

# Ritual relativity

By GENE SANTORO

**L**AUNCHING the Not Just Jazz series at Town Hall Friday night, David Byrne introduced music from Cuba's santeria and Haiti's Vodun (voodoo) traditions to an enthusiastic crowd that included Brian Eno and the Ambitious Lovers. Byrne outlined links between these religions, natural cycles, and Einstein's Theory of Relativity, adding: "Most of our popular music comes out of these religious traditions."

Both santeria and Vodun developed from the Yoruban polytheism brought to the New World by African slaves, who coated their beliefs with Christianity to appease their masters while keeping their music-driven ceremonies.

First up were Milton Cardona and Eya Arania, seven singers, six percussionists, and a bassist in a role similar to that of a talking drum. Cardona and the group laid down fiery cross-hatched percussion that shifted beats and intensity behind call-and-response vocals.

In ritual, the overall hypnotic effect helps induce the trance during which the orisha descends and "mounts" (possesses) someone present to speak through him or

## JAZZ review

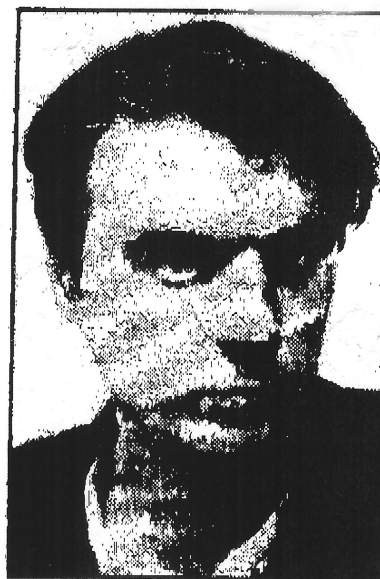
her. At Town Hall, the rippling rhythms induced a secular possession by the sounds documented on Cardona's "Bembe" (American Clave).

Later came La Troupe Makandal, a group of four percussionists, electric bass (as talking drum), four winds and reeds, and dancers led by master drummer Frisner Augustin. Bursting onto the dark stage in a black shirt

*Augustin produced a staggering array of sounds that earned repeated ovations.*

with white skull-and-crossbones, blowing a conch shell and cracking a whip, Augustin evoked Vodun's between-worlds sensibility.

While some of Makandal's set brushed up against salsa and reggae with its sweet-and-sour horns, the mesmerizing percussion-only



**DAVID BYRNE**

*Digging at the roots.*

barrages, usually led by Augustin, recreated Vodun's rites. Damping his drum head with chin or hand or rubbing his thumbs along it, striking the drum's head and wooden body with a hammer-headed stick, Augustin produced a staggering array of sounds, from bone-dry thwacks to liquid burblings, that earned him repeated ovations.