



MARLON SIMON

MARLON SIMON talks about his involvement with music, the struggles of becoming a professional in what he considers a demanding field, and overcoming those obstacles with perseverance and hard work. Read on...

D. Navas

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MARLON: "My first contact with music was through my father, he used to play guitar and sing boleros -which are ballads in Spanish- frequently in the afternoon, when he was back from work or during the weekends. He would take his guitar out and ask us to join him on any thing I could beat on. Later on he bought me a Venezuelan cuatro and some bongos and timbales, I spent a lot of time playing around with those instruments, I was only ten years old. A couple of years later I began to

work with different local salsa and dance music bands from my area. Then I put my own little band together and man... we used to play everywhere and in every event in my town. We were opening acts for national artists from Venezuela, my brother Edward was on piano. We did a lot of dance music and I learned everything on my own since we did not have a music school in our small town. Hard to believe but I took my first formal drum lesson when I was 27 years old, that was in 1987 when I came to the US."

2. Your musical perspective is obviously affected by the fact that you are a drummer, a percussionist, converted in bandleader. Can you expand on this topic?

MARLON: "Well, my compositions definitely have a percussive style, it can be heard on many melodies like "Heidy" and "Little Stars" from my first record, and on "Songo pa Monk", "Clear to Take Off" or "Rumba a la Patato" from my latest CD. On those specific tunes I departed from the rhythms first, later I worked on the melody and harmony. There are a few tunes where I start with the melody and those tunes are not as percussive... "Ericka" is an example of that. Since my main instrument is the drum set, it takes me a lot of work to compose. My piano technique is not good enough to play the tunes at the right tempos. The leader responsibility with The Nagual Spirits has been a great experience for me since on this format I get to play rhythms that I have either created myself or adapted on the drum set. Rhythms originated on other instruments such as batas, timbales, congas, etc. I also improvise a lot when I'm performing, to keep that edge that identifies Jazz. I also let the band members stretch and play their heart off, those magic moments are what I live for."

3. How do you combine your career as a musician with your other half as an educator?

MARLON: "Well, is like having two full time jobs, it takes a lot of dedication, you see, when I first came to this country I took all kinds of jobs, I loaded and unloaded trucks, I worked in different factories, that was physical work... I still managed to sit on my instrument to do some work but to do that you must have a roof on top... nowadays is necessary for me to keep teaching and performing to maintain the standard of living that I want, teaching keeps my theory together, and performing keep my soul happy... by the way, I just received an award from the New Jersey Council for the Arts, as a Distinguished Artist in Education. That award will open even more doors on the educational field for me, meanwhile I am getting ready to go to Europe in October..."

you know what? sometimes I do not know how I make it, but I try to learn on every situation on both fields, education and performance."

4. Who are the main influences in your music?

MARLON: "Well, I have gone through different stages, when I was a kid I heard lots of Latin music: Sonora Ponceña, Irakere, El Gran Combo, so I was pretty much influenced by timbaleros. As I grew older I became aware of Mongo Santamaria, Willie Bobo, Jose Luis Quintana. Later, when I came to the U.S. I dedicated my four years of college to the study of the Jazz vocabulary, listening to the main exponents of Jazz drums such as Art Blakey, Philly Joe Jones, Max Roach, Tony Williams and later on drummers as Victor Lewis -who is also an excellent composer- and the list goes on and on. There are so many musicians that have something to offer... nowadays I honestly do not listen too much music, I am finding my own voice on the instrument and as a composer, I want it to come out of me as pure as possible."



5. What are your plans for the near future, are you already working on new material?

MARLON: "I already started to write new material for the next CD, meanwhile I'm getting the band ready to perform all the tunes from "Rumba a la Patato". We have a couple of concerts coming up in October and January with The Nagual Spirits. I'm also working as a drummer for Hilton Ruiz, we have a couple of presentations coming up in the U.S. and Europe."

6. Do you have in mind some specific collaborations with other musicians in your next recordings?

MARLON: "I haven't thought of that yet, first I have to concentrate in the elaboration of the compositions, which will keep the same concept since I hear a voice starting to define on Rumba a la Patato."

7. What do you think of the actual state of development of Latin jazz music and/or musicians?

MARLON: "I think there is a lot of music out there erroneously called Latin jazz, I say this because although they sound impressive technically and very well rehearsed, they lack the main elements of Jazz: soul and improvisation. On the other hand, we have those serious artists committed to the music such as Jerry Gonzalez, Hilton Ruiz and a later generation of musicians like David Sanchez, Danilo Perez, my brother Edward Simon... just to mention a few. I think these are artists that are creating a Latin jazz that takes different and interesting paths... most of us might not have the capitalist machinery behind, what Jerry calls "el cuchifrito", but we have a great spiritual reward, we are loyal to the music and we do not sell our souls."

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