

A conversation with Cuban bandleader Omar Sosa

By Kevin McLaughlin



Cuban-born pianist, composer, and bandleader Omar Sosa has forged a three-decade career blending Afro-Cuban roots with global jazz traditions, and a decidedly philosophical perspective. He has earned multiple GRAMMY® and Latin GRAMMY® nominations, major awards, and has attracted an international following.

When he makes his debut in Gartner Auditorium at the Cleveland Museum of Art on September 10 at 7:30 pm, he will bring along his new Trio, Outside the Box.

Tickets are available [online](#).

I spoke with Sosa by Zoom in a lively, warm conversation as he prepared to take the stage at the Detroit Jazz Festival over Labor Day weekend. Though he has travelled the globe, Cleveland has been on his radar through a personal connection. His former partner is the daughter of the well-known local architect Julian Madison. “She always told me, I hope you can play in Cleveland one day,” Sosa recalled. “And now that we’ve split up, I will play in Cleveland. Life is like that.”

In addition to Sosa, Outside the Box includes saxophonist Yosvany Terry and drummer Julian Miltenberger. Sosa’s collaboration with Terry has deep roots. The pianist first heard him play as a teenager in Cuba. “When this guy picked up the saxophone, I cried, man... what a voice, what a spirit.” Decades later, he remains impressed by Terry’s vast musical “universe.”

The makeup of the group is notable for what it doesn’t include: a bass player. “The bass puts you inside of the box,” Sosa said. “It’s the backbone, the foundation of the building

and without it, you have to be freer.” That spirit of freedom is both musical and philosophical. “We are all, in a way, slaves of the algorithm,” he explained. Instead of allowing himself to be defined, he said “it is important to be ourselves, outside of what society is trying to impose every second.”

Asked to classify his music, Sosa resists. “How do I characterize my music? Music. Simply, music,” he said. He sees little point in confining himself to categories like Afro-Cuban, spiritual, or meditative. To prepare, he explained, the group begins with “skeletons of ideas,” talks through them, and in a process Sosa calls “organized chaos,” they create music built on trust.

Spirituality runs through Sosa’s work. He finds guidance in Stoic philosophy, citing Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus. “We are responsible for everything that comes to us. The challenge is how we understand it, and how we deal with it.”

Though celebrated as a pianist, Sosa still considers himself a percussionist first. “I am a percussion player who loves to play piano,” he said. Scarcity of instruments in Cuba made piano the pragmatic choice, but he approaches it rhythmically, with a drummer’s sensibility.

As he prepares for his Gartner Auditorium debut, Sosa said that he looks forward to making connections with the audience, encouraging them to mingle afterward. “Backstage shouldn’t separate artists from people,” he said. “Peace and unity altogether.”

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