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Violinist goes from Margate to Manhattan

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By ERIKA BERAS

When he was growing up in Margate, Daniel Bernard Roumain, 36, did two things obsessively: He practiced his violin and he listened to his family's stories about life in their native Haiti.

"I absorbed from that just as much as I did from the records I listened to," he said.

Now a successful musician in New York City, he is as known for his unique music that blends classical, hip-hop and Haitian folk songs as he is for teaching and mentoring young African-American classical musicians. Last year, he earned a spot on NYCrain's 2007 list of Top 40 Under 40. And he has his own multimedia show, *One Loss Plus*, which opened at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in November and will travel the world this year.

He started playing in a strings program at Margate Elementary School. His early gigs were for senior citizens in Broward County nursing homes. He attended Dillard High School in Fort Lauderdale. As a teenager he played in garage bands in North Lauderdale, backed musicians Ray Charles and Dizzy Gillespie in orchestras and worked as a producer for rap group 2 Live Crew at the height of their notoriety.

"He's not just a composer," said author and producer Paul "DJ Spooky" Miller. "He is one of the most original voices out there."

Miller features Roumain in his upcoming book *Sound Unbound*, a collection of essays about electronic musicians. The book will be published this spring by MIT Press.

For Roumain's latest show, the one-time Silver Knight has combined his music with oral and video histories of the community that raised him.

Roumain came home and spent weeks recording interviews with Haitian Americans.

"It was family members," said his father, Daniel Louis Roumain, 66, a retired drug store manager who still lives in Margate. "It was elders, it was children, it was long-time friends. They were some very personal questions. I don't know what he was trying to get to."

The one question he posed to everyone was, "When something is lost, what is gained?"

"There's so much loss right now in the world," said Roumain, the musician, referring to the ongoing conflict in Iraq. "I don't know how to handle it. So I asked relatives who had grown up in a country that felt like a state of war how they learned to handle it."

In Haitian culture, he said, at the end of one's life you celebrate and try to learn a lesson, rather than mourn the loss.

He videotaped the responses and created 12 five-minute films.

"Their voices became a percussion instrument," he said.

The process, said his father, was great, because, "we all learned about each other."

For instance, when he asked about his father's earliest memory, his father described being a child in Haiti during

World War II and looking up to see U.S. Navy blimps hovering over the island.

His mother, Simone, had heard her husband's story before but never in that context.

One of her earliest memories was of living in the Haitian countryside and wanting a shiny red American apple, a symbol of freedom and affluence.

"All of these individual vignettes make a whole story," said Roumain, the musician.

The interdisciplinary show is 65 minutes long with a planned 10-minute encore.

It may eventually make a stop in South Florida, where his family settled in the early '70s because "it's a tropical land without the political problems of Haiti," his father said.

Roumain and his two sisters grew up listening to classical, Cuban, Dominican, Russian and Haitian music, all influences in his art.

He has been commissioned to compose a four-night show for the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts Center of Miami-Dade County to be performed in December. The show, *Makandal*, is a contemporary opera inspired by Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier's accounts of the first Haitian slave revolt from his 1949 book *The Kingdom of This World*.

Carl Hancock-Rus is writing the libretto and working on the story with Roumain.

About his collaborator, Hancock-Rus said: "He improvises on ideas. When I was approached to create a work that would reflect and respond to the Miami community, I knew working with him would be an interesting experience."

The opera will explore themes of escape, freedom and homeland as it intertwines the struggles of Haitian and Cuban refugees, with the journey of Haiti's legendary folk hero Makandal.

Although Roumain is a New Yorker now, his frequent trips to and strong ties with South Florida are leading him to buy a house in Fort Lauderdale, a town he loves not just for its proximity to his family but for its burgeoning music scene.

"I love New York," he said, "And I love Miami. But I'm a Broward boy."

