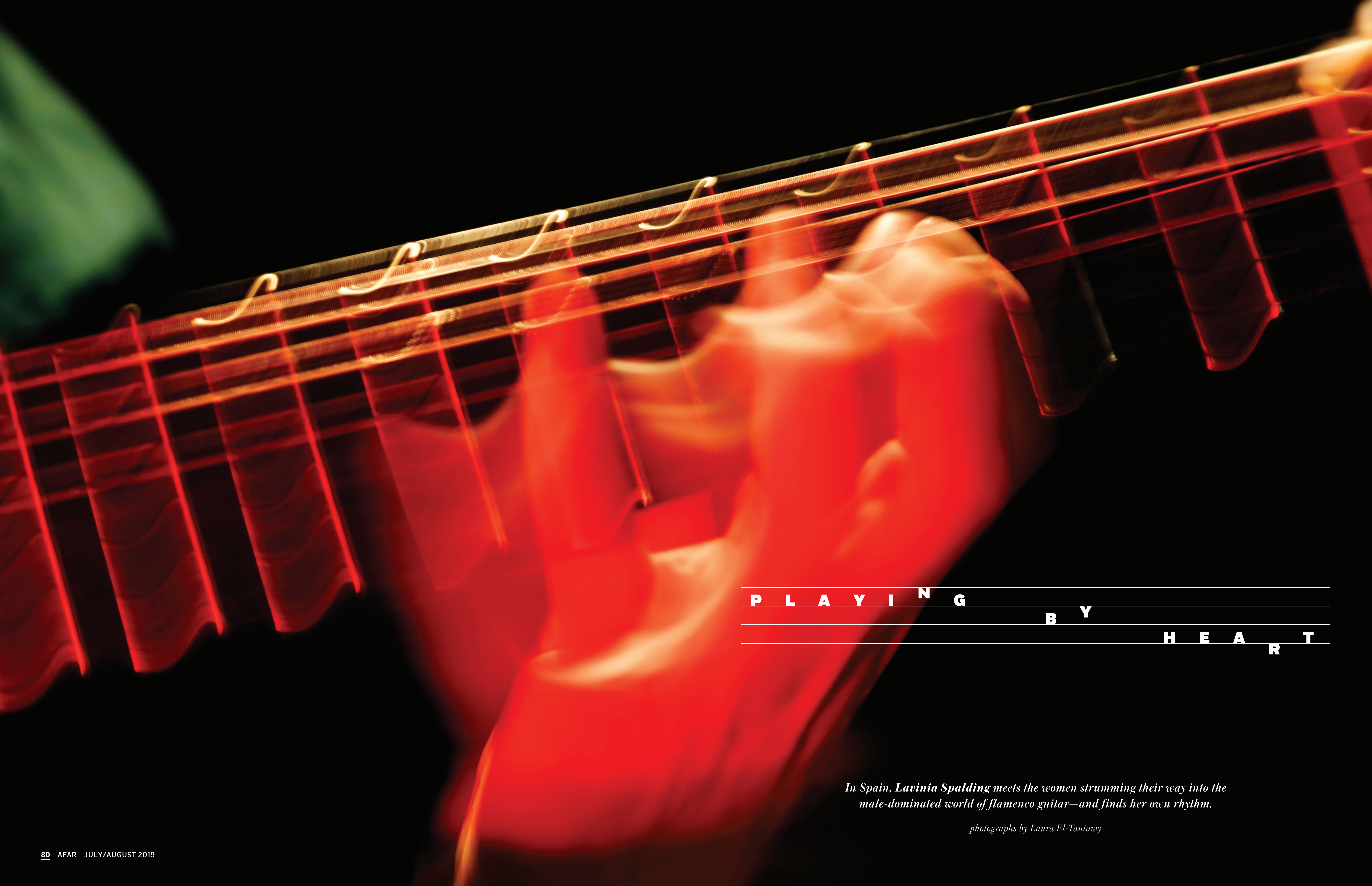

PLAYING BY HEART

*In Spain, **Lavinia Spalding** meets the women strumming their way into the male-dominated world of flamenco guitar—and finds her own rhythm.*

photographs by Laura El-Tantawy

PREVIOUS SPREAD AND AT LEFT: ANTONIA JIMÉNEZ, CONSIDERED ONE OF THE WORLD'S LEADING SPANISH FLAMENCO GUITAR PLAYERS, PERFORMS AT MADRID'S ICONIC FLAMENCO TAVERN, CASA PATAS.

I'VE BEEN IN SPAIN only two days, and already my fingers hurt. It's a prickly, high-pitched sting, like when a fallen-asleep limb returns to life. The sensation delights me. It means I'm doing something right.

Yesterday, after arriving in Madrid, I took the metro to the Delicias neighborhood, home to Picasso's *Guernica* (in the Reina Sofía Museum) and the iron-and-glass Atocha railway station. I didn't visit those places. Instead, I walked to a nondescript apartment building and knocked on a stranger's door. A soft-spoken woman with sleepy eyes and floppy bangs invited me in. We chatted, and then she handed me a $3,000 guitar. "Can you play something?" she asked.

This was the reason I'd come to Spain. Because I once believed I was destined to be a *tocaora*.

Forty-five years ago, when I was two, my father, Walter, also came to Madrid and knocked on strangers' doors. A renowned classical guitarist, he was enamored of flamenco, and in Spain he learned from anyone willing to teach him. He buttonholed performers in bars, befriended buskers on sidewalks, and somehow—to this day, no one in my family knows how—managed to study with Paco de Lucía, the greatest flamenco guitarist of our time.

I started playing classical guitar when I was five. Every afternoon I reported to my father's studio at our home in New Hampshire and practiced, while he sat across from me, instructing and critiquing. I played scales till my fingertips stung and peeled and callused. By age seven, I was called a child prodigy, and guitar came before friends, extracurricular activities, even homework. I attended master classes—always the youngest student by a decade. Sometimes I performed with my father.

Then, at 11, I quit. I was no longer interested, I announced. (The truth: I was a moody tween who craved more time with friends.) Heartbroken, my father distanced himself. Guiltily, I followed suit. He stopped inquiring about my day, and I avoided eye contact. Soon we spoke only when necessary. Mostly we bickered—about chores, rules, perceived injustices. Our relationship didn't fully rebound until I graduated from high school, moved across the country, and found myself bunking with a music student. Suddenly surrounded by guitarists, I longed to play again. I asked my father to send my sheet music, and on my visits home we resumed lessons. Our closeness returned, and he started teaching me flamenco. Then, when I was in my early 30s, he got sick.

Before he died a few years later, my father told me there were almost no *tocaoras*—female flamenco guitarists—in the world. If I kept practicing, he said, I could be one of the first. I promised, and he bequeathed me his guitar. But after he died, I couldn't bear to play it. He'd spent so much time with his arms around that instrument, it seemed an extension of his own body. Holding it gave my grief an unbearable tangibility.

So for 13 years it sat mostly untouched, coming out only recently when my toddler begged to see it. At two, my son, Ellis, was careful with his grandfather's instrument in a way he wasn't with any other object in his reach. It made me want to pass it down to him—both the guitar and the music. Problem was, I couldn't really play anymore.

One night at home in New Orleans, I googled "female flamenco guitarists." Were they still scarce? Google was conflicted. Sure, videos of talented tocaoras turned up. But forums discussing them were cesspools of comments like "Get back in the kitchen." Finally, I landed on a website that insisted tocaoras were on the rise; Antonia Jiménez was the most important name. On a whim, I wrote to her. "If I travel to Madrid," I asked, "will you give me lessons?"

Now, a few months later, here was Antonia, sitting with me in her Madrid living room, politely enduring my defilement—on her alarmingly high-end guitar—of music I once played well but was rendering all but unlistenable.

And this was only the beginning; I'd contacted two other prominent tocaoras, one in Granada, another in Barcelona. I would spend the next three weeks in Spain immersing myself in the world of female flamenco guitar—a world so new it didn't exist while my father was alive. A world I now yearned to be part of.

FLAMENCO IS A COMPLEX art and culture with mysterious origins, but people agree somewhat upon the following: Its roots date to at least the 16th century. A fusion of Arab, Andalusian folkloric, and Gitano (gypsy) music with myriad influences, flamenco emerged as an outlet for the poor and oppressed. It consists of *cante* (song), *baile* (dance), *toque* (guitar), and percussive elements that include *palmas* (clapping), finger snapping, and shouts of encouragement (like "*olé!*"), plus a more esoteric layer known as *duende*, the dark emotion at the heart of everything—a concept popularized by the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca. The rest of the backstory is mostly the stuff of late-night, sherry-fueled debates. There's just one final point of consensus: Women can sing and dance flamenco, but sorry, guitar belongs to men. It's a cut-and-dried case of machismo. A good old-fashioned boys' club.

Antonia Jiménez spent her life preparing to crash that club. Hailing from Cádiz (one of three points on the birthplace-of-flamenco "golden triangle," along with Jerez de la Frontera and Seville's Triana neighborhood), she began playing at five, despite her parents' objections. At 14 she found a teacher and by 15 she was earning money accompanying singers and dancers. After 30 years of studying with masters, composing, playing Spain's best halls, and touring the globe, she's recording her first album.

But her father never came around. He died 13 years ago without accepting her vocation. "He never once said 'Good,' " she told me. "He never said '*Olé*.' I had to do this for myself. I fought for my career, and it was very, very hard to grow in this atmosphere. But you can do anything, so I did it."

I can't help but compare our lives. We're almost the same age. Our fathers died the same year. We both began playing at five. But I stopped, and Antonia couldn't be stopped. She did it. I didn't.

Before my father died, he was teaching me *soleares*, a standard flamenco form. Determined to relearn this in Spain, I came prepared, carrying a thick folder of sheet music, plus a good luck charm: a photocopy of a soleares arrangement by Paco de Lucía, transcribed by my dad in 1972.

Antonia is reverent of the transcription but balks at my folder. "Flamenco is ninety percent improvisational," she explains. "It comes from the houses; it's deep inside the people. It's an ethnic music, not a scholastic music." She suggests I follow along while she plays *falsetas*, or soleares melodies. Then her hands explode across the strings like fireworks, and all I can do is stare. And panic. And realize how *un*prepared I actually am.

Fortunately, she's as encouraging as she is talented and tenacious. "You've got it!" Antonia says again and again during our hour together. She repeats this praise even when it's abundantly clear that I have not, in fact, got it. Toward the end of our lesson, she suggests I record a video of her playing slowly. Back in my rented apartment, I watch the video 50 times and practice fanatically—once for six hours straight—until I memorize the falsetas. And when my fingertips start tingling, I'm euphoric. I run my thumb over them like they're a row of tiny talismans.

I've arranged two lessons with Antonia, and heading into the second, I'm slightly more confident. She's offered her guitar again, and as she tunes it for me, leaning into it, I'm reminded of my dad—the way he cradled his guitar like a favorite child. Though brilliant and charismatic, he wasn't the most affectionate parent, and the tenderness he showed his instruments sometimes made me jealous. It's likely why I was drawn to guitar: to be closer to him by proxy. Antonia finishes tuning, and I fumble my way through the falsetas. But she smiles, she says she's impressed, and I decide to believe her.

On my last night in Madrid, she performs with a group at Casa Patas, a vaunted *tablao* (flamenco stage). I'm guided to a dark, cozy back room, its walls decked with photos of past performers. I scan for images of tocaoras but see none. No matter: One is on stage, and she's luminous.

This being my first flamenco show in Spain, and my understanding of duende being even flimsier than my grasp of the music, I'm expecting something gloomy and maudlin. Like sad opera with stomping. Instead, the show is celebratory, sexy, fiery. Duende, it turns out, isn't about suffering; it's about transforming suffering into joy and passion. Antonia kills it. I try to give her all the *olés* her father never did.

Afterward, I watch a group of Spanish schoolgirls scamper to the stage for autographs. Do they frequent these shows, I wonder? Is this a routine outing? And is tonight the first time they've realized a girl can grow up to play guitar?

GRANADA ISN'T NAMED among flamenco's birthplaces, yet it's inextricable from the origin story: When the Moors and Jews were expelled from the city after the Christian conquest in 1492, they reportedly fled to the Sacromonte ("Sacred Mount") outside the city walls. There, they joined the Gitanos in creating both a neighborhood of caves and much of the music we now know as flamenco. Granada—the Alhambra palace, specifically—was also the site, in 1922, of the

WHERE TO EXPERIENCE FLAMENCO IN SPAIN

The musicians featured in this story—*tocaoras* Antonia Jiménez, Marta Robles, and Pilar Alonso—share their favorite *tablaos*, or flamenco venues, around the country. –MIRANDA SMITH

MADRID

Corral de la Morería
Opened in 1956, Corral de la Morería is one of the most recognized flamenco spots in the country. A Michelin-starred tapas menu accompanies performances by Spain's most famous musicians and dancers. *Calle de la Morería 17, corraldelamoreria.com*

Casa Patas
Paco de Lucía, the flamenco player who taught writer Lavinia Spalding's father, is just one of the many revered guitarists who have played at this tavern. Casa Patas serves classic tapas and offers flamenco dance classes. *Calle de los Cañizares 10, casapatas.com*

BARCELONA

Los Tarantos
One of Barcelona's oldest flamenco venues, Los Tarantos opened in 1963 and continues to host three or four 30-minute performances each night. The lively shows and inexpensive tickets ($17) make Los Tarantos an ideal flamenco experience for first-timers. *Plaça Reial 17*

Tablao Flamenco Cordobés
Located on the iconic La Rambla, the family-owned tablao is as old-school as it gets. Performers sing, play, and stomp without microphones beneath the vaulted ceilings. *La Rambla 35, tablaocordobes.es*

GRANADA

Cueva de la Rocío
Granada's lures include both *zambra*, a local style of flamenco played at the weddings of the nomadic Roma people, and the iconic caves of the Sacromonte neighborhood. Experience both at Cueva de la Rocío, a whitewashed cavern that has drawn such notable guests as Michelle Obama and Bill Clinton to its rousing shows. *Camino del Sacromonte 70, cuevalarocio.es*

Casa del Arte Flamenco
This intimate theater features zambra flamenco played by Granadan musicians and dancers. *Cuesta de Gomérez 11, casadelarte flamenco.com*

LEFT: FLAMENCO GUITARIST PILAR ALONSO PERFORMS WITH HER BAND, MUJERES MEDITERRÁNEAS, AT A FESTIVAL IN GRANADA.

first flamenco competition, Concurso de Cante Jondo. Organized by the poet Lorca, the contest brought flamenco to the world's attention.

I stay in the Albaicín, the neighborhood at the foot of the Alhambra, and in the evenings the palace glows like a Moorish nightlight in my bedroom. All week the Alhambra follows me: Turrets fill gaps between buildings; a bell tower looms outside a café window. It's a constant presence. Flamenco, too.

Granadinos wear guitars around town the way cowboys in the Wild West wore gun holsters, and no establishment seems complete without someone strumming behind an open case. Though I haven't spotted any tocaoras, I know where to find one.

My first impression of Pilar Alonso, when she opens the door to her apartment, is that she's the happiest person I've ever met. Her face is an endless warm smile, and each word she speaks is wreathed with laughter.

Among the earliest female graduates of the lauded Conservatorio Superior de Música Rafael Orozco in Córdoba—the first school to offer advanced flamenco performance degrees—Pilar was also the first woman to teach flamenco guitar in any official learning center. She holds degrees in both classical and flamenco guitar and now teaches at the Conservatorio Profesional de Música Ángel Barrios in Granada, while also performing in Mujeres Mediterráneas, an all-women flamenco quartet.

When I notice a framed photo of Paco de Lucía in her study, she says she considers him her teacher. Pilar started playing folk guitar at age 10, but the next year she was given a Paco de Lucía cassette, and boom: instant convert. She taught herself flamenco by listening to his tapes. I've learned this was the customary method of studying with him. By all accounts, he almost never took on students.

Tell people in the United States that your dad studied with Paco de Lucía, and they'll smile. Here in Andalusia, they'll gasp. Their eyes will bug out. They'll want to hug you.

Pilar is no exception. When I show her my dad's transcription, I might as well have unveiled a sacred relic. "It's glorious," she says, poring over it. "*Magnífico*."

Leafing through my folder of sheet music, however, she acts like I've thrust rotten chicken under her nose. She'll happily instruct me in the ways of soleares, but this?! No. When she demonstrates a *compás*, the rhythm she intends to teach me, her hands become birds—darting and fluttering, dipping and swooping, graceful, furious.

"OK," she says. "Now follow along."

To be clear, there is no chance I can do this. And as I struggle, regret creeps in. How could I have quit—twice—such an important part of my life?

But during our second lesson, something happens. While showing me how to connect a compás to a falseta, Pilar begins playing a melody my father taught me 15 years ago. A delicate, lively string of single notes, it's as familiar as a lullaby. "That!" I shout. Tears blur my eyes, and then my fingers are plucking along as fast as hers. It's as if a spirit has been summoned to return me to guitar. It's as if a missing piece of me is back.

YOU DON'T REALLY go to Barcelona for flamenco. You go for Gaudí, tapas, absinthe. But flamenco—or rather, a flamenco guitarist—has brought me here. So it's a little weird when I arrive at her apartment for our lesson and she won't let me in. "It's a mess," she says, waving a hand behind her as she leads me to a nearby café.

Marta Robles, who began playing at age seven in Seville, has earned four degrees in classical and flamenco guitar from three conservatories. She has traveled the world performing solo and with various groups. She's tall and glamorous, intense and insouciant. When I watched her online, I imagined we'd be instant besties. But no. She intimidates me. Even my precious transcription fails to impress her. She skims it and nods.

Nor is Marta moved to provide reassuring

Marta doesn’t feel like teaching me soleares; instead she’ll show me a rumba. “It’s like this,” she says, her hands a dizzying blur of knuckles and skin.

LEFT: GUITARIST MARTA ROBLES AND HER BANDMATES IN LAS MIGAS, AN ALL-FEMALE FLAMENCO GROUP, PREPARE FOR A SHOW ON THE SPANISH ISLAND OF MENORCA.

answers to my hopeful questions. She won't be defined as a flamenco guitarist (since she plays many styles, and labels are boring). She insists there are still few tocaoras (and most are foreigners). She says that while machismo is prevalent, she's never personally contended with it (except the time a Gitano told her she played well, for a woman). And one last, painful wallop: "No," she says. "The situation isn't improving for tocaoras. It will, but not for a while. Maybe 20 years."

I remind her that two nights ago she and another female guitarist played a private concert for the Rolling Stones, who were touring Europe. And days before that, her all-women group, Las Migas, got a Latin Grammy nomination for "Best Flamenco Album"—not for "Best *Female* Flamenco Album."

"Doesn't this say something about the future of the tocaora?" I ask.

"OK, maybe," she concedes. "Maybe."

MY FINAL GUITAR lesson is scheduled on my last morning in Spain, which coincides with a protest in Barcelona. The day before, nearly 2 million Catalans voted for independence, and 893 citizens were reportedly injured as riot police attempted to prevent the vote. Today, there's a strike. Taxis are nonexistent, and the metro has stopped running. I walk to Marta's apartment, arriving late, worried there's no time for a lesson. I need to check out of my rental in an hour, and what if I can't find transportation back?

"*Tranquila*," she says. She'll take me.

Marta doesn't feel like teaching me soleares; instead she'll show me a rumba. "It's like this," she says, her hands a dizzying blur of knuckles and skin.

"OK? Follow along."

This joke never gets old.

But she shows me again in slo-mo. And as I study her hands, I notice how her fingers form perfect squares above the frets and her thumb never creeps over the neck of the guitar. And I hear my dad's voice reciting these instructions, forever correcting my form, holding my wrist between his long, slender fingers and jiggling it gently. "Let it relax," he'd say.

So I relax my wrist and follow Marta's lead, and a few dozen tries later, I get it. Not just the rhythm of the rumba but the *golpe*, too, the trademark tapping of finger against guitar. "That's it!" she exclaims, and we tamp our strings and play faster and faster until we're strumming in unison and grinning widely at each other. And just like that, I'm no longer intimidated. I'm exhilarated and inspired and as in love with her as I am with my other two tocaoras. I want to cancel my return flight, stay in Spain, and spend every minute with these remarkable, revolutionary women.

Will I? No. I have a life I love back home. But I do remember, finally, what it means to be musical. To practice until something beautiful emerges. To live for the moment when it all connects and you're elevated. And mostly, to share that magic with someone else.

I wonder if this is duende—an old suffering transformed into passion. I know that holding a guitar doesn't hurt anymore. It feels like a rekindling, like the redemption of a broken promise. It feels like joy.

After our lesson, Marta drives me back to my apartment on her motorcycle. And as we zip through the near-deserted Barcelona streets together, I experience a rare moment of pure freedom. The sense of something heavy being lifted away.

I've long carried guilt and remorse for quitting guitar and missing my chance to be one of the first tocaoras. Those feelings are gone. Now I see how lucky I am. Antonia, Pilar, and Marta had zero female role models who believed in them. I have three. They had countless obstacles to overcome. I have zero. I'm suddenly impatient to get home, tune my guitar, and practice all they've shared with me.

And I still intend to share it, too. I want to teach Ellis to play soleares someday. But I've ditched all my sheet music now. When the time comes, I'll make him follow along.

Writer Lavinia Spalding and photographer Laura El-Tantawy are profiled on page 16.