

STICK TO YOUR ROOTS

Guest: Pavel Polanco-Safadit

Location: Des Moines, IA and Indianapolis, IN

Interviewer: Brian Campbell

Date: July 31, 2020

BC: Pronounce your name for me just so I have that correct.

PS: It's Pavel [last name].

BC: Is there any story to your name at all?

PS: There is one. It's kind of embarrassing, but I do have one. My mom was about like 12 or so, 13, and she used to watch, not watch, but listen to a soap opera on the radio. On that soap opera, there was a gypsy violinist called Pavel. She said, "Oh, well, I have a kid. I'm going to name him Pavel." That's my story.

BC: I was curious because Pavel doesn't sound like a common Dominican name.

PS: No, not at all. Then I turned out to be a musician.

BC: There you go.

PS: How weird is that?

BC: Tell me a little bit about the place you grew up.

PS: San Francisco de Macoris, Dominican Republic. Small town with a lot of people. Size small. 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 resources for things you want to do. Is that kind of okay?

BC: Yeah. Definitely. One of the things you mentioned straight away was the sounds that you remember from that place, from your childhood. What kind of music and sounds were around you as a kid?

PS: I pay close attention to sounds in general, but besides the neighbors, whatever they were talking about, and I'm sure they could hear all us too, it was like music. 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 they were so dance group, 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 window, 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: Did you know people who were professional musicians? Did you go to live performances, things like that?

PS: When I was growing up, there wasn't an age requirement to go. I went everywhere. With my father, with my family, yes. We did have a couple of people who were professional musicians in the pop era. We went to see them once in a while.

BC: Tell me more about your family then, your parents and your family when you were growing up.

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 things comes around. He never got back in touch with his old family. Isn't that crazy?

BC: That is crazy. Is that common, to have families with Lebanese background in your community?

PS: Yeah, but right now in the Dominican Republic there is a lot of mixes in there. A lot of Chinese people, Japanese, people from the Middle East, Americans. There is a lot of cultures there. There are people that look Japanese. Head to toes. They don't know a word in Japan. If you ask them, it's "Yeah, I'm Dominican." His parents were Japanese, and they moved there. Or grandparents. You see that a lot there.

BC: Even as a kid and in your family, do you remember encountering that mix of cultures, music, food, other cultures?

PS: Yes. For sure. Usually we say oh, everybody who owned a jewelry store is from China when I was growing up. Still, I would be surprised if it's not quite that way. I'm talking about San Francisco de Macorís, my hometown in the Dominican Republic. I would be surprised if it's not

that way right now. My family is very down to earth. My mom was going to med school when I was growing up. My uncle also was going to med school. My father was working a lot. He was a mechanic. We were very tight, a tight family. We're very close, everybody. Especially for my grandfather's side. We were all very close. My grandfather made sure he had an eye for everybody. They still kind of do. They can't move too much now. You pretty much have to go by them if you wanted to go out. That was including my parents. If they say no, we're going to the ocean, nobody went.

BC: Were you all in one household together and they were the clear heads of the house?

PS: No, actually. 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 saw it. 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*, with a seventy on the front of it. We went there. I hop on the motorcycle – it was green, by the way. Have you seen a green motorcycle before, Brian?

BC: I'm sure I have, but it sounds like this one was memorable.

PS: It was. 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.

BC: It struck you right away, you enjoyed that sound?

PS: 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 that 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: Every morning, he woke you up, and that was your –

PS: It was seven days a week.

BC: Did you know right away you would do it every day, or did you say let's do this again tomorrow?

PS: I knew every day. I knew it, that we were going to do this. Then I was thirteen, and I was playing closers within a year. People were showing up to the concerts. Then they hired me to teach. I was fourteen years old.

BC: You were teaching lessons even back then.

PS: I was so young. I had students anywhere from seven to like sixty-five. 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.

BC: You must have found a piano you could use for teaching lessons.

PS: At that point we had three pianos because they ordered more after a year. Somebody donated some from the US. They shipped it there. There were more pianos. It was easier than just one. I was teaching right away. When I was like around fifteen or so, this was nuts. I used to help the missionary. He even got married to a Dominican person and they had some kids. He was gone for like a year because the missionaries have to go back to the United States to raise money again. For three years or so or whatever those years are, the people come in and say they're going to send you this much every month. They send it to the church members. They have to visit many churches in many states. We wrote a lot of letters and we helped him out a lot with that. At that point, there was some people teaching there and some people teaching English because it was an English academy. 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: You must have enjoyed it. You're still teaching and performing to this day.

PS: I am. I am.

BC: What kind of music did you play 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.

BC: So, it sounds like your family was very supportive, especially your grandfather, put in a lot of hours.

PS: They are. They are. My brothers, my family, they're doctors. And I did go to medicine for about a year or so in school. I enjoyed medicine, I enjoyed watching it. I enjoyed seeing

operations. Most of my good friends are doctors, even here in the United States. I love the human body. I love watching things like that. I said, you guys have more fun when you come and watch me.

BC: When did you feel there was a real possibility music could be a career?

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,” Now he goes to Northwestern; he teaches there. He said, “Just come and play for him. See what he says. He wants to listen. He might come 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.” that’s what I did. I went back, quit college at sixteen. I had a life before I was an adult. So many things happening. 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. There comes [professor name.] He listens to a few students. He listens to me. Maybe 80 or so. He talked to my teacher and they both sat with me and said he wants to take me in.

BC: Wow. Do you remember what you played for that audition?

PS: Yes, I think I played a few things. I played “A Revolutionary” by Chopin, and then I played “Sonata” by Mozart. The one in A minor. Those two things. But then he taught me more lessons after that. Then they talked to my parents. It was worth it. If I would never have taken that chance, Brian, if I had taken that chance of quitting what I was doing, seeing something different ahead, believing in it and trusting people around – that’s a lot of tough decisions for a sixteen year old, or for anybody. And you know what, right now, if someone asked me, I would have done it all over again, even if I wouldn’t know. Going back to sound singing, if you sit down and think about it and listen, you know. You know. You just have to slow down and listen. Listen to yourself. Listen to what’s happening around you. Listen to where you’re at. Based on that and what you think is the right thing for you, then you make a decision. I just listened.

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 dreams. That's exactly what I thought. There's a lot of opportunities there. A lot of resources. It's a developed country.

BC: Did you know other people who had moved to the US or did you have any other connections?

PS: For music, no. 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: What do you remember about that trip? 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 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 to first. I get on the plane, up in the air, I think all of us remember being up in the air at some point in our lives. I was up in the air this morning. 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, both hands. 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: Your first introduction to the US. Then you went to the University of Arkansas, is that right?

PS: Yeah. Beautiful town in the mountains. Really nice people. There everybody stops and says hi. Small town feel. I was there. I stayed there actually with a long time friend of my parents. She happened to be living there. We met them through my teacher too because he used to live there. My goodness, she treated me like a son for so many years. She still comes to visit. I still go there. She's a lot older now. She has been amazing my entire life. That's it. That was my introduction to the whole thing.

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: You got to have a lot more instruction in piano and music though, and that was your dream.

PS: I still had to pass math. Biology, chemistry. Literature. I still have to pass those classes.

BC: Right.

PS: I did. I did it with a great GPA too. My goodness, I had to work my butt off. I think that's when I began – I get three to four hours of sleep. I think that's when it began. That's when I broke my habit. Take it back – when I was practicing at 2:30 in the morning when I was twelve. I don't sleep very much. I didn't. I haven't. I haven't been able to.

BC: It's clear you've got a lot of energy from the way you perform. You're able to operate with less sleep than most.

PS: I think so.

BC: I understand that in addition to playing piano at the University of Arkansas, you also played some basketball. Tell me about that.

PS: 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 because 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. Play with some of the racerback people. Some of the players. Funny though, when they were practicing, I was there practicing. I was friends with one of the team members. You know who Joe Johnson is? And Jannero Pargo? That's when they were there in Arkansas. They went to play in the NBA. Joe Johnson is one of the best shooting stars, he was for many years. I think he retired now, or he's still playing. I have a basketball hoop at home. I play with my daughter there. I dunk on her. She's twelve. She's a good shooter. Basketball is my favorite sport to watch. I know the NBA in and out, from players, everyone, to coaches, assistant coaches. Honors. That's probably my hobby. That's my hobby. I love the commentaries.

BC: That's fun. I know there's a handful of Dominicans who've made it in the NBA, but it seems like baseball is much more popular.

PS: Yes, baseball, oh my goodness. I cannot hit a ball to save my life. I went to a batting cage one time. Whew. That, yeah, that was difficult. Baseball is the sport of the Dominican.

BC: After the University of Arkansas you decided to continue studying music.

PS: I did. When I was at the University of Arkansas, I hung out more with the professors than the students. I had more professors as friends than students. They even invited me to when they had something at their house. I love getting those tags so I can park closer to the building. Faculty parking. There was one of them, he said, "I'm getting another job in Kentucky." I was finishing. It was my senior year. I was applying to some schools. He said, "Why don't you come with me? And you teach and get your degree. You'll be my assistant." That sounds good. So that's what I did. I listened to him, once again, and that's what I did. I got another basketball world in Lexington. I went there and finished my degree and applied to do a doctorate in Wisconsin. One of my teachers knew somebody there. I applied to other places too. I just kept going north for some reason. I went to Wisconsin. After that, I moved to New York for a little bit. Went to England, also at the same time. Worked in there. Did some things in there. Moved to New York. I played with things like that there. Then I moved here. To Indianapolis. I've been in Indianapolis since '10. Now I travel many places. Indianapolis is the longest place I have ever lived in. The longest one. Can you imagine?

BC: Yeah. Academic life.

PS: Academic life, right?

BC: You mentioned you kept moving north, moved to Wisconsin. You were there for several years. That must have been your first experience living in the Midwest.

PS: Yes.

BC: As an immigrant who'd been in the US for several years, do you feel like you had a sense of some of those regional differences? What was it like moving from the south to Wisconsin?

PS: The south, the accents are different. They were different. Obviously, right. That was a little different because I was used to my southern hang-a-left and hang-a-right type of stuff in the community, to take a turn. Go left. The only thing is like in Wisconsin, people had less time. In Arkansas in the community, the people were wonderful, but I think it was the area that I was in. When I was there, they said the average person has a Master's degree. That was in Madison, Wisconsin. It was another level of things. It was a big university too. Huge. Bigger than Arkansas. A lot bigger than Arkansas. More than twice. More demands, for sure. Less time to do anything.

BC: How did you adapt to the Wisconsin winters having come from a place where the windows were open all year round?

PS: I know, right? Oh my. 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: Did you ever try some kind of stereotypical Midwest things? Maybe it wasn't ice fishing, but other things you remember experiencing?

PS: Like what would that be, let me think. That was a long time ago. I tried ice fishing, but not in the middle of it. Skiing. Cross country skiing. I got pretty good at it. I even went to Colorado a few times to ski. I was okay doing that. That was good. What would be some of...?

BC: I don't even know. That's what I was trying to think. How did you wind up in Indiana?

PS: Just a job. Opened up and I came here. I stayed here. I stayed. I'm not moving. I'm not moving. I've moved so many times in my life. At this point, maybe if there's \$5 million on the table I can think about it. I'm kidding, but.

BC: Do you remember there was a time you realized you were going to stay in the US or a time when you thought about going back to the Dominican Republic?

PS: When I was here doing my undergrad, I never thought I was going to go back to the DR because they didn't have what I wanted from the beginning. They didn't have the resources, they didn't have what I wanted to do. I knew at that point there was not a choice. I was applying and I did get accepted at Bamberg University in Germany. Didn't end up going, but they were interested in having me there. I never thought I was going back to the DR. I thought I was going to go to Europe more. That didn't happen for many reasons. I ended up staying here. I knew I was going to end up around here because I wanted to do that and I don't know what I was going to do with my degrees that I was getting in the Dominican Republic at that point.

BC: Through all this time, how was your music evolving? The kinds of things you were learning, the kinds of music you were playing, teaching, performing?

PS: The music, as for now, I don't play classical anymore. I could, but I don't. People don't call me for classical music. More Latin jazz. There was someone when I was in Arkansas, his name was John, 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. He died. 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. That stuck with me, Brian.

BC: Did you have some teachers, some mentors, who reconnected you with those roots? Were there some Latin jazz musicians that you played with over the years?

PS: Yes, people who know and teach it – this is the difference for me. For classical music, just certain people could do it. When you go and do this jazz or Latin jazz now, they have it more in the academic setting and things like that. More jazz than Latin jazz of course. But you learn on the street. You learn from other people. It was passed to me orally. Just like that. It’s the way you do that. Then you learn and you become your own, and you have your own ways of doing things. Doing it different. Having your own language. My music evolved, and people taught me, and people are still teaching me. You still learn from people. I’ll worry when I don’t learn anymore but I still see somebody doing something different. You follow. They go like, “Hey, what are you doing here? This is pretty cool.” You stalk. There’s not a competition at all. No competition.

BC: I’ve heard you describe music as universal language, so it sounds like you’ve travelled and played with all different kinds of people, and music has been a really important way you’ve been able to build those bridges and connect with all different sorts of people.

PS: Mmhmm. That’s correct, yeah.

BC: Even in places like Indiana, you’ve been able to find communities of jazz musicians and even Latin jazz musicians to play with?

PS: Oh yeah. I would say yes. When I play it’s pretty much packed. There’s a big scene in Indianapolis for that. Big scene for that.

BC: Was that always the case? Did you know that before you moved there or was that a surprise?

PS: That was a surprise. I didn’t know that. 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. They have other places of course, smaller. It’s definitely a jazz scene. The first recordings of jazz was done in Indiana. Every famous jazz player went to Richmond, Indiana to record. You name it. Ella Fitzgerald, you name it. Everyone. Then we have the Jazz Avenue. Indiana has been a jazz site for many, many years.

BC: That must be surprising to a lot of people. People think of maybe New Orleans or – Indiana seems like not famous for its musical history always. Maybe more basketball or corn or something.

PS: Some of the most famous jazz musicians were born here. A few of them.

BC: There's some who migrated there.

PS: That's right. There's some that migrated here.

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.

PS: And you also set the tone for the other musicians. I always say you make the money practicing, not on the performance.

BC: So, you've been playing for quite a few years with a particular group, Direct Current, right?

PS: Direct Contact.

BC: Direct Contact, sorry. How did that group come to be? And tell me about the name too, what's behind that?

PS: The name – when I got here, a couple of people wanted me to play. They called my agent at that point, and I said, sure I'll do it. I was playing a lot out of Indiana. I was traveling quite a bit. I said okay, let me see what's happening here. This was the only way I could find out what's up. Let me see. I found a couple of players that were really, really, really good. They said, "Oh, we need to meet!" We met, and I wanted to begin a group here in town and we could do some things. They said, "We'd love to!" 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. When I travel, I travel alone and they get professional players from the places I go. I have been doing this for a long time now that I really know the players in other places. Because it's cheaper that way. It's cheaper to fly me, to pay me, to get a hotel for me, to pay for the food, than it is for a few people.

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. I always say if you've got the heart in the right place, that's all it takes. This community changes a little bit, but we know it's fine. When you go to the sectors of non-profits and people that help in all of this, professionals that go from place to place, that hardly changes. You see the same people everywhere for years. That hardly changes. When you go to a Latin club, every three to five years you see a different crowd.

BC: Why do you think that is?

PS: I think for the part of the club, it's because people get older, they get married, they've got responsibilities. Now they cannot be every week at this place. That's why people go to a club, they've got time. Everybody knows each other. People get married. You've got your fans that come and are always there, but when you play for the dance crowd, if it's the Latin jazz crowd, they're all the same for the most part. When it's the dancing crowd, that changes. Three years, four years, who are these people? I've never seen them in my life. It's interesting, socially, but I think it's just the response. They're younger. They move sometimes. They go someplace. There's a lot of factors that can affect that.

BC: You mentioned the non-profits that helped to support Latinos. It sounds like you've been pretty involved in Indianapolis in some of that, but I also know you lead the Amigos Latino Enrichment Center in Richmond. How'd you get involved with that non-profit work?

PS: Well, it was [coughs]. I'm sorry, I'll get some water here.

BC: We can pause.

PS: Let's pause for a second. Let me get some more water here. Okay, I'm back, Brian.

BC: Okay. It's been more than an hour, so it's good to take a break between sets, right?

PS: [Laughs]. 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. And now I worked in the infrastructure of it, and I organized not only the finances, but getting people in the right places to do what they know and just having a lot of directions and giving a lot of directions. 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. Ethic work. 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. I have seen a heart in an operation room with my uncle who is a cardiologist. That was amazing. Wow. That's what keeps us alive.

[Laughs]. One organ, basically. It's a combination of many things, but if that stops, everything stops. 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. 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 through the Tennis Association in Indianapolis but held in Richmond. Sometimes 35 kids, sometimes 60 kids. That's under the health pillar. Amigos has two pillars: health and education. 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: I believe it's important everywhere, right? Every Latino organization, you have one, and you are teaching English, people that need it – those are the students, the families, the participants, that need the service. And you can talk about them many times, but having an event like that, the sponsors, the organizations, the companies that support the Latino organization, Amigos or whoever that would be, they get to experience that a little bit. Not only to hear about it, but they see the food of that country. Dancing to the music of that country. Learning how to dance. People teach. Amigos has a person that teaches right before the dinner begins in the cocktail hour how to dance to the music of the particular culture that we're going to highlight. It's a cultural event. Especially in a place like Richmond, Indiana. When we begin that, 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. Step by step.

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, it's incredible. It is the largest, and this is the third year of it.

BC: I saw you even had to have an online version of Argentinian culture.

PS: Yup.

BC: And you mentioned it's been important as part of those events to build trust, built relationships with local police. Tell me more about that.

PS: Local police or funders or people from the community. When a Latino person walks in, sometimes for the Latinos if they don't know English, they feel very shy to say anything. To know someone, like oh I saw him at the thing! And even if you don't understand what's happening, there's smiles going across the room and saying hi, something. 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.

BC: It sounds like you said Indianapolis is an international city in some ways, it's cosmopolitan, immigrants are visible whether it's restaurants or music or other things, but maybe there's some differences in a place like Richmond. How do those two cities compare in terms of what it would be like to be a Latino in the Midwest?

PS: Somebody asked me the same question during a meeting earlier this morning. You know really well Indianapolis and you know very well Richmond, and of course you know the Latino community and what's going on in Indianapolis, what's the difference with the Latinos. With the Latinos, the same program in one place is the same program in the other one. It's the same. The only difference is the bigger city has more resources. More opportunities. It's the same need. The same thing. It's just the resources are different, and there are more people doing things. It's still a challenge, let me tell you that much. Not as big of a challenge, but it's still a challenge.

BC: One of the things I imagine has been a challenge there has been across the country is the COVID-19 pandemic. It has really hit hard in communities of color, especially including Latino communities. What have you seen in your work in Richmond and with Amigos?

PS: There was, across the entire state, most of the families either in Indianapolis and Richmond, most of the families who didn't need help usually worked in restaurants, they have part jobs, those kinds of jobs which they are not able to work, of course. That's when the

institutions have to stand up and you get foot boxes to them. People help you out. To be honest with you, usually in a pandemic like this, a non-profit does better because there's a lot of help coming in. People know that families need help because they got laid off. On top of that, they have their kids at home taking online classes which the schools were not ready to do. On top of that, they have problems with, do they have a computer? Because it was Thursday and now Friday we're doing this. Do they have a computer? What about wifi? What about those families that don't have wifi? It's not like you can go to a library and do it because they were closed. There's a lot of challenges that go into making a change like that. Of course there was no other way to do it. What about the social emotional growth of the whole family? How do you treat that? Suddenly, no jobs. Struggling. Kids at school struggling with classes at home, not learning as much. Not having that social contact with their friends and trying to take classes online that honestly have not been very successful. How do you deal with all of that? There's some social emotional learning that goes into that. How can you be compassionate? Being compassionate is not a problem, and everybody was compassionate about the situation. But my goodness, the families, I heard things of many different places and organizations because I look at the thing across the globe, all the non-profit organizations, it can be Latino, the Latino organizations in Richmond, Indianapolis, [phone briefly rings], across everything. Sorry, that was my daughter. This has been a humongous challenge that we are going to see the results of in education later on. We're going to see the impact of this later on. What we can do is still give the help that the Latino community needs momentarily, but... Positive ways, at least there is help there. They're being offered and they're there and they take it from everything. It's good. On a positive end, at least there is help in there to help them get through. There is something there to help them get through.

BC: I saw that you recently wrote and released a new song in response to this pandemic honoring health workers and first responders.

PS: Yes. Yeah. I'm very close to the TV stations in Indianapolis, in the news. I got approached by the president of one of the stations, a few TV show hosts. They said, "You need to write something." I had a song in mind. I didn't know what it was going to be like. Just one line. I said this is weird. It's not a love song, it's not a sad song. What is it? It was in my mind. I went like, "Oh, this is it." And I did. I wrote it. Did you listen to it?

BC: Yes.

PS: I wrote the lyrics. I wrote the horns and everything else. I called my group, my band, I said, "Let's do it." We went to the recording studios. That's where we usually do everything. We work together with them. We did it. We came with a video just to help first responders, healthcare workers, doctors and nurses. The whole community.

BC: Have you been able to play together some as a group in the midst of all this?

PS: We have virtually. We have done a few concerts virtually, yeah. We did one with some from the DR, like a twenty minute concert. That has like close to 30,000 views. We have done some

things. We're planning to do more. The concerts virtually have gotten a lot shorter, which is good.

BC: I imagine it's hard to make a living as a musician when the venues are closed and all the concerts are just streamed online.

PS: Oh, yeah. Music has just gotten hit so bad during this time. By the way, Brian, when my daughter called, the voicemail was stopped and I just began again. I forgot that little bit.

BC: Okay. It looks like it's recording great online. The very beginning when we first started talking, there was some interruption I saw, so maybe the voice memo will be more important for that, but I think it's okay.

PS: Okay. I can send you the first part.

BC: So you mentioned you recently did this virtual concert with some musicians in the Dominican Republic.

PS: Yup.

BC: How have you maintained those connections with the DR over these years whether it's with your family or your musical roots there?

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. We connect them. The conservatory there is very strict. They take like 48 or 60, something like that, per year. Students. You see so many of our students because they're involved teaching them during this camp. They stay connected. We have seen more and more of our students in the university and conservatory starting a degree in music. This year, I talked to Bill because Bill is in health too, he's a very good jazz pianist. He has a degree in piano too. Including this year, art therapies, which is health and music. There is none in the DR. We're including that this year. We have been in contact with some professors that teach that in Indianapolis as well as organizations who have people in places. For example, this lady in Argentina is in charge of all Latin American. She has

a German name. I've never met her before. She lives in Argentina, all Latin America art therapies. They're very organized actually. She wants to write something for the United Nations about this. I give concerts in the DR. That's how I stay connected. Every year I give a concert, every year.

BC: Am I correct that you've given some scholarships to Dominican musicians to come to Earlham, is that right?

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: You think things like WhatsApp have changed the experience of immigration pretty dramatically?

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. We have been together since then. 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.

BC: Pretty amazing story.

PS: Twenty-three years.

BC: And she’s moving to be close to you soon, is that right?

PS: Yeah, that’s the hope. That’s the hope.

BC: Pretty amazing.

PS: Yes. We’re very happy together. That’s for sure.

BC: Are there other things that you want to talk about or things I should ask about?

PS: No. You know my life better than anyone else. [Laughs]

BC: I guess so. I’ll have one of my undergrads transcribe all of this and she’ll spend hours with this story. She’ll especially laugh at this part, I guess. Are there things that are coming up for you that you’d want me to include? Either albums I could mention or are there particular songs that you think would be – if I’m going to include some music? Things like that that you’d want me to integrate?

PS: Just anything from my repertoire. Anything.

BC: Do you have some favorites? Or least favorites?

PS: Anything you like that you think would go with it, that’d be fine.

BC: Okay.

PS: Yeah.

BC: And I can figure out if there’s any kinds of permissions and we can touch base about that.

PS: If you record it with me because when people use my stuff – if it's something original from me, you can check like which of these three would be best.

BC: Okay.

PS: And usually if it's other songs I've made arrangements of, then that's a different deal but if it's something I wrote, then you're free to do it as you wish because I've already been through this with producers and everybody else.

BC: Yeah, I'm sure.

PS: If you can send three, just text me. I'm quicker at text. There wouldn't be any restrictions on that.

BC: Okay. Well then I'll stop the recording and we can chat for just a minute while it uploads, if that works.