



**El Viento Flamenco**  
 a band with a dancer  
 by Kristin Harris

Evelyne Benais  
 Photo by Shane Kelly  
 courtesy of Moncton Times/Transcript



El Viento Flamenco  
 Photo by Sally Morgan

**A**s I approached the Halifax studio of El Viento Flamenco, I was immediately struck by its similarity to residential neighbourhoods of downtown St. John's, the previous home of this dance company. In a cozy, rambling Nova Scotian home, I chatted with Evelyne Benais

about her company, her artistic vision and her move from Newfoundland and Labrador to the mainland.

Benais came to flamenco dance as an adult, after experimenting with other dance forms during her childhood. It was following a move from Toronto to Newfoundland and Labrador in 1990, when she took time off between her undergraduate and graduate studies, that she began dancing flamenco. "I took classes in Spanish dance," she explains, "That's how they were advertised. I had discovered flamenco at a tavern in Toronto called the Don Quixote when I was eighteen and had been dreaming of doing flamenco for several years. I had fallen in love with the form but had never done anything about it because it had never occurred to me that I could go to school and learn flamenco. I, like many people, had a very romantic notion about it and thought that you had to go to Spain, be assimilated into a

completely different culture and learn it directly from the people there."

While her head was following her career path as a future academic, her heart became enraptured with the dance style. Benais soon left for Paris to start her doctorate degree, and continued her flamenco training there. Personal reasons brought her back to Canada in the mid-1990s, and she found herself in Newfoundland re-evaluating her life and career choices. "Although I was enjoying my academic path," she says, "it was not what I really wanted to be doing with my life." She was eager to develop as a dancer, but was hesitant since there was no flamenco community per se in St. John's at the time. As fate would have it, her decision was hastened by a serendipitous deadline. The same date was the cut-off for both a significant piece of writing for her in-progress dissertation, as well as a grant application for the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council. Faced



## It's not just the beauty of the movement; it's also the interaction between >>

with the looming date and a fork in the road, she chose the latter path. Successful with her grant application, Benais used the money to train with various flamenco dancers in Toronto where she apprenticed with Carmen Romero and also studied with Esmeralda Enrique, Claudia Carolina, Valerie Escannura and Paula Moreno.

Back in St. John's, Benais still faced the lack of a community of dancers and musicians in the flamenco style. But she persevered, thinking: "Even if I can find someone who can strum two chords, who I can practice with, then that means that I'm doing what I enjoy doing and I'm lucky," she says. Soon, Benais and her guitarist began getting gigs without even seeking them out. "We started working harder, and then over the years I started receiving grants to bring musicians to St. John's to train my musicians and to enable me to go to Spain. So that's how we became a troupe."

The training provided by the grants led to performances, which in turn increased the confidence of the group, who then sought further professional development. "What was really driving us was the pleasure of learning," Benais states. This shared enjoyment also brought the group closer together as they developed musically.

Benais is the only dancer in the group. Committed to the interdependence of music and dance in the flamenco form, she explains her vision, "What I am interested in, rather than a dance troupe, is El Viento Flamenco as a band that has a dancer." While flamenco performances may emphasize the dancer, Benais feels that the music is paramount. Because of this emphasis, Benais puts much of her time and energy into developing the music for the troupe's performances. "You can't dance flamenco unless you know the *cante* – the song – so I invest a lot of energy learning the *cante*. I am able to sing the melodies, I know how long they are, what the dynamism is and I create my choreography in relation to that."

While there is a certain structure to be followed in flamenco that is dictated by the structure of the singing, there is also a good deal of freedom in creating choreography – something that Benais revels in. Benais asserts that the closeness between the music and the dance implies some restrictions in terms of what steps will complement a song. "Each song has many verses, and what the dancer does depends on what the

singer is doing. For example, when the singer is singing, the dancer is doing what is called *marcaje*, or marking steps, where she's just marking the time." Benais explains that for emphasis she will often punctuate a line in the song with her footwork but she feels that, to show respect for the singer, the dancer should not perform loud steps while the singer is performing. "It's not just the beauty of the movement; it's also the interaction between dancer and musicians." It is this collaborative element of flamenco that Benais continues to cultivate with her company. Benais attributes her own reverence towards the dance form and flamenco musicians to her mentors, under whose tutelage she acquired not only technical mastery of steps, but attitudes about the dance form as well.

El Viento Flamenco grew as a company as the city of St. John's grew to welcome and nurture flamenco performances. As word spread about the troupe, their gigs became bigger and their fan base grew. While more contemporary flamenco companies may have larger more elaborate bands, Benais maintains a more traditional sound with two singers, one guitarist and two percussionists plus herself. In addition to providing a raw sound, the group's small membership proved beneficial when the time came to move to a larger centre.

After a number of years based in St. John's, El Viento Flamenco could no longer grow and remain financially viable. The cost of touring on the mainland was too high, and they had outgrown playing just the local scene. The group discussed the idea of moving to Halifax. Since most of the band members are born and bred Newfoundlanders, this was a big decision. Amazingly, all the band members agreed to move hearth and home to Nova Scotia and settled there in April 2001. The fact that they all uprooted for the sake of the band illustrates well not only how successful they had become, but how close-knit they are as a group of professionals and friends. In their new locale, they now have a larger local base, and are far more accessible to a wider audience. Rather than having to plan the occasional extensive tour, they now perform throughout the Atlantic region and across Canada in shorter, more frequent stints. While they miss Newfoundland and Labrador, the band agrees it is for the best.

And for Benais, the new location provides an

## dancer & musician

even greater opportunity to share her artistic vision and her love for flamenco with as many people as possible. ☞

### Sommaire

C'est à l'âge adulte qu'Evelyne Benais danse le flamenco pour la première fois, à l'occasion de cours de danse dite espagnole. Ayant terminé des études de premier cycle, elle habite alors à Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador. Elle commence ensuite des études de deuxième cycle à Paris mais au milieu des années 1990, elle revient au Canada et délaisse sa carrière académique pour se consacrer à la danse. Grâce à des subventions, elle s'entraîne avec plusieurs artistes en flamenco à Toronto avant de retourner à St. John's. Malgré l'absence d'une communauté de flamenco dans la ville, Benais réussit à mettre sur pied un groupe de flamenco, El Viento Flamenco. Les débuts sont lents. Cependant, Benais et son guitariste se présentent tant en spectacle et connaissent un tel succès que finalement, leur renommée dépasse la région. En 2001, le groupe déménage à Halifax afin de rejoindre un plus grand public et d'avoir une meilleure disponibilité pour des tournées au Canada. Si les spectacles de flamenco mettent souvent les danseurs en vedette, Benais souligne que la musique est primordiale. Elle décrit El Viento Flamenco comme étant « un groupe de musiciens, et puis une danseuse ». ☞



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Photo by Shane Kelly