

Music of the Spirits: Not Just Jazz Series

by Elena Oumano

Traditional ritual creates meaning in our lives where none is apparent. Ritual eases transitions and positions man within the universal matrix. Ritual soothes brows knotted over questions like, "Why was I born?" "Why do I suffer?" and "Why must I die?" Unlike today's rule-riddled Big Three, the old religions were containers for the human creativity that follows the example of Nature rather than attempting out of arrogance and ignorance to conquer her. Musicians were the religious leaders; music, the most ineffable of man's expression, best translated that transcendent feeling of Oneness with Creation.

Santeria and voodoo or vodun, though much maligned by the media, are widely followed traditional forms of worship that have remained virtually unchanged throughout the centuries, despite transplantations from Africa to the Caribbean and then to the Tower of Babylon itself, New York City. Though both religions are practiced here with a degree of secrecy, on Sept. 22 David Byrne escorted Santeria and voodoo out of the closet and onto the stage at Town Hall. Wannabe true believers, the lost and alienated members of the post-atomic tribe, drew around themselves the tattered remnants of their genetic memories and journeyed to Times Square for a healing dose of that old Black magic.

"I'm trying to say there is another side to Santeria," says Milton Cardona, the renowned Puerto Rican singer and percussionist who is also a Santeria priest. "When I saw *The Believers*, the best part was when his wife got electrocuted," he says, laughing. "That looked real, but the rest of it . . . wow! There are a lot of misconceptions about Santeria."

Says Frisner Augustin, master drummer and leader of the Haitian group, La Troupe Makandal, "I don't believe what people say—I just believe what I've got in my hand. I don't have voodoo in my hand to kill people. I have voodoo in my hand to help people, to make them happy."



La Troupe Makandal's exultant dance

Though raised a Catholic, Cardona got into the religion through playing the music. "I was always scared of spiritualism, but the music attracted me. As a Catholic, I was told I couldn't go into any other churches. But with my religion I can go into any church of any religion, because we believe it's all one God and we worship the forces of nature. These orishas or deities represent those forces."

The orishas clearly were listening to Cardona and his group, the drum and vocal ensemble Eya Aranla. Despite the complicated logistics of managing several bata and conga drummers and a seven-person chorus, Cardona and Eya Aranla do not rehearse or even pre-decide on a song list. Cardona simply goes where the spirits move him, singing the praises of a particular orisha as the drummers move to the appropriate drum, the chorus yelps responses and a mighty stand-

up bass anchors the ceremony to terra firma. "That's the way it's actually done in an actual bembé (a public Santeria ceremony)," Cardona said after his performance. "You don't know where the singer is going to take you."

ARTS



Lyrical Haitian aggression and defiance

Frisner Augustin plays in voodoo ceremonies every weekend; for other performances, he adds modern instrumentation as he did with his band in Haiti. A touch of "schiziness"—a duel of the angelic and the devilish—in Augustin's stage persona only adds to his considerable presence and suggests one must fight fire with fire. He began his performance cracking a whip between long, dramatic pauses, as he marched up and down a pitch-dark stage in a black T-shirt decorated with a white skull and crossbones. Augustin doubtlessly was ridding the place of nasty spirits, and his confrontational stares at the audience left no doubt he could do the job.

Once the place was cleaned out, Augustin revealed his other, beaming aspect. "I look at the audience's faces to see who really believes in the spirit and then know what to play for them," he explains. "If I see someone not too happy, I'll make them happy with the drum."

He left the audience very happy indeed, on their feet and screaming for more. Serious drumming deepened by a low, rumbling electric bass and taken in another direction by a soaring horn section set off! Augustin's inspired, richly melodious voice and his atomic, bacchanal energy. Cooking on high burners all the while, the large ensemble worked the spectrum from traditional incantation to disco.

"I want to keep my religion in life," Augustin says, doubtlessly speaking for Cardona as well. "I don't want my religion to go because people say it's killing people. Voodoo for me is helping people."