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Moving To His Own Beat

By Kellie Magnus

Norman Hedman can turn lunch into an improvisational jazz performance.

“Even this is percussion,” said Hedman, making a soft shuck shuck shuck with a salt shaker. “There’s a rhythm in everything. There’s music in everything.”

In his pinstripe shirt and tortoiseshell glasses, the mild-mannered Hedman looks more like the corporate suit he nearly became. But when he starts talking about jazz, the musician-composer-producer lets loose his passion for percussion.

“Like a lot of young kids, I started banging pots and pans because I liked the rhythm,” said Hedman, punctuating his words with beats—the fwip, fwip of a sugar packet on a thumbnail and the ping of a soup spoon against a bowl. “My parents wanted me to do the traditional West Indian things: lawyer, doctor, Indian chief. But I didn’t choose percussion. It chose me.”

That choice has taken Hedman to the heights of jazz, R&B and pop.

His diverse career has included stints with the Spinners, Chico Freeman, Daryl Hall, New Kids on the Block, Alicia Keys and Maia.

For 20 years, his band performed with the legendary Cuba Gooding and The Main

Ingredient. Not bad for a Jamaican immigrant who got his first drum from a Brooklyn garbage can.

Hedman got hooked on jazz as an adolescent, drumming to records by legends like Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie. He first took the stage as a calypsonian, performing at Caribbean events in Brooklyn.

But over the years, he gravitated towards other styles of music from the African Diaspora, fascinated by their individual yet closely related rhythms. His style reflects the culmination of his years of experimentation. With his band, Tropique, Hedman performs what is usually described as Latin jazz, though it encompasses a broad range of African,-African American and Caribbean rhythms.

His new album, due out next year, blends traditional Latin jazz with everything from calypso and go-go to soul, R&B and hip hop. “I’m not the traditional Latin jazz performer,” he said. “I incorporate different styles so that the music touches all ages. The tropical rhythms are clearly there. But you hear all this other stuff on top that you wouldn’t expect to hear.”

That “stuff” includes the diverse rhythms and the range of percussion sounds in Hedman’s arsenal. He uses everything from cowrie bells and shakers to homemade tools — crumpled bits of paper, gourds and even Evian bottles — in his quest for the perfect beat.

“It’s the rhythm that I love,” explained Hedman with a final rat a tat tat on the table, “Finding the perfect sound to round out a song; fusing all the different elements to create a unique sound. It’s the best high.”

For information about Norman Headman, visit his Web site: www.normanhedman.com.

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