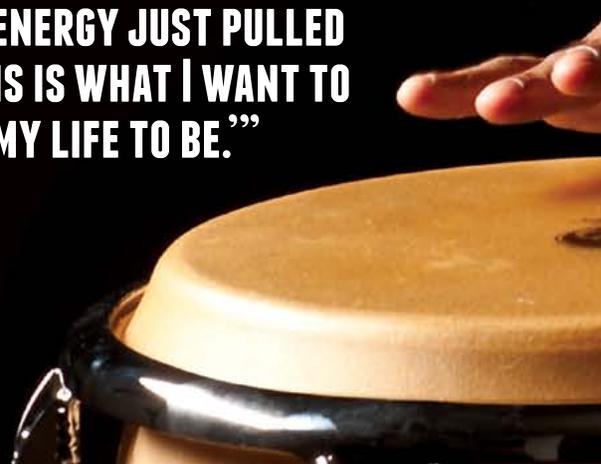


VOICE LIKE LIGHTNING, HANDS LIKE THUNDER

Pedrito Martinez whips up a new Afro-Cuban storm.

By Larry Blumenfeld • Photos by Michael Weintrob

“I FELT LIKE I HAD ENTERED A PARADISE I COULD NOT HAVE IMAGINED. THE ENERGY JUST PULLED ME IN. I TOLD MYSELF, ‘THIS IS WHAT I WANT TO DO. THIS IS WHAT I WANT MY LIFE TO BE.’”





PEDRITO MARTINEZ SITS AT THE REAR OF GUANTANAMERA RESTAURANT, WEARING TINTED AVIATOR GLASSES AND A GREEN NEW YORK YANKEES CAP TILTED JUST SO, UP AND TO THE RIGHT.

With his brilliant smile and boxer's build (he trained in the ring as a boy), he looks younger than his 39 years. He sits atop a *cajon*, a box drum common to the rumba groups he performed with when he lived in Havana, and which he sometimes uses these days to evoke the bass drum of a trap set. Before him are two conga drums, painted like Cuban flags, and the largest of the three *batá* drums (the *iyá*, or "mother," he explains later) used in Afro-Cuban rituals derived from the Yoruba tradition of West Africa.

Guantanamera is a long, narrow room in midtown Manhattan with a bar in the front and roughly 30 tables arranged in rows in back. When Martinez began playing there seven years ago, at the suggestion of a waiter, he and his quartet were bunched up beside the bar near a front window. "They were sort of an advertisement for the place," says Paul Siegel, a tall, affable producer who built a business around instructional music videos before being drawn repeatedly to Guantanamera to hear Martinez, whom he now manages.

After a year or so at Gauntanamera, Martinez's quartet was moved to a corner of the dining area and, finally, a few years ago, to a makeshift stage in front of a rear wall on which the restaurant's name and some palm trees are painted. The group performs in that spot each week, Tuesday through Thursday, whenever it's in town, from around 8 p.m. until after midnight. Dinners get served, cocktails and pitchers of sangria downed. Yet Martinez is the main attraction, the food and drink secondary. His quartet builds excitement with deliberate care at first and then with increasing abandon. It's all highly rhythmic and often rich with three- and four-part sung harmonies. Every now and then, couples rise from their tables to dance in aisles, sometimes with obviously practiced moves, sending waiters into their own improvised steps, swerving to and fro while balancing trays full of food.

On this particular Wednesday night, Martinez doesn't immediately steal the spotlight from his bandmates. Everyone in this group can play at a high level, each with a clear identity. Alvaro Benavides anchors traditional Cuban rhythms on electric bass, getting the anticipatory beats just right. In other spots, he unspools quick yet elegant 16th-note lines, suggesting jazz-fusion or funk. Jhair Sala, who plays cowbell and bongos, shares an intuitive rapport with Martinez, whom he has known most of his life. He can shift a groove substantially yet subtly with just a slight alteration of pace or pitch. Ariacne Trujillo's piano playing reflects her conservatory training and her singing conveys

blues feeling. In another band, she might be the breakout talent. Taken together, when firing on all cylinders and locked in, Martinez's quartet produces a sound big enough to suggest the horn sections of the popular Cuban *timba* groups and American R&B bands Martinez grew up admiring. This was his concept from the start. ("It's not really 'less is more,'" he says, "as much as 'this is all I need.'") Everyone in the band can sing, Trujillo notably so. But Martinez's voice is of another order, smoothly appealing yet also tinged with tension. It's both a seduction and a call-to-arms. Tonight, as on most nights, once the music has settled into a sweet spot, there comes a moment when Martinez unleashes a solo that moves from specific, precisely pitched rhythms to a fusillade of beats, so fast and complex they arrive as pure physical sensation.

"Guantanamera is a workshop," Martinez says later, between sets, at a bagel shop down the street from the restaurant. "At first we played traditional Cuban songs, but then we decided to just play what we love and let people get used to it. People appreciate that we're not just messing around. We don't show off. They already know we can play. We're here to create." It is somewhat startling to encounter a musician of Martinez's caliber and rising stature for no cover charge at a Manhattan restaurant, and it's unclear just how long that offer will last. Then again, the Guantanamera gig has grown into something of an advertisement for Martinez. Among the consistent crowd has been a steady stream of music-industry professionals and admiring musicians. These include players Martinez has worked with for years, such as trumpeter Brian Lynch, on whose Grammy-winning CD *Simpático* he played, and stars from beyond the jazz and Latin worlds. Eric Clapton and Roger Waters have made repeated visits.

In his authoritative book, *Cuba and Its Music*, historian Ned Sublette wrote, "Real percussive rumba never really leapt out of its folkloric box to become a mainstream popular genre. But it seeped into Cuban music in profound ways." As much as any musician, Martinez captures the fullness and range of that influence, which extends well beyond Cuban music. He has the talent, vision and magnetism to perhaps make rumba leap from its folkloric box. At the very least, he has built excitement among diverse audiences by employing traditional Afro-Cuban rhythms in fresh ways.

In March, Martinez transformed Robert Johnson's "Traveling Riverside Blues" into something distinctly Afro-Cuban during



a star-studded Rhythm & Blues Foundation benefit at Harlem's Apollo Theater. In May, he popped up as both headliner and scene-stealing guest on four different stages at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival. In June at Lincoln Center, he helped Paul Simon memorably rework hits like "Late in the Evening" in collaboration with Wynton Marsalis. In July at London's Barbican Theater, he joined Marsalis' orchestra for a program that included his own compositions. In August, his quartet kept a crowd at the Montreux Jazz Festival enthralled well past midnight. (That festival's producer, Claude Nobs, fell in love with the band after stopping into Guantanamera.)

On *Rumba de la Isla*, his new CD on the Madrid-based Calle 54 label, performing alongside standard-bearing musicians from Cuba and Spain, Martinez takes on a tradition that is close cousin to his own, the flamenco-rumba legacy of the Spanish singer Camarón de la Isla. Martinez has also been an essential presence on scores of recordings, especially on those by fellow Cuban musicians living in the United States. His batá drumming was the first sound heard on *XXI Century*, the latest in a string of brilliant recordings by pianist Gonzalo Rubalcaba. His chanting opens saxophonist Yosvany Terry's dazzling recent release *Today's Opinion*.

"It all comes back to those chants and those rhythms,"

Martinez says, sitting in the living room of his Union City, New Jersey, apartment. "Everything I do begins there." His 9-year-old daughter, Ziona, brings in cups of coffee on saucers, as his mother, Regla, and father, Adrian, approvingly look on. Martinez left Cuba in 1998 to tour with Canadian saxophonist Jane Bunnett's Spirits of Havana band and has lived in the United States ever since. He helped his parents move here last year, which is a particular point of pride for him.

He thinks that to truly master a musical style, one must be raised in it, steeped in it. Playing rhythms that swing in the style of American jazz, for instance, is something he feels he has yet to absorb. That can only happen through direct contact. "Recordings are different than life," he says. "It's one thing to listen, another thing is experiencing. You can talk to the guys: What is the secret? What is the touch? Why does it sound that way for you and not for me, even though I'm a great drummer, too?"

Martinez was born into a culture of Afro-Cuban folkloric traditions and their musical manifestations. "My mother's brother was a great *conguero*," he says. "His name was Antonio Campos, but everyone called him Watusi." Watusi died before Martinez was born, but a young Pedrito had many direct sources for both folkloric tradition and more modern Cuban music while growing up in the Cayo Hueso neighborhood of Havana. The former Strand Theater, now the tourist-friendly Palacio de la Rumba, was directly across the street from his home. Then a rehearsal hall, it was regularly alive with the blend of flute, violin and percussion forged by classic *charanga* bands such as Orquesta Aragón. He could hear more modern dance music, representing a then-burgeoning *timba* scene, at free festivals in a nearby park. Two of his uncles would often show up at his home with LPs of Cuban music, instructing young Pedrito on dance moves. They

also played him American pop and rock. "I was listening to the Rolling Stones and the Commodores and Patti Austin at the same time as Cuban music," he says. "For me, it was always all related."

If you listened closely enough for the drumming and chanting of African rituals transplanted to Cuba, you could easily find religious ceremonies in and around Cayo Hueso. As a boy, Martinez often ditched school to attend these ceremonies. "Instead of keeping notes about my classes, I'd write down the chants and rhythms I heard," he says. "I felt like I had entered a paradise I could not have imagined. The energy just pulled me in. I told myself, 'This is what I want to do. This is what I want my life to be.'"

And so it is. Martinez is initiated in the religious traditions of the four main African cultural groups whose presence is felt in Cuban music: *palo*, from the peoples of Kongo; the secret society known as *abakuá*; *Regla de Ocha*, the Yoruba-derived religion more popularly known as *santería*; and *arará*, from the former kingdom of Dahomey, centered in roughly what is now Benin. His chief mentor in spiritual matters has been Román Díaz, a master percussionist who is also Martinez's godfather and frequent musical partner. It is impossible to separate the religious traditions Martinez embraces from the secular music he makes or, for that matter, from any aspect of his life. One small room of his New Jersey apartment is set aside as a shrine, with elaborately decorated offerings for *orishas*, or deities — blue and green for Yemayá, red and black for Elegguá. Photos of family members and deceased musical heroes, such as his Uncle Watusi and percussionist Chano Pozo, hang in rows on one wall.

Most weekends when he is not touring, Martinez sings and plays batá drums at homes in Brooklyn and the Bronx, leading ceremonies for four or six hours at a stretch. On one Sunday in the Bronx, in a crowded living room, he and two other batá drummers played patterns that began in a simple and stately manner and gradually built to feverish intensity. "That pattern is *alero*," he explains later, "for the orisha Yemayá. It represents the waves of the sea and how it is sometimes calm and sometimes powerful and turbulent." Later, Martinez sang, his voice searing and his focus intent, as initiates, one by one, arms crossed, touched their foreheads to each batá drum. "They are showing their respect for the batá player and for the deities," he says.

It was at a home in Havana, in 1994, amid drumming and chanting, that saxophonist Jane Bunnett first met Martinez. Bunnett travels frequently from her home in Canada to Cuba for musical collaborations. "I already knew most of the older cats, and in fact it was unusual at that time to meet someone as young as Pedrito studying these traditions, taking them so seriously," Bunnett recalls. "He had unique energy. He played congas and batá with authority. And when he sang, his voice knocked you back. It was like a lightning bolt."

Martinez was already performing professionally in Cuba and touring by that time. He had worked with the standard-bearing rumba group Yoruba Andabo. He sang lead and played batá with percussionist Tata Güines. At the end of a three-month North American tour with Bunnett in 1998, Martinez decided to remain in the United States. Like so many Cuban musicians, he saw New York City as a place where he could learn, grow and



On the Records

Pedrito Martinez has played on dozens of recordings spanning several genres. Here he discusses some of the more memorable ones.

▲ **Brian Lynch/Eddie Palmieri** *Simpático* (Artist Share, 2006) — “One of my favorites because I had the great opportunity of playing with two of my heroes, Eddie Palmieri and Giovanni Hidalgo. This record won a Grammy.”

▲ **Horacio el Negro Hernandez and Robby Ameen** *Live in Umbria* (Manifesto, 2004) — “My favorite so far because I had the opportunity to play with some of the greatest Cuban musicians living in America, like Horacio el Negro Hernandez and Carlitos del Puerto.”

▲ **Isaac Delgado** *L-O-V-E* (Sony Classical, 2010) — “An honor and an opportunity to sing and play with Isaac Delgado, who was the most popular singer when I still lived in Cuba. Freddy Cole, the brother of Nat King Cole, and truly a great singer in his own right, was also part of this project.”

▲ **Yosvany Terry** *Today's Opinion* (Criss Cross, 2012) and *Metamorphosis* (Zoho Music, 2005) — “I learned a lot from Yosvany Terry in terms of how beautifully he mixes all the contemporary jazz harmony with very complex Afro-Cuban rhythms.”

▲ **Yerba Buena** *President Alien* (Razor & Tie, 2005) and *Island Life* (Razor & Tie, 2003) — “These two albums turned my whole life around in terms of production and in finding a logical way to

bring the New York Latin sound into a truly Afro-Cuban project that results in something very cosmopolitan, and that speaks to all kinds of audiences.”

▲ **Román Díaz and Pedrito Martinez** *Routes of Rumba* (Round Whirled, 2008) — “Román has inspired me to keep our African roots alive. On this record we focused on rumba, one of the most important musical traditions in Cuba, demonstrating how we communicate with our ancestors using some of the most popular rumbas.”

▲ **Gonzalo Rubalcaba** *XXI Century* (5Passion, 2012) — “Gonzalo was at the top of the list of people I most wanted to play when I got in the United States. This record is a masterpiece and a challenge because Gonzalo's music is very complex, rhythmically and harmonically.”

▲ **Pedrito Martinez** *Rumba de la Isla* (Calle 54, 2012) — “Camarón was a very important singer from Spain who inspired a lot of people in Cuba with his songs, including me.”

▲ **Bebo Valdés and Diego el Cigala** *Lagrimas Negras* (RCA, 2004) — “My first experience with Bebo and Cigala. It changed my life in terms of seeing how beautifully Cuban and Spanish music can be blended, and it won a Grammy.” —LB

make a better living. He had also fallen in love with a Peruvian woman living in New Jersey, who he eventually married. He lived for a few months in the Bronx, at the home of percussionist Orlando “Puntilla” Ríos, and then settled in Union City. He began working more widely. One noteworthy stint included singing and dancing with The Conga Kings, a supergroup of Afro-Latin percussionists that showcased Candido Camero, Carlos “Patato” Valdes and Giovanni Hidalgo.

In 2000, a friend alerted Martinez to an edition of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz’s annual competition devoted to Afro-Latin hand drums.

Martinez decided to enter and, on the basis of a taped submission, was accepted into the semifinals. “Everyone else on the list had a long biography with music-school credentials at places like Berklee,” he recalls. “I was the only *rumbero*. But what was on paper didn’t matter to me. I told myself, ‘I’m going to show these guys that the music is about what you feel and how you’ve sacrificed.’” Two of his former Conga Kings employers, Camero and Hidalgo, were among the judges. They were taken aback. They knew Martinez only as a singer and dancer. They’d never heard him play drums. He took first prize. “It was the first time I saw \$20,000 [the award at the time]. Martinez had achieved greater notoriety within Latin-jazz communities through his appearance in Fernando Trueba’s 2000 documentary, *Calle 54*, but the Monk competition victory opened new doors for him. “Things really exploded after that for me — gigs, endorsements with instrument companies. But it was also a really big thing for my self-esteem. It told me that I belonged wherever I said I belonged.”

Unlike most of the Cuban musicians who have made an impact in the United States during the past 20 years, especially within jazz circles, Martinez did not attend Cuba’s elite music schools. “It was a crazy situation for rumberos like me,” he says. “We were not allowed to attend those schools because we did not have the right connections but also because we were considered folkloric musicians. They did not appreciate that I might have the talent to play other kinds of music.”

Saxophonist Yosvany Terry has both the imprimatur of Cuba’s conservatories and a firsthand immersion in folkloric tradition. His father is Eladio “Don Pancho” Terry, a violinist with *charanga* groups and a master of the *chequeré*, a beaded gourd used for percussion. Yosvany had heard of Martinez in Cuba, but did not meet him until both had arrived in the United States. “He is one of the few people I can trust, who can go deep into our culture and has knowledge of our different legacies,” Terry says. “But there are things that make him stand apart from anyone else with that background: his ability to hear and play very complex music and his willingness to expand the language. He’s not just sitting on all that knowledge.” Terry had planned to begin his recent CD with a chant. But when the time came to record, Martinez suggested a different one, from the abakuá tradition. “He just has a sense of what the music needs and how the tradition can serve it,” Terry says.

Nat Chediak, who co-produced the new *Rumba de la Isla* CD, also experienced the transformative power of Martinez’s talent in the studio. “At first, Pedrito tried to be faithful to Spanish melodies,” he says, “but he came off sounding like a Cuban rumbero trying to sing

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flamenco. We asked him to feel free to betray the melody, to approach the songs freely, as he felt them. At this point, the album came alive. Unless you’re acquainted with the originals, it’s impossible to tell where the standards end and Pedrito’s own poetic inspiration begins.”

Martinez’s poetic inspirations have elevated music in various genres on many stages and recordings. He lent edge and drive to the Latinized Afro-beat as a member of the band Yerba Buena. He’s seemed equally at home performing with pianist Eddie Palmieri, singer Cassandra Wilson and pop stars, including Sting. Yet both his identity and his collaborative powers are best showcased through his quartet, which draws in part on the diverse influences of its

members. Benavides, the bassist, is from Venezuela. Sala, who plays cowbell and bongos, was born in Peru. Trujillo, the pianist, grew up in the same Havana neighborhood as Martinez but studied classical piano and opera at a conservatory. Martinez sells a CD culled from past performances at his weekly Guantanamera gig. Good as this is, it can’t keep up with the group’s evolution. This growth, more than any one musical aspect, is what keeps the regulars at Guantanamera coming back week after week.

Trujillo explains the dynamic this way: “It’s kind of like a percussive conversation between all of us. Everyone breaks in with whatever they’re thinking. It keeps changing. It’s unique and weird. I guess it’s New York Afro-Cuban music, but we don’t really know what to call it anymore.”

For all the genre-busting innovation and complexity the quartet projects, there is something distinctly soulful and centered about the music, and that no doubt emanates from Martinez. His arms form blurs as he pounds out rhythms. He changes up rhythms and tempos with barely a nod, so slick is his performance style. And yet he sits somewhat Buddha-like, smiling serenely. Siegel, his manager, says, “Sometimes, when I’m heading to the restaurant, I tell my friends I’m going to church. Because that’s what it’s like.”

Back in May, during a public interview in the grandstand at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, a boy in a baseball cap, no more than 9 or 10 years old, stepped up to the microphone when it came time for audience questions. “What is your reason for playing music?” he asked. Martinez removed his sunglasses, rubbed his eyes, looked squarely at the boy. “Love,” he said. “I love music more than food, more than my wife. It is what I choose to do. And you can make this kind of choice, too.” The boy seemed satisfied with that answer. So did Martinez. ▲

