

The Next Great Wonder?

Like his idol Stevie, singer Raul Midón didn't let his blindness stand in the way of his dreams

Raul Midón is a guitarist. He's also blind. Which prompted him, he says, to try extra hard when he began landing studio work 15 years ago. "I had to be *really* good," he says, smiling, "because I couldn't do anything else, like wait tables."

But that's only half his story. The other half is his identical twin brother, Marco, who's also blind—and a NASA engineer. Remarkably, when the brothers took the

"There's always a better tomorrow even if today is rough," says Midón (in New York). "That is my experience."

Song

SATs in high school, they each scored a perfect 800—Marco on the math segment, Raul on the verbal. How did that happen? Growing up, says Raul, now 39, “we were never told by the people who really mattered that we couldn’t do anything. We had some pretty wild fantasies about what we wanted to do. I think we went with what our strong points were so we didn’t have to compete with one another.”

Midón (pronounced *mee-DON*) has turned at least one fantasy into reality. *State of Mind*, his second album, has received glowing reviews. His singing blends flamenco, soul and jazz, and his technique conjures a one-man band: He strums up all sorts of percussive effects and vocally does a remarkable trumpet imitation. Comparisons to Stevie Wonder are inevitable, especially since Wonder plays harmonica on the track “Expressions of Love.” “He definitely influences me,” says Midón. “I want my music to uplift my audience.”

His life story certainly does that. Born



“I would go play, and he’d be practicing,” Marco says of Raul (left, ca. ’71).

in rural Embudo, N.Mex. (pop. 467), Raul and Marco were delivered six weeks premature and then placed in an incubator that had too much oxygen. Raul’s unprotected retinas were destroyed. (Marco had limited vision in one eye until he was 16.) Yet he doesn’t hold a grudge against the hospital. “They were trying to save my life,” he says.

The twins’ mother, Sandra, who was African-American, died of an aneurysm

when they were 4, so they were raised by their Argentinian-born father, Jorgé, a former dancer, and their maternal grandmother. Raul first picked up the guitar at age 6, while attending a school for the blind, and soon began private lessons. “The way I would do it was literally with my teacher putting my fingers where they needed to go,” he says. Jorgé never discouraged his boys. “I realized a positive attitude was the most important asset they could acquire,” he says. “They embraced that.” Thanks to an anonymous benefactor, the boys enrolled at the prestigious Santa Fe Prep for high school. Though they shared an interest in ham radios and music, Raul began pulling away to the artistic side. Says Marco: “I had vision then, so I was more easily distracted by things.”

They went their separate ways during college in Florida (though even now, the Maryland-based Marco says, “we talk pretty much on a regular basis on the ham radio”). After earning a degree in music, Midón found work as a backup guitarist in local studios. Soon he was landing gigs with the likes of Ricky Martin and Enrique Iglesias, and in 2000 he went on tour with Shakira.

It was while listening to a friend play at a Miami club that he met his future wife, Kathleen. “We started talking a lot on the phone,” he says, “and fell in love from there.” They wed in 1999. In 2002, the couple moved to New York City, where a show at the high-profile Joe’s Pub led to a Carnegie Hall appearance in a concert showcasing the movie music of Spike Lee. Midón wowed the director, who asked him to contribute a song to 2004’s *She Hate Me*. That year he landed the contract that led to *State of Mind*.

That project finally united him with Wonder, who recorded his solo after Midón sent him a note in Braille. They met at a benefit concert last December. Onstage, Midón recalls, “he’s putting his hand out to mine. We’re missing each other because we’re blind. It was insane—and over way too quickly.”

Raquel Cepeda and Liza Hamm in New York City

When producer Arif Mardin first heard Midón (on stage in Denver last year), he says, “I was simply mesmerized.”

