

# Fernando Ortega: Centuries of family, art and the church

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Fernando Ortega has recorded 21 albums—so far. He keeps a regular concert schedule throughout the United States, led worship for eight churches, and has been a touring musician with Anne Graham Lotz. He recently published a collection of his photography and stories in [\*Fernando's Birds\*](#).

Before all of that, he was in the college ministry at Hoffmantown Baptist Church in Albuquerque, N.M., where he played piano for worship services and the youth choir. And before that, he was shaped by his family's long and storied history in northern New Mexico. The following interview is in commemoration of Hispanic Heritage Month.

*UPDATED: The last question and response were inadvertently left off the original post of this interview.*

## **Tell us about where you grew up and your family.**

I grew up in Albuquerque, N.M. I have three siblings: a younger sister, younger brother and an older sister. We were close growing up and remain close as adults, and especially so since the deaths of our parents in recent years. All of us are musically inclined, though my brother and I are the only professional musicians in the family.

## **How long has your family been in New Mexico?**

This is such a great question right now, because my daughter Ruby and I have been constructing the Ortega Family Tree since the beginning of 2021.

I have searched through many kinds of records online, especially census documents, and I've been able to trace back several generations to find the first Ortega in New Mexico from whom we are descended. His name was Francisco de Ortega, and he was born in the Albuquerque vicinity in 1614. His wife was Isabel de Zamora. They had four children: Simon, Maria, Tiburcio and Clementa. Francisco de Ortega is my daughter Ruby's ninth great-grandfather.

## **How does your family influence your view of Christianity?**

I definitely feel the weightiness and importance of such a long line of generational Catholic Christianity in my family, even though I have been a Protestant all my life.

My grandparents Juan Melquiades and Apoloñita Ortega were the first in my ancestry who converted to Presbyterianism sometime in the early 1900s. That conversion was not without its consequences in the family and also the village of Chimayo, N.M., where they lived, but over time, those hard feelings subsided, and both my grandparents died as highly respected and devout Christians in their community.

So, yes, Presbyterianism is what I was steeped in since my birth. The relatively loose—in relation to Catholicism—liturgy and liturgical calendar of that denomination is what shaped me and my siblings and defined the way we lived out our faith and our church life.

If I think about it, though, my awareness of the church calendar was only mild growing up. I don't recall ever being particularly mindful of the church seasons—particularly Advent or Lent—though the Presbyterian liturgy during both seasons is very specific.

As a teenager, I jumped ship from Presbyterianism and spent several years in a vibrant, though fairly bizarre, Pentecostal church. Our Friday night

services at that church were, to put it mildly, wild.

Those gatherings lasted hours. They began with music and dancing, marching around in dance chains, speaking and singing in tongues, followed by a lengthy teach-or-preach, followed by “the anointing” falling on whomever was leading, and culminating in a “laying on of hands” service where healings and demon deliverance took place.

And then, there was the “afterglow.”

I remember our Christmas Eve service always included a birthday cake for Baby Jesus, lit up with Fourth of July sparklers. We danced around that cake like mad. Years later, as a Southern Baptist—long story—the Christmas Eve service was also quite loud and grand, including a gargantuan choir and orchestra.

I mention Christmas Eve simply because in both churches, after our loud celebrations were done, I always found myself driving around Albuquerque in search of the nearest Catholic church where I could participate in a much more quiet and reverent Midnight Mass—a ceremony characterized by solemnity and awe. I suppose it was the religious sensibilities of my ancestors that drove me to such a place on Christmas Eve.

**Your family shows up in your music—whether by name or less obviously. How does your family shape and inform your music?**

My family was very musical growing up. My dad and mom had an interesting and eclectic collection of vinyl that included Italian and French folk songs, classical pieces like Handel’s *Water Music*, Mexican folk songs, Doris Day, Andy Williams. I have vivid memories of lying on the floor and listening to all those discs and absorbing the vibe.

My parents were very faithful at spending lots of time with both sides of the

family. So, we were in the car a lot, driving to Chimayo, Mora, Santa Fe, Los Alamos, and then there were the frequent fishing trips during summer. All that to say, we sang in the car all the time, and harmonized with each other.

And of course, in church we sang with the hymnal in front of our faces. I learned early on how to follow the four voices on the page—bass, tenor, alto and soprano.

**You spent a significant part of your musical career in California and then returned to New Mexico. Of all the places you could go after California, why New Mexico?**

I've thought about this a lot the last several years. I loved California. My former wife and I had a sweet, tiny cottage-esque house in Laguna Beach in a dreamy, hippy-ish party of town. It was charming and peaceful in that canyon, and a brief 10-minute walk to the Pacific Ocean, for crying out loud. But I always was feeling the tug of my home in New Mexico.

All during those 22 years of living in California, I longed to be back in New Mexico, with my family, of course, but I also missed the landscape of the high desert and the Southern Rockies. And after moving back to Albuquerque, I knew I was where I needed to be. But now that I've been able to research and contemplate the long history of the Ortegas in this place, it all makes even more sense. The last few pieces of the puzzle are now in place.

**More recently, you've become an avid photographer. Your favorite subject seems to be birds. How did that start?**

I had a bazillion rewards points with my American Express account. Among some of the amazing stuff I was able to get for free, I scored an entry-level

Canon camera and a couple of lenses.

One day my sister Cristina invited me to go photograph birds with her, something she'd already been doing for years. We traipsed through the woods along the Rio Grande and spotted all kinds of birds I never knew existed.

At one point, I was lying on my back on a huge fallen tree trunk, staring up at the sky when a majestic, chunky white hawk flew directly over. I recklessly aimed my camera at the bird and took some remarkably sharp images. It was a ferruginous hawk, and it instantly became my favorite raptor. I was immediately taken by the experience.

## **Coming back to your family: You have a daughter. What part of the Ortega heritage do you see her taking forward?**

Sadly, I've really let the ball drop with Ruby and the Spanish language. She had a few decent teachers when she was in elementary school, but now that she's in secondary, she doesn't have any Spanish classes. That's something I'd really like to remedy.

I failed to mention earlier that a huge part of the Ortega family's history is the weaving of textiles. My grandfather [Juan Melquiades](#) was a weaver of great renown here in New Mexico, as were his father and three of his brothers. When Grandpa died in 1991, the Smithsonian Institution acquired a couple his weavings and parts of his loom, which were all displayed in the National Museum of American History. Those artifacts now are part the Institution's permanent collection.

My brother Armando and I learned to weave from my grandfather. I would be crazy not to pass the art down to Ruby, who is very artistically inclined.