

Beat Happening (*The New Yorker*)

Pedrito Martinez's Cuban rhythms.

By **SASHA FRERE-JONES** MAY 14, 2012

The Cuban-born percussionist and singer Pedrito Martinez does not look much like a priest or a bearer of ancient culture. With his high cheekbones, dazzling smile, and gently tapered Mohawk, the thirty-eight-year-old looks about half his age, and has the charisma of a mainstream star, which he is to many in the Cuban-American musical community. “They say to me, ‘You’re the next one, you’re No. 1!’” Martinez, who now lives in Union City, New Jersey, told me. But, while he recently performed with Paul Simon and Wynton Marsalis at Lincoln Center, and, with his quartet, played a series of shows at Jazz Fest, in New Orleans, these are not the lights by which he navigates. Martinez is a devotee of Santeria, the Yoruba-based religion that evolved when slaves were brought from Nigeria to Cuba in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He regularly plays at ceremonies in homes, in the Bronx and Brooklyn, which involve six or seven hours of singing and playing the *batá* drums. In addition, since 2005 he has played at the Cuban restaurant Guantanamera, on Eighth Avenue—for the past two years, his quartet has performed three times a week, three sets a night. The jazz guitarist John Scofield has called it “one of the greatest groups playing today.” Martinez sees both venues as instrumental in spreading what he calls “folklore,” as good a word as any for his powerful blend of African and Cuban traditions. He told me, “When I am writing something, I start with the Yoruba chants, the melodies, and the *batá* rhythms I’ve known since I was little.”

Martinez grew up in central Havana, in a musical family. One day, when his godfather, the musician Roman Diaz, needed a last-minute substitute vocalist for a Santeria ceremony, he called on Pedrito, who was then only fifteen. Martinez left Cuba in 1998, at the age of twenty-five, with the Canadian saxophonist Jane Bunnett and her band, Spirits of Havana, and has lived and played in the United States ever since. But the rhythm that is central to Martinez’s music, called the clave, entered the American mainstream in 1931, with the hit song “El Manisero.” A decade later, the Cuban *conguero* Chano Pozo broadened the fame of the clave, when he collaborated with Dizzy Gillespie. In Spanish, *clave* means “code,” or “key,” and it is the clave beat that underlies much Afro-Cuban music. In his authoritative book “Cuba and Its Music,” from 2004, the musician Ned Sublette provided a definition: “A European ear would analyze it as a two-bar pattern: one syncopated bar followed by one unsyncopated bar,” or the other way around. Clave is also the name for the wooden sticks that are used to keep the pattern, though it can be spread among any number of percussion instruments. The sound was further popularized by *congueros* such as Mongo Santamaría and Carlos (Patato) Valdés, and it helped lay the foundation of what many think of as Latin jazz. (One of the first mainstream exposures to this music was in the 1956 film “. . . And God Created Woman,” in which Valdés tries to teach Brigitte Bardot how to mambo.)

Today, Afro-Cuban musicians are represented in a variety of American forms, but they often end up in jazz ensembles. Their music’s intricate patterns and various chants are complex, especially for an ear accustomed to folk or pop. The *congueros* and *rumberos* (a term for players as well as for audience members, who often dance) are attracted to jazz for its dynamism and common roots. But, for the Afro-Cuban culture, which is rooted in dancing, jazz can sometimes be a problematic form, since jazz long ago ceded most of its role as dance music to other genres.

Martinez and his remarkable quartet do not generally present their music through recordings—they are playing live gigs too often for that. The quartet plans to record soon, but right now one of the best examples of Martinez’s singing and drumming can be found on “Today’s Opinion,” a recent album by the saxophonist

Yosvany Terry, a Cuban transplant to New York. The opening track, “Summer Relief,” begins with Martinez singing a Yoruban chant, which the band briefly answers. Terry’s compositions and playing are in the school of post-bop and may not be immediately identifiable as Afro-Cuban; it is Martinez’s high, unrestrained voice and eruptions of conga drumming that take the band out of New York and back into the Afro-Cuban world.

The best way to experience Martinez is live. On a recent Tuesday evening, Martinez and his band set up at Guantanamera. The restaurant has approximately thirty tables, and the only space for dancing is also the passage for waiters, so dancers have to be nimble. (Martinez draws a racially mixed crowd, and one couple told me that they had been taking salsa lessons just for his shows.) Martinez’s piano player is Ariacne Trujillo, a woman with long dyed-blond hair who often chats during songs with Alvaro Benavides, the bassist, who is a dead ringer for Pedro Almodóvar. Martinez sits center stage, on a *cajon*, a Spanish box drum that provides low notes, and works two conga drums decorated with Cuban flags. To his right is Jhair Sala, who plays the cowbell and the bongos. Maintaining the clave rhythm is his job, more or less.

The sets typically move at a relaxed, mid-tempo pace, with plenty of room for improvisation. Martinez sings in a hard, high voice, with the intermittent jumps and slower, side-stepping descents that are specific to Cuban singers. The Santeria goddess Oshun, who typifies sweetness and a certain feminine grace, is often praised in ways that sound like basic love songs. Martinez characterized a passage for me: “I am praising her dress, how she moves, the sweetness of her being.”

During the show, the band moves in and out of four-part harmony in a display of easy virtuosity. Listening, I thought of the Jamaican phrase “music like dirt,” for how ubiquitous and plentiful it is on the island. The band played small solos almost constantly, though they happened quickly and overlapped, without the pomp that can slow down some American jazz sets.

But Martinez’s big solo was a showstopper. He began with an Olympic-calibre flurry of triplets on top of triplets, then moved into an almost clinical examination of the conga drum’s head. He used different techniques—a brittle, snapping sound from striking down with two fingers, a soft thump from the side of his hand—and strung together the sounds as he found them. He settled into a rhythm that pitted three beats against the band’s six, slowly pushing how far against the sound he could go, making the drum solo the simplest element of the song, almost as if to mock the very idea of soloing. He broke out in an enormous grin and lifted the conga off the floor with his legs, allowing the open end to resonate, which lowered the instrument’s range by almost an octave. He thumped on it powerfully and directly, abandoning the subtle math he’d been sketching for almost a minute.

Martinez and his band have won over dozens of people I’ve taken to see him, despite their confessions beforehand to not liking jazz or not understanding Latin music. His ties to the roots of Afro-Cuban culture are as deep as those of anyone working—he still studies the foundations of Santeria weekly with Roman Diaz, who came to the U.S. a year after he did—but his spirit is entirely open. If anyone can move Afro-Cuban music into greater visibility, it’s Martinez.

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