

Martin Zarzar's new beat

The Pink Martini percussionist extends his reach with a solo album of worldly influences

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Portland is a hub for musicians from all over the world. In the case of Martin Zarzar, percussionist for Pink Martini, he brings the world to our city through his music. Having lived and played all over the world, he is a quintessential global percussionist.

At the ripe age of 3, he began to explore music on the keyboard of Eugene Skeef, a South African percussionist, composer, poet and educator living in London. It was just a year later that he remembers falling in love with the bass at a performance by American-born jazz musician Stanley Clarke.

The depths of his worldview are readily available to tap into on his first solo album, "Two Dollars to Ride the Train." The album combines a multitude of rhythms — many of which, Zarzar explains, are evolutions of African beats. The songs are written in five different languages: French, Spanish, English, Portuguese and Arabic, which he sings mostly himself.

The album integrates global friendship and sounds. Though joined by a phenomenal cross section of international musicians, Zarzar shows his proficiency on many instruments on the album, including guitar, piano, percussion, and Middle Eastern oud.

After a decade of touring with Pink Martini, Zarzar is now taking his own album



PHOTO BY KRISTINA WRIGHT

on tour, debuting with a show on Saturday, June 23, at the Alberta Rose Theatre.

S.Z.: Tell me about the album. How did it come to be?

M.Z.: This album really coalesced between the end of December and the beginning of March. I pretty much recorded the entire thing. I wrote most of the material and had the overarching vision come together for the album.

Being on the road all of the time, you change so much. It's hard to come back to the same vision that you had before, so I inevitably started over again each time I would come back home.

This time I set a deadline for myself. You reach the crucifixion age. I'm 33. My grandfather always joked about that — the age of crucifixion. That's when you get married and you do things that mark your life story.

But the story leading up to these few months (when I recorded the album) is basically the story of my life. I tried to encompass that — it comes through in the album — what you do, who you are. What you live, informs what you're doing.

S.Z.: You have a rich cultural background, born to a Peruvian mother and Palestinian father. Tell us a bit about your cultural

heritage?

M.Z.: [Martin waves to a friend] This is Sean Ghazi, speaking of cultural heritage.

(We are joined by Martin's friend, Sean Ghazi for coffee in the Powell's coffee shop in downtown Portland. Ghazi is an actor, dancer and singer from Malaysia. After introductions and pleasantries, we dive back into the conversation.)

S.Z.: So we were talking about cultural heritage, specifically yours.

M.Z.: Peru is a place that in the heyday of its social political power, it was a melting pot. It was a magnet for immigration and people came from all over. From Asia, from Europe, a lot of Middle Eastern people — especially Palestinian. But this happened before World War II and before the creation of the Israeli state. A lot of movement toward Peru happened all the way from late 1800s to mid 1900s. Somewhere in there, my father's family moved from Palestine to Peru and they kind of remained in the Palestinian community. My father was the first person in his family to marry outside of the Arab colony. It was very much a Palestinian family in that sense, but he wasn't born in Palestine, if that's even a place.

My mom's family is also kind of an

immigrant family, but it goes a little bit further back. I think it is a testament to all humanity being made up of immigration — migrations forever.

That's kind of what the album is about, so I brought this cultural vision and identity. The music, to me, was inspired by the transformation of African rhythms and their travels throughout the world. Also, it kind of parallels the story of the migration of humanity. And when you trace the music you can pretty much retrace the history of our world civilization.

S.Z.: So what are your thoughts about immigration, specifically in terms of the United States, but also a larger, global perspective.

M.Z.: I've always had horrible and funny experiences with immigration. I think partially because I have almost a unibrow and I look very Middle Eastern, but also because I had a Peruvian passport for most of my life and the amount of inefficient bureaucracy that you are subjected to as an individual when you are trying to travel is completely inhumane. And lines go around the block for a season. (He looks to Sean who is still sitting with us. Sean has recently moved to Portland from Malaysia.) I'm sure

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