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Posted at 02:30 PM ET, 02/19/2010

## Be specific: Miguel Zenón on perfecting a mix

By Sarah Godfrey

Alto saxophonist **Miguel Zenón** pulled off a jazz first in 2008 by receiving both a Guggenheim Fellowship and a MacArthur genius grant in the same year. The Guggenheim award allowed him to create his latest album "Esta Plena," which fuses modern jazz with the plena music of his native Puerto Rico.

Zenón, who performs with his Miguel Zenón Quartet at the [Sixth & I Historic Synagogue](#) on Saturday, spoke with Click Track about the process of mixing two beloved musical genres, his first attempt at writing lyrics, and what plena musicians back home think of the new album.

### What were the common elements of jazz and plena that initially caught your ear and made you think they would work well when combined?

Well, the roots of the music are the same. In the case of jazz music, for example, jazz is considered American folk music, along with blues, gospel. It's a music that's African in nature, there are elements of call and response, and plena has that as well. Plena and jazz are contemporaries born around same time, although plena took a lot longer to develop than jazz. Plena stayed in its shell a long time, it didn't change until the last 20, 30 years.

So, when I was approaching this, I'm playing plena, but still within a jazz conception, still being respectful of rhythmic language plena represents. The plena rhythm gave us the rhythmic language, and the melodic language and harmonic language are coming from jazz--that's where combination happens.

*(The reaction back home and writing with lyrics, after the jump.)*

### You grew up listening to plena, you've been releasing jazz recordings for the better part of a decade - why put the two sounds together now? Why do this project now?

I grew up listening to the music when I was a kid, it was not music that was new to me; what's new to me is the interest to learn more about the history and development of the music. Growing up, I didn't pay attention - it was just music to me. I didn't realize how special it was for us to have this music that developed in Puerto Rico.

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It all kind of started as personal desire to learn more about music and the history of plena. I was fed in a way, because over the last few years I've had kind of a lot of exposure hanging with musicians that play this kind of music for a living. Usually I go to Puerto Rico for the holidays, down there plena is big over the holidays, and I found myself in that scene, playing a little bit. This kind of started as a desire to learn more, and as I was doing that, I started writing music, and it kind of grew into project of its own.

Have you heard anything from the musicians you played with in Puerto Rico and what they think of the project?

What I've gathered so far, from being in Puerto Rico over the holidays, is that it was actually well received by the traditional musicians. It was a very nice feeling for me, to see they received it as a tribute to them and the music they loved, because that's something that I was shooting for - trying to give the music exposure and put it out there for people who didn't know of it, didn't know how rich it is.

In talking about the new album, you recently said that people need to let go of ego and the attitude of "that's theirs and this is ours," when it comes to music - what did you mean by that?

I was talking specifically about the folkloric side of plena - it developed in Puerto Rico, and Puerto Ricans are very proud of our music and our culture. Plena is Puerto Rican music, but at the same time, you have to be conscious that Caribbean music and Latin American music has a common root, which in many ways can be traced to Africa. Even though plena was born in Puerto Rico, it would be impossible without the influence of music from other Latin American countries.

And plena has influenced other Latin music - by studying the history of this music, this was something I realized. The same way plena is ours, it's also very universally Latin American, in that you can find similar music in all kinds of places. It gives you just a little wider view of Latin American folklore, and our roots.

Half of "Esta Plena" is instrumentals, and the other half is compositions with vocals...

Writing the music that has lyrics was a little harder for me, because it was something I had never done before. I basically approached it as a kind of tip of my hat to the tradition of plena lyrics. Traditional plena lyrics are strong, one of the main characteristics is the lyrical side. I wasn't really trying to push it in terms of trying to be too poetic. I tried to stick to tradition, and it kind of flowed in a natural way.

Any plans to do something like "Esta Plena" again?

There are a lot of possibilities not only with Puerto Rican music, but all kinds of Latin American music. For me, it's something I do organically, I don't want to take some obscure style and fuse it just to fuse it. It really has to make sense to me. I am very interested in learning more about music from my own country and Latin America in general. The more I learn, the more it will find its way into my own music and eventually, the idea is that this becomes a natural part of my development - it will just kind of come.

By Sarah Godfrey | 02:30 PM ET, 02/19/2010

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