STAFF SPOTLIGHT: MUSICIAN AND BANDLEADER FRANCISCO FERREIRO

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By Leila Darabi

If you've ever encountered a man with curly brown hair, olive skin and a not-quite--placeable Australian accent calling out across the produce section or the loading dock as new deliveries arrive, you may be familiar with multipotentialite and Coop staff

member Francisco Ferreiro.

He is a band leader, guitarist and educator who has at various points explored many other areas and interests in life. He studied engineering and physics, worked as a seasonal farm worker on his grandfather's farm, completed compulsory military service in Spain at the age of 18, served in the Australian Air Force straight out of college for a year and a half and worked as a tutor and substitute teacher.

SEEKING FRESH PRODUCE

Born in Australia and raised between that country and his parents' native Spain, Francisco first found the Coop about four years ago while seeking out fresh produce in New York.

"In Spain, you can go out to the local corner store and buy a tomato that looks like the Lancaster tomatoes that we get—you know the really beautiful ones that we get [at the Coop]? I came from that," he said.

Moving from Europe to the U.S. and missing tomatoes that taste like tomatoes was a rude awakening. "But obviously the Coop is the next level, an oasis in the middle of the desert—a food oasis."

Francisco visited the Coop with his wife, Jazmine Arelis Catasús, a printmaker and papermaker. They had heard of the Coop through "Brooklyn folklore" and through a couple with whom they were close friends, Thomas and Jenny. "Thomas is French, and he kept talking about the cheese, the cheese, the cheese."

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FROM SHOPPER TO STAFF

Francisco and Jazmine became members but quickly found themselves on alert due to Jazmine's hectic schedule as a printmaker, working a nighttime bar gig and babysitting.

"She would never do her shifts," laughed Francisco. "So we always had makeups, and I was always at the Coop. And at one point I thought, why don't I just try to get a job here?"

He went full-time at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and now serves as a Receiving Coordinator in produce and receiving.

"I'm all over the place. I'm quite proud of that," said Francisco. "I've tried to learn as much as I can so far. And I just like to help out wherever I can. I like learning new things and meeting new people so that I'm always evolving."

DISCOVERING MUSIC

The pursuit of music—and acceptance at the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston—first lured Francisco to the United States.

After getting into some scuffles in Australia, his parents had sent him to live with his Spanish grandparents in a village outside of Albacete, a city between Valencia and Madrid. Francisco describes the place as a "stopover" between larger cities, a location to "water horses" and move on. "There wasn't much to do for teenagers."

There was, however, a thriving independent music scene as local independent bands had broken through and were touring throughout Spain and Europe. Francisco describes the sound as heavily influenced by the Manchester scene in England, evoking early Radiohead and Sonic Youth.

His grandfather—or *yayo* as he calls him—was a janitor at a music school, and from

an early age Francisco's family had encouraged him to play piano and guitar. They did not, however, encourage a career in music.

"The culture where I came from, [in] my family, music was a hobby. It wasn't something that you could really do [for a living]."

So while he started bands and began to play out at local venues in Spain, Francisco dipped his toe in other areas before accepting his fate as a professional musician.

FROM THE AIR FORCE TO THE STUDY OF SOUND

As a teen, he returned to Australia and spent a year studying for and passing the prerequisite exams to enter the University of New South Wales, where he studied engineering and science. Afterward, he immediately joined the Air Force.

While he loved flying and logged 150 military flight hours, he never saw himself as a soldier. "I remember I was ironing bed sheets in officer training school in Melbourne. It was about 2 a.m. on my first night there and I was like, 'What am I doing here?'"

After leaving the Air Force, he entered a master's program in acoustic physics, the study of sound waves. "I feel like acoustic physics was kind of like [my attempt to] mix music and physics."

But Francisco quickly found himself forming bands, arranging music, and playing shows, leaving little energy for the research demanded by his program. "I used to be surfing all day and playing music; it's just so far from who I am."

His supervisor, trained as a classical musician himself, one day pulled him aside and said: "Francisco, look, at one point I had to make a decision: I'm either going to do physics or become a musician."

Francisco made his choice and, as luck would have it, Berklee College of Music held

auditions in Australia soon after.

FROM GOSPEL CHURCHES TO AFRO-FUNK

After a year at Berklee, Francisco transferred to a school in New York, where he met his wife and made a permanent home. Over the past decade, he has taught physics and music and worked as a musician for a large gospel church in Queens.

Today, his main creative project is a seven-piece Afro-funk band called Turiya Electric, named in homage to jazz musician Alice Coltrane, who took the Sanskrit name Turiyasangitananda.

FINDING A CREATIVE COMMUNITY AT THE COOP

Francisco sees his role at the Coop as linked to his lifelong pursuit of the arts and science. “I feel like food is an empowering and enlightened tool. And for me, it really closely correlates to creativity. Food for me is an art form, too. What you eat is what you are, and it influences your spirit.”

He said he found like-minded creatives when he joined the Coop and then became staff.

“Everyone seemed really open and really cool, which they are. I feel like most of my coworkers are artists or musicians or just really open-minded liberal people. So it feels like a real creative environment.”

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CIRCLE OF LIFE

Though he has landed far from where he grew up, Francisco sees the Coop as a continuation of the appreciation for food and farmers that he learned from his Spanish grandparents.

“When I was little, I used to work on my grandfather’s land picking onions and stuff,” said Francisco. “I learned to ride a bicycle on the dirt track of a corn field. I remember the corn fields that day, and for me the association of food is so closely tied with who I am.”

He also links these early lessons to the Coop’s mission of equity.

“I think it’s extremely important in a big city like this that we are building community, so that we’re supporting each other, supporting small businesses, more farms, and growing together as a force,” said Francisco.

“Because we’ve all seen the other option. We’ve all seen monopolization. And we see what it does to the land, to the people, or to the communities. [We need to] make sure we’re reaching all parts of the community and giving everyone opportunities to access the food.”