

STICK TO YOUR ROOTS

Guest: Pavel Polanco-Safadit

Location: Des Moines, IA and Indianapolis, IN

Interviewer: Brian Campbell

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BC : I'm Brian Campbell and this is Mid-Americana: Stories from a Changing Midwest. We're now in our second season, and we're sharing stories of immigration, with eight individuals who left their native countries to make a home in the heartland. Today, we hear the story of Latin Jazz musician Pavel Polanco-Safadit, originally from the Dominican Republic, who now lives in Indiana.

PS: I have a basketball hoop at home. I play with my daughter. I dunk on her. She's twelve. Basketball has been a love of mine since I was in the DR. I dunked the ball. I used to be in dunk contests. Let me tell you, I remember my piano teacher becoming so mad because there might be a concert on Friday and I'm playing Wednesday basketball, full court, with all these people dunking. Oh my goodness, the fingers. He used to get so mad. So mad. Like, "You cannot do that. People are coming! You are performing!" I'd say, "Okay, I'm not going to." I broke a few fingers along the way, but it never messed up my playing, my concerts.

BC : Growing up in the Dominican Republic, the DR, Pavel loved performing, flashy dunks on the basketball court, but his first love was performing music, and it was those precious fingers that would one day lead him to the U.S. to study piano. Today, he makes his home in the Hoosier state, famous for its basketball fanaticism, but Pavel is also proud to be part of Indiana's surprisingly prominent place in the history of jazz.

Pavel recorded his first jazz album in Richmond, Indiana, the same small Midwestern town where some of the biggest names in American jazz and roots music pressed their first records beginning in the 1920s. In Richmond, Pavel also taught jazz for many years at Earlham College, and he now leads Amigos Latino Center, which empowers the Latinx community and supports cross cultural connections in Richmond and beyond.

As you'll hear in his voice and his piano, Pavel pulses with energy and creativity. And he's found his musical and cultural home in the Midwest, building bridges within the increasingly diverse community of Richmond and developing musical partnerships between Indiana and his native Dominican Republic.

(music)

BC: Pavel, welcome to Mid-Americana. To start, tell me a little bit about the place you grew up.

PS: San Francisco de Macorís, Dominican Republic. Small town with a lot of people. Really hot. Right on the foot of the mountains. You can see the mountains. Rains a lot in May. There are people, for the most part when I was growing up, since it's so hot and there was no AC anywhere, only the banks, everybody kept their doors and windows completely open, so the houses are very close together. You can hear everything your neighbors are doing and what kind of music they listen to. If there was an argument. Anything. It was not very private. A lot of street vendors. A very beautiful place, and colorful. The street vendors, they just came selling whatever, and let me tell you Brian, those vendors, they have pipes in their throats. You can hear them a mile away. They're selling everything, whatever they were selling, and sometimes people go down there. The market is brought to you. You could go to the market, but. Very nice people, they are. At that point and still, there were not that many things you want to do.

BC : When he was young, Pavel wasn't so aware of this lack of resources so much as the abundance of sounds.

PS: In my house at the beginning, we listened to a lot of classical music. But next door, they listened to a lot of bachata music, and bachata is originally from the Dominican Republic. Sometimes some people listened to merengue music, which is the national dance of the Dominican Republic. Across the street, there was an old university who moved, but they still had some old things there, and there was a dance group, a religious dance group. I'm not talking about Catholicism or Presbyterians, I think which is more like those people who believe in other gods. It was kind of cool to hear those drums. They were all dressed white. I used to go across the street to listen to it, and they used to close the windows when they were practicing, but I could see a little bit because those windows, they were all cracked. My mom used to get me. She used to say, "No, that's not safe. Come over here." So I never knew what was behind those doors. I just loved the drum sound. I really did.

BC : There was a rich mix of musical and religious cultures in the DR, in part because of the small country's own history of immigration, a history embodied in Pavel's own family.

PS: My father is pure Dominican. My mom is Dominican as well, but her father's family comes more from Lebanon. The story goes that my grandfather, he's still alive, my great-grandfather too, was supposed to marry someone in Lebanon because there was arranged marriage there in Lebanon. He said, "I am not going to marry that person." He and his brother left Lebanon on a boat, changed their last name on the boat. His brother stayed in Miami and the other brother went to the Dominican Republic. That's when he met the love of his life and that's where the whole thing comes around. He never got back in touch with his old family. Isn't that crazy?

My grandparents built a house for each of their four kids right next or across from them. Of course, everybody moved away from those places and got all their homes. From the beginning, my mother was right across from my grandfather. My uncle was right next to my grandfather in another house. My aunt lived right next to my uncle. We were the neighbors.

BC: So, the sounds you were talking about hearing from the neighbors

PS: It was my family.

BC: Tell me about how you first got introduced to the piano.

PS: I used to see the piano in the tv. We used to have one of those all black and white TVs. I played percussion when I was a little kid, the tambura, which are percussion instruments you play merengue with for the most part. I liked doing music when I was a little kid, but I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do because that's not one of the things you did back then. I saw the piano. There was one time my father said to me, "Hey, there is a missionary here from the Episcopal church." He was there as a missionary teaching music in English. He said, "Let's go and talk to him." My father used to have one of those motorcycles. We call them setentas, over there, in the DR. We went there. I hopped on the motorcycle, and we went and talked to him. He said, "Yeah, I'll take him. He can come next week and start." And that's the first time I touched the piano. I was like, wow! This thing makes noise. That was my first time.

I was playing right away. I don't know how in the world I was playing right away. I had never played the piano before, but I was playing. He was like, "Can you play something for me?" I had never touched the piano before. I said, "Yeah!" I sat down, and I played something. I don't know what I played. He said, "Oh, okay!" And he taught me a lot of techniques. I learned so much good techniques from that guy from the beginning. That helped me my entire life.

BC: You started doing some lessons with him?

PS: I did, yeah. Once a week. My only problem with that, Brian, was what would I practice? When am I going to practice? I talked to my mom. That was one of two pianos in that whole town. I talked to my mom, and she said I could practice on the table. It was kind of a new table she got. Somebody made it for them. Then I cleared it off and practiced on the table for two hours. I just imagined the piano. I had the music and started to read the music and things like that. My fingers are very, very strong. Like right now when I play live, it's like the piano is completely out of tune after my show, or halfway through. There always has to be a piano tuner there in the middle or the end because when I go I play really hard because I practiced on

that table for so many years. After a while, I said, I can't keep doing this table thing. I kept talking to the pastor of that church. That pastor was nice, but at the same time, he was a pain in the butt. Finally, basically he got sick of me. I needed to practice. In a small church, one room only where they do services almost every day, they teach English, they have offices, they teach music. It was basically from 7 to 10. 7 to 11. I mean 7 in the morning to 11 at night. I said, "I need to practice." He said, "I don't know when, because we cannot stop what we are doing." I said, "I can come really early in the morning. I can stay really late at night." I was twelve. I was twelve. Finally, he said, "Here is the key. Do whatever you need to do. Be out by 7 am in the morning." At that point, I used to sleep at my grandparents' house. I talked to my grandfather and he went like, "Oh, okay." I said, "I want to do this. Can you take me?" No alarm clocks. He said, "Yeah, I'll take you." He did. I said, "Wake me up at two thirty." No alarm clocks. He woke me up at two thirty, took me there. He used to carry a machete in his hand for protection. We walked for a little bit and then he checked all the doors and the windows and said, "Be safe in here. Don't leave. I'll come back." And he walked back to his house. It's about six blocks, something like that. Ten blocks? My practice there was like a kid in a candy store. Then, since all the windows are open into the yard, the next thing I get is complaints from the neighbors because they can hear the piano at 3 o'clock in the morning. The pastor comes to me and says, "I don't think this is going to be possible." This is after a few weeks. The neighbors, you know. My grandmother used to have a clothes shop. She used to sell [?] and things like that. I got this piece of fabric. I put the fabric between the hammers and the strings to mute it so it could be really soft, and I did it. My grandfather and I, we did that for a year. We never missed a day.

BC: I asked Pavel what kind of music he played as a teenager?

PS: I began learning, because that's what he knew, classical music. Chopin, Beethoven, Mozart. Bach, Mendelson – I played all the stuff. It built me. It built my technique to a point to do this. It was good that I began with that. I was doing that a little bit, but then the need of making money through music is not classical, really. You start branching and learning new things. You're learning from other people about jazz, about Latin jazz, Latin music so you can do other things. Music is huge. I began to learn from other people other things. Then I played jazz, played Latin jazz. I remember one time, I used to play with older guys. I was like fifteen, sixteen. It was a bar, and they had a piano there. An upright piano. That piano was a piece of crap. I used to go there, and I'd touch all the keys. The one that'd stay up. I said, "Okay, guys, everything else today, every song is going to be in B flat minor," because that's the only – I had to figure out what keys were up. I couldn't play in case it went down and stayed down. I learned those things, I learned a lot. I stuck more with Latin jazz throughout my career. Let me tell you, classical music and those techniques just enhanced my playing a lot.

Then they hired me to teach. I was fourteen years old. At school at that point was only from eight to twelve in the DR. Then after you went, you didn't go back to school. I was teaching from 1 to basically 7 or 9 o'clock at night. He was gone for like a year because the missionaries have to go back to the United States to raise money again. I applied for that one year thing. All the people did. And I got it. I was in charge of paying people. I was fifteen. I was the director for one year until he came back. My parents helped me out a little bit. And I got paid. I was getting paid when I was thirteen teaching lessons. Wow. That was young. I don't know if I would recommend that.

BC :Pavel worked hard at piano, hours and hours a day, but that wasn't his only passion as a teenager in the Dominican Republic.

I was teaching at that point and there were more pianos so I didn't have a very rigid schedule on my end. I was not waking up in the middle of the night anymore to go and practice. I took up basketball with some people. I can shoot. I can not defend very much because I'm not a big guy. I can be easily tossed around. But shooting techniques – I'm always about techniques – so shooting techniques and dunking. I remember my piano teacher becoming so mad because there might be a concert on Friday and I'm playing Wednesday basketball, full court, with all these people dunking. Oh my goodness, the fingers. He used to get so mad. So mad. Like, "You cannot do that. People are coming! You are performing!" I'd say, "Okay, I'm not going to." I broke a few fingers along the way, but it never messed up my playing time.

BC : As much as Pavel loved piano, he didn't always see a future in music. Even after all those hours of practice, he had almost given up on piano as a profession, until music opened up what would be the opportunity of a lifetime.

PS: There was a point where I was sixteen or so – I finished high school really early. I said, "Man, there's no music." I saw my teacher there, and I said I need to do something. Because there's not a career in music here. So, I went into the capital like three and a half hours away to study. I was not very happy, let me tell you that much. This was not my thing. What else am I going to do? I cannot just play the piano at my church for the rest of my life.

Like about one year, within that time, my piano teacher went and visited me in the capital. He just told me, "What are you doing? This is not what you are supposed to be doing." I said, "What else am I going to do? I have got to make a living at some point in my life." He said, "This is not what you're supposed to be doing. I have a friend of mine, he's a classical professor, piano, Chinese-American from the University of Arkansas. Just come and play for him. See what he says. He wants to listen. He might come and give scholarships. We don't know." That's all he had to say. That was all he had to say. Within an hour, I called my parents. It was nothing that

was clear. Nothing was for certain, but that's all he had to say. I called my parents, said I'm coming home. I've got to do what I want – what I need to do. I got a window here. A long shot, but I've got a window. I know what to do. I go there, just practice and prepare. They said, "We support you in whatever you want to do." And that's what I did. I went back, quit college at sixteen. I had a life before I was an adult. So many things happened. Teaching, director, college, gosh. Then I practiced, you have no idea, like a hundred times as hard. I practiced really consistently, persistently. This was like, to the power of ten. I did.

BC: And so the kid - who had practiced on his mom's dining room table, woken up before dawn to play piano in the church, and stayed up late playing in local bars - he now practiced even harder to prepare for this audition. Along with 80 or so young Dominican musicians, he played for University of Arkansas professor Allan Chow, and at the end of the day it was PAVel who had earned a scholarship to study music in the U.S.

(music)

BC: When you think back to that excitement of having that opportunity, do you remember what you imagined it would be like moving to the United States? What did you think about that at that time?

PS: Oh my. You heard about it. It was like wow, it's so wonderful over there. There's so many things. You hear about it. It's the country of the dreams. That's exactly what I thought.

And I didn't even know that much English either. I got on a plane alone. There were people waiting for me on this end.

BC: You went to the capital to catch a flight?

PS: I went to the capital. My parents were really sad and my grandparents right behind me when I was leaving. It was one of the saddest times I ever saw them in my life. Then there was a couple that came here to help some kind of building for the school to make it bigger, and I met them through my piano teacher.

They said, why doesn't he come before he begins school, because I had to pass the TOEFL test. He can come and learn English and stay with us for a few months. That's a great idea. That's where I went first. I get on the plane, up in the air, But I'm like, wow. You land in Jacksonville, Florida. The first restaurant I ate was Cracker Barrel. I still like Cracker Barrel, believe it or not. Then you go wow wow wow on both ends. They have to drive me from there to Hilton Head. If you have ever been to Hilton Head, South Carolina where they have tons of rich people living

there by the ocean. It's an island. I thought everything was just like that. Those huge houses by the oceans and you can see the dolphins. That's where I lived for a while. Like wow, really? People live like this? With a boat and a helicopter, and you can drive, you can fly in a motorhome over here? In cars? Wow. That was a very rich community. That was my first trip.

BC : After a few months of language immersion in this island of affluence, Pavel began his music degree at the University of Arkansas.

BC: Do you remember what were some of the challenges adapting to life in the United States?

PS: The language. I didn't know before I came here. I didn't know. The language is like somebody dropping you in the middle of Japan where they wouldn't speak English, and you have to go to school. Not school, college. Every homework I had, it took my friends an hour to do six, five, at the beginning. It took them two [hours], it took me six, seven. It was like that. I didn't have that much down time, and I had to practice.

BC : Pavel struggled with English at first, but he continued to work hard, especially at music. After college, he went on to earn a masters at Eastern Kentucky University and a doctorate in music at the University of Wisconsin. Pavel moved to Madison, and like many immigrants settling in the Midwest, he remembers the shock of that first winter.

PS: When I saw it was sunny in the winter, I said, I'm dead. The sunny days were the most cold days, Brian. Oh my goodness. I had to take a bus. I had to wait. It was a school bus from going to one class in one building to another sometimes. Not for classes, sorry, but for meetings. I had to be there. There's no parking around unless you pay. Those winters were brutal. Madison, Wisconsin is in an isthmus. An isthmus is a land between two lakes. The newspaper there is called The Isthmus. I-S-T-H-M-U-S. You can see them in the winter. Both lakes completely frozen. Then you can see – this was mind blowing to me – you can see tons of people with their trucks, SUVs, in the middle of the lake with little tents, fishing. You thought that was the ocean. People swim in it. Like a beach. Wow. When I saw that, I was like, "I am not going to be doing that." In the middle of it. Not the edge, but with cars all the way over there. That was different, let me tell you that much.

BC: Something you never would have imagined growing up.

PS: No. Wow. That winter. The winters there were brutal.

BC : Pavel bounced around for a few years, living in New York City and in England, traveling, teaching, and playing different styles of music. As exciting as this was, he felt pulled back to his musical roots.

PS: There was someone when I was in Arkansas, his name was John, John Harrison. He had a two door pickup truck. Big white guy. He loved singing in the choir at his church and listening to classical music. That was his life. He used to bring me to his house. He had all the operas in the world. I heard most of the operas and I know them, and I study them. It's kind of weird for someone who knows jazz and Latin jazz. I used to listen to a lot of things. He brought me there, we'd listen to things. That guy always kept saying to me, "I know you like this type of music, but you need to stick to your roots." Always he told me that. Stick to your roots. Do some Latin music. That's what you need to be doing. Trust me. That always got stuck in my head.

That stuck with me, Brian.

BC : And Pavel has rediscovered these roots in, of all places, Indiana.

PS: Oh yeah. There is a scene there. I wouldn't say huge, but there's a scene there that allows musicians for many things, especially a place called the Jazz Kitchen. They have live music seven days a week. Not only jazz, but they have Latin jazz. All types of music. They bring many famous people there I got to accompany before but also the Jazz Foundation; I'm a board member. The Jazz Fest, which I'm a board member for that. I wouldn't say that it's humongous, but it's big enough to support a lot of musicians there. You know, the first recordings of jazz were done in Indiana, by the Starr Gennett Foundation. Every famous jazz player went to Richmond, Indiana to record. You name it. Everyone was in Richmond, Indiana.

So Indiana has been a jazz site for many, many years.

MUSIC - King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, Dipper Mouth Blues (1923)

BC : How was it that Richmond, Indiana, this rural Midwestern town, came to play such a big role in the history of jazz?

In 1872, James Starr opened the Starr Piano Company, recruiting German immigrants to Richmond, to work in his factory along the Whitewater River. The factory was part of a post Civil War boom in manufacturing in the Midwest, which would eventually produce not just agricultural equipment but automobiles, airplanes, and appliances. With investment from the Gennett family, the factory grew into one of the largest piano producers in the world. By 1915,

they had diversified their operation, mass-producing phonographs, and shortly after, they converted a small shed into a recording studio and pressing records on their own Gennett label.

To compete against big, established record studios in New York, Gennett Records decided to focus on musical styles that were not yet mainstream. Gennett produced some of the first recordings of what we might now categorize as American roots music, from now iconic names like delta bluesman Charlie Patton, the singing cowboy Gene Autry, and the father of gospel music, Thomas Dorsey. In 1923, Gennett recorded, for the first time, a young trumpeter named Louis Armstrong, including this song you're hearing now, Dipper Mouth Blues, which he performed with King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band.

The Gennett catalog reflects just how much of a cultural crossroads the Midwest had become by the 1920s. Black musicians from Chicago popularized the blues and jazz traditions they brought north with them during the great migration. White, "hillbilly" country musicians recorded music from the Appalachian South. Gennett released a huge range of recordings: Hopi Indian chants, Polkas, Klezmer music, and more. Gennett hosted some of the first ever mixed race recording sessions, as early as 1923, when Jelly Roll Morton played piano with the New Orleans Rhythm Kings. They also recorded and sold songs and speeches from Indiana's Ku Klux Klan, which in the 1920s had over 200,000 members in the state. The rural Midwest was, and still is, a complex and ever changing place, with a diverse mix of cultures, and a place where these differences can produce beautiful music, but also plenty of tensions.

BC : In 2010, right there in Richmond, Pavel recorded his first album of Latin Jazz, with his own multi-ethnic band, Direct Contact.

Music - Pavel & Direct Contact, Pa'Lante (2018)

For the past decade, Pavel and Direct Contact have played together, recording four more albums and performing countless gigs in central Indiana and beyond.

PS: I named the group Direct Contact because I always wanted to be in direct contact with the audience. I always wanted them to be connected to what was happening on the stage. That's why I named that. We've been together a long time. We're good friends. We're like family.

BC: People who describe your live performances almost always comment about the infectious energy you have. What is it like for you when you're playing with a group of musicians or playing for an audience?

PS: What is it like for me? It's entertainment at all levels. It's a huge responsibility when I have, like say if I play outside of town, I have 600 people come and see me for whatever they do. They're paying money to come in, which is not going to be cheap, and they're bringing some buddy with them. Whatever that money is is double at the door. They probably have to get a babysitter to take care of their kids if they have kids. Their gas getting there, they'll buy food and drinks. I take my job seriously. People when they come and decide to see you, it's not cheap. There's an investment made. I make sure they have the best time of their life when I'm on the stage. That's why I'm very animated. I involve the audience constantly. You never know if I'm going to start dancing or hitting the keys with my foot or jumping into the audience. Besides the musical quality, there's the aspect of the show. The show. To answer your question, I just don't sit and play.

BC: It looks like you're having the time of your life as well.

BC: It sounds like you've really made a home in Indianapolis and central Indiana. Tell me a little bit about what that experience has been like as a Latino in the heartland. What's the Latino community like in Indiana?

PS: The Latino community is strong in Indiana. In other Latino centers there, they help the Latinos that cannot pay for rent, things like that. I mean, they have a few Latino organizations that help the culture of the areas. The presidency of the Indianapolis International Airport is from [?]. Some bank presidents there are from part of Latin America. You have the high end of it and the very low end of it, the people who need help and the people who can give help. The Latino community can be better. But, ya know, it's there. There is one, yes. And we all know each other. We all know each other.

BC: It's close, it's small, but it's also strong and growing it seems like.

PS: Yes.

BC: How has that changed over the time you've lived there? How have you seen attitudes and spirits of Latinos in the US changing over the last twenty or so years that you've been here?

PS: I think a lot of things have changed. We talk about undocumented Latinos coming here and students have been here and the DACA have changed a lot of things for the Latino community so they can go to school and do things on their own. That changed, in a good way, things. It has been an evolving community.

BC : In addition to teaching and performing music, Pavel has spent many years leading non-profit organizations in Central Indiana. He is now the Director of Amigos Latino Center in Richmond. I asked him how he got involved in this sort of work and how he's helping mentor the next generation of Latino leaders.

PS: From a long time ago, if you can go back to my piano teacher in the church there, when we used to write letters raising money, that was basically a non-profit. It was not a company, but we were doing the work of a non-profit back then. I didn't know what that was, though. When I got to Indianapolis, I had always been kind of involved in little things here and there helping people, when I got to Indianapolis, I began to work in a non-profit organization. I got to have basically one of the best in the business show me some things. Still showing me some things. I learned a lot from it. Then I also had the chance to be part of Amigos Latinos Center and help develop that because it was a one person thing. Now it's seven people and going strong.

Here's one question I always ask if I'm hiring someone, I don't care if it's music, non-profits, there's one question I always say. I don't like trick questions, and I don't think this is a trick question, but nobody expects this question because job interviews are carbon copies of everybody asking the same thing for the most part. But this one, I said to them, describe your heart for me. The first answer is like what? It's a question, right. Describe your heart. How do you see your heart? They say, "My heart?" Everybody has the same reaction, by the way. "My heart? I don't know." I say, "It's okay. It's just a simple question. I just want to see how you see your heart." That's so important. If you're going to teach and you don't have a good heart? You've got to have patience. You've got to give students direction. In a non-profit sector, you don't have a good heart? You just want to think about yourself and things like that? That's a problem. That's not going to go far in any kind of job. I learn how to hire people that have qualities that you cannot teach. You can teach programs. You can teach finances. You cannot teach good will. You cannot teach great attitude. You cannot teach desire. You learn in life, and you want to find people with those qualities that you cannot teach. That makes a big difference.

BC: How do you answer that question then? How do you describe your heart?

PS: My heart is simple. I always think about others before I think about myself. My heart is full of love. There is not one person in this world I hate. There is some that I disagree with. My heart is always full of positive outcomes. There is always a way to solve something. Sometimes waiting is solving itself. My heart is open. It's an open heart. That's how I describe my heart.

Good question.

BC: It's your question.

PS: [Laughs].

BC: Tell me a little bit more about the programs and missions that Amigos has in Richmond.

PS: They have programs of – it keeps evolving. Amigos has two pillars: health and education. They have a middle school program that's a leadership program. It's about college exploration for the kids, for the students. Amigos also has a program that is a tennis program. Sometimes 35 kids, sometimes 60 kids. Amigos also has English classes not only for Latinos, but for any immigrant that goes there. They're very organized. Those are the programs that Amigos has. On top of that, there are two events that happen a year. One is a dinner, a fundraising event. One is a dinner, what's it called? – that highlights a different country in Latin America, meaning live music of that country, the food, the drinks, the dancing, the culture. I created that dinner. The other one is the Richmond International Food Festival. It's the largest food festival in Richmond which I also, I said we need a festival here. We got together with some people, and it's going strong. And a summer program, a couple of them. Amigos summer program.

BC: That's one thing that really strikes me about the organization. You do so much to support Latinos in east central Indiana with youth programs, health, distributing food, all these things to support the community, but you also have these big events that really seem like they're aimed at celebrating Latin American culture. Why is that such an important thing to do, especially in that context in Richmond, Indiana?

PS: As soon as we did that, successfully very much with the amount of turnout, everything, we realized what a need this is. This is a need. It's a different kind of need. It's a culture need. You can see the police talking to the Latinos, really having fun, let's do that again. You have to have some police people there because it's required by the city. You see people from this country hanging with people from some other country and everybody's happy. They get to see each other, connect with each other, and they've never met before in a fun atmosphere. That's how you change a place.

BC: What's the response been? It sounds like –

PS: It's amazing. People usually say we need to do more of this. They have no idea how much it takes to do one. Of course you don't want to do more because you don't want to take away from that one. Nope, once a year. That's it. But the response from the city to the officials to the attendees to the staff, from the volunteers, the sponsors, One of the Latino ladies said, "I saw this person over there and he came right away and said hi," and she felt so good. She said, "If we never would have had the festival, that person would have never known who I was." Which

is true. Which is true. You connect people from different circles together and different backgrounds. It's incredible.

BC : In 2020, Amigos has adapted to serve the urgent needs of the Latinx community impacted so hard by COVID-19 and the ensuing economic crisis. The Center has been providing public health information, boxes of food for families, and support for children learning from home. Pavel and Direct Contact have also adapted and responded to the crisis. They wrote and recorded a new song in honor of healthcare workers, and they've streamed a series of free online concerts, including a recent performance together with musicians from the Dominican Republic. I asked Pavel how he's maintained musical connections with his native country over all these years.

PS: Six years ago or so, with one of my really good friends, Dr. Bill Sando, he's a plastic surgeon in Indianapolis, and actually he's a good friend with my brother who's a plastic surgeon as well, we began something called Music at Fest for those kids in the Dominican Republic that were up in the mountains that don't know what's going on in the capital or that don't know what's going on in the United States. It was me, actually, when I was growing up. We get all these kids, their bosses to bring them to the conservatory of music because now they have degrees in music. When I was growing up, they didn't have degrees in music. They don't know that that's happening. All of them come one day and they get the famous people there, the ones on TV, to teach them. We have a lot of workshops and a lot of things happening in that area. Every year has been a success. Every year. We have been doing it for about six years. We raise the money here in Indianapolis, and then we carry through. We give t-shirts for everybody there. We connect them with the conservatory. There's some of them that we've brought to the United States as an exchange program to change their lives. There's some of them that have for the first time ever living at the universities here, there. And I give concerts in the DR. That's how I stay connected. Every year I give a concert, every year.

BC : For years, Pavel taught music at Earlham College in Richmond, and on his annual visits to the DR, he is always on the lookout for a student in search of a scholarship to study in the US.

PS: We offer, Earlham offers them but they have to go through all the paperwork and pass the test to get here. It hasn't happened yet, but there is one working on it.

BC: That's one of your dreams.

PS: Goodness gracious.

BC: To offer a scholarship to another young Dominican.

PS: They have an exchange program, yes. They stay here and they saw the culture.

BC: What do you think is different for those young people today who are coming to learn and live in the US compared with what your experience was back then?

PS: I think it's in a way similar because the tests have gotten shorter. Before, it was six hours. Now it's two. Social media is a big deal. I didn't have social media back then. Email, yes. Not social media. Now you can just travel and see a lot more things without moving. There's more connections. The world is more open now.

BC : Platforms like WhatsApp allow immigrants to maintain contact with friends and family around the world.

PS: WhatsApp, I don't think there's one Latino person who doesn't have a WhatsApp account. WhatsApp has changed a lot of stuff. That's for sure.

BC: I understand that social media has also allowed you to connect with your Dominican roots in another pretty remarkable way these past couple years.

PS: [Laughs] Yes. The past few years.

BC: You've reunited with your childhood sweetheart? Tell me a little bit of that story.

PS: Yes, I did. We did. We were kids that fell in love when we were thirteen or so. Our parents, like anybody else, said, "My goodness, wait a second. These two are feeling like this? This is not good. They are too young." Which we were. They kind of blocked our connection, divided us against our will, if you can say that. At that point, I was getting the scholarship to come here and her father got a job in Brazil. We wrote letters, but we didn't know where to write because we didn't know where we were at. There was no – I didn't have an email. There wasn't even email back then, I don't think. No, there wasn't, no. And of course, no social media so you couldn't connect. Twenty-three years later, without having any contact, she saw an article in a newspaper somebody posted. Social media – I keep up with, but there are other people who do that for me, which is totally fine, but you've got to get this. Just do it. The first thing they got was a Twitter account for me. I should just make it private, whatever it is. There was a newspaper article that had a big picture of me, and it had my Twitter account. I guess that was seen through Facebook or Instagram or something. Two minutes later after she saw it, she reached out to me on social media on – what's it called? – Twitter. I remember the person said, "Hey, you've got a message from someone on Twitter." I saw who it was. After twenty-three

years of not a call because we didn't know where to call. Email, I didn't have any social media, she had no idea where I was at. I had no idea where she was at. That's pretty remarkable. We are very happy together. We have been together since then.

BC : Thanks for listening to Mid-Americana. And a special thanks to Pavel for sharing his story and also his song, Pa'Lante. You can listen to more of his music by searching for Pavel & Direct Contact on your favorite streaming service. That's Pavel, P-A-V-E-L. You can find video of their performances and follow the band through their Facebook page, Pavel & Direct Contact. Just a few weeks ago, they recorded another new collaboration with musicians in the Dominican Republic, which you can find there.

Next time on Mid-Americana, Josh speaks with Zoe Bouras, who's with the Immigration Project in Bloomington, Illinois. Zoe immigrated with her mother from northern England to rural Illinois when she was eight years old. She had to redefine herself again while studying abroad in high school and graduate school, when her hosts in Peru and even her native England assumed she was American. Zoe thinks of herself now as a Midwesterner, but it was only this year – while working as an AmeriCorps VISTA with the Immigration Project – that she began her own path to American citizenship.

You can find transcripts and show notes for this, and all our episodes, on our website, midamericana.com, which also features original illustrations for each episode by artist Mathew Kelly. The show notes for this episode include links to learn more about Pavel's work in Richmond, Indiana and the DR, plus links to books and podcasts with lots more about the history of Gennett Records.

If you like our show, please recommend us to your friends and rate and review us wherever you listen to podcasts. Pavel Polanco-Safadit's story was produced by me and Josh Dolezal, and edited by Brad Linder, with production assistance from David Barasoain. The theme music for Mid-Americana was written and produced by Adam Bruce. Mid-Americana is supported by Central College, Humanities Iowa, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Thoughts aired on our show do not necessarily represent the views of Central College, Humanities Iowa, or the National Endowment for the Humanities.