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Miguel Zenon fuses Puerto Rican heritage with American jazz



By **ANDREW HIBBARD**
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Saxophonist Miguel Zenon is kicking off Duke Performances' mini jazz festival WAIL! tonight. The Puerto Rican musician, now living in New York, recently ended a sensational decade that in 2008 alone saw him awarded both a Guggenheim Fellowship and a MacArthur "genius" grant. Zenon will be bringing the result of some of that work to Duke tonight with the Esta Plena Septet. Consisting of his jazz quartet and three purveyors of Puerto Rican plena music, the project is a post-modern fusion of classic jazz with Afro-Caribbean folk music. Andrew Hibbard spoke to Zenon about the project, his influences and more.

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What sparked your interest in plena music for the Esta Plena project?

I've been listening to plena since I was a kid. I grew up around it. It's a pretty common style of music to hear if you live in Puerto Rico, but I would say within the last few years, I started getting more and more interested in it—specifically the history and development of the style. The times I got to visit Puerto Rico I found the music was omnipresent, and I was really interested in the protagonism the music had in this everyday culture. So that was what drew me to pursue this investigation and the project itself.

How did you end up getting into jazz given Puerto Rico's soundscape?

There wasn't that much jazz in Puerto Rico when I was growing up. There actually isn't that much jazz now. I went to a music school when I was growing up there, from around age 11 to age 17. It was mainly classical training with a little popular music here and there. I discovered jazz while at school through some friends listening to recordings and all that. What initially drew my attention to the style was the improvisation aspect to the music. Since I was trained in classical music, that aspect wasn't present.

What has sustained this interest over the years?

Of course as I got more and more into the music, I found that improvisation is not found only in jazz, it's found in all kinds of music. But it wasn't improvisation all by itself. It was a language that was tied to a history and to a development throughout the years. After I discovered that, I put all my focus in studying the history of jazz and the history of my instrument, in order to just fill all the holes I needed to grow as a jazz musician. This is stuff I still do. It's not just something you do very quickly.

How did you approach bridging plena music and jazz?

I've dealt with the idea, not with plena before, but with trying to fuse some elements of Puerto Rican or Caribbean or Latin American music. But specifically on this recording, it was the first recording I was bringing the traditional instruments of the style to. In this case, the hand percussion that is symbolic of the style—the bandero, it's at the heart of it. I brought those instruments and I include some lyrics in some of the songs. The idea was to have two worlds. You have the jazz world, which is represented by the quartet—saxophone, bass, piano, drums—and you have the more folkloric plena world, which is represented by the lyrics and the bandero. When I wrote the music, the idea was for these two worlds to coexist with each other, moving parallel but without compromising the essential elements of each style. We're still playing with a jazz conception in mind, but rhythmically we are living within a corollary that comes from within plena. But I still see it as a jazz record.

Were there any difficulties for your quartet in adapting to the plena musicians?

It was pretty easy. I've been working with these guys for a long time. With the percussionists, I knew them too. I was very careful and conscious of wanting to make everyone feel as comfortable as possible, and I wanted everyone to be able to feel they could play the music to the best of their ability. So when I wrote the music, I was thinking that I didn't want the guys playing percussion to have something weird they'd have to adapt to. The music was written around the rhythms they played. They just played the way they play, and the music that we played was built on top of that.

Given your already global focus, how did your tour of West Africa in 2003 contribute to your musical development?

A lot of the music we play in America is directly connected to the music we brought over from Africa 500 years ago. But the thing that I found when I went over there—I kind of knew this already—but what hit me in the face was how I was able to see all this stuff from the roots. We visited Nigeria, Congo, Cameroon, a lot of places that have a strong connection to the music we play in America. A lot of the rhythms we're playing, people related to immediately. Even some of the Puerto Rican or Caribbean rhythms we play, they would have the same rhythms with a different name there. They related to it like it was their music. It made me see things in a different way—not necessarily Puerto Rican, Cuban or American music. It's all kind of connected, and it's all variations on the same root.

What do you make of your explosion of success and popularity over the past 10 years?

For me, it's a whole different perspective. I guess what you're talking about is a certain measure of success that's hard for me to measure. What's really helped me is that I've been able to be in contact with a lot of important figures in the style of music I've been working on. I've been able to play with a lot of legendary musicians, and share the stage with a lot of great musicians. This has put me in some sort of limelight but prepared me to be a better musician, better leader. A lot of other things have happened like the Guggenheim and the MacArthur [fellowships]. The combination of all those other things have helped. I honestly feel these are opportunities that have been presented to me that could have been presented to anyone. I did my best to prepare for when these opportunities arrived, and I feel that this preparation and trying to be focused and be at my best, this is what helped me the most.

What are your thoughts on playing in Durham?

I'm really looking forward to it. Whenever I talk to anyone from there, I always say the same thing and it's that I happen to be a really big fan of the Blue Devils and I've been trying to get some tickets for a while. But I'll be rooting for them, and I'm looking forward to playing there because I've never played [at Duke] before and I'm excited to be close to the team.

Miguel Zenon will perform tonight in Reynolds Industries Theater at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$22-28 or \$5 for students



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