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On the Beat

# Eric Oberstein is a star behind the scenes

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Eric Oberstein is a rising star, both as a Grammy-winning record producer and as one of the organizers behind the eclectic Duke Performances series. JULI LEONARD [jleonard@newsobserver.com](mailto:jleonard@newsobserver.com)



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Instruments of destiny can take many forms. For Eric Oberstein, it was an audience-response card filled out at a concert.

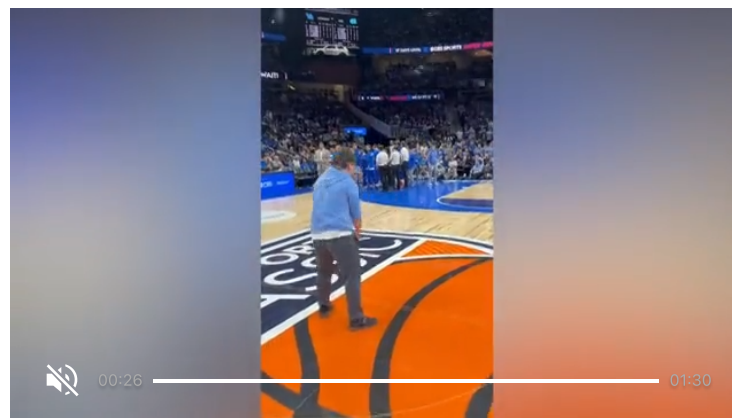
In the fall of 2007, Oberstein was in New York as a Columbia University graduate student after earning his undergraduate degree at Duke. He went to a show by the [Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra](#), an 18-piece band playing the sort of Latin jazz Oberstein had grown up hearing and playing himself.

The exotic music deeply moved Oberstein, who was aware of a nonprofit foundation that ALJO pianist/bandleader Arturo O’Farrill had just started to preserve and promote big-band Latin jazz. So on impulse, Oberstein wrote a note on the show program’s audience-response card – “I’d love to help you out” – and heard nothing until 10 months later, when O’Farrill’s wife found that note under a pile of papers in their kitchen and sent an email.

After a series of meetings, Oberstein became O’Farrill’s assistant director and right-hand man for his nonprofit and eventually his band at age 24. The collaboration has paid big dividends for both of them, especially the Grammy Award they won together earlier this year.

Although Oberstein is back in Durham nowadays as associate director of [Duke Performances](#), he remains O’Farrill’s producer. The fifth and most recent Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra album produced by Oberstein, 2014’s [“The Offense of the Drum”](#) ([Motema Music](#)), won the Grammy Award in February for Best Latin Jazz album. There is every chance their next collaboration, “The Conversation Continued,” will earn similarly lofty accolades when it’s released this summer.

#### TOP VIDEOS



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Having a Grammy on his resume makes Oberstein a rarity at Duke. And yet, the only one who doesn’t seem too impressed by that is Oberstein himself, whose calm exterior belies a maniacally focused capacity for organizing everything from recording sessions to the creative university campus.

“People have been asking since I won the Grammy, ‘Are you going to go into producing full-time?’” Oberstein said in his Duke Performances office one recent morning. “And I just have to laugh. Producing does not pay the bills. It’s a labor of love, but I do want to keep doing it. And I didn’t get into this for the trophies, but peers acknowledging your work is a nice byproduct.”



### **RISING STAR IN THE ARTS**

Most anyone who knows Oberstein will tell you he's wise and capable beyond his 29 years. Even if he hadn't gotten that break with O'Farrill from the audience-response card, there is little doubt that Oberstein would have found some other way to become a rising star in the world of arts presenters. When he's not producing records, Oberstein produces arts events for Duke Performances, a series that aims to make the arts an integral part of the university's curriculum as well as the world beyond.

"Eric is among the most modest people I've ever met," said Steven Seidel, director of Arts in Education at Harvard University (where Oberstein did further graduate work). "He's deep into music – you don't get a Grammy if you're not – and is also very adept on the role of the arts at universities. I expect he'll be a major contributor to larger cultural conversations."

At the same time, Oberstein looks almost preternaturally young for one so accomplished. In 2010, New York's Village Voice described him as "earnest (and) baby-faced," and he still looks young enough to pass for a Duke undergrad.

"Yeah, it's a long-running joke," Oberstein said. "In New York with Arturo's nonprofit, I'd go into meetings with people who didn't know us, shake hands, sit down and they'd still be waiting for the director to show up. They thought I was some intern moseying on up to the table. But I earn my stripes by proving I can do the work, and respect comes after that."

Oberstein grew up in the Queens borough of New York, the son of a computer programmer and a midwife and the product of Jewish and Cuban roots. His mother left Cuba at age 6 in 1961, fleeing Fidel Castro's communist regime. Not everyone escaped the revolution. Oberstein's grandfather worked on a sugar plantation as a political prisoner for years.

"My mom did not see her father for most of her childhood, until he finally got out and rejoined the family in New York," Oberstein said. "That was some painful history."

### **NOT IN FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS**

While growing up, Oberstein played saxophone and drums. He realized early on that he'd never be a virtuoso, but he loved music enough that he was determined to find a place for himself in the arts – especially after getting a sample of his father's computer work on Wall Street, which he couldn't abide.

Oberstein's extended family included two cousins who seemed more like siblings. One of them went to Duke, which was his introduction to the university. Oberstein's first time in Durham was for his cousin's graduation; that plus Duke basketball was enough to set the hook.

Oberstein enrolled at Duke in the fall of 2003, studying cultural anthropology. For a senior thesis, he wrote about contemporary Cuban music after the collapse of the Soviet Union – the underground music from the margins rather than the traditional Havana nightclub music of Buena Vista Social Club, whose self-titled 1997 album with Ry Cooder sold millions worldwide.

"(Buena Vista Social Club) was a very different picture of Cuba, this idyllic pre-revolution music," said Oberstein. "I love that, don't get me wrong. But I was more interested in Cuba's contemporary music and how youth were using it to speak to challenges, frustrations and hope."

### **MANY ROLES AT DUKE**

After graduate work and his stint running O'Farrill's Afro Latin Jazz Alliance nonprofit, Oberstein returned to Durham in 2012. Duke Performances head Aaron Greenwald, a mentor during Oberstein's undergraduate days, lured him back to take the newly created job of associate director.

In that capacity, Oberstein helps present an eclectic series of up to 70 events a year covering dance, theater and all types of music. The latest Duke Performances season lineup ranges from India's Nrityagram Dance Ensemble to crossover jazz trio The Bad Plus. Oberstein is in on all aspects of the programming, from brainstorming ideas to escorting visiting artists around campus.

"Nothing is more exciting than seeing an idea through from the beginning and putting it out into the world," Oberstein said. "It takes several years at least, and it's satisfying. So is the strategy behind running arts organizations. So many different skill sets go into it and no two days are the same. I wear a lot of hats at Duke Performances."

## **CUBAN CONNECTION**

Another hat Oberstein wears is record producer, although he came to it somewhat reluctantly.

His initial experiences with studio work were mixed – a high-school internship at a New York studio that paid \$6 a day and exposed him to abuses like getting chewed out for accidentally dropping a phone call from a Los Angeles producer.

But Oberstein put his hesitations aside and became O'Farrill's producer, a role that is ongoing. As on all his projects, whether presenting or producing, Oberstein serves as calm epicenter.

"A lot of people produce by injecting opinions or connecting money with projects," O'Farrill said.

"But Eric does a producer's real job, which is to sit in the control room taking notes, listening carefully, keeping track of things and managing communication. When I'm recording, there's a lot vying for my attention – engineers, assistants, 18 or 20 musicians – and I just want to get notes on tape. Eric is my extra set of ears. Sometimes that involves defusing things when some musician has a meltdown and I have to get angry. He's a great buffer."

Working with O'Farrill led to Oberstein realizing a lifelong dream – traveling to his ancestral homeland of Cuba.

After making his first Cuban visit in 2010, Oberstein was there in December 2014 when word went out that the Obama administration was renewing normal relations with Cuba after more than a half-century.

“We had just arrived to work on this next album, ‘Cuba: The Conversation Continued,’ and the fact that we were there when that announcement happened made it all the more wild,” Oberstein said.

“The album’s premise was to commission new works, half by Americans and half by Cubans. American jazz musicians aspire to tap into the energy and traditions of Afro-Cuban music, while Cuban musicians idolize American jazz. So this is like a continuation of a musical conversation Dizzy Gillespie and Chano Pozo started back in the 1940s.

“Cuba’s a remarkable place,” he concluded.

“Going there was an amazing experience for a Cuban-American kid who’d grown up eating the food, hearing the music and dreaming about it. Flying over the island the first time felt like entering this imaginary place, and it’s been great to work there. I’m excited about where things can go.”

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### About Eric Oberstein

Home: Lives in Durham with girlfriend, Emma Miller (programming coordinator of the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival)

Degrees: AB with distinction in cultural anthropology, Duke University (2007); MA, Arts Administration, Teachers College, Columbia University (2009); EdM, Arts in Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education (2010).

### The critics speak

A sample of the critical response to “The Offense of the Drum,” winner of the Grammy Award for Best Latin Jazz album.

- “It’s a work of visionary brilliance.” – [All About Jazz](#)
- “Listen to ‘The Offense of the Drum,’ give it some time, and see if you don’t notice that the world has changed a bit after you connect with the music the way O’Farrill intended.” – [National Public Radio](#)
- “By virtue of its disciplined execution, cultural queries, and celebratory inspiration, The Offense of the Drum is not only O’Farrill & the Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra’s most ambitious moment to date, but its finest on record.” – [All Music](#)

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