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Music

PREVIEW

Spanish Bombs

Portland's Al-Andalus explores the 15th-century ethnic melting pot of Andalusia and finds a minefield of music, history and identity.

BY BILL SMITH
243-2122 EXT. 310

Reed College Chapel
3203 SE Woodstock Blvd., 777-7755
8 pm Friday and Saturday, Dec. 10 and 11
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Last night I met all my ancestors together. They came to my dream to meet me. They came to my dream to tell me that I had as many ancestors as I did cells in my body.

--from "Genetic Memories"

Al-Andalus--it's hard to define. Basically, it's the Arabic and Sephardic name for Andalusia, a province of Spain. Specifically, it refers to the 700 years between the 8th and 15th centuries, when Muslims, Christians and Jews converged on the area and created a cultural hive rich with the artistic honey of ethnic cross-pollination. In Arabic cultures today, the word has become synonymous with an idyllic Eldorado of ethnic acceptance re-imagined through the sepia-toned veil of memory.

Al-Andalus is also the name of a Portland band of wanderlusting world musicologists who took the name for all these reasons. *Willamette Week* got a linguistics lesson from flamenco guitarist Julia Banzi, who co-founded the group with her husband, Tarik.

"The word encompasses a time when things worked," she says. "It also has a broader meaning of whatever you may be wanting." The band itself has added its own contemporary definition to the mix. "We also see Al-Andalus as America now," says Banzi. "A mix of cultures, not without conflict, but with all that beauty also."

The same searching complexity defines the group's work, a musical web that stretches to every corner of the Andalusian diaspora. Elements of traditional Arabic and Ladino (Sephardic Jewish) song, trance-inducing Moroccan G'nowa melodies and Indian classical ragas are all infused with the rhythmic intensity of Spanish flamenco. The group combines elements with the quiet assurance of skilled alchemists and comes up with a mix that's aural gold.

To serve such a fragile folk-music stew with any authenticity requires global simmering. "We're all from different countries," says Banzi, "but most of us have lived a significant portion of our lives in one other than our own and have all been dramatically changed by the experience."

You can hear it in the music. Julia, a native of Denver, only discovered she was Jewish on her father's side when she was 12 (he was an orphan who stumbled across some ancestral information). A neighbor gave her the flamenco bug at age 14; she spent a decade in Spain studying the music with master guitarist Manolo San Lucar. She met Tarik in Madrid in 1985 while he was playing and studying the oud, an Arabic stringed precursor to the lute. Tarik's ancestors were driven from Andalusia in the 15th century during the Spanish Inquisition, settling across the Strait of Gibraltar in Morocco. His family still holds the key to the house it lost 500 years ago.

The two formed Al-Andalus when they moved to Portland in 1989 and encountered like-minded ethnic straddlers. Julia met South Indian vocalist Ranjani Krishnan through teaching. Krishnan, who spent years in the Middle East, has the honey-smooth delivery of the best international soul singers, plus the acrobatic swoops of Indian classical singing. (Banzi jokes that such vocal purity can only come from Krishnan's years of vegetarianism.) Peruvian



percussionist Martin Zarzar studies at Boston's Berklee School of Music; fellow percussionist Hanan Banzi hails from Morocco. Violinist Billy Oskay, also of the group Nightnoise, is an American who has spent his career fiddling with his Celtic heritage.

All of these bloodlines converge on the new, aptly titled *Genetic Memories*. The melodies for "M'enamori" and "Marrakesh" are good examples of the group's cleansing of ethnic stereotypes. Though the first is a 12th century Jewish tune and the second from Muslim Morocco, they both trace their roots to Andalusian Spain. "Absence" not only fuses ethnicity, but technology as well. The text--an Arabic poem from the Middle Ages about the marriage of art and science--is "read" by a computer to band backing.

The CD's title piece could serve as the group's theme song. "It's from an Andalusian poem that says we carry within our genes memories of past places and people," says Banzi. "We know genetically we're linked to the whole world, and musically we as a group can draw on that.

"It's part of the mystery and magic of America to look back at our roots."

Few, however, make such a grassroots obsession of their heritage as the members of Al-Andalus.

Willamette Week