

fancy FLAMENCO FINGER-WORK

Renowned flamenco guitarist
Rene Heredia brings his rich
folk style to Vail for four nights

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During a recent phone interview with flamenco guitarist Rene Heredia, one of his students played guitar softly in the background. Heredia put his hand over the mouth of the phone and, though muffled, said, "Just keep practicing that; it sounds great. Keep going."

Without skipping a beat, Heredia turned his focus back to the interview.

"I perform a lot, but I still teach to pass on the craft to someone else," Heredia said. "Like blues and jazz, flamenco is handed down through the generations."

Heredia has been playing flamenco for more than 40 years, but that is not his only passion; he is a music and movement maestro. He teaches dance and guitar out of his Denver-based school, composes orchestra pieces, choreographs and even helps his students pick out their costumes.

"I wear a lot of hats," Heredia said. "You have to these days. If you have your own business, like I do, you have to keep things going in times like these."

Heredia was invited by Bob McNichols, owner of the Marketplace on Meadow Drive in Vail, to perform a four-night run at the Vail cafe. He will be playing his solo show twice per night Tuesday through Friday. The show is free, and the Marketplace will be accepting reservations. The hope is that visitors will enjoy Heredia's playing while eating dinner.

"He is a very accomplished musician," said McNichols, a longtime fan and friend of Heredia. "He's a fabulous entertainer that has kind of flown under the radar because he's been so devoted to his teaching."

Along with performing at the restaurant, McNichols said Heredia will visit some of the schools in the area while he's here. His hope is that children will learn a little bit about folk and gypsy cultural traditions.

"He has over a half-century of experience traveling the world teaching," McNichols said. "He's a good communicator and relates to everyone, and he might be able to show them the flavor of music they might not have been exposed to."

McNichols said the intimate atmosphere of the Marketplace on Meadow Drive will allow guests to experience the performer up close and see his fingers move, something they've been doing since he was a gypsy child in Grenada, Spain.

From the kitchen table to Carnegie Hall

"My family were gypsies who came from India around the 10th century," Heredia said. "I had three sisters that danced, and I played the guitar. I didn't start off thinking I was going to be a flamenco guitarist. But as I learned, the guitar kind of took over my life."

Growing up, his home was filled with renowned flamenco guitarists and dancers — gypsies who taught him about his cultural heritage around the kitchen table.

Since he developed international recognition as the 17-year-old lead guitarist for famed Spanish dancer Carmen Amaya, Heredia has played around the world for large audiences and exclusive private parties. He eventually left Hollywood, Calif., for Denver, where he is now known as the man who brought flamenco to Colorado.

"I did a lot of shows for Prince Bandar of Saudi Arabia at his home in Aspen," he said. "All through the '90s, I played up there for him. Sometimes, he would call me and have me play just for dessert. But once I sit down, I have to play — it doesn't matter who is in the audience."

"I've been performing all my life, and there are challenges," he said. "I played with the entire Denver Symphony Orchestra at Red Rocks. And all I had was just a wooden box with six strings."

Heredia has also played New York's Carnegie Hall five times to standing ovations as well as the Greek Theatre in Los Angeles.

Right hand = heart

Though Heredia said he's happy he gets to play the guitar rather than "sell cars or head up a company," the job isn't without stress. He said that creating new and original music is the hardest part of his profession.

"It all depends on how fertile your mind is," he said.

He continues to study music by listening to classical jazz and folk music from around the world. Despite his broad influences, however, he keeps very close to the traditional style of flamenco, careful not to "water down" the folk style known for fancy finger-work.

"(Nuvo flamenco players) are very technical and very fast — they try to impress you. But after a while you get tired of hearing just one note after another."

Heredia said that when playing guitar, the left hand — the one that formulates the chords and comprises the technical aspect to the music — is attached to the mind. But the heart plays through the right hand, where the strumming patterns and phrasing bring emotion and life to the music.

"Once you have your technique down, the only thing left is feelings and ideas," he said. "You take from the happiness and sorrows in your life and transmit what you're doing to the audience."

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