

ISLAS' intention with this section, "Profiles," is to introduce our readers to the life, work, ideas and perspectives regarding Cuba today, and to the future of outstanding African descendants on the island. These black men and women are involved in politics, culture, civic activism, and religion.

Raudel Collazo Pedroso. "Escuadrón Patriota"

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Before seeing Raudel Collazo Pedroso for the first time, I already knew about him via testimonies and references by other people who had been captivated by the noble, strong personality of this trained psychologist. He was born nearly 38 years ago in the Güines municipality of Havana, and has marked an entire era with his artistic stamp and human qualities as a genuine representative of hip hop, an urban musical genre totally connected to the realities and traumas of our society.

Yet, Raudel, leader of a musical project known as *Escuadrón Patriota*, is much more than an urban poet with a tough and engaging lyric. Each and every one of his performances is moving; they express the feelings and worries of a people that suffer and dream. His truthful and profound rhetoric is made coherent by the strength, gentleness and commitment with

which he convinces the young and old, as well as Cubans and foreigners, because he inspires admiration and confidence. His aesthetic and poetics move the feelings of those who hear him. They immediately become his followers and admirers.

Escuadrón Patriota was founded in November 2003 as a hip-hop group in the heat of the moment's political and social situation. Its mission was entirely progressive and revolutionary. Their lyrics requested and demanded transformation for Cuba and their community. Its autodidactic, spontaneous members, lacking formal artistic or musical training, nevertheless took on the challenge of inserting themselves into an urban musical genre, making it theirs, and expanding it.

At first, *Escuadrón*'s members included Nairan, Alberto and Jorge Hernández. Then Raudel joined, and Nairan and Alberto would



Raudel Collazo

leave due to conflicting interests and differences. In 2004, the group recorded its first underground rap demo, titled “Voces clandestinas” [Clandestine Voices]. That same year, *Escuadrón* went to the Provincial Rap Festival and won first prize: Best Lyrics for the song “Voces Clandestinas.” They also won the Brothers Saiz Association Award (AHS), an organization to which its members belonged for a time, and participated in the CUBA International Festival of Rap (in Alamar and Habana del Este).

In 2005, they went to the Almendares Vivo Rap Festival and La Madriguera, one of the most popular places, along with Almendares, for the hip-hop scene. By this time, Raudel was the only member left. In around 2007, he joined the Comisión Depuradora [Purifying Commission] and participated in the recording of Volume 4 of Sonido Turbio, which he did before appearing in the *Calle Real 70* documentary and on the record “Compilatorio de hip hop cubano” [Compilation of Cuban Hip-Hop] (2008).

At around that same time, he worked with and recorded with the *Aldeanos*, *Maikel Xtremo*, *El Discípulo*, *Albert Rompiendo Barre-*

ras and others. He also records “Mi testimonio” [My Testimony], gave a concert at the Rotilla Festival and made an appearance at the end-of-year concert produced by independent, cultural project *Matraka*, in Havana.

By 2009, he was still working, essentially on a record project, “El Legado,” with a new musical point of view. He presented at the Havana nightspot Barbarán, the Aldeano’s habitual hangout, and at the Karachi and Saturno clubs, as well. He released his “El Legado” CD, produced by *El Prófugo*, and recorded at the Champion Records studio. He gave a special presentation at the Rotilla Festival and appeared at the very first Puños Arriba Cuban Rap Festival, with the recording “Mi Testimonio”, which won him first prize in the Spoken Word category, and appeared at Omni Zona Franca’s World Festival of Poetry Without End.

In 2010, he releases a number of videos: “Decadencia,” which was popular worldwide; “Por si mañana no estoy” and “No más discriminación.” He was invited to participate in an *Aldeanos* concert at the Acapulco Theater, and to the second Puños Arriba awards, where he walked away with quite a few. He also par-

ticipated in the Rotilla Festival; presented at the concert “Somos la raíz del cambio” [We Are the Root of Change] with the reggae band *Herencia*; and took part in the Twelfth World Festival of Poetry Without End.

The next year, he worked on his new record, “Somos la raíz del cambio,” which is a continuation of a project proposed by *Escuadrón* to create a more politically committed project, but it is highly spiritual, too.

In 2012, he was participating in the “Alma Cubana” project, by visual artist Ana Olema, by recording a CD in Quito, Ecuador (mostly). Its topic is the Cuban diaspora, the phenomenon of exile, and the idea of rebellion as a way to reclaim and rescue the new Cuban soul, a notion of José Martí’s this project defends. The CD’s title is “La nueva filosofía de lucha” [A New Philosophy of Struggle]. Raudel also joins other rap artists for the recording of the CD “Créeme” [Believe Me]; it has a new aesthetic concept but is equally committed to the cause. It was presented in concert at the Acapulco Theater (Havana) in May of that year.

This year, Raudel once again went to the World Festival of Poetry Without End and was invited to an annual event planned and hosted by the Citizens’ Committee for Racial Integration (CIR) and other organizations. He made various presentations, among them the successful concert he gave on March 15th in the Avenida Theater (Playa Municipality). At this moment, *Escuadrón* is working on a recording project titled “Catarsis” [Catharsis] and already successfully completed his first summer tour throughout the United States.

Raudel Collazo’s trajectory reveals a career that has become solid and strong, despite many obstacles and pressures. It consecrates him as one of the pillars of genuine, Cuban, popular culture. He is committed to revealing and discussing society’s concerns and needs, and ready to face present and future challenges

by giving of himself, like those artists who do not compromise their convictions. Raudel has agreed to share with *ISLAS*’s readers his ideas and experiences:

Leonardo Calvo: What made you get into a genre with so much social sensibility and impact?

Raudel Collazo Pedroso: I think it was my experiences and the change in my thinking that happened at a particular moment. I have said this many times: a new phase of my life occurred that I describe as a totally new spiritual awakening. This is reflected in the questions I ask, my critical analysis of things, my attempt to understand things that were going on around me, my essential experience of being poor and black in Cuban society, and all my existential ebullience. All of this shows up in my rap and my life. I took rap on as I considered it to be a powerful tool that could give expression to everything that was going on inside me. All my lyrics represent the reality of a segment of the Cuban population, the most beaten one—with all its rawness and tenderness, but also its honesty.

L.C.: What intellectual and musical influences have contributed to shaping your ethical and poetic discourse?

R.C.P.: Essentially, there was a book at the epicenter of my entire transformation. It changed the way I saw the world. That was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Then there was all the information about all the movements involved in the struggle for civil rights in the United States, with Martin Luther King, Jr. and other U.S. African American leaders; also, Gandhi and his philosophy and impact, the writings of Marcus Garvey, and His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie’s message, which was influential in my spiritual conversion. I found in the writing of Franz Fanon that I felt a part of that history, even though it was far away in time. U.S. black music influenced me from

the very start, especially soul, gospel, and rap, of course. I once again felt that the reality expressed in that music was connected to our experiences in some way, allowing for historical differences, but sharing one same essence. All of this influenced what I had to say in a great way. My words would become pretty radical and belligerent, like Malcolm was at his time, for example.

L.C.: What has the impact of your work managed to change? What have you confirmed within you as a result of the pressures you've suffered because of your work?

R.C.P.: More than change, things are going through a process of confirmation. We've tried to narrate our island's reality as we see it and interpret it. We became chroniclers, trying to be consistent and condemning from our point of view. They said we were crazy but we also got support from a ton of folks both inside and outside of Cuba. They were our accomplices; even those who did not entirely agree with us legitimated our message. For many, we were a necessary evil; for others, the voice of the voiceless. The government lied and the people are not the government: that is a false relationship. We attacked the Cuban government's obvious and subtle lies, and then paid the price: a censorship and discredit with which it attempted to bury us, campaigns and conspiracies against us and our friends and loved ones. God knows I am not lying. Yet, it has all been worth it. We resisted the worse moments and asked God to take care of us, and we're still here, reconfirming everything. Perhaps we were not entirely right, but we're right in what we sing.

L.C.: What is essential to you regarding the race problem in today's Cuba?

R.C.P.: I've always said that racism has never disappeared in Cuba, especially anti-black racism: not the traditional kind, practices by a large part of the white population, nor

the institutionalized or official kind, which is practiced by the system and government. Racism persists and there seems to be no cure yet for this social ill, which has been around for so long and persists so in our contemporary society. The situation of blacks in Cuban continues without resolution, and creates all the expected and associated consequences: a general lack of opportunities for the black population, little or no representation in the government and the better paid jobs, like in tourism, for example. The same thing is true in the sciences, research, leadership positions and even universities. Concomitantly, we have a large number of blacks in prison. All this serves to illustrate that racism is an evident reality in a country whose official rhetoric tries to make this phenomenon invisible to Cuban society and the world.

L.C.: What steps need to be taken to practically and successfully confront the race problem in Cuba?

R.C.P.: What I think is most urgent is that official rhetoric be honest and bravely accept the reality of racism. From that moment on, when, we must have a conversation—all across the nation—to openly discuss the problem with all involved parties. This debate must be as equitable and just as possible; it must be transparent in its intention to find viable solutions to this situation, because it is true that it is extremely hard to eradicate racism from the minds of those who practice it. However, if the government and State expressed a true will to solve this problem, it could adopt strategies to make things more transparent. I believe that if the government got involved in a national plan or project to promote the struggle against racism, this could make the population's way of thinking change little by little. A wake up call could be the way to begin to face the problem and challenge people so we can address the