

Newsday

EDITORIALS

"Where there is no vision, the people perish."

A32

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This Patient Beat a Cadence in His Head

By Marc Siegel

THE NAME listed in the hospital register was Ernest, Ernest Puente. He had a private room and, as was often the case with famous patients, the door was closed. But there was no attempt to conceal him, no administrative directive to grant him additional privacy.

The nurses knew who he was. When I asked for "Tito," they immediately directed me to his room, but there were no fanfares, no special attention paid, no requests for autographs, no signature music in the background. The hospital routine had a reassuring appeal because it was based on tireless work and attention to detail. Nurses and doctors knowing their business to the point of errorless execution didn't have time to differentiate among their various patients.

I knocked on the door, entered and found Tito Puente alone. He seemed comfortable, but nervous. I told him that I had been sent to see him by his manager, who was a patient of mine. Tito nodded. He'd been expecting me, he said. He looked

healthy; sometimes it was a matter of subtle perception to differentiate who needed an operation from who didn't.

In Tito's case, this was especially true. He had a full head of white hair, a smooth complexion. He was slightly overweight. But he had thick healthy bones, and he moved easily about the room in the manner of someone who hadn't given over the identity of his body to that of its illness. Rather, his movements exuded a concise energy. He seemed to be keeping a musical cadence going in his head, and he immediately asked me how soon he could get back to work after the operation.

"It depends how you feel," I said. "You'll start slow, then increase your activity after a month or two. Your chest will hurt for awhile."

"I'm working all the time now," he said. "I'm always arranging, composing in my head. I don't really sleep. I take catnaps in between."

"You'll get back to it," I said.

I drew a picture of the heart and showed Tito where the valve was that was damaged. It was a straightforward operation to repair it and, if the vessels that fed the heart its blood and oxygen were blocked, a bypass operation would be performed at the same time. Tito was nervous about the operation. He was used to exerting maximal control over his life, his music. Now he would be handing all this over to a stranger, a man who, in a different world, was also a control artist, working long hours with maximal attention and focus,

a man who was also known for his great hands.

"Does he like music?"

"He's a big fan of yours," I said. This was the special paradox I was used to; Tito in his modesty, was comfortable with the lack of fuss over him, but at the same time he seemed to be hoping his surgeon would approach his case fully aware of Tito's credentials.

As I examined him, he talked about all the concerts he had planned but might have to cancel as well as a record that was about to be released and others that were still in the planning stages. I thought he seemed suddenly vulnerable, caught unexpectedly between so much accomplished with even more still to accomplish. Doctors had been urging him for several years to have the valve done, and he'd been putting it off until a recent trip to Puerto Rico had led to an acute episode of heart failure. Right now, after effective diuretic therapy, his lungs were clear; he was ready for surgery. As I stiffened my fingers and tapped out his belly, outlining his liver and spleen with my hands, Tito paid me the ultimate compliment.

"You could have been a percussionist," he said.

The television hanging over the bed was on, and presently Tito turned the dial to Channel 4. A few moments later the weather report came on, and Tito told me that the meteorologist was his daughter, Audrey. He watched her closely, the

See PUENTE on A36



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This Patient Beat a Musical Cadence

PUENTE from A33

proud father, and I could see that she spoke with authority and dynamism that she might well have gotten from him.

"She's very good."

"She's getting there," he replied. "Paying her dues."

The telephone rang, and I left the room to give Tito his privacy.

"It's probably my manager," he said as I was leaving. "I'll tell him you were here."

I realized that, the whole time I'd been there, no one had called or knocked on the door. Probably, he hadn't told very many people that he was in the hospital. This added to the sense of vulnerability of Tito the patient as opposed to Tito Puente, bandleader, composer, the acclaimed king of mambo, El Rey de Timbales.

A few days later, he underwent surgery. I stopped in the recovery room to look for him.

"He's still in the operating room," a nurse told me.

"It doesn't look good."

"What happened?"

"He's bleeding from everywhere. They stop it one place, it starts somewhere else. He's back on the bypass pump."

I went downstairs to speak with his relatives. They were holding a vigil near the elevators where families traditionally waited for the surgeon to bring them the news. In Tito's case, the surgeon was still in there with him, trying to treat the unforeseeable bleeding disorder. For almost 10 hours he'd been there with his patient, unwilling to take a break. I arrived there at the same time as the pizza man, bringing the family more sustenance than I could. "It doesn't look good," I said, something they already knew. I recognized Tito's daughter from the TV and, as she jounced up to pay the pizza man, I could again see her father's energy.

The following morning, when I tapped in my computer code and looked at the glowing screen, there was one name missing from my patient list: Ernest Puente. In the barren language of the hospital, this was all we had to signify a death.