

Pedrito Martinez, a Musician and Priest, Finds Success in the Drumbeat

By Tammy La Gorce / July 1, 2016

At the Cuban restaurant La Churreria in Union City, [Pedrito Martinez](#) is probably the only regular who would be recognized by rock stars like [Eric Clapton](#) and [Derek Trucks](#). He may also be the only regular at the place — a known gathering spot for local musicians — who was nominated for a [Grammy](#).

But he is not, he is quick to point out, the only talented Cuban musician at La Churreria.

“When you go there, you see the best of Cuba — singers, musicians,” Mr. Martinez said recently from his living room, a few blocks from the restaurant. “We get together there, just meet by accident, and they tell me how they’re struggling to survive in music, how there’s no gigs for them. It’s sad.”

Mr. Martinez, 42, is too modest to say so, but he is quite likely an inspiration to them. Since 1998, the year he came to the United States from Havana, the singer and percussion master (bata, conga, cajon, timbale, drums) has played with the saxophonist [Paquito D’Rivera](#), the pianist [Arturo O’Farrill](#) and [Bruce Springsteen](#), among others.

With his four-member Pedrito Martinez Group, formed in 2005, he landed a decade-long residency at [Guantanamera](#), in Manhattan, where Mr. Clapton and Mr. Trucks made a point of bringing their musician friends to sit in the audience; from there, his reputation took off.

His group’s self-titled debut album came out in 2013 and features trumpeter [Wynton Marsalis](#) and the guitarist [John Scofield](#). The recording earned Mr. Martinez a Grammy nomination for best Latin jazz album.

Last month came the release of the group’s second album, “Habana Dreams.” Mr. Marsalis plays on two tracks, and guest vocalists include [Ruben Blades](#) and [Angélique Kidjo](#); Mr. Martinez will perform with Ms. Kidjo on July 29 at the [Celebrate Brooklyn!](#) festival.

“It’s great, you know?” said Mr. Martinez, who has an infectious smile and is buff from years of boxing and running. “It feels amazing. It feels like I’m doing the right thing, capturing people’s attention.” Sometimes, he said, success feels surprising.

Mr. Martinez recalled that in the 1990s when he was in his early 20s, he worked for \$1 a month playing conga drums seven nights a week in a Havana hotel. That employer — as well as all Cuban hotels — was off limits to him when he wasn’t playing.

“It was so sad,” he said, “because I had these students from Switzerland. They would come to my house so I could teach them music, and then they would invite me to come to their hotel with them to eat and drink. The people at the hotel wouldn’t even let me inside. They’d say, ‘He’s Cuban, he has to stay outside.’”

Nearly everything was a struggle, he said: At home, the electricity would go out for hours at a time with no explanation, and when it was turned back on, the gas might be shut down. When the gas came back on, the water was likely to go.

Getting around was just as frustrating. “When I was playing at the hotel I used to get done at 3 a.m., and there was no bus or taxi, so I’d walk one hour to my house,” he said. “I’d walk one block and put the conga down to rest. Then I’d lift it and walk another block, then I’d set it down. All the way like that until I got home.”

Mr. Martinez left Cuba for good in 1998 when the Canadian jazz saxophonist [Jane Bunnett](#) invited him to join her touring band. When the group got to New York, he ran into a Cuban shaman he used to play bata for as a 19-year-old, during religious ceremonies.

The shaman invited Mr. Martinez to stay with him while he looked for more permanent lodging, Mr. Martinez said. Soon thereafter he joined a group of Cuban musicians who held rumba parties on Sunday nights in Union City, which is where he met his wife, Maria. Two months later, he moved to Union City, Maria’s hometown. The couple married in 1999; their daughter, Ziona, is 13.

Rumba is the music Mr. Martinez grew up on, and how he learned to play bata, a drum frequently used in Santeria ceremonies. He still plays occasionally at local rumba parties. “It’s in my blood,” he said. But rumba’s relationship to religion has been slightly complicated for him. Although Mr. Martinez became a [Santeria](#) priest in 2010 and maintains a small shrine to Santeria deities in his home, he feels that the religion is largely misunderstood, and he hopes to avoid an overemphasis of his spiritual side in any discussion of his music.

“To me, religion was a way to learn the music,” because getting into a Cuban music school required connections, and he did not have the right kind, he said. “But people don’t see that – they’re fascinated, they love the mysticism. It’s important to me that people understand I’m a musician, not just a priest.”

His musical talents are hard to miss on “Habana Dreams,” which was recorded in October in Havana at Areíto/Egrem, a studio Mr. Martinez said he never would have been allowed in when he lived there. For the song “Recuerdos,” Mr. Martinez invited his three brothers, still in Havana, to the studio to play with his group, which includes the percussionist Jhair Sala, of

Paterson, the bassist Álvaro Benavides, of Queens, and the keyboardist and arranger Edgar Pantoja-Alemán, of North Bergen.

“That was beautiful, having my brothers there,” Mr. Martinez said.

Reunions with his parents are more frequent — they live across the street.

La Churreria, the gathering spot for local musicians, played a role in his parents’ decision to stay in Union City after a three-month visit.

“When they first got here, my mom had a steak there, and she said: ‘Let me tell you something, son. I’m not going back to Cuba,’” Mr. Martinez said, laughing at the memory. “Now I see them every day.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/03/nyregion/pedrito-martinez-a-musician-and-priest-finds-success-in-the-drumbeat.html?mtrref=www.google.com>