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## Pushing Boundaries of Rumba Fervor

### Pedrito Martínez Takes Next Step in Debut CD With Band



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

The Cuban percussionist Pedrito Martínez and his band at Guantanamera in Midtown Manhattan.

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It has become a familiar question backstage at festivals, concert halls or anywhere else that musicians gather on the road: Have you heard that amazing Cuban percussionist in New York City? [Pedrito Martínez](#) may not yet be known to the public, but among his peers, he is firmly established as a source of rhythmic delight and inspiration.



Angel Franco/The New York Times

Pedrito Martínez in his shrine room to Santería deities in Union City, N.J. A strong religious element pervades his music.

Fifteen years after arriving from Havana, Mr. Martínez, 40, is a first-call player for recording sessions of all types, and his three-nights-a-week residency at Guantanamera in Manhattan has made that small restaurant-club a favorite hangout for visiting pop, rock and jazz stars. On Tuesday, he takes another step forward, with the release of his first CD as a bandleader, accompanied by a celebratory show at City Winery. "Pedrito's got a unique combination of forces coming together in him," said the musician and writer Ned Sublette, author of "Cuba and Its Music." "He's a percussionist with deep drum knowledge, and also a singer and bandleader, but he's also something over and above that — the flowering of a new creative spirit of rumba, breaking out of the traditional context and taking it to a larger audience."

Mr. Martínez was born and raised in a Havana neighborhood called Cayo Hueso, a traditional center of the family of African-derived rhythms known as rumba. Not only did he have uncles who played the music, but he also grew up just a block away from the [Palacio de la Rumba](#) and sneaked into that theater to watch top orchestras rehearse when he was a child.

Initially, though, because Mr. Martínez could not qualify for government programs to train musicians, which are limited in number, he thought about becoming an athlete. He boxed for a while, but focused on judo, which gave him stamina and made him limber, two qualities that have served him well in coping with the physical demands of playing the congas and the two-headed batá drum, his main instruments.

“I never went to music school, because in Cuba, at that time, to get in, you needed a connection, some clout, and I never had that kind of connection,” he said in a recent interview. “But at the same time, I’m happy with the way I learned things on the street, because they teach you things you can’t learn in school.”

As a teenager, Mr. Martínez began working as a musician and performed with top ensembles, like those of Tata Güines and Los Muñequitos de Matanzas. But he found the routine, playing in hotels for a dollar a month, he said, enervating and demeaning.

“If you wanted a ham sandwich, you had to eat it on the sly, in the kitchen, because if the manager of the hotel saw you eating in front of the foreigners, you’d get fired,” he recalled. “And then, at 2 in the morning, I’d have to walk home carrying my congas or my batá, because there was no bus. When I got home, there was no light, water or gas, so I’d eat some cold food, amid a terrible heat. It was the worst time of my life.”

In 1998, the Canadian jazz saxophonist Jane Bunnett, a frequent visitor to Havana, invited Mr. Martínez to join her touring band, which allowed him to leave Cuba. When the group got to New York, and his contract ended, he decided to stay on, “because of all the musical opportunities here,” and played with local bands.

Breezy, outgoing and relentlessly optimistic, Mr. Martínez said he thought making his mark would be easy. But he went to a jazz show and had an unpleasant revelation: after he was invited to jam onstage, the band, led by the trumpeter Brian Lynch, promptly launched into a tune that began in a 5/4 time signature and then shifted to 9/8, and he was lost.

“You hardly ever see that kind of irregular time in Cuban music, so I had no idea what to do,” he recalled. “It was the biggest embarrassment I’ve been through as a musician, but it’s what made me say to myself, ‘This city is a place that can teach you a lot of things, and I’m going to learn how to play this.’”

So Mr. Martínez embarked on an intense program of instruction, learning to read music and studying composition. He also took private lessons with a fellow Cuban, [Román Díaz](#), a master percussionist and Santería priest whom he describes as a mentor.

A strong religious element pervades Mr. Martínez’s own music. At his home in Union City, N.J., where he lives with his wife, daughter and parents, a room is set aside as a shrine to Santería deities, and he said it is there, practicing on the batá, often used in Santería ceremonies, that he perfects many of the innovative rhythms [he plays onstage](#).

Mr. Martinez said one big challenge he faced in making the new CD, called simply “The

Pedrito Martínez Group” (Motéma Music), was translating the dynamism of the band’s live performances. The record includes several songs the group regularly plays live, both originals and Cuban standards, as well as Afro-Cubanized versions of Robert Johnson’s “Travelling Riverside Blues” and the Jackson 5 favorite “I’ll Be There.”

All four members of the group sing, with Mr. Martínez doing lead vocals on most tracks. The record also features guest appearances by Wynton Marsalis, John Scofield and Steve Gadd, the ace American drummer who also produced the record with Mr. Martínez.

“It’s pretty extraordinary what they do,” Mr. Gadd said. “The rhythms that Pedrito is singing are complicated themselves, and then to be able to play other complicated rhythms around that, it’s special. This is a real band, singing and playing rhythmically advanced music of the highest order.”

When Mr. Gadd stops by Guantanamera, he occasionally joins the group onstage, but most visiting musical luminaries, perhaps as intimidated as Mr. Martínez was when he first encountered jazz, are content to remain in their seats. On successive nights last month, members of Earth, Wind & Fire and a Spanish flamenco troupe showed up, and Mr. Martínez’s manager, Paul Siegel, also remembers visits by Eric Clapton, Steve Winwood, Paul Simon, Roger Waters, Billy Cobham and Stanley Clarke.

“Over the last six to eight years, I’ve taken every band I’ve been with to see him, because his musicality is just staggering,” said the guitarist Derek Trucks, who has played with the Allman Brothers and Eric Clapton bands. “After Allmans’ rehearsals, three or four of us will head there, and it’s funny how many other musicians you’ll see. You know that everybody is going to go through New York, so you say ‘You’ve got to see this guy, you’ve got to go to Guantanamera and see Pedrito whipping it.’ ”