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BY DAN OUELLETTE

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Miguel Zenón

Cover photo and above photo of Miguel Zenón shot by Jimmy and Dena Katz in New York City.

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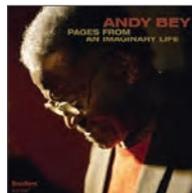
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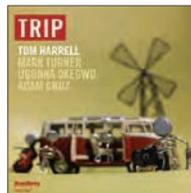
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Photo by Jimmy & Dena Katz

# MIGUEL BY DAN OUELLETTE

# ZENÓN

## REACQUAINTED WITH HIS HOMETLAND

**I**t's early September, and in that rare state of mind at the convergence of satisfaction and anticipation, Miguel Zenón is sitting in El Barrio (aka Spanish Harlem) in a Nuyorican community arts room at Los Pleneros de la 21. The space has a wall of mirrors for aspiring *bomba* and *plena* dancers, conga drums and speakers scattered about, and posters of upcoming events and classes. He's comfortable here in a neighborhood that has been one of the primary landing points for Puerto Ricans arriving in New York City.

Zenón, who was born and raised in Puerto Rico's capital city, San Juan, smiles

as he tells how he never expected to arrive at the creative pinnacle where he finds himself today—one of the most esteemed and singular-voiced alto saxophonists in jazz; a formidable bandleader as well as a founding member of the SFJAZZ collective (2004); a recipient of both a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship and a MacArthur Fellowship in the same year (2008); and, most importantly, a passionate spokesperson who has explored his homeland's music in the context of jazz—especially on his ambitious new album, *Identities Are Changeable*—and simultaneously probed the social and cultural issues faced by Puerto Ricans who live in the United States.

The album, three years in the making, developed out of a 90-minute multimedia production commissioned in 2011 by the Montclair (New Jersey) State University's Peak Performances series. (It premiered in February 2012.) The recorded voices of seven Puerto Rican interviewees are complemented by Zenón's compelling, rhythmically profound six-part song cycle performed by his core quartet augmented by a 12-member brass ensemble. In selected concert appearances, a video installation created by artist David Dempewolf features footage of the interviews along with colorful, abstract image collages. Even though some of the music has been played in concerts with his quartet and his big band, Zenón has been eagerly awaiting its recorded life.

"This comes out of my interest in Puerto Rican music," he says, noting that since his 2005 release *Jibaro* (Marsalis Music), he has been fully exploring the rich heterogeneous music of his homeland. "It represents my roots, my foundation as a Puerto Rican. There's the folk element in my music that is very powerful. People identify with it even if they have never heard it before. It's coming from the generations; it's something that came from the earth."

While ramping up for the Nov. 4 release of *Identities Are Changeable*—his ninth album as a leader—Zenón is basking in the success of the ninth edition of his Caravana Cultural. The program presents free concerts in rural areas of Puerto Rico, featuring Zenón and various assembled musicians. The last tour in late August

focused on the music of Joe Henderson. "It's the greatest experience in my whole life doing this," says the soft-spoken 38-year-old. "It's connecting to humanity. This one old lady brought her kid to one of the shows. She had never heard jazz. She had heard that it was crazy or music just for certain people. But she told me after the show, 'Now I love it.' That's what I want to do."

Early in his jazz life, Zenón began to formulate a series of goals for his future that have evolved into grand manifestations—titanic sequoias that remarkably grew from tiny seeds.

When he was a youngster in Puerto Rico, he studied classical piano and then saxophone at San Juan's Escuela Libre de Música. Zenón became enthusiastic about jazz during his teens and figured he needed to come to the States to take the next step in his proficiency.

After garnering a Berklee College of Music jazz scholarship at the Heineken Jazz Festival in San Juan in 1995, he was able to cobble together other funds to make the move north to Boston. Did he experience culture shock? "A little, but I had been visiting my family in New York since I was 10," Zenón recalls. "They were living in the Bronx in Echo Park and the Grand Concourse. Those were my first experiences outside of Puerto Rico, but it felt like home away from home. Everyone spoke Spanish, listened to the same music, ate the same food."

He says that he was happy in Boston working with such teachers as Bill Pierce and Hal Crook as well as hanging and jamming with some of his peers. "They were from all over the world," he says, "and here I was from Puerto Rico, where I played with just a few people."

Again with scholarship help, Zenón moved to New York in 1998 to pursue a graduate degree at Manhattan School of Music, studying with Dick Oatts, who became an important mentor. "I wanted to be in New York to take advantage of being around artists I admired," he says. "At Manhattan, I got to know musicians and even some of my heroes. It was a good springboard in terms of meeting a lot of people and teachers who helped me get connected to the scene. I never went into jazz to be a leader or to have a career, and I wasn't sure if I'd go back to Puerto Rico, where I knew some musicians who could play jazz."

However, his jazz ties kept him in the States. "In Boston I was able to connect with Danilo Pérez, one of my idols and heroes, who took me under his wing," he says. "I'd go to his house every week and play. He helped me in many ways—as a musician but also as a person, as a Latin American musician who played jazz. Through Danilo, I met David Sánchez, who hired me for his band. Those two guys made a big difference in my life. I saw them as examples of what you can achieve if you worked hard. That's when things really started happening. I started playing more and I began to write."

While Zenón's earlier albums revealed him to be a strong saxophone talent, his voice didn't begin to fully develop until he made the commitment to acquaint himself with the music of Puerto Rico. "To try to find my own voice, I had to look into my roots," he says. "When I lived in Puerto Rico, I was hearing a lot of music, but I wasn't listening



## Making a Cultural Investment

In 2008, Miguel Zenón was given two prestigious, lucrative honors—a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship for music composition (the average grant that year was for \$43,000) and a no-strings-attached MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (at the time, \$500,000 dispersed over four years).

Such funding can fuel artistic freedom. “I applied for the Guggenheim to be able to write,” he says, “and I used that money to do the *plena* music project, which financed some of the recording [for 2009’s *Esta Plena*]. The MacArthur came out of the blue. The day they called, the first thing I thought about was a project I had been thinking about for many years: sharing with the people in Puerto Rico how much I love jazz and why it’s so great.”

Zenón’s dream was inspired by *Heima*, a documentary film about the Icelandic rock group Sigur Rós, which toured its homeland in 2006 performing free and unannounced concerts. “They were thanking the public for support by playing in schools or a field, really anywhere,” he says. “I could have used the grant to stay at home and practice or go out and record a big band album, but I wanted to make a cultural investment.”

So Zenón began the three-year process of launching Caravana Cultural, a program that presents free concerts in rural areas of Puerto Rico. The concerts, which started in February 2011, focus on historical figures in jazz, such as Charlie Parker and Duke Ellington. “I remember when I first started playing music, and it wasn’t a job,” Zenón says. “I basically fell in love with the feeling of creating music. I thought it would be great to go back to that—to share the music and not think about ticket sales, etcetera.”

The plan, he says, was ambitious: go to a town and in collaboration with the residents there, introduce jazz to new audiences via free concerts in theaters and cultural spaces. “We paid for everything,” he says. “I paid for musicians to fly in or I used people from the island. I contacted a local music teacher to assemble a group of students to participate. For the Joe Henderson concert we just did, three months beforehand I sent the charts and an MP3 of ‘Isotope.’ I gave a preconcert talk, giving the audience an idea about jazz, its history and improvisation, and then talked about the music they were going to hear. I figure about 50 percent of the people who attended had never been to a jazz concert.”

Zenón had questioned the longevity of Caravana Cultural because of its expenses. But SFJAZZ board member Robert Mailer Anderson held a benefit at his house in October 2013 and raised enough money for the saxophonist to continue the program for the next five years. “You’ve just got to find a way,” Zenón says. —Dan Ouellette



to it from the point of view of a musician, and I never analyzed it like I did with jazz. I had to basically learn the music of my homeland from zero. I didn’t want to get stuck musically, so that became my road. As I got more into it, the more I was convinced that this is the truth. The truth is in the music. I’m still learning so much. It’s kind of like being a rookie.”

As a newcomer to the legacy of his homeland, Zenón sought out people who intimately knew the various facets of the music. For example, his 2009 album, *Esta Plena* (Marsalis Music), arrived after he plunged into the festive and social commentary

tradition of *plena*. “It was like research,” he says, “like gathering information. The more I got into that vibe, the easier it was for me to have that music come out of me naturally.”

The search continues with the dynamic *Identities Are Changeable*, a celebratory and poignant dive into understanding the bicultural identity of New Yorkers of Puerto Rican descent. It is an album of highly charged and personal music that at its heart showcases storytelling with passion.

Puerto Rico’s relationship with the United States has evolved quite a bit since the former

Spanish island colony became a U.S. protectorate as part of the spoils from the Spanish-American War in 1898 (the Philippines and Guam were also ceded). In 1917, residents were granted U.S. citizenship. In 1952, Puerto Rico was officially recognized as a U.S. territorial commonwealth. As citizens of the United States, Puerto Ricans were afforded the right to freely travel to the mainland—not as immigrants—settling in cities such as Boston, Chicago and especially New York, where today 1.2 million Nuyoricans live (the largest Puerto Rican community outside of the island).

“Becoming citizens made us different from anyone else,” Zenón says. “Anyone could come here. My mom and all her family lived here for years, then moved back to Puerto Rico. In this generation, 75 percent of Puerto Ricans spend time in New York. They’ve developed relationships with the country and city. This has been going on for 100 years.”

Writing in the liner notes of *Identities Are Changeable*, Zenón says, “Having been born and raised in Puerto Rico, I’ve always been curious about the causes and development for this mass migration . . .” He notes that even second- and third-generation Puerto Ricans born in New York “were as connected to the traditions of their parents and grandparents and as proud to be Puerto Ricans as the people I knew back home.”

This inspired Zenón to find out why. He interviewed seven Puerto Rican New Yorkers, including his sister Patricia Zenón, actress Sonia Manzano, jazz bassist Luques Curtis, Nuyorican poet Bonafide Rojas and percussionist Camilo Molina (who performs with Eddie Palmieri).

He also interviewed Juan Flores, a professor of social and cultural analysis at New York University who wrote *The Diaspora Strikes Back: Caribeño Tales of Learning and Turning* (Routledge). For his book, Flores interviewed 22 people and converted their compelling reflections on circular migration into short stories (including the tale of a 15-year-old girl from the South Bronx whose parents decide to return to Puerto Rico, where she first discovers prejudice and ostracism, then hero status for bringing her “unique style” learned on “the streets of Nueva York” to her “enchanted island homeland”).

Flores’ book sparked Zenón to put his own spin on the theme of identity. “I found it so interesting how varied the experience could be depending on the person and the situations they encountered,” he says. “So I wanted to follow through from a musical standpoint. But I had never done anything like that: Compose the music, include the interviews, work with a larger ensemble—everything about the project was new to me.”

Zenón had performed a *plena* project for Montclair State, and the university asked him to return to “do something, anything,” he says. Once he got the commission, he started to conduct the interviews by asking the same series of questions to each person—where did their sense of pride in being Puerto Rican come from, what did they consider their first language, what was their “home” and what are the elements that help shape their national identity. At first, Zenón considered writing a piece about each individual, as Flores had done in his book. But he changed course as he began to identify certain subjects people talked about. “That was something else that was new to me,” says Zenón, who came up with six themes, including “My Home,” “Second Generation Lullaby,” “First Language” and “Through Culture And Tradition.”

*Identities Are Changeable* opens and closes with the charged piece “¿De Dónde Vienes?” which is translated as “Where Do You Come From?” It features an introduction to the interviewees, who weigh in on the question while Zenón and company weave together musical motifs from every tune on the album. The title track focuses on the project’s central theme: how identities change and are molded through a lifetime. The musical setting features soaring and swinging alto lines and horn harmonies. “My Home” centers on the idea of where home is. “It’s a common thing,” says Zenón, who delivers clear-toned, melodic alto sax gusto on the track. “A lot of people say New York is my home, while Camilo, who was born in New York, says that Puerto Rico is his home and that when he gets older maybe he’ll move there and have a family.”

The idea behind the slow-tempo “Second Generation Lullaby” came from Zenón interviewing his sister, whose child was born in New York. “She grew up in a tight Puerto Rican environment and speaks perfect Spanish and English,” he says. “But she wonders about her child and how the tradition will be passed on. When I was writing these pieces, my wife was pregnant, so that was going through my mind, too.”

“Same Fight,” which features John Ellis soloing with brio on tenor sax,



explores the common thread between the Puerto Rican and African American communities, where both groups “find themselves in the same places with the same struggles,” Zenón says. “We adapted a lot of the same things, like South Side hip-hop, dressing and talking alike and liking the same kind of music. There’s just too much in common not to pay attention to.”

In “Through Culture And Tradition,” one interviewee says, “Music was a starting point,”

which Zenón and company accentuate with *bomba*, *plena* and salsa flavors in the mix. “Even if you’re not born in Puerto Rico, there’s a connection through the music,” he says. “It’s very powerful to me. In the interviews, everyone expressed this in one way or another.”

With the thematic road map developed, Zenón faced the challenge of composing the music. “When I write, it’s not coming from a total abstract space,” he says. “I like having a concrete idea, which is what I did with the *Alma Adentro: The Puerto Rican Songbook* album, where I carried through with the compositions because there was a musical idea that brought it all together. In this case, though, it was harder.”

The key to unlocking the music for Zenón was to use various rhythmic ideas. “I started thinking in terms of playing three beats against two beats, for example, so that the rhythms rub against each other to create a counterpoint,” he says. “So you find that all over the place in all the compositions.” He also uses the five-beats to seven-beats pattern on a couple of tunes, while two others move with five-beat and six-beat rhythms being played at the same time. “When I was writing, I started with the rhythmic motifs, which made it easier for the melodies to be built on,” he says. “And excerpts of the interviews work as an extra layer.”

He road-tested the new pieces with his longtime quartet (formed in September 2000 at the C-Note in the East Village), which currently includes pianist Luis Perdomo, bassist Hans Glawischnig and drummer Henry Cole (who came aboard in 2005 when Antonio Sanchez left to join the Pat Metheny Trio). It was a workout. Perdomo, a native of Venezuela—where he grew up fed by his culture’s rhythmic folkloric tradition—praises Zenón for always writing “fresh” music. But he admits that the compositions are difficult to play: “Miguel’s music is challenging, technically and musically. I like a challenge. But I needed to go back into the practice room for a few days. He’s always writing. I remember at one soundcheck, he came up with a sketch that ended up being the tune ‘My Home.’ We could see what he was

working on to get the different rhythms rubbing together.”

Glawischnig, born in Austria and respected for his connections to the Latin community of jazz musicians playing in bands led by Ray Barretto and David Sánchez, adds, “Miguel’s music is very specific and hard, but it’s worth it. We played this music for a year to get it under our fingers, to get a vibe on it. Once we recorded, we knew the music so well that it only took one or two takes in the studio.”

Cole, a fellow Puerto Rican who has done his share of transiting between his homeland and New York, says that he’s fascinated by the different layers of rhythms Zenón wrote. “But it’s hardest music I’ve ever played,” he adds. “It required a lot of focus. He likes to change rhythms. But what he’s done is very special and very creative. I can relate to the story.”

Once Zenón got the basics for the compositions, he had to learn how to write for the larger group. He used his experience with SFJAZZ (“The collective has been my musical godfather,” he says) and his work with Guillermo Klein, as well as sideman duties with the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, Maria Schneider, John Hollenbeck and the Mingus Big Band, to chart a path. “All those sounds put a lot of ideas into my head,” he says. “After working on the pieces with the quartet, I orchestrated what we were already playing, so that the big band is the quartet amplified. I was paying attention to the arranging of Duke Ellington and Count Basie, too. So, I began thinking about layers of orchestration.”

Zenón plans to take the project on the road, mostly with the quartet but also a few dates with the big band. “Right now, I’m pushing this, doing everything on my own,” he says. “I’m working on the marketing and publicity, and I did crowdfunding with Kickstarter.” He’s also releasing the album on his own label, Miel Music, with a co-production credit to Up Cal Entertainment, run by novelist/screenwriter and SFJAZZ board member Robert Mailer Anderson, who helped to finance the recording. “Everything came together, but I’ve been very, very lucky. It’s been a lot of work, but I love to work.”

Beyond his annual Caravana Cultural free concerts, Zenón does not have any plans to return to Puerto Rico at the moment. He lives in New York’s Washington Heights neighborhood with his wife and his two-and-a-half-year-old daughter. And his career continues on an upward trajectory. There’s still so much more he wants to do and explore. He needed to come to the mainland from his modest little island (just over 100 miles long and 40 miles wide) to steep himself in jazz, but now his goal is bigger. “Of course, I consider myself a jazz musician who plays clubs and festivals,” he says. “But in most of the places I’ve played, people have never heard Puerto Rican music before. So, it’s on me to put the word out, to expose people to this great music.”

Does he see himself as a cultural ambassador? Zenón laughs, then says, “I’ve been getting interested in so much Puerto Rican music over the last decade, so even though I wouldn’t use that term, I’m interested in that concept. I am set on pushing that music forward.”

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