally. Return the leg to the ball or floor and switch sides. For a deeper stretch or intermediate level, place both hands on the back of the thigh. Inhale to

prepare. Exhale to slowly walk the hands up the back of the leg. Inhale at the top as you reach toward the toes while keeping the shoulders on the floor and gently pulling leg towards the chest.

Exhale to walk down the back of the leg. Repeat three times on each leg. These exercises not only will help you to straighten your core, and legs, but they will also help you correct alignment problems. As your feel stronger, increase the counts and repetitions, and decrease the length of your resting period between set. Have fun and continue enjoying Flamenco...

[Back to top](#)

© jaleolé.com 2005

