Flamenco singer Esperanza Fernández respects roots, innovates

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Latino-Canadian singer Esperanza Fernández comes to San Francisco for the Bay Area Flamenco Festival.

The complexity of modern life and new emotion of flamenco's stance—jovial, or deep, somber—mixes in a beguiling way in the profoundly musical voice of flamenco artist Esperanza Fernández, who appears with Joel Valero on Friday, March 27, as the Bay Area Flamenco Festival's first public performance at the French Heritage.

As it is with many flamenco artists, music and dance was the family business for Fernández. Her father, Curro Fernández, and mother, Pura Vinga, as well as her siblings perform as La Familia Fernández, so it’s perhaps unsurprising that Fernández knew from the time she was very small that she wanted to be an artist, although she started out as a dancer with her father’s group.

“I didn’t realize I should be a singer,” she says. “Then, little by little, I began singing, and one day my father said, ‘You know that’s what you are best at—you should be a singer.’”

Growing up in the Zeina district of Seville, Fernández knew many of the great flamenco artists of the time as family and friends, but she says she was exposed to many of the most traditional styles. Then, the young Fernández met Lola Monroy, of the groundbreaking duo La Pau Municio, whose fusion of flamenco with Arabic styles became widely popular in the 1970s and can be heard in the soundtrack to Quentin Tarantino’s “Kill Bill, Vol. 2.”

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“She was such a modern, experimental singer,” Fernández says. “And as a young woman, I was so inspired by her singing. She became my mentor and my idol.”

But the youthful singer also knew she didn’t want to be an imitator, that she needed to find her own personality and approach to her music. New, of course, considered one of the innovators, and a truly unique voice in the flamenco world, Fernández has a reputation for versatility, having worked with international artists as varied as North African singer Nouria Maloua and American violinist and conductor Yehudi Menuhin, in addition to the great Spanish guitarist Paco de Lucía and flamenco pianist David Pérez Durán.

Many flamenco purists nowadays raise the term “fusion,” and the Festival Flamenco Glitter is itself a celebration of the Gypsy roots of the art. Fernández will also perform at the closing event of the Bay Area Flamenco Festival, “Flamencanito” at Caldirola’s Crocker Theatre in April on Sunday, March 29. However, she is a matter of fact about the impact of modern music and style on the flamenco voice.

“I am often wary of the concept of fusion,” she says emphatically. “People who attempt fusion based on a superficial understanding of their own music, well, it doesn’t come off. If you are deeply rooted in your tradition and then incorporate other global influences, then you can achieve a rich and worthwhile much. But I find a lot of these ‘experimentations’ that people make rather superficial and trivial. ‘Oh, the other hand, I have done collaborations myself, but I have always tried to come from my own根 and that’s allowed me to stretch out without losing myself.’

Fernández debuts at 8 as the lead singer in Mario Meyer’s “Anamó,” and has had an extensive performing and recording career. Her album “Researchers” received a 2004 Latin Grammy nomination, and her most recent project was the 2009 “El viejo en el pulpería,” based on poems of José Sacramo.

Numerous collaborations, noteworthy, Fernández mainly focuses on singing traditional flamenco, but she also considers what work in other genres has taught her.

“I am very much inspired and influenced by Ellie Holcomb’s singing,” she says. “We don’t have the same techniques, of course, but I love her phrasing and the way her music, I also love to listen to Miles Davis and the Egyptian singer Usma Kolbey, too. So even while staying traditional flamenco, I bring into it those things that are innovative because it’s part of my reality as a woman living in a globalized 21st century.”

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If you go
Caste Jodos Cante Gitano 8 p.m., Friday, March 27, 800-832, Baca Theatre, 210-248 H., S.F. (S.F. 938-3906. www.bayareaflamencofestival.org. (Fernández also performs as part of “Flamencanito” at Caldirola’s Crocker Theatre, 210-248 H., April 2.)

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