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## His Jazz Career's Rich Rewards

By **LARRY BLUMENFELD**

When Miguel Zenón began practicing his alto saxophone at home in the hardscrabble Residencial Luis Llorens Torres projects of San Juan, Puerto Rico, music was just a hobby. Sure, he enjoyed his study of classical repertoire at the rigorous Escuela Libre de Música. But math, in which he excelled, was more his focus and, he and his mother agreed, the key to a successful future. He had yet to try improvising, hadn't listened to much American jazz. And though he'd heard plenty of Puerto Rican folk music -- bomba and plena and the jíbaro songs that were popular around Christmas -- he hadn't thought to play that music either.

Twenty years later, from his home in New York City's Washington Heights, Mr. Zenón lives out his ambitions through his alto sax. And all those influences -- Puerto Rican folk music, jazz improvisation, mathematical calculations -- have intertwined along a path rich with possibilities. That path grew richer still when, in September, he was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, often referred to as a "genius grant" -- an unrestricted award of \$500,000, distributed quarterly over five years.



Miguel Zenón is a composer, saxophonist and MacArthur fellow.

Some previous fellows drawn from jazz's ranks, such as Max Roach and Ornette Coleman, had amassed iconic bodies of work by the time of their awards. Yet others, such as violinist Regina Carter, who was named a fellow at 40, have been honored more for their promise than their past. In a phone interview, Fellows Program Director Daniel Socolow spoke of Mr. Zenón's potential in terms of "creating a new jazz language for the 21st century."

At 31, Mr. Zenón is at the forefront of a generation of musicians doing just that, or at least constructing their own dialects from equal parts jazz tradition, ethnic inheritance, and wide-ranging musical tastes. He has both benefited from and contributed to a deepened understanding of the bonds between Afro-Latin music and American jazz. And he is one of many jazz musicians for whom nonprofit arts organizations and independent music labels are, these days, more empowering than nightclubs and storied jazz imprints.

"Who expects such a call?" Mr. Zenón said of the MacArthur notification. "It's flattering. But what this means most of all is what all artists want, I guess -- continued opportunity and a sense that people appreciate what you're chasing through your work."

Mr. Zenón has already attracted significant institutional support and delivered on those investments. A New York State Council on the Arts grant funded "Jíbaro Journeys: Music From the Mountains of

Puerto Rico," his exploration of the music of backcountry Puerto Rican troubadours. The piece debuted at Manhattan's Jazz Gallery in 2004 and formed the basis of his CD "Jíbaro" (Marsalis Music). Earlier this month, Mr. Zenón returned to the Jazz Gallery for the premiere of his "Esta Plena," based on another traditional Puerto Rican musical style of rural origin, plena, and commissioned through the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation.

"Although forms like plena and jíbaro music have been replaced as popular music over the years, the stuff is still around everywhere in Puerto Rico," said Mr. Zenón. "I was exposed to them, but I had no idea that they were special."

Plena's special qualities are expressed chiefly through the interplay of three different-size panderos (small hand drums, much like tambourines without cymbals) used to play variants on a basic four-beat rhythm, and via topical lyrics (plena is often called a "living newspaper"). For "Esta Plena," Mr. Zenón composed 10 new pieces: five instrumentals and five with lyrics, on subjects ranging from the Puerto Rican economy to the joys of hearing plena music at a friend's New Year's celebration. He added three veteran plena practitioners, on panderos, to his working quartet.

At the Jazz Gallery, each new composition sounded distinct: Some leaned toward modern jazz, others sounded more like traditional songs. Mr. Zenón worked in his full range of influences, from to bebop innovators to European composers, and made clever use of rhythmic tension between the panderos and the trap set. At the music's center, but never overly dominant, was his urgent, sweet-yet-tart alto saxophone sound. A cross-cultural concept piece of such grace is a major achievement that should be more widely heard (and will be, courtesy of Mr. Zenón's next recording).

For his jíbaro project, Mr. Zenón had drawn rhythmic and harmonic schemes from the décima, that style's strictly 10-line verse form. In "Esta Plena," he phrased and harmonized in threes, in reference to the panderos. His fascination with mathematical permutations derives from both natural inclination and a formative association with saxophonist Steve Coleman, whose music is as complex and as elegant as any natural science.

"Miguel writes all this complicated stuff, but he plays it with a passion and spirituality that belie his technical expertise," said Branford Marsalis, who made Mr. Zenón among the first signings to his Marsalis Music label, in 2002.

Dale Fitzgerald, who has made Mr. Zenón a fixture at his Jazz Gallery, appreciates Mr. Zenón's sense of purpose. "When I call my place an international jazz cultural center," he said, "what I mean is exactly what he's doing."

Mr. Zenón found his purpose gradually, beginning in Puerto Rico when, at 15, a friend handed him a tape of a Charlie Parker record. "Once I realized that he was making this up as opposed to working from a score, it made a big impression on me," Mr. Zenón recalled. "I had no idea you could do that."

At Berklee School of Music in Boston Mr. Zenón met saxophonist David Sánchez, also from Puerto Rico. And he began informal studies with an early mentor, pianist Danilo Perez, who was born in Panama. He's since distinguished himself as a player in Mr. Sanchez's quintet, Charlie Haden's Liberation Music Orchestra, and the SF Jazz Collective, among others bands. But it's his achievements as a composer and leader that are most compelling.

The inevitable question -- What will you do with the MacArthur grant? -- yields answers less about music than its context. Mr. Zenón dreams of a massive research project, tracing the African roots of Latin American and Caribbean music. And he'd long been thinking about bringing American jazz musicians to Puerto Rico for a series of free concerts in several cities.

"Growing up, I didn't have a lot of exposure to live jazz," he said. "I wonder what would happen if jazz could be heard in Puerto Rico -- not just as something for people who can afford it, but by anyone, as

regular music. At first, I thought about going to various organizations and asking for support, not knowing if they'd listen or if I could do it. But now, I know they will, and I can."

**Mr. Blumenfeld writes about jazz for the Journal.**

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