

Mike Freeman Biography

From Omaha, to Chicago, to Hell's Kitchen NYC, Mike Freeman is the vibesman behind several notable groups and leader of ZonaVibe.

With spirited soulful swing rooted in Afro-Cuban clave, Freeman creates a distinct brand of **mambo and salsa infused jazz**. Dee Dee McNeil of Making A Scene says, "His original compositions entice me to the dance floor. Mike Freeman's melodies are beautiful and catchy." Freeman's music is born from his background as a drummer and percussionist in his youth along with decades performing and recording extensively with high profile Latinjazz and salsa groups in every borough of New York City, most often the Bronx and Spanish Harlem.

Freeman's performances have taken him from North America and Europe to the Azores, Caribbean, and South America. His recordings of original music have received national and international attention with outstanding reviews, radio airplay charting on jazz, contemporary jazz, and World Music radio, and airing on nationally syndicated radio shows (Latin Perspective with Tony Vasquez, Jazz after Hours with Jim Wilke, The Jazz Show with David Sanborn, WOR radio network with Joey Reynolds, Music Choice, and United Airlines).

Freeman moved to a ground floor apartment on **Ninth Avenue in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen** neighborhood during the middle of the crack epidemic of the 1980's. The neighborhood was rough and not a desirable place to live at the time, but for adventurous creative people who lived there it was an affordable place to create and exchanged ideas. The area has undergone a dramatic transformation since then and Freeman has now become a keeper of neighborhood history and an advocate for musicians on local issues.

Freeman is a **Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) Creative Engagement grant recipient** for Hell's Kitchen Vibe-Centric; Boricua Blues; Hell's Kitchen Soul Sauce; and Latin Music in Hell's Kitchen. Performances included legendary guests Ray Mantilla and Jose Mangual Jr. at the Times Center, Highline, Pier 84, Bella Abzug Park, Riverbank State Park, and Dimenna Center in NYC. The concert productions highlighted the once-thriving Latin music record businesses that dotted the landscape in Hell's Kitchen, music of high profile groups Freeman has been a part of, the tradition of vibraphone in Latin music, and his original music born from that tradition.

Commissioned work includes a decade-long series of compositions and arrangements for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Percussion Scholarship Program and arrangements for a national percussion curriculum for China that were performed by members of the Shanghai Symphony at Shanghai Symphony Hall.

Freeman is also known for his work and recordings with several acclaimed groups including the legendary Ray Mantilla, Jose Mangual Jr's Son Boricua with Jimmy Sabater (an architect of boogaloo), Lucho Cueto's All-star Black Sugar, Julio Salgado, and Willie Villegas' Joe Cuba Sextet.

Early Years

Born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska, Mike Freeman started learning drums at age five and began playing professionally at age thirteen. At twelve, he began playing the vibraphone, and by fifteen, he was a percussionist for the Omaha Symphony under conductor Thomas Briccetti. During his last year of high school, he began traveling to Chicago to study with renowned percussionist and veteran studio musician Bobby Christian. He graduated DePaul University with a Bachelor of Music in composition with high honors in 1981. In New York, where he's lived and worked since, he studied with composer/arranger Hale Rood (who wrote for Louie Bellson).

Family music: Freeman's grandfather was a drummer and leader of Ron Freeman and the Melody Masters, a popular band that was heard on the radio in the Midwest. Neal Hefti played in his band before becoming famous in California. Freeman's paternal grandmother sang and played the organ and marimba. His maternal grandmother was a talented piano player in her youth. His father, Harry Freeman, worked his way through college playing the saxophone and clarinet.