

Ben Bolt Goes to Spain Written by Steve Bolt

Today is a normal day. At age 50, the blessings of life come in sameness. Most of the time, I'm too tired for adventure. I love sitting at my desk thinking or planning. If I pop out of my chair, it's for trivial things. May I take you back to 1971? I was 21 and my brother Ben was 17. It was late September. Ben and I would soon be flying to Europe. We had aspirations as far apart as east and west. I was heading to England to a Bible School I wasn't enrolled in and Ben was going to Madrid, Spain to study guitar with the masters. My father always loves a bargain and airfare was no exception. The best deal was out of New York City. So both Ben and I drove with my Dad to New York City in a beat up black Cadillac. Dad had misjudged the traffic. I just knew we'd be late for our flight. I was nervous. "Pop, we gonna make it?" "Traffic's pretty bad," was his only reply. I think he knew our destiny as well. We had those tickets that were irreversible. It was either you make the flight, or you lose the flight. Wondering about my father's next move, we finally made it to the airport. They had either sold the flight out or something and we were out of luck. But by paying a little extra we could fly Air France to Paris. We had previously booked some "Airbus" special and now we would be flying first class. Dad was extremely pleased and retorted, "The Lord was with us." The flight was great and so was the food.

The stress of catching the plane was tiresome, so I fell asleep. Finally, we landed in Paris. We didn't see the Eiffel Tower or the Arch de Triumph. It was just an airport with everyone mumbling French instead of English. Our next flight to London would be hours away. Still exhausted, I found a vacant padded bench seat and fell asleep. A little before the flight, Ben woke me up. I bounced to my feet. I started to walk towards Ben and my right leg completely gave way! I crashed to the floor with a thud. Ben thought it was hilarious and started laughing. With him chuckling, I remained on the floor. "Ben, help me up," I lamented. With Ben's help I could barely get up. My leg gave way again. "What's up, Steve?" "It's my leg, it's totally asleep!" I had fallen into a deep sleep on that bench, cutting off circulation to my right leg. It took forever to get any sort of feeling back again. I limped for 2 weeks afterwards.

The first order of business was to get me enrolled in Bible School. Believing by faith or presumption, I was to go study the Word of God, so Ben and I headed for the northern part of England.

Billy Strachan, the Dean, lectured me that I had spent a lot of the Lord's money flying to England without being accepted as a student. After the lecture, he told me that a student had just cancelled and there would be room for me! That's how I got into Bible school. The next order of business was to get Ben in Spain to study the guitar. My "Spanglish" was a little better than his, so I would be his ambassador/ interpreter forging the way for all domestic responsibilities. I had to find a boarding room, where to get laundry done, and where to eat. We had designed a window of time of about three weeks to get Ben ready before I had to return to England. I shopped for a room for us and landed a great deal. There was no shower in the room, but we had a sink. A little lady carrying a baby greeted us and showed us a room. We quickly took it thinking that would be one less decision we'd have to make.

I started my pre-biblical studies everyday and Ben began practicing the guitar. We shared meals together and basically spent all day listening to each other do scales or quote scripture. We were untamed youth at the pinnacle of desire for the future. Spain and England held the keys for our preparation. About 11 p.m. every night, our hotel would get a little noisy. You could hear girls giggling or men clearing their throats. And there were a lot of footsteps. During the day, the place was like a tomb, which was great for studying. But at night it was another story. It took me about a week to figure

it out. Ben and I were staying in a house of ill-repute. I was mortified! Ben immediately saw the irony of it and burst into laughter. This was going to be a great story to tell on big bro who was ardently studying the Bible.

After we got Ben in a routine, we needed to find a guitar teacher. Until we were able to locate Ben's teacher, all Ben could talk about was his teacher. We knew nothing about Jose Luis Rodrigo. He was giving a master class when we arrived and we had to wait a week before we could meet him. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner conversations always centered on Ben's teacher. What was he like? Was he tall? Was he short? Did he have bad breath? Did he have a family? On and on Ben went. He never stopped frothing about his guitar teacher. He was so excited to be in Spain studying the guitar; he could have jumped out of his skin. (He certainly got next to mine.) Finally the day came to find his teacher. Madrid is a very large city, probably the size of New York. It's full of concrete and wherever there's grass, there are signs everywhere to not walk on the grass. It's full of museums, subways, buses, and lots of bars. We fell in love with the ceviche. Ben had been a vegetarian for a short while, so this delicacy of fish became a noon time favorite. But as always the tide of the conversation would turn again to Jose Luis Rodrigo. Infrequently, Ben would talk about the greatest player of all time, Andres Segovia.

To me, Segovia was an elderly man with a pipe sticking out of his mouth and his picture plastered on packages of guitar strings. I quickly memorized his face.

Ben and I had grown up in Miami, Florida. Ben's first love of the guitar was listening to Chet Atkins. He was captivated how one person could make a guitar sound like two people playing at the same time. So Ben's first guitar was an electric guitar. His first teacher was Jeri Veri. Jeri was a kind, methodical man who owned a big German

Shepherd. The dog never left his sight. Years later I found out that Jeri had gone to prison. He had taken the blame for his band members smoking dope and Jeri had chosen to be the fall guy. The dog was Jeri's side kick, just in case any trouble from prison ever bumped into Jeri. Jeri taught Ben the basics of music. Nothing fancy, just the pure basics. But Ben loved his teacher. It was a bond Ben would never forget.

Ben was in his first band called the Six Pack when he was twelve. He wasn't old enough to drink or smoke but there he was playing cheap nightclubs in Miami Beach. My father had underestimated Ben's drive, desire, and ability to play the guitar. Ben had wanted a guitar even at age six and my father dismissed it as some childhood fantasy. Now Ben was doing the nightclub scene at age 16 and Dad finally began to understand that guitar was very important to Ben. To balance the scales on the side of Ben's excellence on the guitar was his inability to be a public school student. We all sang hallelujahs when Ben graduated from high school. So began my father's deliberation with what to do with this poor scholastic long haired kid of 17. Dad prayed about it and for some reason got fixated on sending Ben to Spain. Ben's choice was go to college or go to Spain and study guitar, which took no thought on Ben's part. Ben didn't even own a classical guitar until about six months before going to Spain. I gave him his first nylon stringed beauty. I purchased it in Panama and it cost around \$30.

With the offer of lessons in Spain, Ben went into warp speed dreaming of the day when he would land in Spain and study the guitar. And that day had arrived. So we boarded the Madrid underground subway system in search of Jose Luis Rodrigo. The appointment would be in the early afternoon. We left at 9 a.m. Ben wanted extra time in case we lost our way. I had called Senor Rodrigo and got the address. Ben could not speak Spanish except for Buenos Dias and adios. After I hung up, Ben hammered me again on what his teacher was like. In controlled frustration, I told him I just didn't

know. Jose's address was something like 12DI Circulo de Mariscos, Barrio Madrido. Ben made sure that I questioned any local that would talk to me how to get to Rodrigo's apartment. He prodded me the whole way. "Make sure again, Bro," he would say. "Make sure you get it right!" "Seguro," would be my reply. It took a lot longer getting there than I thought. We found the barrio (the neighborhood) alright, but got very confused on the address. We couldn't find Circulo de Mariscos anywhere. Frustrated, I suggested we get something to eat. Ben relented and we had a quick bite.

He wasn't even interested in the ceviche. I ate well. I was trying not to let this whole ordeal become my emergency. But Ben had endured England with me, so I had to reciprocate and find this elusive address. We wandered for at least another half hour. There was no one on the streets. It was lunch time and the neighborhood had become a ghost town. The Spaniards love their siestas and today was no exception. Finally we were edging toward the appointment time. We had finally located Circulo de Mariscos Street. I was judging the placement of the street by cars whizzing by and the street was accessible only by foot. But finally, here it was. We had no time to waste. Ben's anticipation was at fever pitch. His eyes glistened; he was overcome with pure emotional tension. But he had to wait on my interpretation and introduction before he could properly meet his teacher.

There were two towers in the apartment complex. We went to the right tower. The address said 12DI so we figured it had to be the 12th floor. As the lethargic elevator waned its way up, Ben was about to burst. I lamented why Spanish elevators were so slow. One look at Ben and it was as if his whole face told it all. The boy from Miami was in Spain. He had made the journey. The high school illiterate was about to walk through the doors of infamy. And just down the hall was the first key to that door, Senor Jose Luis Rodrigo. We quickly burst through the elevator doors and headed down the spacious hallway. We were still on time much to Ben's delight. "Well, Ben this is it," I said. We are on the 12th floor at Circulo de Mariscos and all we have to do is find apartment D. We raced through A, B, C and easily found apartment D." We made it, Ben, and on time!" I exhaled. I ran through Spanish 101 again and rehearsed in my mind," Quiero presentarle a mi hermano." (I want to introduce you to my brother.) I looked at Ben one more time and rang the door bell. Me with short hair to go to Bible School and Ben with hair length approaching his shoulders and wire rim glasses. It was Mutt and Jeff in Spain, the true odd couple. A lady answered the door. I had to change gears and instead of," I want to introduce my brother" I said: "Hola, aqui es mi hermano. "(Hi, this is my brother.) Before I could utter another word, the apartment became alive like a swarm of bees. The lady who answered the door yelled at another lady and there was a lot of commotion. The second lady came to the door and I went through the introduction again. When I finished, she gasped and ran to the back of the apartment. We were stunned. She had left us standing at the door disappearing into the recesses of her home. Ben looked at me and said," What's going on, Steve?" "Oh! I don't know. I must have messed up the translation. Let's just stay here and wait for her to return." *

She did return with a gentleman following her." Ben, I think it's your teacher," I said as Ben was trying to peer around her to get his first glimpse of Jose Luis Rodrigo.

It seemed like he was very excited to see Ben. I looked at him and thought," Wow! "The long awaited teacher is right before our very eyes. " He approached, Senor Jose Luis Rodrigo... or was it? He was waddling and had on a baseball cap. A distinguished Spanish guitar teacher wearing a baseball cap? And he wore the cap sideways. He looked pretty goofy for a teacher! Before I could interpret or say anything, Ben's teacher looked at him and began hugging him. Pretty friendly guy, I thought. And as God is my witness, these were the first words out of Mr. Rodrigo's mouth:*" Ughhhh, errrrrr, gheeee, schllggg." Before we knew it, Ben was being tightly embraced by a man in a baseball cap uttering guttural sounds. Ben was confused. I was confused. Ben looked at me while he was being hugged and

was too shocked to say anything. Ben's glasses were askew as the portly, friendly man embraced Ben incessantly. By this time, the entire household had erupted all over Ben. I was trying to figure out what was happening as the Spanish slid out of their mouths. Suddenly, I heard one of the women yell, "Caleefornia!"* Ben's teacher never changed his voice. He just kept hugging Ben and was almost to tears in pure joy at seeing Ben. By now we figured out that the guy in the baseball cap was not Mr. Rodrigo. I was able to piece together that these people thought Ben was our baseball man's long lost nephew from California. The poor man was deaf and couldn't hear. Thus, all the mutterings. For awhile he thought his nephew had come in. A distant relative coming all the way from California to Spain for a visit had to have been the highlight of his life. I showed the lady the address and tried to determine where the real Jose Luis Rodrigo lived. We had written down 12DI which meant 12th floor, apartment D. But the I meant izquierda, which is left tower. We had gone to the right. As the door closed to 12DD (D meaning derecha or right) and we trudged down the hall, Ben could not contain himself. He burst into hilarious laughter. We both laughed so hard we cried! It took us about 10 minutes to recover and compose ourselves enough to go back down the elevator and go up the left tower. We found Senor Rodrigo and he was very normal and very cordial.

The next order of business was to purchase a Spanish guitar. The Ramirez shop was the place you bought guitars if you went to Spain. Ben went ape in that store. He picked through every concert model on the shelf. I remember that guitar well. The hallmark was the black stripe down the back of the neck. Well, the price tag was \$400 and all we had between us was about \$200.

So Ben's guitar remained in the shop as he schemed how to get it. In those days, I'm sure American Express existed, but two rag tag kids from Miami had certainly left home without it. We called Dad to send us a cashier's check. Church was the other agenda my Dad had for Ben, so we went to an English speaking Baptist church in Madrid. We met a great couple and Ben pushed me to explain to them our plight about the money. For some reason, the husband lent us the extra \$200 we needed to buy the guitar. We tromped back down to the shop and bought the Ramirez. But we were stone broke. To add to the drama, it started to get cold. We had left the heat and humidity of summer behind. With fall approaching, all we had to wear were T-shirts. We couldn't go back to the kind man for more money, but we were desperate. Dad's check did not come as fast as we thought it would. So we got invited out to eat Sunday dinners with the kind family. We borrowed another \$20 and Dad's check finally arrived. We paid our debts and celebrated with a five course meal which cost 95 cents instead of the budgeted 35 cent meals we had been having. The daughter of the man at church who had befriended us was dating a military guy. Ben and I met some of his other military friends and it worked out for Ben to move in with them. The painting was complete. God had engineered every detail for Ben and me. Ben seemed to be in good hands, so I returned to Bible School to begin my studies. I felt like a bird out of a cage as I left the responsibility of taking care of little bro. To think that I left Ben in Spain without being able to speak a word of Spanish and he made it! Christmas break arrived at Bible School. It was too expensive to fly home, so all of the American students spent the holidays at other student's homes in Europe. I was no exception and I had my invitation as well. Then I received a letter from my Dad. It read, "Steven, I want you to go back to Spain and register your brother for the draft. He's not going to do that on his own." There goes my vacation. But I went. I wanted to see Ben again and how he was doing. Jose Luis Rodrigo had Ben on a tedious study of scales. As Ben practiced hour after hour, he drove the military guys' nuts. Gene (the oldest military man in the apartment and no believer in the faith by any means) gave Ben the ultimatum that he couldn't practice those blankety blank scales anymore. I arrived at the apartment right before Christmas. Gene had some harsh words with Ben and we were kicked out of the apartment on Christmas Eve. It started to snow as well. It was truly a day for violins and not guitars as we trudged around to find a place for Ben to stay.

Ben quickly forgot about being homeless and got on another jag. ” Steve, we are going to find Andres Segovia. I know where he lives!”*

* “The guy on the guitar strings?” I said. ” Yes! Jose Luis Rodrigo said I could go meet him.” With Rodrigo’s recommendation, Ben set out to find Segovia. We dumped our stuff at a church member’s home and bought two train tickets to find Segovia. It took us two days to find Segovia’s home. We had several train and bus transfers and got within a half mile of the estate. Ever persistent Ben with me tagging along to interpret. We rounded the corner of the estate to find one of Segovia’s gardeners. I asked him, “ Este es la casa de Senor Segovia?”* He nodded yes. We had found the place. Ben was elated.” Pero, El no esta. Se fue!” Segovia was not there. He had left on a trip .I quickly recovered from the disappointment and told Ben it was no use. He whimpered back to Madrid and was totally bummed out. We returned to our lonely room in Madrid to face Ben with the draft. Ben hated the military. He was a peace loving vegetarian. 1971 were Viet Nam days. There was no way Ben was going to war, as he sternly told me. The struggle to get him to the draft was not an easy one. It was further complicated by the fact that Ben had developed an abscessed tooth. At times on the bus he would grab his mouth in agony as the sharp relentless pains jabbed him like knives. The whole ordeal would last about two minutes. I’d hear him moan. Then he’d open his mouth and jam his ten fingers to the paining area in hopes of relief. Being no dentist, I had no idea what was happening. It didn’t occur to me to take him for a checkup. I figured it would pass. The day came to register Ben for the draft at the American Embassy. Ben’s tooth was giving him considerable agony. It was everything I could do to get him out of bed for his duty to God and country. Finally, we were on the way. We arrived to find the Embassy was closed for a holiday. Ben gave me a fiendish smile knowing he had eluded the dreaded draft for one more day. I knew I’d be toast if I didn’t get the draft thing done, so the next day I began the whole process again. Tugging and pleading for Ben to get out of bed. His tooth was hurting on and off about every hour. We made it to the Embassy and it was open. Ben huddled at a corner desk and started filling out the draft form. I was killing time and pacing a little. Suddenly, this gentleman caught my eye. “No way!” I thought. “It can’t be!”

*” Hey! Ben, I think that guy over there is Segovia.”*Ben muttered something. But my curiosity got the best of me. ” It’s Segovia, or somebody that looks a lot like him.” I had memorized Segovia’s face on those guitar string packets. Unabashedly, I walked over and said,” Sir, are you Mr. Segovia? “I’ll never forget his reply. He nodded his head and said,” Yes, I am.”*

When Segovia said, “Yes, I am,” Ben came running over to him and slid into a kneeled position right before the Master of guitar himself. Ben had pushed me out of the picture and just blurted out every heart’s desire he could upon the master. Segovia could speak English and Ben was dancing on the 12th fret as he and Segovia had their moment. The timing of this encounter was going to be one for the books. I asked around and found out that Segovia was at the American Embassy getting his visa for a concert tour trip to the United States. So that’s why we missed him at his home. Two dejected worn out boys in Spain looking for the elusive Segovia had discovered him right under their noses while registering for the draft. Ben later went to study in Alicante, Spain under one of Segovia’s protégé’s.

Ben also attended a master class and studied with Segovia himself. Segovia said of Ben, “Very clean playing!” Segovia and Ben’s Spanish studies gave him the heart, soul, and musicality for his extensive background. There was one more place Ben would travel to complete his studies. At a master class in Spain, Ben heard about a teacher in South America. His name was Abel Carlevaro. Carlevaro had discovered something about guitar that Ben had missed. Carlevaro was able to play the guitar without squeaking. Even the world renowned Segovia when playing would slide his fingers over the strings to produce an annoying screeching. Ben headed to Montevideo, Uruguay to study Carlevaro’s technique.

He laboriously threw away all his pre-conceived ideas to let Abel Carlevaro bring him into this new birth of guitar ability. The exercises were excruciating. Carlevaro was training his students how to memorize by muscle memory where every fret on the guitar was. By keeping one's fingers in basically the same position and rotating the left arm, you could literally jump to any fret on the guitar without sliding fingers on metal strings. Voila, no squeaks! It took Ben two years to learn this. Ben was amazing in his ability to practice. I would watch him go at it for six hours a day. He worked and worked at playing. I don't see how one brain could memorize so much music! There was something else lacking in Ben's studies, which he found in Uruguay. He began to seriously study music theory with Guido Santorsola. It was Santorsola's training that allowed Ben to view piano music and transcribe it into guitar. Ben's *Valses Poeticos* was published and exemplifies the fruit of this training.

With years of ardent study behind him, Ben decided to settle outside of Knoxville, Tennessee. He and his lovely wife own 11 acres on a farm complete with two horses and a lively German shepherd. An African Grey parrot greets him every morning as well. His home has been carved right out of the land. On a recent visit I remarked how much wood his home contained. His bedroom is a composite of cedar and oak. "It's beautiful, Bro," I told him as I glanced around the bedroom. * "Yes, it's kind of like sleeping inside a guitar," he quietly said.