Superman wore a cape

Capes may be normal in Krypton, but on Planet Earth they’re kind of weird.

In one of my favourite absurd dialogues from the iconic ‘90s sitcom “Seinfeld,” George Costanza, the plump, middle-aged maniac played by Jason Alexander, gets quite upset when he realizes that his parents are planning to divorce. As an only child, the mere idea of having to celebrate two separate Thanksgiving dinners is making him mad. Though one thing unsettles him the most, Jerry and Elaine, George’s reluctant best friends, have seen George’s father, Frank, talking that same morning to a man wearing a cape.

George: “You know what this has to do with? The man in the cape. I bet you he’s mixed up in this. I don’t think men in capes.

Jerry: “It’s a good point. You can’t cast dispersions on someone just because they’re wearing a cape. Superman wore a cape and I’ll be damned if I’m gonna stand here and let you say something about him.

George: “Alright, Superman is the exception.

Jerry: “It’s a sentence. You can’t cast dispersions on someone just because they’re wearing a cape. Superman wore a cape and I’ll be damned if I’m gonna stand here and let you say something about him.

George: “Alright, Superman is the exception.

Jerry: “Or without capes, having faithful fans is implied in the condition of a superhero, though so is having critics. Much is expected out of a superhero, far too much. And what’s worse, once people get used to them, they’re taken for granted.

All superheroes are gifted—or cursed—with some sort of superpower, and they won’t be left alone until they put it to what the general consensus thinks might be a good use. That is why, utterly disappointed by our selfishness, many superheroes end up venturing into the dark side. And who can blame them? “With great power comes great responsibility. This is my gift, my curse,” said Spiderman’s alter ego, Peter Parker, in despair.

Besides, a life without limitations and under the constant scrutiny of others is not only hard to fulfill, but it can also lead to solitude and, in the most severe cases, to self-denial. This was true of the characters in Greek tragedy and modern superheroes represent the human condition to the maximum of its dramatic capacities. They epitomise our joys and fears, our endeavours and phobias, our successes and failures, our luminous as well as our dim sides. Perhaps the world would be a better place if we weren’t so harsh on our superheroes, if we showed them a bit more sympathy and respect. After all, they’re just exaggerating our fears.

In the pages of más+menos 17, we’ve tried to cover the whole superhero spectrum, even including the cursed ones. We have stories about stars that once shined brightly, iconic figures who died young, brave buffalotwoers who become pathologically shy out of the spotlight, women surrounded by personal threats and violence who still manage to make life better for others, individuals who, much like the superheroes, put on a costume to go to their jobs or to participate in the worship of a stellar cult, and teachers who sacrifice the comfort of their homes in order to defy a law that they consider unfair.

We respect and admire all of the superheroes portrayed in this and in all past issues of our magazine. Some of them are in a position of an uncertainty and bleakness that is hard to imagine. In order to succeed, they must see their own standards and rules, which in reality makes them privileged individuals, because cured and all, they are ultimately what we all long to be: free.

One of the most exciting parts of working with our students on this publication is the possibility to rediscove, semester after semester, the place where I grew up and, once again, live. Our students come to Sevilla with an honest and uncompromised gaze, and –confession made—I try to take advantage of that.


Eight years into our publication, this is the first issue of más+menos produced inside of the newly created Communication, New Media and Journalism program at the CIEE Study Center in Sevilla. Our magazine, small though constant, has led the way to this new and exciting academic venture. The same spirit that más+menos has always had as an experiential learning project based on immersion is embedded in the overall design of the new program.

Though let’s not make it sound so easy. Our magazine wouldn’t really work as an educational tool if things were in place and pre-packed before our students arrived. I believe that a certain degree of perplexity is needed in order for this project to become, just like any other project in study abroad, a long lasting or a life-changing experience. That is why I feel that dealing with “culture shock” preventively does not quite make our students more independent or better equipped for their new environment. Life is life.

Aren’t our students capable of confronting things more or less as they are? Do they need the answers that we provide for questions that they don’t, but we, have made?

In truth, few people would be as shocked and perplexed by this culture as I am, so I try with the help of our magazine’s contributors to revisit each semester what’s new, unique, extraordinary, positive or moving about this place and its people, about us.
“Star Wars” fans from HoloRed Estelar—the largest “Star Wars” fan club in Spain—gather at the Plaza de España in Seville, one of the sets from the George Lucas saga. There, they explain to us why they’re drawn to the films and how they see the story as a universal myth.

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, before Luke Skywalker destroyed the Death Star or wielded a lightsaber, the forbidden romance between his parents, Anakin and Padmé, began to blossom as they strolled through the semi-circular palace grounds in Naboo.

The arcaded entryways, the multitude of columns and the magnificent fountain in the center of the palace from the scene in “Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones” is unmistakably familiar to every sci-fi fan. The Plaza de España in Seville, Spain is not only a set in the famous space opera but it’s also the beautiful España in Seville, Spain. With about 80 active members, HoloRed Estelar is the second largest “Star Wars” fan club in Spain. Their meetings are more casual now the meetings have become more serious and less casual.

Santiago Benítez, president of HoloRed Estelar, did not always like “Star Wars.” His father’s friend, Julián, was the one who loved “Star Wars.” Benítez says his father’s friend, Julián, was the one who loved “Star Wars.” Benítez says that when he was younger, he was only 5 years old when the second episode premiered. He says that when he was younger, he was interested in the lightsabers and the armor. Now what interests him the most is the Jedi’s attitude.

“The Jedi try not to have any strong feelings and are always at peace,” Loreto explains. “They don’t get agitated or sad, nor are they really happy; that’s why they are always calm. Many times I suddenly become agitated or feel very happy. I want to become calmer and peaceful like the Jedi.”

Before Anakin turned to the dark side, he said, “Compassion...is essential to a Jedi’s life.” The members of HoloRed Estelar show their compassion by periodically going to local hospitals in their costumes and spending time with the children. They bring “Star Wars” toys donated by businesses like Hasbro. In the spirit of the holiday season, their next visit will be at the Virgen del Rocio Hospital on Dec. 27.

“We mainly go to make the kids at the hospitals happy,” Benítez says. “It’s really gratifying to see them smile because of us.”

As the meeting continues, HoloRed Estelar discusses how to improve their next JEHES and votes in favor of “helping their fellow sci-fi friends with their “Star Wars” convention. Amidst the talking, Darth Vader’s Imperial March rings out. One of the members urgently steps out of the circle to answer it.

“We must have his wife,” another member says. ""
Schools, Style and Sacrifice: the Nonviolent Revolution of the Women of Western Sahara

Since the Moroccan occupation and subsequent repression of the people in Western Sahara began in 1975, some Sahrawi women have taken the lead in the nonviolent pursuit of independence and human rights.

FATMA’S STORY

One afternoon in December of 1975, a young girl named Fatma was playing in her hometown of Elgeitia, Western Sahara, just like any other day that winter. At 4 p.m., airplanes appeared overhead. They fired missles, and dirt was kicked up instantly by fire all around caused by mines dropped from the sky.

Unable to locate her whole family, she grabbed the hand of her aunt and began to run. Thus began a four-day journey to seek refuge in the Algerian desert, a journey that included the flight from the Algerian army.

Fatma’s father was a Sahrawi soldier. She lost contact instantaneously by fire all around caused by mines dropped from the sky.

Selma, her daughter, was 11 months old. Fatma was her mother, she would speak as I do.”

Fatma didn’t believe Fatma was her mother, insisting, “If I weren’t my mother, she would speak as I do.”

When Fatma was 18 years old, she gave birth to her first child, Selma, who became ill from a pituitary epidemic in the refugee camp when she was 11 months old. Fatma worked in the National Union of Sahrawi Women while at the refugee camps in 1991 after a United Nations-brokered ceasefire.

Despite the infrastructures that women put in place during the war, men took over the majority of administrative roles in the Sahrawi community when they returned to the refugee camps in 1991 after a United Nations-brokered ceasefire.

POWHER THROUGH ART

Despite the infrastructures that women put in place during the war, men took over the majority of administrative roles in the Sahrawi community when they returned to the refugee camps in 1991 after a United Nations-brokered ceasefire.

The problem right now is that Sahrawi women are returning, to some extent, to housework,” said Fernando Peraita, the president of the Association of Friendship with the Sahrawi People in Seville. As a result, many Sahrawi women and organizations have been working for the past 20 years to reestablish the power they previously held.

One such organization is called Sahara Libre Wear (SLW), a clothing brand that grew out of two projects featured in the annual Sahrawi Art Festival El Filtis. These projects—titled “Pintarropa”, run by artist Alonso Gil, and Estetik, run by artists Angustias Garcia and Esther Repiquete—merged in 2009 to form SLW.

The clothing line seeks to express the pain and hopes of the Sahrawi independence movement through fashion made by Sahrawi women. SLW produces traditional clothing depicting Gil’s unique designs, such as gowns that flow into the sky and the name of the independent Sahrawi state written in the Roman and Arabic scripts.

The three artists said in an interview with the French-language magazine Riz that they created this project because “clothing serves as a vehicle to make visible and evident the situation in which the Sahrawi community lives, [which has been] forgotten and silenced by those who choose to see only their own interests in the Sahrawi condition.”

At the same time, the artists emphasize that the Sahrawi women are the heart of the project, and that the choice of traditional clothing as a medium of expression lends itself to “a space of feminine communication, reflection and debate, with and for women.”

As this program grows, the three founding artists have been working with Sahrawi women to give them complete control of the project. It is a challenging task, given that it takes far less time to create the clothing in Spain, where Gil pressses the designs onto the fabric than at a time, than it does in Western Sahara, where the climate requires women to press the designs separately to keep the paint from drying too quickly.

“Bar even though it takes time, I think that the process of self-administration of the project is going to go very well,” Gil says, beaming with pride for what the women of SLW have accomplished.

Reflecting the continuing pain of the Sahrawi community, many of the recent designs created by the women depict the Gdeim Izik (also written Gdeim Izik or Agdaym Izik) incident. As reported in Amnesty Internationals’s 2011 Annual Report, Moroccan security forces dismantled a peaceful protest outside of Laayoune, the capital of occupied Western Sahara, on November 8, 2010. The forces physically assaulted the protesters and destroyed much of their property. This incident sparked violent in the camp, ending in casualties on both sides as well as hundreds of arrests of protesters. The women of SLW responded to the Gdeim Izik incident by making icons of the Sahrawi victims of the violence.

THE FIGHT CONTINUES

Individual Sahrawi women such as Aminata Haddar have continued to promote the role of women in the fight for Sahrawi rights and freedom in recent years.
Leonardo Hernández Narváez, a mild-mannered young man, transforms when he goes to the plaza to perform the bullfight on his horse as a rejoneador. He came back after an accident that almost left him completely blind. In 2003, we interviewed him for the first issue of our magazine. He was then starting what would become his superstar career.

**The Alter Ego**

It is a Saturday afternoon in early November, and Leonardo Hernández, a young superstar in the world of arts and one of the top three mounted bullfighters competing today, is being saluted by his mother for the second time in an hour. The biting wind of the Extremaduran plains blows through the cozy warmth of the rustic house.

“My poor dear!” the middle-aged woman admonishes as she sets a pot of stew on the stove. “How many times do I have to tell you?”

“I closed it!” the young man protests, not bothering to turn around and check. His mother scoffs loudly. “Look!” she commands, pointing to the swinging iron door with her free hand.

He rolls his eyes and glances over his shoulder. Seeing the kitchen door wide-open, he laughs.

“Joke!” he swears with a good-natured grin, and crosses the cozy kitchen to push the door closed.

A slim, curly-haired 24-year-old, there is nothing about Íscar, Valladolid, Leonardo raised the sable de munte to deliver the final blow, but slipped and took the blunt end of the spear to his right eye. The blow damaged his ocular nerve so severely that it was initially blind in both eyes.

“Thankfully, the swelling went down in his eye. I would have trouble,” he said in a 2011 interview with Mundotoro. “Thankfully, the swelling went down in his eye. I would have trouble,” he said in a 2011 interview with Mundotoro.
**Wonder Woman in Disguise**

Ana Chavarro, the 37-year-old Colombian woman who cleans at night in the CIEE Study Center in Seville, has overcome a past full of trying events through her heroic fight for a better life for herself and her family.

Every Monday through Friday, Ana Chavarro spends the morning taking care of a 10-month-old baby that isn’t hers. She rocks her, feeds her, holds her, changes her diaper and puts her down for a nap. When Tula wakes up, Ana straps her into a stroller and the two of them wander over to pick up Tula’s 3-year-old brother, Eliot, from school.

When Ana was this 37-year-old Colombian woman, I knew instantly that she was extraordinary.

“What’s my spoiled little boy?” asks Eliot, who is holding her hand with a fierce grip as I push Tula in her stroller.

“Eliot!” he answers with a priceless smile plastered across his little face.

“That’s right,” she says, and she picks him up and plants a big smack on his cheek. This kid might not be her, but there’s a whole lot of love there.

The children’s parents, Morgan and Oscar, work at the CIEE Study Center in Seville. That’s how Ana and her husband, Duber, also got jobs at the center. They both clean the building at night.

“Oscar and Morgan have seen me happy, sad, everything. I’ve felt all of these things and I’ve never only felt one at a time,” Ana says. Even as she recounts her life story, she does so through tears and laughter. It changes from moment to moment and story to story. But one thing is constant: her strength.

Ana works two jobs in Seville, but at one point she was working four. She used to care for an elderly woman named Minni during the weekends and she worked for the Panácuts Gata de Lucha, an organization that provides mothers who are struggling financially with food, diapers, milk and other necessities for their babies.

Ana gained job stability with Oscar and Morgan at CIEE. This allowed her to quit her other two jobs. “I am so lucky that I found them here,” she says, especially because she arrived in Seville at the beginning of the bullfighting season is rife with photos of Leonardo triumphantly waving at the crowd as adoring fans carry him from the stadium on their shoulders.

But at home on the ranch, as the family prepares for an afternoon training the up-and-coming moustaches, he’s just Nonayo, same as ever.

“Wear your jacket; it’s freezing outside,” Leonardo’s mother commands, spotting his attempts to sneak out the back door in just a sweater.

“Joked” laughs the superhero, but grabs a fleece on his way out all the same. **•••**
Ana helped Vicky’s husband, Orlando, change a light bulb. The light bulb broke and cut his face and Ana accompanied him to the hospital. While she was there, two men came looking for her at the house. One of them was the father of her child, Alicia’s husband.

Ana thought nothing of it when she was told that these two men had come searching for her. But the next day, she heard on the radio that those men had killed her best friend. It was then that Ana realized a broken light bulb had saved her life. It was after this that she decided to move further away from her family.

“My mother said to me that I could stay or leave. She told me that she loved me and what had happened to me had really hurt her. But she said that she would prefer to have a daughter far away, but alive.” After that, Ana left for Rivera, in the department of Huila, eight hours away by bus.

Ana’s past doesn’t seem to weigh her down or make her bitter. It amazes me how a woman who has been through so many horrible things can laugh so genuinely. Tula pulls on her hair and Ana shrieks and laughs while wiping away the tears.

She continues to talk about her daughter, Constanza. One night, Ana received a phone call from her sister saying that her daughter was in the hospital. “She was working at a restaurant. She went to work that evening and never came back.”

Constanza was drugged, robbed and raped. “It was so hard for me to hear, because I had been through a similar situation. And it completely changed my life.”

Ana’s greatest dream was to come to Seville and earn enough money to buy her daughter a house. Constanza, who is 24 years old now, has three children: Natalia (9 years old), Karen Daniela (7 years old) and Julián David (18 months), the son that she has with her current husband, Adolfo, a corporal of the Colombian army who fights the FARC’s guerrillas in the jungle.

Ana and Duber were married in Colombia on Sept. 11, 2008, and three days later they moved to Seville to work and support the family.

“I have always liked to work, for myself, for my daughter, for my grandchildren, for the things that are important to me. When I decided to come to Seville, it was very difficult. But I always had a lot of dreams and goals to achieve, and now I’m achieving them little by little.” For example, she has helped her sister and her brother-in-law to open an auto parts store with the money she earned and sent home.

Ana is now far away from her daughter, but speaks with her on the phone every day. She loves Constanza more than anything else on earth.

This 37-year-old grandmother has been married twice; she’s dealt with deaths of loved ones, traumatizing illnesses and unimaginable hardships. She’s had to make the most difficult decisions, and many of them before she even celebrated her 15th birthday, or quinceañera.

She is Wonder Woman incarnate. She doesn’t have superpowers and she doesn’t wear hot pants or a headband. She wears bell-bottom jeans and black V-neck shirts, and she pushes a stroller around and holds the hand of a 3-year-old boy who absolutely adores her.

She mops the floors of a beautiful palace where privileged American students spend their days studying. She doesn’t look like a superhero. But she is one. Her strength is awe-inspiring and unfathomable. She is a warrior.

We reach a main road and I turn to Ana to tell her I’m going home. I thank her for her time and her willingness to share her story with me and I get a goodbye kiss from Elliot and Tula. I watch her walk away, one hand pushing Tula’s stroller, the other holding onto a dancing and singing Elliot.

I smile because I know she’s happy, even though it’s impossible for me to imagine how. I smile because I feel honored that I am the one who has the privilege of sharing her story with others.

But most of all, I smile because she’s with her family and she’s so purely and genuinely happy; I believe that’s exactly what she deserves.

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Ana’s greatest dream was to come to Seville and earn enough money to buy her daughter a house. Constanza, who is 24 years old now, has three children: Natalia (9 years old), Karen Daniela (7 years old) and Julián David (18 months), the son that she has with her current husband, Adolfo, a corporal of the Colombian army who fights the FARC’s guerrillas in the jungle.
I want to tell the story of Silvio Fernández Melgarejo, just Silvio, the spontaneous, all the money he got from his wife, or he would go to the Milagro airport and asked, ‘Where is the next plane headed?’ and he’d take it.” Not surprisingly, his wife left him and went back to England with their son, Nammy. Silvio went to England to visit Sammy but his ex-wife would not let him near. The father and son did not have a personal relationship.

But since Silvio’s death in 2001, Sammy Taylor, who is now a musician as well, has performed in Seville with his father’s band, The Dealers, singing his father’s songs in Spanish while surrounded by his father’s dedicated followers and friends.

In 1962 Silvio returned to Seville, where he and his friends drank heavily and partied. They tried “loads of drugs, every type, every color, every dimension,” Paquico recalls. Silvio had international fans and groupsies and lived the outlandish life shared by most rock stars. He loved having a good time and didn’t care what people thought of him or what they said about his legend, love him like a musical superhero because he stood as himself in the spotlight and he didn’t try to hide his self in the spotlight and he didn’t try to hide his
For many people in Seville, a saint is like a comic superhero: someone to ask for extraordinary help in times of need. Devotees of Saint Judas Tadeo, a nun and an actress who has dedicated the last 11 years of her life to playing the role of the Virgin Mary in a comedy show explain what these sacred figures mean for them.

The role of a saint is much greater than its religious aspect. The saints have become part of the culture intertwined with the daily life of the Spanish Catholics. Figures of saints inhabit almost just as many homes as Spanish people do. From churches to homes, to restaurants and bars, you can find one of these familiar figures in paintings or sculptures almost everywhere.

“Make use of this particular privilege given to you to achieve visible and quick help where it is almost impossible. Come to my assistance in this great need so that I may receive the consolation and help of healers in all my needs.” María finishes her prayer and steps out of the crowd. With wet eyes she says, “I have been coming here for 25 years to pray to Saint Judas Tadeo because my mother brought me here since I was a child and he has always helped me.”

“Take away the plastic and you are left with the earth in all my needs.” María finishes her prayer and steps out of the crowd.

“I do not pray to all of the saints, I only pray to the ones that are closest to me,” says Carmen Carmona, one of the few other people who graciously spare a few moments to talk about the Catholic martyrs.

“I pray everyday without a doubt to Saint Judas, Saint Antonio, Saint Esperidio and the Virgin, for good health and work. I pray that they take care of my children and grandchildren.” If one thing is apparent among the hundreds of red-lit candles and flowers that crowd the floor near the saint, it’s that there is plenty of faith in miracles here in Seville.

“What we try to express through the play ‘Estrella Sublime’ is that people spend too much time looking up, waiting for someone to help them, when in reality the Virgin and the saints were all just as human as anyone else at one point. People think when they ask something of the Virgin like, ‘Help me find work,’ boom, she is automatically going to make it happen with her magic wand, but no, the Virgin says it takes a lot of hard work to make a miracle happen.”

Sister Adela from the Madre de Dios monastery agrees with Lola’s viewpoint. “Saints are not really superheroes, they are merely role models. They’re everyday people who have learned to live each day of life with love, love for God. People ask for a huge amount of things from saints because they view them as the medium between here and heaven. The people pray because they have faith that the saints are doing what they can to help God in that world as they did in this one.” Although Sister Adela believes we should all have faith, she says that the need for miracles is not as real as waiting for miracles. We should try and help ourselves, work hard and live everyday with love.

Charo Urbano as “Lola” and Lola Marmolejo as “Maci”, in “Estrella Sublime” / Juana Buzón

A the waiter approaches the table to take our order, he immediately recognizes my company. A grin spreads from one ear to the other, taking up most of the space on his face. “What you guys did with the lights in your last show, it was brilliant. It left me mesmerized. I watched the performance on stage.”

Lola Marmolejo and Juana Buzón have been partners for many years in life and in the work place. Working with the theater company Bastarda Española and its director, Antonio Campos, they have put on more than 200 shows. More than 25,000 people have attended their plays, which include “Carmen, confía,” “Estrella Sublime.” The waiter leaves and Juana continues to talk. “If I had to describe Lola as a superhero, she would be an invisible one; she takes the stage by night, but off stage she likes to keep to herself and go unnoticed.” For 11 years Lola has dedicated her life to playing the role of the Virgin Mary, portraying realistic views of religious myths and conveying the importance that people have placed on religious figures.

“The Virgin suffers like any other woman, or human for that matter, but people expect great things from her,” she explains. With finesse, “I am the Virgin, not President Obama,” Lola brings the holy mother of God down to an earthly level. “The Virgin is a unique character, but even she has her limitations,” Juana says as he_sips his coffee. Lola smiles from the side of the table.

Crossing her legs, Lola appears to be smaller than she already is. As she creates even more room in her loose winter dress, she says: “So long as there is a crisis, people will hold on to their beliefs; so long as there is something to ask for, they’re going to keep on asking.”

ASKING FOR HELP

It’s a Saturday morning and as the people walk into the small courtyard of the San Antonio church on Alfonso XII street, they all seem to gravitate towards the statue of Saint Judas Tadeo. Stopping at his altar before reaching the church doors, the mass of bodies sprawl out, giving each other space to pray. María Lara walks from where she stood behind the crowd and as she makes it to the front she holds her arm out to the wall, looks up to Saint Judas and then looks down.

“Make use of this particular privilege given to you to achieve visible and quick help where it is almost impossible. Come to my assistance in this great need so that I may receive the consolation and help of healers in all my needs.” María finishes her prayer and steps out of the crowd. With wet eyes she says, “I have been coming here for 25 years to pray to Saint Judas Tadeo because my mother brought me here since I was a child and he has always helped me.”

“My mother’s friend died a few weeks ago,” says Alvaro Langfrid, speaking to me in English. “She lights a candle for her in our house, every night. It’s the fear of death that makes people pray so much, they believe that the saint holds special powers and that they can protect us,” he explains. “I cannot say that I am really religious, but when I come across one of these figures, I get a rush of emotion, not because of the religion, but because of the culture.”

Sonate Sastre, the Holy Week, is one example of religion and culture mixed together. In this age-old holy tradition, one is guaranteed to see shrines dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ and as many saints as you can imagine. This is not just a celebration for Catholics, because nearly the whole town participates. As the streets shut down, so that processions can take place, you begin to see people of all ages coming out and joining in the commemoration of the Passion of Christ. The band plays its tunes, making the emotional ceremony much more intense.

But why celebrate these figures? How is it that they have come to be worshiped by the whole city and by millions of other people across the world?

“Take away the plastic and you are left with the same thing; two invented stories about people with powers who save the day,” says Lola Marmolejo, comparing the idea of comic book heroes like Superman with the idea of a saint. The only thing missing really in the second case is the cape.

CHARO URBANO AS “LOLA” AND LOLA MARMOLEJO AS “MACI”, IN “ESTRELLA SUBLIME” / JUANA BUZÓN
Camarón: Immortal

The flamenco singer’s talent and spirit were so great that he continues to inspire people 19 years after his death. He lives on through his music and his fans that worship him up to this day.

Sitting in the bar he owns in San Fernando, Nicolás Cotariella points out a wall crowded with framed black and white photographs of Camarón de la Isla. The pictures show the flamenco legend on stage, his huge curls of light brown hair forming a halo around his head, his face wrinkled in concentration. “He’s like a god,” Nicolás says, chuckling a little, leaning forward and nodding his head in affirmation. “He was a very simple man. That’s just how he was. The fame never changed him. He was always the same quiet person,” recalls the 54-year-old bar owner and flamenco guitarist, who has served a few beers to Camarón himself at the very table we’re sitting at.

Despite his godlike status, Camarón encountered some controversy in his lifetime and countered some controversy in his lifetime and self at the very table we’re sitting at. He was never satisfied,” he says, shrugging, “There are so many artists in the music industry that are involved with drugs, and for me, it really doesn’t change how talented he was or take anything away from his fantastic work.”

Camarón de la Isla, or José Monge Cruz, was born in San Fernando, a town built on the Ida de León close to the city of Cádiz, on Dec. 5, 1950. Later he moved to La Línea, near Gibraltar. He grew up poor but his life changed drastically once he began to sing at flamenco shows. The boy, who was the sixth of eight children and was given a nickname that means “little prawn from the island,” started in the industry because he needed money to support his family. Forty-two years and 20 albums later, lung cancer took the flamenco legend’s life in 1992. His spirit has survived through the fans that worship his work, while his music continues to influence people around the world.

A shiny plaque on a tiny house in a narrow street marks the place where Camarón was born. The white paint is wearing off in large sections and exposing the dirty concrete beneath. Vertical bars in a tiny window are decorated with a patchwork of orange rust and the decaying wooden door is splintered into spikes as if to ward off passersby.

The house is somewhat characteristic of Camarón, who was quiet, simple and private. It seems unlikely that someone with these characteristics would become such a public person. Camarón’s widow, Dolores Montoya, known as La Chispa, or “the spark,” once said in an interview with Eduardo del Campo in El Mundo’s Magazine: “It didn’t even seem like he knew how to sing. He rose to the occasion the moment he got on stage. There was where he became Camarón.”

Situated five minutes from La Carbonería, a popular flamenco bar in Seville, is the Peña Flamenco Camarón de la Isla, where flamenco artists from all over come to perform on weekends. Antonio, a 65-year-old man with sparkling clear blue eyes, walks in the door with his wife, patting his friend on the back as he yells to someone else across the room, laughing the whole time.

“He would put on his tapes in the studio and ask me for my opinion. But he, like all of the greats, always said, ‘This could have been done better.’ And you listen to it and it’s perfect! He always had this doubt. He was never satisfied.”

When he finally sits down he explains, between side conversations and making jokes with everyone in the room, that Camarón continues to have a great influence on the music industry 19 years after his death. “Before every artist starts to sing, they first turn to the portrait of Camarón behind them for a moment of applause. After all, he was the greatest,” he says.

These artists and their audiences show respect and gratitude to their deity in the same way that churchgoers give a moment of silent thanks to the crucifix above the altar.

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For me, Camarón is an idol in our era,” he says. Though the singer died before Gerson was born, the artist is still an influence on him. “I hope that Camarón is in my soul,” he says.

Though Gerson jokes around with his classmates and seems to take little seriously the young student sings flamenco with remarkable self-poise, maturity and focus. In those moments, he says, “I think about the feelings, flamenco is all about the emotions.”

The same was true for Camarón—listens could absolutely see and feel the emotion when the master Camarón sang. Seated on stage he would sing with his head slightly down, eyes shut and eyebrows furrowed in concentration. His hands quietly kept the beat in his lap, only stopping when his entire body tensed, every muscle working in unison to release his powerful yet controlled voice with a crescendo of emotion and energy, resulting in a roar of applause from the audience.

It wasn’t just Camarón’s talent that brought him success. He put a lot of time and work into his music. “He would put on his tapes in the studio and ask me for my opinion. But he, like all of the greats, always said, ‘This could have been done better.’ And you listen to it and it’s perfect! He always had this doubt. He was never satisfied,” La Chispa said, recalling her husband’s work ethic.

There’s one final aspect, apart from talent and hard work, that made Camarón so great; his genuine kindness and selflessness. In her interview with El Mundo, La Chispa said her late husband was “an artist and a person, he was good with children and people. He was simple. He liked to go unnoticed and wanted to be treated like any other person.”

But he was like no one else, why is his spirit lives on two decades after his death. To many of his fans, like Nicolás the bar owner, Camarón will always be drifted among the flamenco greats.

“There is a before and an after flamenco,” Nicolás explains. “Before and after Camarón.”

José Monge Cruz, “Camarón de la Isla”/ EYE
The story of an African migrant who fled from Liberia, became popular in Seville for the way he sells tissues to drivers and who dreams about someday becoming a judge “to work for humanity.”

Upon first glance, he is a gentleman in a top hat. He is a Spanish knight and a flamenco dancer in a flowing pink dress. A blue grocery basket swings from his arm as he weaves through stopped and still-sliding cars, waving at friends, acquaintances and everyday passersby catching a glimpse of the day’s outfit.

“Hello, amigo!” he calls out as he approaches drivers stopped momentarily by his side. He grins as he offers them packs of tissues for 1€ each. “Thank you, amigo, thank you! Have a good day!” he calls out in English, heading back to the sidewalk as the cars begin to roll forward. He welcomes his guests with a bow and sends them chuckling on their way. “They always laugh with me,” he explains. “I love this happiness. Because of this, I love my job.”

The stoplight on Plaza de Armas is his territory, one he staked out almost nine years ago. Howard Jackson, more commonly known as Howie, weaves through the stopped cars from 10 a.m. until he leaves for class in the afternoon. Some nights he returns to work for a few more hours if he hasn’t gone home to study.

Fleeing the war

But for the happiness he offers to others, Jackson’s story is one of struggle as much as joy. He fled his home in Liberia in 1993 and travelled through eight African countries before finally reaching Seville, where he has lived since his arrival 13 years ago. “I just wanted to see someone,” he says, as friends, acquaintances and everyday passersby catch a glimpse of the day’s outfit. “I have no uncles. I don’t know anyone.”

Although Liberia has seen many changes since Jackson left, including the election and later the re-election of a new president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, who is also a recipient of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize, Jackson has witnessed this transition with his feet firmly planted in Spain.

“I don’t have any desire to return to Liberia,” he says. “I don’t have anything and they don’t recognize me as a citizen either. I left with nothing. And they asked me, show me your passport or whatever you have from your country and we’ll recognize you.”

But because he left without these documents, the Liberian government does not recognize his citizenship. And although he has tried, he says that since he left he has been unable to reach his family and friends at home. “I cannot reach my mother, I cannot reach my dad,” he says. “I have no uncles. I don’t know anyone.”

A new life

Despite these challenges, Jackson has built a new life for himself in Seville. “From the beginning when I arrived here the Spanish people accepted me very well,” he says. “They helped me in whatever way they could. I cry sometimes but not a lot and someone is always behind me to say, ‘No, don’t cry no more.”’

This support has also come from the Fundación Sevillán Arco, an organization founded to help immigrants find their places in the social and economic fabric of Spanish society. According to the government of Andalucía (Junta de Andalucía), in 2009, the latest data available, there were 12,302 immigrants in Seville from sub-Saharan African countries, the third largest foreign population in the city if we count them together as a single group regardless of nationality.

With help from Sevillán Arco, Jackson began to learn Spanish, found a place to live and began working. But even though he was in the country legally, he did not have the documents to work. And, he says, after working in other short-term positions, he settled on selling tissues because there is always a need.

“You can’t sell newspapers because people already have them,” he explains, laying a hand fondly on the packages arranged neatly in his blue basket. “But people need tissues, they use them many times a day.”

Although he has spent close to a decade at the stoplight, Jackson says he will leave his post at some point. Two years ago he wanted to become a lawyer once finished with his current studies of English, Spanish, math and psychology. But now, he says, his dream has changed.

“My future, my goal, should I achieve that, I will dedicate it to humanity. And I will work for humanity too as a judge in the court.”

For humanity too as a judge in the court.”