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Percussionist Cyro Baptista savors the role of music

By Bob Karlovits | 2.28.2014

Percussionist Cyro Baptista says music never stops being a basic form of communication.

“Before being musicians, we are human beings,” the Brazilian-born star says. “So is the audience. We are going take a trip together, and in the end, we will have stories of struggles and victories.”

Those stories emerge whether he is part of the jazz of Herbie Hancock or singer Cassandra Wilson or in his own Banquet of the Spirits quartet, which will be at the Andy Warhol Museum on the North Side on March 5.

That quartet offers its versions of folk sounds of his native land. It is music that is imaginative, yet distinctly rooted in the culture.

“We create or choose our environment, and then, the environment supplies our necessities,” Baptista, 63, says in an email conversation. “For some time in my life, in NYC, I lived in the subway. At that time, the sound of the train coming from a distance, passing and going away was very important to my music — and still is.”

That role of music gives it a basic importance, he says.

“I am sure that in the beginning, what we now know as music was a survival element of the daily lives of our ancestors,” he says. “It was as important as hunting. At a specific time of the day, everybody would produce a sound that kept then together and alive until the next day.”

He says the role of this quartet and its music is “to remind the audience that we all carry this ritualistic instinct in every cell of our body.”

Of course, Baptista has been adding that reminder to music — in many forms — for many years. He came to the United States in 1980 and started adding his percussive brilliance to many musical projects. He plays percussion instruments from his own land, Africa and the Middle East, as well as inventing new ones when he is looking for a specific sound.

He has been part of five Grammy award-winning projects and has recorded with Melissa Etheridge, James Taylor, Santana, Robert Palmer and the Chieftains. He also toured with Yo-Yo Ma, Paul Simon and Sting.

Working in such varied settings has been challenging, of course, but always gratifying.

“America has created some of the most powerful music manifestations in mankind, and everybody should be grateful for that,” he says.

