

Jazz at Lincoln Center

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Wynton Marsalis' Notes From The Road: March 10-15, 2015

A little more than a week ago we left Mexico in high spirits. The concerts were well received and we were all pleasantly surprised by the large number of students who came out for our workshops and performances, their attentiveness and enthusiasm. We were sorry to leave, but headed off to the airport bound for our next stop on the tour – Venezuela. We flew from Mexico City to Panama City, where we planned to take our connecting flight to Caracas. Our staff back home, members of the band and their families, had all been diligently monitoring the 'goings on' in Venezuela for the last few weeks. Although politics and posturing are standard practices across the global landscape, art usually tends to fly high above that radar. Still, there was some concern. In my 35 years of touring, Jazz has never been in the crosshairs of any nation, not even our own, making it even more of a disappointment when we made the tough decision to cancel our trip to Venezuela and stay in Panama City.

This was such a hard choice. The weeklong residency with El Sistema had been planned for more than a year and was something we were all looking forward to with excitement. We had scheduled more than 10 education programs and workshops, plus 2 concerts. One of the concerts featured The Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra playing "Swing Symphony", a piece I wrote for jazz and full symphony orchestras to perform together. For me, it hurt because I have such profound respect for Maestro Abreau's system and think it is a miracle of clarity, practicality and insight. I believe that because these young musicians possess a deep historical perspective on western music, passion, technical virtuosity AND they grew up playing dance music, making them uniquely qualified to play the orchestral music I struggle to write. I've waited years to hear them play it, so making the decision to postpone this visit was extremely painful.

By now it was 2 am and we were stuck in the Panama City airport. Boss Murphy, Fernando and the whole team worked like magicians to get our bags off the plane and all of us into a hotel. By 4:30 in the morning we had rooms, but we were gig-less for the next six days.



But by the end of the next day, wouldn't you know that our extended musical family had come through for us in a big way. Danilo Perez, the musical seer from Panama, and his wife Patricia, jumped into action and set up a spate of education events and a weekend stint for our quintet at his educational foundation/school. And Ruben Blades, a man who walks around with a rainbow in his pocket, was also on the case, providing comfort for us in his native land.

We had a band meeting on Tuesday night to determine if we would all stay or if those who had less to do should go home. The financial implications were a wash, so it was up to the band. Ted Nash spoke eloquently saying:

"Our touring staff has done an incredible job dealing with last minute logistics. This whole experience has pulled the band together in the way that difficult situations often do. While there exists the option of sending people home for four or five days, it was the overwhelming sentiment among the band we stay together and go through this as a group, a family, and search for alternative gigs and educational opportunities - not necessarily to raise money (it will be impossible to make up the huge losses incurred) but to complete what our mission has always been: to bring soul, spirit and connection in the form of performances and teaching to places in the world that may not have had the chance to experience them delivered our way."

Ted's sentiments reflected and galvanized the feeling in the room, so we moved on together.

Victor embraced the moment saying that our response to it should come from our music

itself. He said:

"Syncopation in music is the shifting of a note or rhythm from the strong part of the beat to the weak part of the beat. In general, it is something that you least expect, like someone throwing a ball at you when you are unprepared. It can startle you and get your attention immediately. How you respond determines the outcome. You must have reflexes and instincts to respond quickly and appropriately. For us, this is a syncopated moment. The expected was for the Jazz At Lincoln Orchestra to travel to Caracas, Venezuela. The unexpected is that we would end up in Panama City, Panama. While we were very disappointed to not have the opportunity to work with and fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Venezuela, we were presented with the opportunity to meet more of our extended family in music and Jazz in Panama."

And with that, everyone got down to business.

Now Carlos Henriquez works overtime whenever we are in the Spanish-speaking world. I know we drive him crazy with, "Carlos, Carlos what does X or Y mean?"

Once he realized the challenge we were facing he was quick to try to seek help.

In his words:

"The minute we knew we were staying in Panama City for a week, I called Ruben. He said, 'Get ahold of Mr. Jorge Sanches ASAP!' Jorge is the VP of Promed a global Medical device supplier. He is also a longstanding Board member of the Bio Museum in Panama (Frank Gehry's first Latin American design). Jorge immediately started booking dinner reservations for twenty

at spots he and Ruben knew we would love. Wednesday night was dinner at Las Clementinas.

The Bio Museum agreed to conduct a special tour for the entire orchestra and staff and as the week progressed, Mr. Sanchez extended more and more hospitality to the entire orchestra and refused to let us even SEE a bill. On Friday, he added a special lunch for us after an unbelievable tour of the Panama Canal. There are no words to sufficiently describe the generosity that has poured out of this man. Even this morning as we headed to the plane to Lima, Jorge wanted to make sure we were all okay."

By our 12 o'clock band meeting on Wednesday, Patricia, Danilo and the Foundation had organized a full 4-day schedule with activities planned day and night. It was all hands on deck. Raymond, Dan and Juan were coordinating everything and Fernando was handling our equipment in Venezuela and all the new logistics for the re-routed tour. Our education department in New York had already coordinated with Danilo's Foundation to develop a preliminary work schedule. The orchestra used this as a template and decided how to divide up our teaching, lecturing and playing responsibilities (with an eye on not killing the rhythm

section). At this meeting we also determined the program and arranging suggestions for Wayne Shorter's approval for his upcoming visit to Rose Hall and discussed the layout of the show celebrating our brother Joe Temperley next month.



That afternoon we were in the front room of the Foundation surrounded by musicians, students, parents and Foundation supporters. When we walked through the door, we knew this would be special and memorable. It was deep neighborhood and had the feeling of adults involved with kids lives in a very personal way. I am reminded of my father and the faculty in the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts faculty in 1974/75. The teachers go far above and beyond to lift the students as people to a higher place. Every faculty comment is based in "help our kids play better."

After watching an inspiring film on the Foundation's work and meeting its leadership, we got down to conducting our first class on the meaning of Jazz. We played the blues and Chris and Vincent sang it. There were many questions asked about the meaning and fundamentals of Jazz. Victor answered one saying:

"The great pianist John Lewis once told me that in his opinion in order for music to be Jazz it must contain three things: 1) the suggestion of swing (which is the coordination of rhythm), 2) the blues, and 3) syncopation (the element of surprise)."

Paul Nedzela recalled about the day:

"Right away you could just tell how excited the kids were, and all ages, from maybe 6 to 20. It's always interesting to play and teach in different countries and experience how different cultures react to music in general and to Jazz, and to learning about it. These kids had a

light in their eyes. They were hungry for knowledge. Even the teachers and administrators of the Foundation had such a positive feeling. They had no cynicism and were genuine and pure in their efforts to help and guide. The director of the program, Luis, has terrible arthritis that makes it difficult for him to walk and extremely painful to play, but he was still so thoroughly positive. He knows he's making a difference in the lives of the kids, and so do they. Everything about the music brings him joy.

When it came time to play some blues, Vince was forced to demonstrate the fine art of mumbling. Then I watched as Sherman grabbed a student's horn and made it sing in a way that kid never knew it could. When you're a student, there's something different about having a master use the exact same instrument as you. It takes away any excuses you might have had about why you play and sound the way you do, and you are forced to confront the truth; and it is beautiful, terrifying, and awe inspiring. That's what I saw in the faces of those kids



After the general assembly, we had a joint trombone and trumpet brass class. Elliot Mason speaks for us all when he observed:

"We didn't have our instruments but students were eager to pass their horns to us to play. Our brass master class was revealing. It was refreshing to hear how the members of the orchestra express their knowledge of fundamentals through to expanding the jazz vocabulary. You couldn't help but learn something from hearing everyone's unique approach. The language barrier was squashed when we demonstrated exercises, improvised and listened to each other play."

Afterwards I talked about long tones and using them as a form of meditation. Here are some of the concepts covered in the class:

1) Kenny said the great Panamanian trumpet master Victor Paz asked him, "Do you practice with the click or the light when you practice?" Kenny said "the click" and Victor replied, "Play with the light, because light is faster than the speed of sound."

2) Elliot said "consider the flow of air to be a wall that supports everything you play including fast things. Let those rapid notes ride on the steady unrelenting stream."

3) Greg talked about bending the notes down a half step without changing fingerings in order to feel the corner muscles. Then he demonstrated a slur exercise that featured slurring up and down two partials with the same fingering then three then four and so on, up to as many as you could.

4) Marcus then said "you want to sound like a vocalist, so the bent note exercise Greg showed helps you lean on notes." He also said "if you struggle playing the higher notes, go down a fifth to G and work your way back up."

5) Vincent advised us to break down techniques to the smallest component and listen to your own sound. He said, "Let your sound be the indicator of everything that is right or wrong in your technique."

6) Chris asked students "where did they feel pain when getting tired, the corners or the center?" Most said the center. He then showed us a way to pivot the mouthpiece based on register to alleviate tension in the center. The exercise helps you to find your comfort zone in all partials. I had never even heard of it.

Then we all discussed improvising on tunes with harmonic and rhythmic accuracy.



While we were teaching, the reeds were also holding court. We could hear them swinging in the next room. Where our class was technical, theirs was about improvising and developing vocabulary. They talked about the importance of knowing the melody and the lyrics of the song and demonstrated how to build a solo based on the melody. They stressed the importance of knowing the chord changes and being able to articulate them on your instrument. It led to a frank discussion about building solos based upon the sounds of the chord changes by using notes within a particular scale to create melodies.

Here's Victor to give his take on it:

"Both students and mentors demonstrated a feeling and interest in the music that was as strong as one would expect from an institution bearing the name of Danilo Perez. They opened their doors and presented us with their finest gifts and instruments figuratively and literally, because our instruments did not make it to Panama City. They listened to our presentations with the most profound levels of interest. In our reed workshop with Walter, Sherman, Ted and Paul, the students came to learn about Jazz and wanted to know how to indulge in the Feeling of Jazz. Not all of our participants were jazz performers, but the interest they demonstrated indicated that they realized that WE were celebrating the opportunity to speak to them about something great.

We listened to two young saxophonists (maybe 10 and 12 years of age). One on alto and the other on soprano saxophone. They both performed with great confidence and style. And although their vocabulary was in its infancy, their statements had a weightiness that indicated the hand of great teaching. Our classes were inspiring and gratifying, and the experience reassured us that we are on the correct path as students and ambassadors of and for Jazz."

And of course we can't forget our core, our rhythm section, who in their workshop were explaining and demonstrating how to play the functions of the drums, bass and piano. Drums- swinging. Bass- walking. Piano- outlining harmony. Ali said:

"We then demonstrated how we can all play the melody on our instruments.

Followed up by showing them how we can all individually stretch the time.

As an example Dan, Carlos and I, played 2 choruses of the blues. Dan played first, 1 chorus on top the beat and 1 chorus behind the beat. Carlos and I followed suit. This was very interesting!

It demonstrated how we all can be different rhythmically inside the consensus quarter note."



On Thursday morning, Sherman and Vincent taught a group of elementary school students from the Escuela Estados Unidos at the Foundation while the trumpet Section, along with Carlos and Juan, went to Victor Paz' home.

'Vitin', as he is called, is 83 years old. We know he has had some health issues and were eager to see him. For me, just sitting next to Mr. Paz on gigs as a teenager was a lesson itself, but Kenny actually took lessons with him. He said:

"Victor Paz is one of the greatest trumpet players to ever play the horn. Many consider him to be the Father of Latin Jazz lead trumpet playing. I played with him for several years in Chico O'Farrill's band, before I got up the courage to ask him for lessons. He taught me in NY until he retired and moved back to Panama. When our flight landed in Panama from Mexico City, Wynton and I called Victor Paz, just to say hi and show him some love and respect. We knew there wouldn't be time to see him, since we only had a short layover before our flight to Caracas. After all was said and done, we ended up getting to spend time with Victor in his home. Marcus, Greg, Carlos, Wynton and I were full of questions and Vitin patiently answered them all as recordings of his stellar playing with various groups played in the background. Periodically we would comment on the playing as he was explaining a point and he would nod as if to say, "Yes. We were playing.



He explained his perfect embouchure saying that he thinks of the stronger upper lip as the 'pitcher' and the bottom lip is the 'catcher'. They both have to work together in order to achieve balance. He spoke of his father who was his trumpet teacher and was also a furniture maker who always insisted on correct measurement in making chairs from the foundation up, and who used this skill to teach Vitin how to play with perfect rhythm by subdividing the whole note to understand all of the smaller rhythms. I could go on and on because every word out of Victor's mouth is a profound lesson. What a blessing!"

That afternoon, more master classes and exchange of information. What can we say about Luis Perez, Director of Education of the Foundation? This is a guy who went to school as a boy in the same building where the Foundation now stands. (It was the former Conservatorio). He was dipped in soul and honey as a baby. He worked overtime making sure we were where we should be, when we needed to be there. His attitude of openness and inquisitiveness and absolutely no ego, teaches the students how to be. His involvement in music is honest and direct. Some things I saw him do you would think only happens in movies. He stopped a young teenaged girl we drove past in the street and grilled her about why she hadn't been in school. It was parental, familial and was obviously impactful. Conversations with faculty were full of energy and desire for improvement and for information unburdened by the politics of position or politeness. To say I loved him is an understatement.

When I first played with Danilo in Poland over twenty years ago, we stayed up hanging and talking all night for a solid week. I said he was my brother from another mother. When I met his parents we joked about it and his mother said 'it's true'. Well, Luis embodies the spirit of educator, community worker, activist and counselor – all that is required to be effective in the

neighborhood. He is a revelation.



That night cats attended a dinner at the great boxer, Roberto Duran's Restaurant called La Tasca de Duran. They said that Duran gravitated to Marcus Printup.

Here's what Marcus had to say:

"I've always had a love for sports. There are so many values to be learned from competitive teamwork that goes far beyond a final score or championship. It's that grind, that hunger, that camaraderie that can influence you for other areas of your life after your competitive days are over. After the postponement of our trip to Caracas, there have been many parallels to sports and teamwork in Panama. Going to the original "Hands of Stone" fighter, Roberto Duran's restaurant activated my thinking about sports and music. The food was excellent. We all sat around and watched his greatest fights on the wide screen. "Ooos" and "ahhs" resonated as if though we were at the actual fights! All of a sudden we heard applause up front. Roberto Duran himself walked into the restaurant! He came over to our section and graciously took pics with EVERYBODY! He looks like he can still knock somebody out!

He kept talking to me in Spanish with Carlos graciously translating. It was inspirational. After leaving organized sports in high school, I never thought I'd feel that feeling of TEAM again. Throughout all the tribulations this past week, I realize that I've been on an incredible team since 1993. This band. This organization. We support each other fully and this week has truly brought us closer."

As a nightcap there was a salsa concert in our hotel and Carlos and Greg sat in with the band. Carlos sent an email at 1:34 am saying "Gisbert!! Is playing a pile of trumpet!!!!"

Friday morning we held more classes and developed on what had been established the last two days. As always, the students and teachers were as open, attentive and gracious as could be. Ali did an incredible master class that afternoon. He recounts:

In the drum master class I demonstrated the relationship between the West African 6/8 and 4/4 Western European (march) rhythm. I was asked many times by the students how I'm able to change the feeling of the rhythm in so many ways. I told them that this all comes from study and the "real life" experience of playing and interacting with great wise musicians. Great percussionists like the late Yacub Addy (Ghana), Anga Diaz (Cuba), Giovanni Hildago (Cuba), Jamie Haddad (US), Ballu Khan, Rafiq Ahmed, Najaf Ali (Pakistan) Bobby Allende and Marc Quiñones (PR/ Bronx) have all contributed to my experience in the ubiquity of the world rhythm. This is a knowledge that is living and often not found in a book.

We journeyed through many rhythms. I played a quarter note at 120BPM and we traveled through a variety of feels, interpretations and grooves: Shuffle, Charleston, 2nd line, bolero, change, Guaguancó, son, canzone, bolero, march 6/8-2/4, bulerias. We ended with a native groove from Panama "Tamborito" which is in 3 and 2."

Later that evening, the quintet (Walter, Carlos, Ali, Dan and I) played a benefit concert for the Foundation and some of the cats dropped by to sit in. We covered a wide range of standards and originals and the rhythm section let us know who they were. It was like turning a racecar loose on the open road. They were starving to swing!



Throughout this week cats had been teaching and establishing personal connections outside of our official activities. Greg Gisbert said:

"I have had the opportunity to work individually with students and working professional musicians. I had fun sitting in with a fantastic salsa band. While taking a nighttime walk in the 'old city', I discovered a wide variety of live music, including a few cafes where some of the Foundation students were playing GIGS!! This is the best thing for their development and I was encouraged to see it and supportive of them."



Saturday morning we conducted an outdoor education event for the community sponsored by the U.S. Embassy and the Foundation. It was held across the street from the Foundation in an open square-type area and under a big tent. There were families, kids, students of the foundation and just "regular" people from the neighborhood who attended. We drew electricity for an electric piano and a couple of microphones from someone's apartment and played in big band formation with borrowed instruments and no music. The lesson was improvisation, swing and the blues form. We ended by playing "Oh! When the Saints". It was truly an open neighborhood event and with its easy informality and lack of fanfare, it reminded a lot of us of the public jazz educational events that we had participated in growing up. We loved it. The orchestra was trying to swing like we were in Rose Hall.

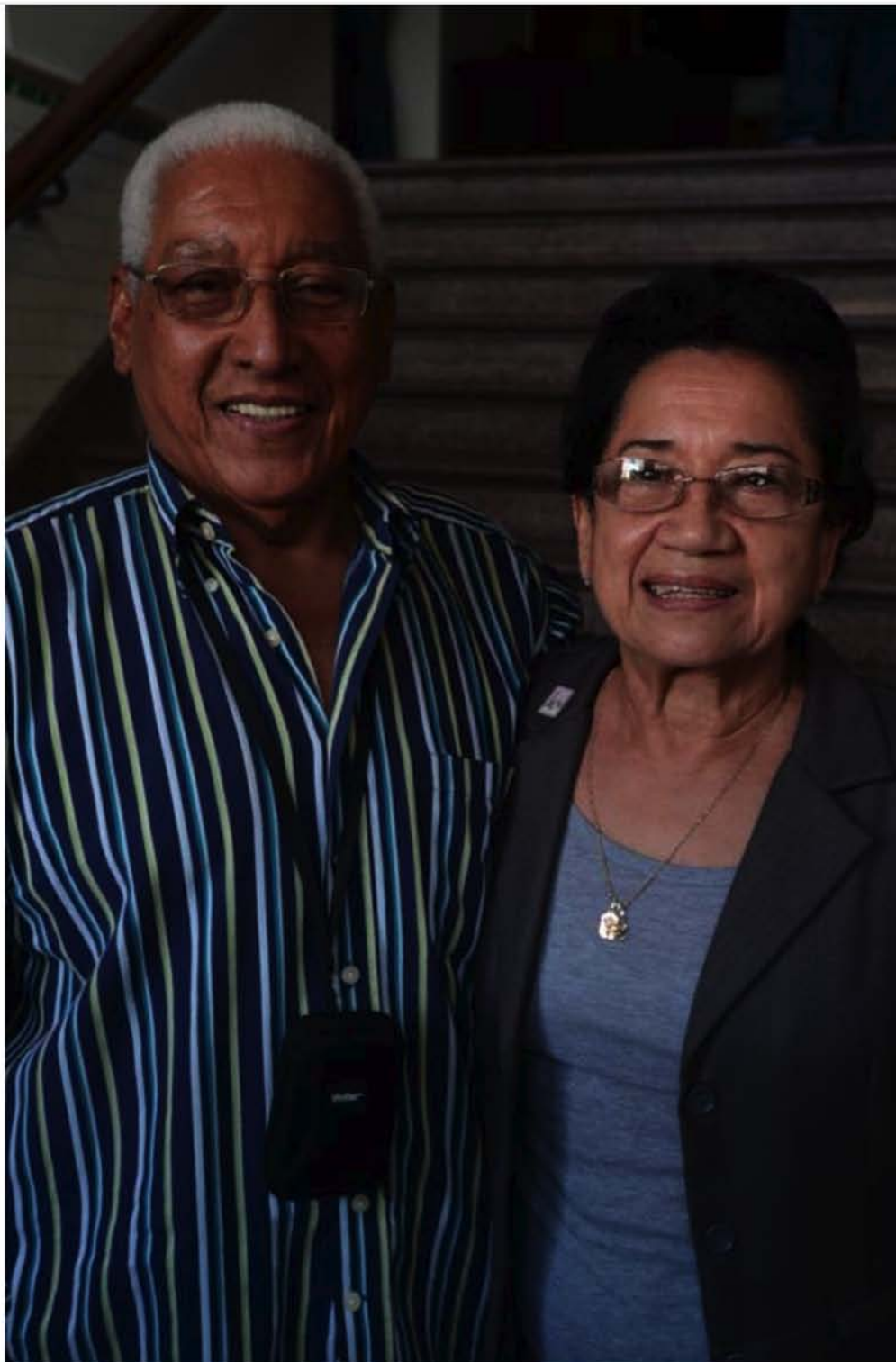
Afterwards, we ate an eloquent lunch at the Foundation featuring some shrimp stew that we tried to clone.

By Saturday evening, we were all tired, but the rhythm section was in the club handling their business with intensity and unflagging interest. This night was attended by almost the entire band - when they definitely didn't have to come. That level of participation was

heartwarming. And cats played AND didn't abuse the rhythm section and were rewarded with some deep, deep swing! The room was peppered with students, teachers and board members - a constellation of participants from all over. It was, in the word of Carlos, "Jaayuzz."

At 1am, as I sat in an upstairs library repurposed as a dressing room for this occasion, a young lady named Nicole was cleaning up the room and fretting over my general comfort while transforming the impromptu Green Room back to a library. I pulled down two volumes of Herodotus to read about heroism and karmic punishment across generations for dumb deeds done. I have to laugh at the timeless consistency of human behavior, especially when we're being stupid. And on the other side of the field I think about how great we are when we are working with and for each other. Drenched in sweat, the experiences of the week had a chance to wash over me and settle. I reflect on Danilo and Patricia and Ruben and Jorge and the morning's outdoor community education event, the meetings with the faculty and the students, the hard relentless swinging of our rhythm section through Friday and Saturday's gig and the warm gracious way we were all embraced and embraced again, it was filling. Everyone had gone out of their way to welcome us with the best they had to offer.

Danilo's parents, who had come to the gig on Saturday, also came backstage. I didn't know whether to hug and kiss them, or genuflect. It was like greeting royalty. I can see where he gets all of his positivity, optimism and sheer magic.



On Sunday afternoon we were treated to a brunch reception arranged by Ambassador Jonathan Farrar and his vivacious wife Terry. They attended the gig on Friday night and had done as much as they could to help us on this impromptu journey, from accommodations to performance – they were in our corner. This included helping to organize the Saturday outdoor class for the Foundation's neighborhood, for which we must also thank Kevin

O'Reilly for his efforts on our behalf and also Kristin Stewart and Andrea Corey from the Embassy.

As luck and fate would have it, Jonathan Farrar was the U.S. Ambassador to Cuba when we visited in 2010. Back then we enjoyed a fantastic reception in their home and this time was no different. It was amazing fellowship, filled with musicians, artists and culturally active, engaging citizens.

There was an explosion of interesting conversations all over the rooms and a delicious lunch featuring perfect paella and all kinds of delicacies. Like gumbo, paella is easy to abuse in the name of cooking, so I always sample with caution. This one had people standing around with plate in-hand, pretending like they didn't want to take the large shrimp bulging out all over it. (But did anyway, after glancing around, as if forced. We all saw you! All of you). The pièce de résistance was butter cookies baked by Terry in the shape of New Orleans fleur-de-lis with gold, purple and green icings. He-he. I have to admit we ate some before lunch was served and those cursed cookies made me sneak a couple more.

Walter shared his thoughts on the reception:

"Terry was a wonderful host. She seemed to be everywhere at once taking care of us all. She told me that her experiences in diplomacy have taught her that one can never assume anything about a person simply based on their social position or the nature of their job. We somehow stumbled into this conversation after she confessed to baking the delicious cookies people couldn't keep out of their mouths. Just because her life revolved around diplomacy, didn't mean that she was not also a very warm, loving woman who could also bake cookies like a pastry chef.

She's right about perception versus reality. At first glance, the students of the Danilo Perez Foundation seemed to be comprised of children from the surrounding neighborhood who were just beginning to learn about music in general. After the first afternoon spent with them, they revealed themselves to be an interesting mix of peoples from all over the city with a wide variety of backgrounds: lawyers, physicians, professionals, and amateurs of all ages and levels of musical ability.

The Ambassadors, the Foundation and the folks at Roberto Duran's restaurant all seemed to understand the value of how music appreciation and expression through the arts is an integral part of our being able to understand each another's cultural differences and bridge those obstacles with the things we all have in common."



Later that day, Victor and I embarked on the two-mile trek to the fish market. We crossed a maze of highway to arrive at an avenue on the Pacific lined with young lovers on the walls, runners in various states of shape and desperation, young men playing basketball (or what was passing for basketball), soccer, men and women playing volleyball, kids dancing and whizzing around with glow in the dark gizmos of all shapes and functions, people selling home cooked goods, popcorn, young people in small dojo-type groups break dancing to rap and competing with other types of callisthenic dances to other types of backbeat electronic music.

Yes, it was Sunday and the living Carnival of people being themselves was peaceful, round and universal in its ceremonial routineness. As dusk surrendered to darkness, we came to the market and the many restaurants that form an outdoor food court. It was a symphony of conversation and camaraderie. It was the point counterpoint of our internal and social lives as expressed in an end-of-weekend ritual that stretched back to town and village squares immemorial. Tomorrow would be Monday and everyone was squeezing the last juice out of this weekend. The weather was perfect, the wind was ocean swept and no one was rushing, they were savoring without being philosophical. It was...necessary.

On the cab to the airport, some light rock music is playing in the cab: "You don't know what it's like, to love somebody, to love somebody, the way I love you." Each time more earnest, fervent and with feeling. We will reflect on this week for some time. Juan Montoya from our Education department who is on the road with us for the first time summarized it best:

"It was great to see how the orchestra and staff adjusted to this week in Panama. Although

everything was arranged at the very last minute, we still generated an amazing output on every activity done. The support we received from everyone involved in classes, concerts and other activities couldn't possibly be better!

The sense of community was amazing and we all saw how everybody attending the concert helped to set up and tear down the stage and chairs before and after the show. It was teamwork at its most selfless best.

"I have only positive and good things to say from this experience. That this visit was not planned beforehand made the experience even more valuable and insightful."

We'll give Kenny Rampton the last word on this stretch of our adventure:

"A lot of seeds were planted in Panama City last week. We met with hundreds of student, teachers, diplomats and local musicians. It's going to be very interesting to see what those seeds will blossom into over the next few years. I think that this week's response to unexpected circumstance is going to fertilize an amazing season of growth for both our organization and the community in Panama.

I love my job!"

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#Panama #Wynton Marsalis #South America #Jazz

Mar 19th, 2015
22 notes

