Do you eat asparagus or start your meal with soup and end with dessert, or use toothpaste or wear your hair in bangs? If so, you owe a lot to one of the greatest musicians in history.

He was known as Ziryab, a colloquial Arabic term that means "blackbird." He lived in Spain more than a thousand years ago and founded a music school whose fame survived him by more than 500 years. He spread a new musical style around the Mediterranean, influencing troubadours and minstrels and affecting the course of European music. He was an expert in matters of taste, style and manners.

If you haven’t heard of this remarkable artist, it’s not surprising. It’s probably because he spoke Arabic and was part of the royal court of the Arab empire in Spain. Muslims from Arabia and North Africa ruled part of Spain called Al-Andalus from 711 until 1492. This area experienced a golden age of civilization that was the envy of all Europe and set the stage for the European Renaissance that followed. Muslims, Christians and Jews interacted with each other in a spirit of tolerance and cooperation that was unparalleled at the time. Ideas from Arab Spain spread to France and then throughout Europe, and to the Americas. This is how Ziryab’s achievements of became part of western culture.

Blackbird’s real name was Abu al-Hasan 'Ali ibn Nafi'. He was born around 789 in what’s now Iraq. Some Arab historians say he was a freed slave whose family served al-Mahdi, the caliph (ruler) of the Baghdad-based Abbasid empire from 775 until the caliph’s death in 785. According to Ibn Hayyan of Córdoba, one of Arab Spain’s greatest historians, he was called Blackbird because of his dark complexion, the clarity of his voice and "the sweetness of his character." In Baghdad, Blackbird studied under the royal court musician Ishaq al-Mawsili ("Isaac of Mosul").

Baghdad was then a world center for culture, art and science. Its most famous ruler was Harun al-Rashid, al-Mahdi’s successor. He loved music and brought many singers and musicians to the palace to entertain his guests. In Ibn Hayyan's account, when Harun asked to hear Ziryab perform, the young man asked permission to "sing what human ears have never heard before." Playing a lute he had made himself, Ziryab began to sing and the caliph was quite impressed.

This worried Ishaq, who feared Ziryab might replace him. So Ishaq issued an ultimatum: “Leave Baghdad, take up residence far from here, and swear that I'll never hear from you again. If you do this, I'll give you enough money to meet your needs. But if you choose to stay—I warn you, I'll risk my life & all I possess to crush you. Make your choice!"

Ziryab took the money, fleeing to Kairouan (present-day Tunisia.) Ziryab had no intention of staying there, however; his eyes were on al-Andalus & the city of Córdoba; he thought might be a fit setting for his talents.

He wrote to al-Hakam, the ruler of Al-Andalus, offering his musical skills, and al-Hakam invited him to Córdoba. But when Ziryab arrived in Spain in 822, al-Hakam was dead. His son and successor, 'Abd al-Rahman II, renewed the invitation. He wanted a young musician who would bring culture to Al-Andalus, the wild west of the Arab world. His own Umayyad family had come to Spain as exiles from Damascus, where they had ruled an Islamic empire for several hundred years. 'Abd al-Rahman offered Ziryab a handsome salary and land, and he accepted.

Once 'Abd al-Rahman heard Ziryab sing, contemporaries say he was so captivated that he would never again listen to another singer. The men became close confidants, and often met to discuss poetry, history and all the arts and sciences.

Ziryab served as a kind of "minister of culture" in Al-Andalus. In addition to knowing 10,000 songs by heart, he was also an excellent poet, a student of astronomy and geography, and a dazzling conversationalist. One of his first projects was to found a school of music that welcomed not only the talented sons and daughters of the higher classes but also lower-class court entertainers. Ziryab also made two major changes to the lute. He added a fifth pair of strings and played the instrument with an eagle's talon or quill, rather than the traditional wooden pick, giving it greater delicacy of expression and a greater range.

Music, however, was not Ziryab’s only area of influence. He revolutionized the arts of dining, in ways that survive today. Before Ziryab, having a meal in Spain was a simple affair: Platters of different foods were piled together on bare wooden tables. Table manners were nonexistent. Ziryab combined foods in imaginative recipes, and elevated a spring weed called asparagus to the status of a dinner vegetable. He also developed a number of desserts.

Ziryab decreed that palace dinners would be served in courses, starting with soups or broths, continuing with fish, fowl or meats, and ending with fruits, sweet desserts and nuts. Eventually, the custom became the rule throughout Europe. The English expression "from soup to nuts," indicating a lavish, multi-course meal, can be traced to Ziryab, who also altered the setting for dining by introducing table coverings, delicate crystal and even a trimmer, lighter soupspoon!

Ziryab developed Europe's first toothpaste, made shaving among men popular and set new haircut trends. For women, Ziryab opened a beauty parlor where he created daring new hairstyles. The women of Spain traditionally wore their hair parted in the middle, covering their ears, with a braid down the back. Ziryab introduced a shorter, shaped cut, with bangs on the forehead and the ears uncovered.

He established a fashion calendar based on the seasons. In springtime, men and women were to wear bright, colored clothes. In summer, white clothing was the rule. In winter, Ziryab recommended long cloaks with fur.  
  
Not surprisingly, Ziryab's tremendous influence incurred the jealousy of other courtiers in Córdoba. However, he had the ruler’s support and that was all that mattered. 'Abd al-Rahman II died around 852, and Ziryab is believed to have followed about five years later. Ziryab’s children kept alive his musical inventions, assuring their spread throughout Europe.

As the first millennium drew to a close, students from France, England and the rest of Europe flocked to Córdoba to study and to take advantage of the great city library with its 600,000 volumes. When they returned home, they took with them not only knowledge, but also art, music, cuisine, fashion and manners. Europe found itself awash with new ideas and new customs, and among the many streams that flowed northward from Spain, more than one had been channeled by Ziryab.