

Master artists reflect on healing power of Afro-Cuban music

Written by Al McFarlane, Editor-in-Chief



Wain talked with Juan De Marcos Gonzales, leader of the Afro-Cuban All Stars following their phenomenal performance at the Minneapolis Orchestra Hall. Wain told de Marcos Gonzales about their music providing him a bridge to ancestral realms and a soundscape for his exploration of separate realities.

Wain was describing his journey to other worlds while he lay in a medically-induced coma at Mayo Clinic Hospital in Rochester, MN. He was there for a routine check up on the successful recent kidney transplant he had undergone.

But the examination revealed cancer in the liver had become aggressive requiring immediate replacement. They moved him to the top of the waiting list and within a day, he was in surgery for a liver transplant. His body rejected the liver, however. Doctors kept him in a coma while they waited for a new liver.

A second organ was considered and passed on. By Saturday, he had been "under" four days already. He had 48-hours to live without a functioning liver.

Ray and I drove down to visit. The room was full of machines and monitors, tubes and bandages...emergency gear of all types. Like in the movies. But this was serious. It was no joke.

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We were comforted by the massive amount of technology, and the huge amount of medical learning and science, and the excellent care and compassion of expert health workers, all organized to support and sustain life.

But something was missing.

There were beeps and buzzes. Bells and public address announcements. The occasional siren wailed faintly in distances beyond the hospital walls. The sound of the room was the ambient signature of the business of life...and death.

Wain McFarlane's life is music.

Wain is music.

I asked if it would be ok to get a boom box or cd player and play music for Wain. They said yes and ordered a boom box from the hospital library. I had Afro-Cuban All Stars cd "Distinto, Diferente" in my car. I got it and dropped it in the cd player and plugged in the box on a ledge just above Wain's head.

Nurses said Wain might be aware of what was going on in the room, but they were not sure. He could hear, but he could not speak, due to the sedation. And they were not sure exactly how much he would actually hear or comprehend or remember.

So I talked to Wain. I rubbed his forehead. Then I walked to the other end of the bed and I rubbed his feet. I said "This is a gift, Wain. So have no fear. You are being given the opportunity to examine this world and others from distinct and different points of view. So, Go! See! Remember all that you can! You will be able to cross vast amounts of space and time in blink of an eye. You can fly and stop at will, suspended in any space you choose. Let this music guide you and connect you to our Ancestors."

Wain arose three days later speaking Spanish, Portuguese and other languages he did not know. He had visited what appeared to be construction sites. He said, on closer examination,

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he recognized that he was watching people building the Great Pyramid. He visited the Andes and Southern Mexico and experienced ancient Toltec culture. Beings from that world followed him back to this world. As he drifted toward ordinary consciousness he could still perceive energy bodies that had tracked him, two to defend him, one to destroy him.

Wain shared this story with Juan De Marcos Gonzales and with our mutual friend Victor Valens, another Twin Cities-based Cuban, who visits Cuba regularly. De Marcos Gonzales, eyebrow raised and gaze fixed on Wain's words, smiled deeply, understandingly. He was experiencing the story stereophonically...from Wain eye to eye directly in front of him, from me on one side, telling my part of the story in English and in Spanish, and from Victor, reinterpreting what he had heard from me and from Wain, purely in Spanish.

There was one song, Wain said, about being a Jamaican but living in Cuba. Yes, de Marcos said, it paid homage to a great Cuban singer Nino Rivera, who, like many, went to Cuba to find work and to live.

And there was another song on that album that no doubt affected you, he said to Wain. "*Warar iansa*" is a song from my father's religion, he said, an African religion that retained its expression in Afro-Cuba. His father was the Pope of that religion, he said. The music's mission is to protect and grow the culture by looking back to the ancestors and playing a pathway to the future.

In preparing this observation I found the following liner notes about the Afro-Cuban All Stars:

"A multi-generational big band, with members ranging in age from 13 to 81, the Afro-Cuban All Stars incorporate the full spectrum of Latin dance music, including mambo, cha cha, salsa, rumba, son montuno, timba, guajira, danzón, abakuá, and bolero. During a late-'90s interview, Gonzalez explained, 'We have to use all the heritage of Cuban music to create a sound of the future.' Gonzalez, who holds a doctorate in hydraulic engineering and Russian and has worked as a consulate at the Agronomic Science Institute in Havana, formed the Afro-Cuban All Stars shortly after the disbanding of Sierra Maestra, the group with whom he had attracted global attention since 1978. Musicians in the Afro-Cuban All Stars, including pianist Ruben Gonzalez and trumpet player Yanko Pisaco, represent the cream of Cuba's instrumentalists."

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One of the people in the audience, who is a Cuban now living in Twin Cities, and who got special recognition from De Marcos Gonzales was Gloria Rivera. After the reception backstage following the concert, Gloria, Wain, Victor and I sat for coffee at a late nite bistro across the street from Orchestra Hall. Gloria, who sings with Wain from time to time, told me in Spanish, that her father was the object of celebration in the Afro-Cuban All Stars song "Tributo al Nino Rivera."

Wain had felt the meaning of the song in his coma. He remembered. And he asked De Marcos Gonzales about that song in particular.

Gloria Rivera, the daughter of the song, was in his life already, unbeknownst to him. This night connected and extended the gift of life.