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# Latinos In The US: Pedrito Martínez Talks Being Discovered In Cuba To Collaborating With Sting, Bruce Springsteen [EXCLUSIVE]

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By **Maria G. Valdez**, Feb 27 2014, 09:30AM EST



Pedrito Martinez came to the United States knowing no one, no English and with a dream. Facebook/ Pedrito Martínez Group

Back in January, my mom, my sister and I were invited to have dinner with my mom's friend. It was a girls' night out in New York City. My mom's friend, Janet, was kind enough to make a reservation at this place she insisted we go to, because it's Cuban and it had a live band playing "Latin" music. I had already taken a few days off from work to be with my mom and sister who were visiting, so I was in the "I'll go wherever you take me" mood. Janet gave us the address and we agreed to meet there. It was 8th Avenue between 55th and 56th streets. The place: [Guantanamera](#).

We get there right on time for our reservation and the place is packed. A group of people was standing by the door trying to get to the hostess and see if they could get a seat. It took them about 45 minutes for them to sit us on our table, and although my mom was beginning to get a little impatient, Janet assured her she wouldn't regret it. And she was right. We sat down and finally were able to appreciate what was going on: the restaurant has a stage with a live band that sounded amazing. It was talent coming out of every single pore on those people's bodies.

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They played popular songs in Spanish with a very ethnic feel, popular English songs with amazing arrangements, and songs that I didn't know about but made me clap, move on my seat and even stand up for a moment. It was something magical, straight out of Latin music heaven. To add a cherry on top, on the table next to us was legendary musician **Rubén Blades**, who just happened to pass by to precisely enjoy [the band that was playing](#).

I felt left out for a moment as I realized everyone knew about these people except for me. And then I felt mad because I didn't have their sound in my life sooner. So I did what any reporter would have done, and asked around until I found their manager, **Paul Siegel**. I introduced myself and exchanged contacts. The next day I emailed him to set an interview with the head of this out of the ordinary band, **Pedro Pablo Martínez Campos**, or **Pedrito Martínez**, how he is known in the business. It turned out, this 41-year-old percussionist's history is more impressive than I thought, and I am very thankful to have come across him, so I could share his story with you. I give you Pedrito Martínez of the [Pedrito Martínez Group](#) (PMG).

"I was born and raised in La Habana, Cuba, in a very small neighborhood in the middle of La Habana called Cayo Hueso," Pedrito began. "I came to the United States when I was 25 years old. Back in Cuba I was always involved with music ever since I was 13. I come from a family of musicians. My uncle, my mom's brother used to play with a lot of known orchestras like Pello El Afrokan, Orquesta Fajardo, and I loved it. So I began to get involved with folkloric music, Afro-Cuban music and I became a part of many groups too, like Yoruba Andabo, and the maestro **Tata Güines**, until 1998, when a Canadian saxophonist went to Cuba and heard me playing with a local group at the Casa de la Cultura de Plaza, in a festival they do called Jazz Plaza. And she invited me with a Cuban group to go tour the United States and Canada, and well, I ended up staying."

**When you moved to the States, did you have any family or relatives here?**

"I didn't know anybody."

**What did you do then? How did you become a part of this new culture and blend in and eventually get jobs in the music community?**

"When I came in 1998 I met a person named **Orlando Ríos**, also a Cuban, who had come to America in 1980. He knew me from Cuba, because every time he went back to do his religious stuff, he gathered a group of musicians and I was one of them. So when I came here, he opened up his house for me. I lived there for a few months. He was recognized here too, and he played in different groups here too. So I started working with him, and he connected me with other musicians. And that's how I started. Going to religious activities with Orlando, playing with local bands in restaurants and such."

**When did you form the Pedrito Martínez Group? And how did you select the musicians that play with you?**

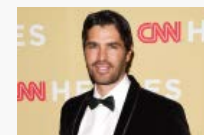
"Before forming this band, I was playing with a lot of well known groups. I used to play with them and I also recorded a lot with them. I played with **Eddie Palmieri** for a long time, with **Paquito D'Rivera**, **Steve Turre**, **Sting**, **Bruce Springsteen**, **Elton John**. I've done a lot since I started out and before forming the Pedrito Martinez Group. A group that broke all barriers for me was Yerba Buena, which I founded. The director of the group was **Andres Levin**, a Venezuelan, and great producer. With them, a lot of doors opened for me. At the same time I was playing with **Horacio 'El Negro' Hernández** and we had a great contract in Japan, so we traveled a lot. And around that time I recorded a lot of albums too. And in 2001 I get the great opportunity of going to the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition, each year they focus on a different instrument, and when it came the time for percussion, I went, I won and I got \$20,000 and the option to go to a music school. That really opened up many doors for me."

**So you originally learned your instrument from watching your family play...**

"I learned in the streets basically. I never had the opportunity, given my socioeconomic conditions and



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the political conditions of my country, to actually go to a music school. So I learned everything in the streets, with local groups in schools, religious groups, and yes, so to continue the story, the PMG came together eight years ago, when a friend of mine called me and told me there was a man who wanted to open a restaurant on 8th Avenue between 55th and 56th. Back then the place was called 'Azúcar,' now it's 'Guantanamera.' And the owner wanted a local band to play the whole week. Back then I used to travel a lot and I had a baby, so I was asking myself 'How do I balance my family and my work?' So I made the decision to stop traveling with other groups and form my own to be closer to my family in New York City. So I went over to the restaurant, talked with the owner, and I put together a band, that was not the same one I have now. A lot has rained ever since and a lot of people have come and go. And the ones who stuck were actually there by coincidence when other musicians stood me up and they showed up to cover for them, and it's been four years since we've all been together. They're extremely professional, disciplined and they sounded how I wanted them to sound."

**Well, it has worked, because in order to see you play reservations must be made weeks in advance at Guantanamera!**

(Laughs) "It's worked out yes, we're traveling a lot, our album has been a sensation, and it's all good. I'm very happy to be able to show and promote Latin music around the world."

**How would you define your genre?**

"It's been a lot of years of me playing a lot of jazz, pop... but the root of what we play is Afro-Cuban, because it's where I'm from, it's what I learned ever since I was a kid. But we have a very New Yorker feel that's very ours. The Afro-Cuban sound comes in the rhythmic base, but everything else is very New Yorker. And New York has that mix of a cosmopolitan sound, that comes from many places in the world, many cultures, and that's something that no one can take away from this city. I feel equally New Yorker and Cuban because this city has taught me so much. But yes, I think we're a [mix of Latin music with a modern New York sound.](#)"

**Pedrito, you mentioned earlier major names of the music industry that you have worked with. What has been the best experience you've had working with some of those artists?**

"Well, who would've told me that I, a little kid from the streets of Cuba, was going to have the opportunity to come to the Big Apple, the capital of the world, without knowing anybody and being able to play a full house in Carnegie Hall, playing with some very big names. It's a bit traumatic. The first time I was called to do a project with Sting with the Rainforest Foundation to gather funds to save the Amazon, it was impressive. I had never had a drum set as big as the one they had for me. They were instruments that I knew how to play, but the genre was totally new for me. This was pop. It was colors, details, everything very subtle. It was a whole new world for me and I learned so much to be playing with such important people and seeing where I was, it was an impressive experience for me."

**What's next for the Pedrito Martinez Group?**

"We're going to the Calle Ocho festival in March, we're the hosts, and then we're off to Michigan, Puerto Rico, Aspen, Israel, Denmark, Stockholm, Finland..."

**If you hadn't been a musician, what do you think you would be doing now?**

"I have always been sporty. I boxed for many years and practiced Judo too. I come from a family that likes sports. My dad and my brother boxed, my two brothers wrestled, my uncle was a Judo champion, so I love sports and I take good care of myself."

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**Maria G. Valdez**

Born and raised Dominican living in New York (do not confuse with Dominican-York), who claims to be Sofia Vergara's long lost daughter and who has an unhealthy obsession with JLo. Associate Editor of Latin Times, overseeing the editorial operation and content strategy of the website. Trained journalist and musical theater performer with solid entertainment instincts. Experience covering human interest stories and social and large scale events with focus on Latino entertainment. Maria began her career in journalism in her native Dominican Republic where she worked for Ritmo Social, one of the country's most prestigious magazines, and as on-air co-host of a radio variety show.

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