



May 30, 2004-----

MILWAUKEE, Wis.--Paul Cebal has traveled all over the world in the pursuit of music. He just finished making field recordings in Mexico City. He played a battered nylon string guitar in Havana. He opened for Nick Lowe in London.

But his soul has never left his native Milwaukee.

Cebal is the bandleader of Paul Cebal and the Milwaukeeans, who formed in 1986 as an offshoot of Milwaukee's R&B Cadets. Cebal, 47, has since been a staple of the club scene in Chicago, Milwaukee and Minneapolis. Few people understand what makes Milwaukee famous better than this adventurous native son.

I've always liked Milwaukee because of the late 1950s "Laverne and Shirley" texture of the city. Milwaukee is a treasure trove of funky bookstores, used record stores, vintage clothing shops, neighborhood bars and old world restaurants. I asked Cebal how the city retains its retro qualities. "We don't have enough money to rip it all down," he cracked during a daylong tour. "It's a working class town. It can't quite put on airs, it's a down-to-earth situation here."

Any given day begins at Cebal's apartment in the East Town neighborhood, several blocks northeast of downtown. His nine-room, fourth floor apartment is packed with 14,000 albums, 2,000 45s, hundreds of music books and several guitars. "A place like this (circa 1906) becomes a bargain because of walk-up status," Cebal cracked. "Eight flights of stairs."

One entire room is lined with African, Brazilian, Latin and gospel albums. Another huge section is devoted to jazz. Across the way, a reggae and calypso vinyl library is evenly divided. Boxes of Stax-Volt and New Orleans rhythm and blues 45s rest atop a bookshelf. A nearby coffee table has rare Cuban video dance tapes Cebal unearthed in Miami. A Regal resonator guitar (circa 1930s-40s) leans against the record library. Cebal found the precious instrument at Wade's Guitar Shop, 3490 N. Oakland Ave (414-961-0848).

Fortunately--or unfortunately--Cebal lives a block away from Musical Memories, 833 E. Kilbourn, (414-271-0666), a place jammed to a Wisconsin walleye's gills with 200,000 45s, 150,000 LPs, old cassettes and sports memorabilia. Musical Memories also has the best collection of 45 carrying cases this side of the Kane County Flea Market.

Cebal and I picked up two copies of "Wisconsin Grooves, Vol. 2," a 28-song Milwaukee CD soul compilation with wonderful one-hit wonders like "A Man Ain't Nothing Until a Woman Takes His Name" by Marvell and the Blue Match. "And Harvey (Scales) singles are

tremendous and you never can find them," Cebar said as he cited Scales dance numbers like "Get Down."

Sometimes I'm reluctant to disclose the deepest of road secrets in the fear they will get overly discovered, but Cebar knows of the Park East Hotel, 916 E. State (414-276-8800), a dandy place in his neighborhood, walking distance from Lake Michigan. "A lot of musicians stay there," he said. "And the Plaza Hotel (1007 N. Cass, 414-276-2101) is in East Town. They have a good diner (Cafe At the Plaza) there."

Cebar also lives near Brady Street, a gentrified Italian neighborhood of small grocery stores and corner bars that has touches of San Francisco's North Beach. Glorioso's is a deli and grocery store at 1020 E. Brady (414-272-0540) that offers superb muffalatas and Italian sausage sandwiches. Joseph, Ed and Ted Gloriosio opened the grocery store in 1946. The restaurant followed in the 1960s. Cebar said, "Actually, the family of (late San Francisco Mayor Joseph) Alioto lived here. That gang from Sicily came here and to New York, Chicago."

From his dance pad, Cebar regularly walks over to the breathtaking Milwaukee Art Museum (MAM), 700 N. Art Museum Dr. (414-224-3220). He is a member, and I know this because he dug out his membership card to help me get a discount in the museum gift shop. Time magazine named MAM's addition, designed by Santiago Calatrava, "Best Design of 2001." The addition features a moveable, winglike sunscreen on the roof. Cebar is proud of the museum. "It's an oddly meditative place," he said as he walked around the museum, filled with natural light. "I come here a lot. It's like our city pet. In the summer, you stand outside on the lawn and you feel like you're nuzzling up against some big elephant."

The Milwaukee Art Museum has more than 20,000 works. The collections of American decorative arts, German Expressionism, folk and Haitian art and American art after 1960 are among the nation's best. Cebar likes to goof around sculptor Duane Hanson's "Janitor," (circa 1973), a profoundly realistic figure made from polyester and cast fiberglass. This is when he thinks of the 1972 Betty Wright hit "Clean Up Woman."

After leaving East Town, we drove three miles south through the Third Ward, Walker's Point, (named after George Walker, one of the city's first mayors) to the up-and-coming Bay View neighborhood. Picture Chicago's Lincoln Square adjacent to Lake Michigan.

Cebar drove his new blue Chevy Van while playing some of his works in progress, such as ambient recordings he made with a (Cuban) marimbua recorded on a cheap tape recorder. In a Milwaukee studio, Cebar later added tambourine, maracas and guitar to create a Middle Eastern/Caribbean sound. He also contributed the Tams hit "Untie Me" to an upcoming Joe South tribute album that includes Chicago soul legend Otis Clay and vocalist Kelly Hogan.

Another favorite Cebar stop is the Walker Point Antique Center, 1134 S. 1st (414-383-3036). "It's underneath the Allen-Bradley clock (now Rockwell Automation)," Cebar said. "The largest FOUR-SIDED clock in the world--at least it was when we were kids it still holds the record. It was also known as 'The Polish Moon'." At night, each of the 40-foot wide, 12-ton clocks are illuminated. Cebar laughed and repeated, 'FOUR-SIDED.' They had to qualify it. That's a Milwaukee kind of distinction."

Cebar and his band rehearse in Bay View and the neighborhood is the home of Cafe LuLu, 2265 S. Howell (414-294-5858), one of Cebar's favorite restaurants. The cafe is in the distant shadow of St. Josaphat Basilica, 2333 S. 6th (414-645-5623). Cebar looked at the church and said, "It was an old post office building they brought up piece by piece from Chicago." This is when I began to realize Cebar was more than a tour guide. He is a vital part of this city's everyday fabric.

Cafe LuLu was a good place to have Cebar sit down and dig into his roots, which are quintessential Milwaukee. His parents Anthony and Dorothy Cebar are retired schoolteachers. Anthony grew up in West Allis, not far from the old County Stadium. Anthony's father was a factory worker from Croatia. Dorothy was reared in the industrial valley of Milwaukee. Her mother was from Czechoslovakia and her father came to Milwaukee from Austria. Cebar has a younger sister, Mary, who is a Head Start teacher in Milwaukee.

Cebar started playing guitar when he was 17. He attended New College in Sarasota, Fla., where he earned a degree in humanities with an emphasis on musicology. He wrote "The Blues What Am," a thesis about 1940s bandleader Louis Jordan and the split between art and dance music. Cebar said there wasn't a tremendous amount of music around the house growing up and the Ed Sullivan television show blew the doors open for rock 'n' roll music as it did in the mid-1960s for kids from Milwaukee to Manitoba.

"But Dad was an AV (audio visual) Man at his school," Cebar said. "So he'd bring home turntables and fix them. He'd bring me transistor radios. I tried to listen to crystal radio. I got hooked. I'd be down in the basement listening to Barney Pip (on WCFL-AM out of Chicago). At night, we'd get WLAC (out of Nashville)."

Cebar's earliest memories of hearing live music in Milwaukee is the Lakefront Festival of the Arts at the Milwaukee Art Museum. "It was a way for city kids to mingle with rich kids," he said. "It was idyllic. It was jazz-oriented in my youth. I saw Red Norvell and Helen Humes. The Wild Magnolias came (from New Orleans). I was barely in my teens. You know (the Magnolias tune) 'Big Chief's Got a Golden Crown'? I had that in my head for years. Summerfest has been around for 30 something years. I remember seeing Dr. John there in the getup with glitter and the whole deal."

The Milwaukee music club scene has become more scattered since Cebal broke out of the coffeehouse circuit in 1976. "Now there's smaller clubs in different neighborhoods," he said. "There's nice theater venues. The Pabst Theater (144 E. Wells, 414-286-3663) has been restored and it's a beautiful place to play at. They reconfigured the (old Milwaukee) Arena and Auditorium and that's the Milwaukee Theatre now. There's all this housing going up in the downtown area, it's hard to say what's going to happen."

Cebal named his band after Milwaukee while playing a show in the trendy SoHo section of New York City. "I thought to just own up," Cebal said. "All the names were so great back then. The Del Byzantines were playing. You couldn't top it. Milwaukee means 'gathering place of the waters,' although one year someone wrote it meant more like 'sinkhole' to Native Americans."

Cebal and the Milwaukeeans are a staple at the 300-seat Shank Hall, 1434 N. Farwell Ave. (414-276-7288, www.shankhall.com). "When I started hitting clubs that was called Teddy's," he said. "I remember the week I got my ID, they had Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee on Tuesday, (Charlie) Mingus on Wednesday and Howlin' Wolf on Thursday. I only had enough money for one show. I went to Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. I never saw Mingus or Howlin' Wolf. I have to say it's not like that right now. But it's not like that anywhere."

Cebal has strong fan bases in New Orleans, San Francisco and Seattle. I've known Cebal for nearly 20 years and have wondered why he stays in Milwaukee. He laughed for a long time before answering the question. "I get tired of that question from myself," he said. "Early on it was very inexpensive. I could build a band here where their rent wasn't so high they couldn't afford to play with me. Also, Chicago is 90 miles, Madison is an hour and a half, Minneapolis is 5 1/2. That was my circuit, initially. My folks are here and I'm pretty close to them, although I don't see them as often as I should."

"Also at different times I felt strong about the advantages of being from an 'underdog' town. My band was actually rehearsed, where my friends in New York had bands they couldn't afford to rehearse. I had four sets I could play if I wanted to. Plus, if something happens in Milwaukee, it's not like it gets imposed on you from somewhere else. There is an economy of scale that is somewhat attractive. Whenever I travel and come back, it is a good place to recharge and gather forces for another fore out into the wild world."