

FALL 2015

SPECIAL FOCUS: GUITAR EDUCATION

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**BEN WOODS WITH
FLAMENCO DANCER
ARLEEN HURTADO**

FLAMETAL MASTER

Groundbreaking stylist Ben Woods learned all the rules, then started making his own

BY OCTOBER CRIFASI

“Can you tell what this is?” guitarist Ben Woods asks upon my arrival at his Los Angeles studio, a gleeful smile on his face. In the background, I hear a gorgeous flamenco arrangement of a song I should recognize, but can’t quite pinpoint. “It’s for the new Judas Priest flamenco record,” he says. It is the most intricate and beautiful arrangement of Judas Priest I have ever heard.

With an impressive list of flamenco and hard-rock collaborations and performances to his credit Woods has crafted a unique and much sought-after sound and niche for himself, often referred to as “flamenco metal.” Whether it is with his trio, Heavy Mellow, or as the traditional flamenco duo of Flamenco LA with his partner and flamenco dancer, Arleen Hurtado, Woods is forever exploring new ways to break the boundaries of both genres.

You started out as a metal guitarist primarily. What led you to playing flamenco?
I was living in Seattle in the early '90s and renting a house with a group of my mu-

sician friends. I was 18 or 19 at the time and playing lead guitar in a death-metal band. We rented out a room to a guy who ended up being a junkie. We came home one night to find that he had left and took my electric guitars and gear with him, never to be seen again. I needed to keep playing and still had my classical guitar, so I practiced on that. The more I played fast music on the nylon strings, the more I thought it sounded like Spanish music. I did some research and discovered that flamenco was what I liked. It was acoustic speed metal—aggressive, fast, and virtuosic—exactly everything I needed.

Did you study with anyone specific, or did you teach yourself?

I was very lucky to find flamenco instructors Marcos and Rubina Carmona.

Marcos taught me in the traditional Spanish way, mano a mano. He would play me something and I would have to play it back to him. I would tape the entire lesson, then go home and play along with it. I would do this for several hours a day.

You learned everything completely by ear?

Yes. We didn’t use sheet music, but he did provide some tablature. We started out with the soleá, which is the mother of all flamenco forms, then learned some tangos and rumbas, which are the 4/4 forms. Sevillanas, which is standard for all beginner flamenco students—guitarists as well as dancers—came next. We got into playing bulerías and fandangos later, as they are a little more complicated. I also ordered a ton of CDs from Spain each month and would try to figure out the licks and little patterns I heard in the recordings.

Eventually, Marcos and his wife, Rubina, a flamenco singer and dancer, told me that if I wanted to learn flamenco properly, I had to learn how to accompany the *cante* [singing], and the *baile*, [dancing] as well. I had to learn the unspoken communication of how a flamenco group works together.

I didn’t hesitate. I dove right in, accompanying flamenco classes several days a week and continued to do so for the next five or six years.



3 TIPS FOR FLAMENCO IMPROVISATION

1 The most common way to improvise in flamenco relates to the compás, which is playing the rhythmical bass, and you're playing mostly chords. It's supportive accompaniment, but it's also driving the music forward. You are not only the drummer, but the entire band. Being the entire band means you have to play the chords, but there is room for improvisation. For example, let's say you do some sort of I-IV-V thing to close a section. You can modify that—maybe you've rhythmically altered it with some countertimes or you put a few little cuts in there to make it interesting. The I-IV-V is still there in its essence, but you've changed it a little bit.

2 Another approach has to do with falsetas, these short, melodic musical phrases that are really complicated most of the time. To improvise one on the spot would be similar to a player like Sharon Isbin improvising a classical piece on the spot. Falsetas have to be practiced over and over again outside of performance. If you're very lucky, there will be space in a song during the live performance where you can play it and hope that it works. It's not very easy, but boy, when it happens right, it's pretty magical. It's one of my favorite things to do.

3 The third way is the most common among musicians, especially jazz musicians. People know the form of the song and everybody gets a turn. A guitar player would start with a single line and start working on a string and then start string-skipping and going around.

—Ben Woods