**“From Sallins to Seville; an examination of the influences and work of the (living) Irish flamenco composer and guitarist, John Walsh”.**

This paper was first presented at the Irish-Spanish Relations Symposium, organized by the Dept. of Humanities, Dundalk Institute and held in house on Friday, 11th April 2025

**Summary of Contents**

1. **Flamenco as Cultural Heritage** – A Romani art form, not merely Spanish, embodying centuries of displacement, resilience, and artistic innovation.
2. **UNESCO Recognition (2010)** – Declared Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity for its historical depth and living evolution.
3. **Romani Origins** – Rooted in the diaspora of Punjab (NW India) to Andalusia, blending with Moorish, Jewish, and Andalusian traditions.
4. **Multidisciplinary Art** – Fuses raw vocals (cante), percussive dance (baile), virtuosic guitar (toque), and handclaps (palmas).
5. **Franco’s Appropriation** – Politically exploited in the 1950s to market Spanish identity, obscuring its Romani roots.
6. **Seville’s Crucible** – The port city’s mix of Tartessian, Phoenician, Roman, and Moorish cultures shaped Flamenco’s birth.
7. **Sufi & Qawwali Parallels** – Shares vocal melismas and themes of exile with Islamic devotional music, reflecting ancient trade routes.
8. **Paco de Lucía’s Revolution** – Mastered pulgar (thumb technique), jazz fusion, and complex compás, elevating Flamenco guitar globally.
9. **Guitar’s Rise** – From accompaniment to solo prominence via 19th-century luthiers (e.g., Antonio de Torres) and pioneers like Ramón Montoya.
10. **John Walsh’s Irish Flamenco** – A self-taught guitarist who abandoned physics to study under Paco’s teacher, blending Celtic motifs into Irlandalucia.
11. **Zapateado & Dance** – Rhythmic footwork central to Flamenco, as seen in Walsh’s homage to Paco’s style.
12. **Living Tradition** – Continues evolving through new voices (like Walsh) while preserving its marginalized Romani soul.

When I saw the invitation to present at the Dept. of Humanities Symposium and its theme, I was immediately drawn to the prospect of properly researching Flamenco, a musical genre that has long resonated with me personally and which enjoys a position of global cultural significance. I was also delighted to find that there is a living Irish composer and musician, John Walsh, who was very generous with his time in providing two extensive interviews to me to discuss Flamenco and how it positively upended his life. John now resides in Sallins but was reared in Co. Longford. This is a story about following a passion, about discipline and determination and about authenticity. And in a world that is crammed with the phony and the artificial it is inspiring to see the very opposite. My initial perception of Flamenco, like that of many outsiders, was narrowly confined to its stereotypical Hispanic imagery; the percussive footwork of dancers, with long frilly skirts, tight hair buns on severe looking women and the sharp clicking of the castanets. Indeed Flamenco was appropriated by General Franco after the 20th century Spanish civil war, especially in the 1950s, as a symbol to promote Spanish tourism and identity.  As I delved into the research I learned that Flamenco is not merely a musical style, but an entire way of life, one intrinsically tied to the Romani people not the Spanish and their centuries long history of displacement, resilience and artistic innovation.

Now the Spanish terms for the Romani is spelt g-i-t-a-n-o-s and pronounced hit-ann-os, but that is a derogatory term and we’ll avoid that and just say Romani. The reality of that lifestyle now is economic precariousness and street performance for tourists sustained by coffee, cigarettes and social welfare. Flamenco is folk but that gives an impression of simplicity which is incorrect. Flamenco is complex and its complexity lies in its synthesis of multiple art forms. So, we have the raw, emotive vocals (khan-tay), the rhythmic intensity of dance (by-lay), the improvisational brilliance of guitar (toe-kay), and the polyrhythmic interplay of handclaps (palmas) and body percussion. It is not a static tradition, it is a living, evolving practice that reflects the sociohistorical struggles of a marginalised community. In 2010, UNESCO formally acknowledged its cultural weight and significance by designating Flamenco as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, a recognition that underscores its historical depth, contemporary vitality, regional expression and its role as a universal artistic language.

The question of Flamenco's origins remains a subject of academic debate but its foundational ties to the Romani diaspora are incontrovertible. The Romani people, whose migrations, began in the early second millennium from the Punjab region of Northwestern India, carried with them a rich musical heritage that intersected with the traditions of every society they encountered.  So, given the geography of the migration, that's most likely Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Bulgaria, North Macedonia/Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Italy, France and finally Spain. You’ve got to remember that nation names and maps were fluid then as they are now.  By the 15th century, their arrival in Andalusia (which is a region slightly larger than all of Ireland in Southern Spain) collided with a heady cultural melting pot already shaped by the Tartessians (indigenous Bronze Age Spanish), Phoenicians (modern day Lebannon), Tunisians (but it was called Carthage), the Romans, Visigoths (modern day Scandanavia, Germanic) and Moorish influences.   The inland seaport city of Seville - a nexus of empire, trade, and human traffic - became a crucible for Flamenco's development. So, think about a port that is critical in terms of empire. You have legitimate goods cargo, human traffic, the trafficking of humans, smuggling, black market, maritime employees, sex workers – that’s an intoxicating brew and underbelly. The Port of Seville is situated in the estuary of the (Gwad-al-k-veer). From the Atlantic ocean after a journey of 90 kilometres, you arrive at the port facilities of the city of Seville, entering through a lock which is the only one of its kind in Spain.

Comparative musicology reveals striking parallels between Flamenco and other traditions. One such example is Sufi devotional music which is called Qawwali. The vocal melismas (which is from the Greek word for melody - a style of singing many notes per syllable), rhythmic cycles (compas) and even the themes of longing and spiritual exile in cante jondo (deep song) echo the Islamic musical practices of West Asia. A poignant example can be heard in Rahat Fateh Ali Khan's performance in the Jemima Khan film What's Love Got to Do With It where the ornamentation and emotional cadences mirror those of Flamenco. Such similarities are not coincidental; they reflect centuries of cultural exchange along trade routes spanning the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

So, I mentioned rhythmic cycles – compass. There is actually a compas flamenco app that teaches all of the different beats and their names. Another must have for the prospective student of flamenco is some knowledge of the flamenco tree and the best introduction I found on the flamenco tree is by Alberto Marin with his Learning Flamenco Guitar channel on YouTube.

The Romani's nomadic existence - always on the fringes of society - infused Flamenco with its characteristic themes of sorrow (pena), defiance and catharsis (emotional expression). Marginalized by mainstream Spanish culture, the Romani of Andalusia preserved their musical art in private gatherings (juergas, pronounced where-gaz), where song and dance served as both comfort, solidarity and subversive resistance. The genre's instrumentation evolved organically and pragmatically; before the guitars dominance, rhythms were marked by handclaps (palmas), knuckles rapping on tables, or even the anvil strikes of Romani blacksmiths, whose craftsmanship with horseshoes and metalwork lent a percussive rigor to early Flamenco. So, that’s a brief look at the history. Now we will look at where the guitar fitted into all of this and its emergence as a key facet in flamenco it its own right.

While flamenco is often synonymous with the guitar today, its historical primacy belongs to the voice. The kan-tah-or (singer) was the focal point, with the guitar serving a subordinate, accompanying role – basically no more than a harmonic and rhythmic scaffold for the lyrics. This hierarchy began to shift in the late 19th century when luthiers (string instrument manufacturers) such Antonio de Torres Jurado refined the guitar's design, creating a lighter, more resonant instrument capable of projecting over the din of crowded “ta-BLAH-os” (flamenco venues - no microphones). By the 1920s, guitarists like Ramon Montoya (who was Romani) pioneered the toe-kay solista (solo guitar), transforming Flamenco into a concert art form. This innovation paralleled broader societal shifts, as Flamenco transitioned from intimate Romani gatherings to public theatres and eventually global stages. The particular technical demands of the guitar requires a fusion of folk intuition and classical discipline. Those technical demands are essentially alternating between rapid picado (scale runs). rasguedo (strumming), and alzapua (thumb technique) - I would like to be able to say that at this point we can properly introduce our hero, John Walsh, but there is another artist who John himself would credit as essential to the narrative and that is Paco de Lucia.

Paco de Lucia, which is a stage name, revolutionised Flamenco and if John had not seen his name on a list of must-listen-to guitarists in a magazine dedicated to everything guitar which encouraged him to go out and buy Paco’s CDs John’s professional, indeed life, story would have taken a different trajectory. Paco was born in 1947 and was christened Francisco Sanchez Gomez. He was immersed in flamenco from birth, not by heritage as he is not a Romani, he is a Pie-yoh, non-Romani, but by a brutal training regime by his father which would make Daddy Joe Jackson look positively slack. His father was a struggling guitarist and forced him to practice long hours daily from the age of 5. His formal education ended when he was 11 and he went to play in bars, absorbing the raw flamenco of Andalusian taverns. He was not in Seville at this time but in the place of his birth Algeciras (Al-j-seeras) in Spain. Because he was a Pie-yo he was actually excluded from Romani circles in the early years but his obsessive discipline earned respect and inclusion. He partnered up with Camaron de la Isla (the stage name of a celebrated Romani singer), who was a couple of years younger than him. That partnership broke the barrier between the two traditions, the pie-yo interpretation of flamenco and the hitanos interpretation.

So, what was special about Paco's technique?

1. Lightening fast playing of scales

2. Mastery of strumming

3. A thumb technique called Pulgar where he played bass lines and melodies at the same time, which gives a full orchestra effect

And that's only the right hand!

In terms of Paco’s actual unique compositions:

1 He used jazz influenced extensions

2. His compositions wove classical forms into traditional styles and the fusion are essentially flamenco riffs

He also uses silence to create dramatic tension and his flamenco metres were very complex, and ordinarily flamenco metre (compas) is complex to begin with. Again, I would recommend the free app just to get a sense of the multitude of beats.

Paco was, forgive the pun, picky about his guitars, and he always performed sitting down as he disliked guitar straps.

John Walsh’s introduction to Flamenco was serendipitous rather than inevitable. Growing up in rural Ballinamuck, County Longford – a landscape far removed from Andalusia’s sun-baked plazas -he wasn’t brought up in a musical family and neither of his parents were deeply interested in music, but they always encouraged John in whatever he undertook. As a child he had a love of astronomy and used to look at the night sky using binoculars from a barn roof and draw maps of the night sky. This love of astronomy is reflected in Cassiopeia a composition written in later life. Cassiopeia shows a convergence of twenty first century artist’s personal experience and humanity’s cultural foundations. Cassiopeia is the name of the constellation, but the constellation is so named after Cassiopeia a cruel Queen from the Greek myths. As a teenager John turned to the guitar as a respite from academic pressures, but decided to pursue it seriously and formally, meticulously studying Bach’s fugues. The fugue – derived from the Latin fuga (“flight”) – proved prophetic: Walsh’s encounters with Paco de Lucia’s recordings in a bedsit in Rathmines in his very early twenties ignited a creative exodus, compelling him to abandon a burgeoning career in physics for the uncertain path of a Pie-yo flamenco guitarist. Not even a Pie-yo from Andalucia, but a Pie-yo who was an Irish Pie-yo. Walsh’s technical prowess, honed through a Trinity College of Music in London diploma achieved in 2006, was a solid foundation to start the flamenco adventure. To experience the authentic flamenco experience, he immersed himself in Spain’s flamenco heartlands, studying under Salvdador Andrades in Alegciras – the hometown of Paco de Lucia who was Salvador’s uncle. This apprenticeship was not merely about mastering compas or falsetas (musical phrases); it demanded the erasure of his Irish accent, a metaphor for the cultural fluency required to navigate flamenco’s codes. In practical terms he went to and from Spain to Ireland for about 5 or 6 years – learning while in Spain and earning while in Ireland. John’s dedication culminated in performances at Madrid’s venerable El Candela and the Paco de Lucia Guitar Festival, as well as collaborations with the National Ballet of Ireland and Riverdance. The National Ballet of Ireland had a short ballet based on Carmen. They wanted to bring it on tour, which meant extending it by 45 minutes and they asked John to write the music and also perform it which was tough because there was no room for improvisation or error. That’s because the dancers needed it to be note perfect.

Walsh’s 2020 album Irlandalucia exemplifies Flamenco’s adaptive potential. Tracks like Cassiopeia – not named for the mythological queen whose vanity earned her a celestial punishment, but after the constellation – weave very personal musical motifs into Flamenco’s rhythmic architecture. John’s comrades in music in Andalucia say they can hear the whiff of the Celt in the music. In terms of the personal motifs what I mean is that John might have particular admiration for a guitarist or composition and he denotes that respect in his own compositions with a little musical “easter egg”. The album Irlandalucia received critical acclaim and underscores a broader truth; Flamenco thrives not through isolation but through exchange.

That is its history and every time it becomes more exciting is when a new voice is added to the mix. This ecumenical approach is also evident in John’s newer collaborations with uilleann piper David Power and Baroque violinist Marja Gaynor who tackle compositions from places as diverse as Argentina and Germany. Interestingly Seville had a Baroque movement in its history which matched with the time the Spanish empire was beginning to decline. As Amanda Wunder stated in her 2017 treatise Baroque Seville: Sacred Art in a Century of Crisis, Baroque art flourished in seventeenth-century Seville during a tumultuous period of economic decline, social conflict, and natural disasters.

Now let’s have a deeper dive into one of John’s songs, the titular Irlanducia.

We can see that Walsh tells us that it is Zapateado. So that is a term to describe the footwork of the dance, so he expects this song to be danced to. But it is a nod also to Paco as he had a composition called Zapateado.

**Zapateado** is a term used in Spanish dance and music, particularly in **flamenco** and traditional folk dances, referring to the **rhythmic footwork** performed by the dancer.

Let’s listen to the music from the 2nd minute, we can hear the palmos clapping in the background, the fusion of celt and flamenco.

This is a master guitarist and composer at work; his advice to our students is listen to everything you possibly can and practice daily. That’s time up folks, thank you for listening.

**Appendix 1**

**Classic & Foundational Recordings**

1. **Ramón Montoya – *Flamenco Guitar Solos* (1936)**
	* The first solo flamenco guitar LP, breaking from vocal/dance accompaniment.
2. **Sabicas – *Flamenco Puro* (1961)**
	* Revolutionized *toque* (guitar) with blistering speed and clean technique; influenced Paco de Lucía.
3. **Paco de Lucía – *Entre Dos Aguas* (1973)**
	* The iconic rumba that globalized flamenco; blends tradition with modern innovation.
4. **Paco de Lucía, Camarón de la Isla – *La Leyenda del Tiempo* (1979)**
	* Avant-garde flamenco fusion (jazz/rock) with Camarón’s legendary vocals.

**Modern Masters & Innovators**

1. **Vicente Amigo – *De Mi Corazón al Aire* (1991)**
	* Poetic, lyrical style; bridges flamenco and world music.
2. **Tomatito – *Barrio Negro* (2001)**
	* Gypsy authenticity meets jazz improvisation; heir to Paco’s legacy.
3. **Gerardo Núñez – *Jucal* (2000)**
	* Pushes *compás* boundaries with complex rhythms and harmonic daring.

**Contemporary Crossovers**

1. **Paco de Lucía – *Cositas Buenas* (2004)**
	* Late-career masterpiece; fuses *bulerías* with Latin jazz.
* **Ojos de Brujo – *Techarí* (2006)**
	+ Catalonian fusion group mixing flamenco with hip-hop, electronica, and rumba.

**Essential Live Performances**

1. **Paco de Lucía, Al Di Meola, John McLaughlin – *Friday Night in San Francisco* (1981)**
* Legendary live album showcasing flamenco’s dialogue with jazz.
1. **Paco de Lucía – *Live in América* (1993)**
* Peak technical mastery; includes the definitive *Solo Quiero Caminar* suite.

**21st-Century Visionaries**

1. **José Fernández "Tomatito" & Diego del Morao – *Soy Flamenco* (2017)**
* A modern tribute to raw *duende* (soul) and rhythmic fire.

**Bonus Deep Cut**

• **Manolo Sanlúcar – *Tauromagia* (1988)**

* A symphonic flamenco concept album inspired by bullfighting.

This list spans **traditional *toque*, groundbreaking fusions, and live improvisation**, offering a roadmap to flamenco guitar’s past and present.

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Appendix 2

YouTube Clips

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-6D12QttFXk> (Carmen 1983)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xs7tN0A7RC8> (Qaawali)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pmps3Cc-5_0> (Paco on Parkinson 1976)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sMFXrn9doc> (John Walsh, Irlanducia)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-RxOYcv7Y4> (Walsh, Cassiopeia)