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Review/**Music**

## *Straining Out the Religion*

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By PETER WATROUS

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The double bill at Town Hall on Friday night, featuring Milton Cardona and his group, Eye Aranja, and Frisner Augustin and his group, La Troupe Makandal, brought up a handful of issues about the meeting of different cultures. Labeled "Music of the Spirits," the performances, with David Byrne of Talking Heads as host, drew from the Santería and voodoo religious traditions that were imported to Puerto Rico and Haiti from West Africa. The music, wrenched

from its religious function, was obviously presented with an audience of nonparticipants in mind — nonparticipants who might not have been there without the pull of Mr. Byrne's name.

The show opened with Mr. Cardona and his group. He was introduced by Mr. Byrne. Joined by two other drummers, Mr. Cardona moved into a choppy lope that quickly broke into double time; the piece was part of the introduction to a *bembé*, a Santería ceremony. That quickly gave way to singers, more percussionists and Andy Gonzalez on bass. Mr. Cardona,

an exceptional singer, would begin a melody and let the chorus — sounding similar to thin, pinched West African choruses — sing it back to him. He permuted melody after melody, and each piece evolved gradually, taking its time, until Mr. Cardona cut it off.

Mr. Augustin, who is Haitian, brought elements of voodoo ceremonial music to his performance; he augmented the traditional drum choir with a horn section and a bassist plus five dancers. The full band sounded a bit similar to early Haitian pop music, but with more emphasis on *rara*, or Mardi Gras rhythms. Mr. Augustin's show really took off when he and his drummers, minus the band, muscled their way through a hard and propulsive groove that had the audience cheering.