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Music

For Pedrito Martinez, the past is always present

By Siddhartha Mitter | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 18, 2013



MICHAEL WEINTROB

“As soon as I got here I started learning other cultures,” says Pedrito Martinez.

UNION CITY, N.J. — Eleguá, the red-and-black trickster who opens and closes the pathways of men, and Yemanya, the blue governess of the seas, preside over the other orishas and garlands, offerings, photographs, and sacred items in the small altar room of Pedrito Martinez’s home in this humble town at the mouth of the Lincoln Tunnel.

They protect the dwellers of the first-floor apartment: Martinez, the Cuban percussionist and bandleader who arrived here in 1998; his wife, who is from Peru; their daughter; and Martinez’s parents, who moved here from their Havana neighborhood Cayo Hueso — “a really poor place, real ghetto,” Martinez says — two years ago.

When Martinez composes a song or develops a new arrangement for one of the Afro-Cuban rumbas that resonate from his childhood, he retreats to the altar room, where, perched on a low stool, he solicits inspiration from the Yoruba spirits and the bygone masters of the music that, at its root, is inextricable from Santería practice and faith.

For Martinez, 40, nothing in life, and least of all his music, occurs outside the boundaries of an ongoing conversation with the ancestors.

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“All the time,” he says. “We’re surrounded by the great rumberos who passed away. Some of them you had the opportunity to play with, some of them you didn’t have the opportunity, but you love them always. You invoke them, pray, ask them to give you a good show.”

The visible evidence suggests the ancestors have been listening.

Martinez, a street-trained player who couldn’t read music when he arrived in New York, has become a first-call percussionist for a host of jazz, Latin, and pop projects — including prestige vehicles like Sting’s annual Carnegie Hall rain forest benefit, or appearances with Paul Simon or Wynton Marsalis.

His weeknight residency with his four-member band at Guantanamera, an unfancy Cuban restaurant in Midtown Manhattan, has become a musician’s pilgrimage site, where the likes of Eric Clapton or Roger Waters are commonly spotted.

Pedrito Martinez Group

Johnny D’s, 617-876-4275.

<http://www.worldmusic.org>

Date of concert: Saturday

Ticket price: \$25

“Almost every time I’ve gone there’s been someone heavy in the crowd,” says Bill Bragin, the director of public programs at Lincoln Center, who brings international touring acts to check out Martinez after their own show is over. “It’s like the best-kept worst-kept secret in town, a place you bring people to show off the real New York.”

After a pair of live recordings, the Pedrito Martinez Group has just released its first, and self-titled, studio album. To mark the occasion, Martinez, who has performed around the world as a sideman, is taking his band on the road. They play Johnny D’s on Oct. 19.

In a city where Afro-Cuban music and jazz have long cross-fertilized, Martinez has evolved a new variant. He draws from not only jazz, but funk, gospel, rock and soul — witness a kinetic cover of the Jackson 5’s “I’ll Be There” — while grounding every arrangement, and the whole performance, in the tempestuous rhythms and muscular energy of Afro-Cuban percussion sound. A charismatic performer, he looks the part as he works up a sweat in a T-shirt or singlet, his cap turned backward.

“As soon as I got here I started learning other cultures, that’s what makes your music more rich and beautiful,” Martinez says. “I’ve been involved in a lot of projects, and I take from that experience whatever I think will fit into my music.”

The group’s steady lineup brings trust, ideas, and influences. Ariacne Trujillo, a fellow Cuban — but one who, unlike Martinez, had the benefit of studying at the country’s music schools — is a converted classical concert pianist who plays keyboard, sings, and brings her own finished arrangements. “I just add details,” Martinez says.

Venezuelan bassist Alvaro Benavides and a second drummer, Peruvian Jhair Sala, whom Martinez has taught since Sala was a child, round out the unit. “There’s a magical thing going on with the group,” Martinez says. “We’re very connected to each other, especially with all these years playing at the same venue.”

Martinez says that leaving Cuba not only exposed him to other styles, but allowed him to complete his Afro-Cuban education as well, since he lacked formal training and the Cuba of the 1980s placed a stigma on Santería and African-based folk tradition.

“I came with maybe 70 percent of Afro-Cuban information,” he says. “The rest I learned here. Mongo Santamaría, Armando Peraza, those guys who were here forever, they feel Afro-Cuban rhythms differently from being here so many years. There are many ways to learn the same thing you learn in Cuba as soon as you get out of Cuba. The way I play the batá now, the rumba, it’s been a metamorphosis.”

Had Martinez stayed in Cuba, he says he would have been stuck with a limited repertoire and few outlets — basically, private Santería ceremonies on the weekends, and tourist gigs to survive. “It was the same routine every day, frozen.”

Nowadays, the climate is changing; Martinez visits Cuba frequently and has performed there twice, though not with his own group. He was also featured in the 2000 documentary “Calle 54,” which was widely screened in Havana. Roots culture is having a renewal, and Santería is growing. “They respect what I’m doing,” Martinez says.

But he is grateful that by leaving and taking the plunge in New York, he has found a way to grow his music without leaving behind his cultural roots. That awareness, he says, stops him from accepting some of the rich offers he fields — “I could have been playing with Santana this month,” he says — in favor of developing his own group.

“There’s no guarantee I can make it,” Martinez says, even though all the auguries seem to point the right way. “But it’s not about that, it’s about following your own dream. There are some things I can only do with my music.”

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