

Gemini

by Daniel Harris

Not many people like Geminis. They're obnoxiously expressive, clever, playful, and serious comics. The flip side of their dual personality is that they can be moody, peckish and infrequently mean. The sign of the twins is ruled by speedy Mercury which saves them when they switch their personality to escape trouble.

To make matters worse my name is Robert. A name I detest. No one calls me Robert, no matter how much I entreat them to do so. Instead, I'm Bob. Bob the Gemini classical clarinetist with a palindrome name. Palindrome Bob the jazz saxophone player. My boustrophedon personality happily goes left to right and right to left.

For musicians, life can be a circle in Dante's hell. You play in a band that plays the same songs over and over and over. You can't afford to quit. You need the bread. You get the picture. Well, I was stuck in a scene like that. My interest in the music soon waned, though it was interesting in a historical ethnographical way. But unchallenging musically. I was paid well, above scale, and the women who attended the concerts and dances were easy on the eyes.

The band, Haitian Journey, was a Haitian version of Cuba's Buena Vista Social Club. Haitian Journey had the usual big band instrumentation, plus strings, and three singers: two gorgeous women and a handsome dude who sang bass and could also sing tenor in *false*to. I played alto sax and clarinet.

The Haitian population attending our concerts lived in Brooklyn, was prosperous, or at least hard working. They knew how to dress—nothing but class—and they danced the elegant old French court dances as well as the native *mér*ange. A house cleaner by day was a queen by night. The men were handsome with rich Creole voices. They were, after all, from the first modern Black nation. There *is* a pride of place.

I was having trouble with the Haitian band. The gigs were too long, and too many free rehearsals. I occasionally played in Salsa Viva, a band from the Bronx. It was a real Latin band with five trumpets, five trombones, five reed players, three singers, piano, bass and percussionists to infinity. The musicians were some of the top players in New York. I was one of the reed players in that band. Salsa Viva was a popular band and worked as many as six or more gigs a week. They played music from the Caribbean and Latin America. The musical arrangements and musicians were superb. But the pay was low and the gigs onerous—street fairs and block parties in sweltering heat and sometimes rain. Then there were the wedding receptions that lasted from 9 p.m. to 9 a.m. Serious hard work. We were all paid scale, but the tips made the difference. After the gig, Carlos, the leader, would pass out tip money. There was great comradery among the musicians and the music was exciting. Like the Haitians, the Latin audiences dressed to the nines, especially at formal gigs.

One day, Carlos got it into his head that the band looked too scraggly. Beards and long hair had to go. Mustaches, okay. I guess we had to look clean-cut like the Yankees. He told me: "Shave the beard." When I arrived home and told my fiancée what Carlos had demanded, she said, "So, shave the beard."

If I was going to remove the beard, I wanted it done by pros. I went to the barbershop in Grand Central Terminal. They were Turkish barbers who swathed you in hot towels, then slathered rich spicy lather on your face, shaved you with a straight razor and followed this up by burning any remaining stubble, ear hairs, or nose hairs with a gas flame. When you left the shop, you looked like a British Navy ensign. Clean as a whistle. This time, they followed up the burning with a tanning elixir. I left the shop with the visage of a Las Vegas casino mogul—one of those guys whose mug has a varnished mahogany sheen.

That night I had a gig with Haitian Journey. When I arrived at the gig, Pierre, the band leader, didn't recognize me and asked who I was. I told him I was Bob's identical twin brother, Mike. The always

distracted Pierre bought it. I played five gigs with Haitian Journey as Mike. Then Pierre stopped calling. Maybe he realized I was pulling his chain.

Fast forward a few months. Out of the blue, Pierre calls me in a panic. Actually, every time Pierre called me he was in a panic. Could I come that afternoon to a recording session in Hell's Kitchen. "Sure," I said. By this time, I had regrown my beard.

The session was a piece of cake. Haitian Journey never sounded better. Pierre was all smiles. As he was writing out the check for the session, he said, "Never, ever, send your brother to one of my gigs. Your brother sucks." "Yes, sir," I said. I pocketed his check and never answered Pierre's calls again.

A few weeks later I was playing with Salsa Viva in Harlem at the New York City Stickball Championships and Street Festival. My Irish twin brother Mike, a trombone player was also playing the event with Tito Puente's band. Tito, who had the same bad gambling habit as Pierre asked my brother to play saxophone after one of the saxophone players walked off the gig in a cloud of vile Spanish obscenities. The altercation had something to do with a bad debt. Mike said he couldn't play sax. Tito says, "Mike, don't fuck with me. Pierre Petit tells me you played sax in Haitian Journey." "I think he's confused. My *brother* plays sax and has a beard. He's standing right there. Ask him to sit in."

