

Andalusia: A Journey of Music and Cultural Exchange

*Digital Story Script (*AN - Audio Narration)*

AN: I was born and raised in Chicago to immigrant parents from Palestine. Some of my extended family traveled here as far back as the early 1940s.

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AN: We were a Muslim household, but it was really music and not religion that took the forefront in my life. My father and younger brother were both musicians, and together we had a family band.

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AN: Aside from learning the music of my Mid Eastern heritage, I was also exposed to similar musical styles from other cultures in Chicago. We performed with Greek, Turkish, Indian, Persian, North African, Western musicians, and more.

AN: And thanks to my cousins, my brother and I also had a healthy dose of playing and listening to rock and roll.

<CUE: Rock Music>

AN: Being raised in such a diverse society helped me understand and learn about other cultures.

AN: Growing up in a Muslim household I often heard stories about another diverse society in Al Andalus, also known as Andalusia in Spain. People of the Abrahamic tradition, Muslims, Jews, and Christians, lived together sharing in one culture. I learned that this happened way back in the 8th century with the Moorish Islamic occupation of Spain and lasted for nearly 700 years.

AN: The story of Ziryab, an exiled 9th century musician from Baghdad, was one of the most popular stories I heard about Andalusia. My dad's musician friends would often recount how Ziryab brought 'el oud', a Mid Eastern lute, to Spain, and how it would later become the guitar, which eventually led to Spanish flamenco music, and a lot of other styles too.

<CUE: Oud Music>

AN: In North Africa, the Mid East, and Spain, the mere mention of Andalusia or Ziryab invokes feelings of nostalgia for this bygone era. People still reminisce about the culture, poetry, music, and philosophy. As a youth and now an adult, I'd like to think that the

multicultural reputation of Andalusia is still possible, if not already in practice here in America.

AN: However, being Palestinian and Muslim in America usually felt like I was making a political statement every time I mentioned my ethnicity or religion. A common narrative was that Jews and Arabs were always at odds.

<SOUND FX>

AN: People either ignorant of history or easily swept up in modern politics about the Mid East would often say things to me like, “There’s always been conflict there!” or “Those people have been fighting for thousands of years.”

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AN: This really bothered me and I simply didn’t agree. I didn’t want conflict to be the only narrative that many people understood about my culture or religion.

AN: Recalling the story of Ziryab, I was inspired to take my own trip and try to follow a similar route as he did. With intuition and determination as my guide, and a little help from Travelocity, I planned a trip to Andalusia to see the imprint of this historic civilization in cities like Cordoba, Granada, and Seville. While I was there, I would also visit Morocco to bear witness to the culture from where this historic influence came.

<CUE: Music>

AN: I wanted to discover alternative narratives and learn what I possibly could from people who may have remembered a history beyond conflict, and one of cultural exchange.

AN: My first destination was Granada where the historic Alhambra palace fortress was located. It was built up over centuries during the Islamic rule of Spain and is today considered not only a world heritage site, but also one of the greatest marvels of human design.

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AN: The Islamic influence on architecture old and contemporary was evident. Buildings, doors, and arches were a mix of medieval Islamic and European design with a unique flair found only in Andalusia.

AN: Another renowned trait of Granada was its music. Flamenco and Arabo-Andalus artistic traditions were heavily prevalent in this historic city. Musicians, singers, and dancers were in the streets, concert venues, teaching at schools, and in the famous cave taverns in Granada’s Al Bayzin quarter.

AN: The next stop was Cordoba where it all began. This was where Ziryab himself dwelled.

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AN: A quick walk to the old part of the city and within a one-mile stretch you'd pass through the Jewish quarter and come upon the famous Mosque-Cathedral. Modern Andalusians still called it *La Mezquita*, or Mosque in Spanish, even though it was converted into a cathedral in the 15th century. To me, this was a clear indication that the people celebrated the diversity for which their region came to be known.

AN: As I walked through the Mosque, one of the museum guides took notice of the instrument I was carrying. Immediately, he recognized it as an oud and mentioned Ziryab. The guide was an author and scholar on the mosque and Andalusian culture. As we spoke, he echoed my assumptions that he, along with many Andalusians, took great pride in their history and pluralist culture.

AN: Though it was small, Cordoba had a vibrant historic essence. The architecture, music, and statues all seemed to exclaim: "Here exists a culture shared by the three Abrahamic faiths!"

AN: Inscriptions were written in Spanish, Arabic, and Hebrew. Street names also paid tribute to artists, philosophers, and scientists from the Islamic period.

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AN: The next destination was Sevilla, one of Andalusia's more modern cities. Like Cordoba and Granada, Sevilla was known for its old city prominently displaying art and architecture reminiscent of a shared culture.

AN: One of its greatest features was the Catedral de Santa Maria de la Sede, also known as the Sevilla Cathedral.

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AN: The cathedral had a unique bell tower, La Giralda. It was actually an old minaret modeled after a mosque in Morocco and converted to a bell tower after the Reconquista in the late 15th century. It remained a lasting vestige repurposed by a different Abrahamic faith, ironically, for a similar reason of calling people to prayer.

AN: What I saw throughout Andalusia was definitely enlightening and reaffirming of my belief that people remembered and respected a time in history without conflict. However, something just didn't seem complete. I was seeing the remnants of a historic era inherited by its current European citizens. But what of the people who were responsible for some of this history? What do they say, and where could I ask them? There seemed only one way to find out. It was time to head to Morocco and experience for myself.

AN: Across the Straits of Gibraltar to the shores of Africa, I finally landed at the port of Tangier.

AN: When I arrived, I didn't know what I was looking for, but I knew somehow I'd find it.

AN: After checking into a guest home, I wandered the Old City and found myself at the steps of the Place de Kasbah. In case you were wondering, casbah means fortress in Arabic (*Al Casaba*). The Clash also sang about a similar 'casbah' in Algeria.

<CUE: *Rock the Casbah*>

AN: Near a giant door in the fortress walls, I noticed a small café to my left that couldn't have been any bigger than my living room in Chicago.

AN: Above the doorway of the café entrance a sign read, 'Les Fils du Detroit', or *The Sons of Detroit*. Now I was intrigued. An old man inside noticed me standing in front of the café with my oud and waved for me to come in. Little did I know, but I stumbled upon one of the great treasures of Tangier.

AN: Inside was a group of older musicians all of whom gathered nightly to perform a repertoire of Arabo-Andalusian music.

<CUE: *Video*>

AN: They asked where I was from and if I'd like to join them in a jam. Without hesitation, I agreed and pulled out my oud. I proposed a tune we might all know in common; a famous Egyptian piece by the legendary singer Oum Kalthoum guaranteed to be known by such seasoned musicians.

AN: After we played, they gave me an indication that I'd earned my place and asked, "do you know any Andalusian music?"

AN: I realized in that moment that to be asked this question was one of the main reasons I made this journey.

AN: I acknowledged growing up playing many popular Andalusian pieces, but I was on a quest to discover more. They taught me a piece of music right then and there, and offered suggestions for where I might find sheet music in the town of Tetouan. It was a little over an hour from Tangier and was the location where Arabo-Andalus music found its roots.

AN: I thanked them for their help and made plans to visit Tetouan the next day. The group also invited me back to play with them before I left Tangier.

AN: In Tetouan, I arrived at *La Maison de la Culture* – House of Culture, which was a cultural center run by the city and had a school of music and other arts disciplines.

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AN: I explained to the person at the front desk that I'd come a long way and was looking for music. We went to the library and he provided me with all the sheet music and poetry I had longed to find. I made my purchase, thanked him for his help, and set back on my way to Tangier that same evening.

AN: The following day was my last day in Tangier and I went back to meet with my new musician friends. We picked up from the previous encounter discussing music, what it was like in America, what we thought of each other's cultures, and the influence of their culture on Andalusia. We even had mutual musician friends in Belgium, Paris, and Qatar.

<CUE: Video>

AN: As we talked and played music the rest of the night, I reflected upon my whole trip. I realized that while the content of my conversations was very interesting, what seemed more significant were the cultural exchanges happening, right there, in real-time.

AN: I recalled the scholar in Cordoba when he, too, saw me with my oud and reminded me of his and my part in this shared history.

AN: With the musicians in Tangier, not only did we share mutual friends proving the world smaller than we might imagine, but also music of our respective cultures. Music they learned in Morocco and I learned in America.

AN: More importantly, I learned that among the multiple narratives or points of view we may encounter, one thing remained constant. The story of humanity continues to be written by us all whether in Andalusia, Morocco, America, or anywhere else in the world.

<CUE: Credits>

LINK TO DIGITAL STORY: http://youtu.be/_F6QmSDGEm0