

Management

Mariah Wilkins
phone/fax: 212.426.3282
cell: 646.361.3515
e-mail: mariahwilkins@earthlink.net

Booking

Myles Weinstein/Unlimited Myles
phone: 732.566.2881
fax: 732.566.8157
e-mail: myles@unlimitedmyles.com
www.unlimitedmyles.com

Miguel Zenón

www.miguelzenon.com
miguelmusic@miguelzenon.com

Miguel Zenón Esta Plena

Earthy and sophisticated, the music of Esta Plena suggests a summing up of the work of saxophonist and composer Miguel Zenón thus far. It is rooted in the traditional plena music of Zenón's native Puerto Rico – reinterpreted with the sensibility, the approach and the tools of 21st century jazz.

Zenón's first new work since receiving both a MacArthur and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2008 – the first time a jazz musician has been awarded both on a single calendar year – Esta Plena is the direct result of the Guggenheim Fellowship, awarded to him for musical composition. Also called the "genius grant," the no-strings-attached MacArthur Fellowship recognized Zenón for "drawing from a variety of jazz idioms and the music of his native Puerto Rico to create complex, accessible sounds that overflow with emotion."

Esta Plena could be viewed as a follow-up of sorts to *Jíbaro*, Zenón's brilliant 2005 reworking of the country music of Puerto Rico. "It is definitely connected to the idea behind *Jíbaro*, in that we took something that was very folkloric and put it in a jazz context," says Zenón, "but on this record we went a step further by incorporating some of the actual instruments used in the music which are so central to this style. Because of the Guggenheim, I was able to do more extensive research, go deeper than I had for *Jíbaro*."

"Initially, what drove these projects was a personal desire to know more about my own culture," he says. "After I left Puerto Rico, I immersed myself in jazz for a very long time so I wasn't really dealing with Puerto Rican music. I had been exposed to it growing up, but it wasn't until I began writing my own music that I really started to pay close attention to it. That's when I decided to explore this music and find out more about my roots, who I really am, where I came from ... and I felt it was important to study it at a very fundamental, core level. That's how these projects were born."

In his liner notes, Zenón defines plena as "a by-product of Spanish Colonization, combining African rhythmic syncopations with European harmonies and melodic cadences." Moreover, since its emergence in the 19th century in Ponce, a city in the southern coast of Puerto Rico, plena has been the music of the disenfranchised while functioning as an oral newspaper. Singing to the rhythms of the panderos, or hand

held hand-held drums, the pleneros, or plena singers, "described the events of everyday life as experienced by the impoverished classes of the Puerto Rican population," explains Zenón. "These lyrics eventually expanded to include themes of patriotism, social protest, love, humor, and just plain appreciation for the plena and the pandero."

He says that he approached Esta Plena as if bringing together two bands – his standard jazz quartet and a plena group – both going at once. It's an idea that demands special, and committed, musicians, and Zenón has been able to work for the past five years with the same quartet comprised of Luis Perdomo, piano; Hans Glawischnig, bass; and Henry Cole, drums. Such consistency is a rarity in jazz.

"I've been so lucky to have the same group to work with all this time," says Zenón. "When you play with people for so long you basically know how they play, how they are going to react and how they might bring their personalities to a tune. So after awhile, you are definitely writing for specific musicians, for how they are going to play it."

In part as a nod to the tradition, in part as a way of enriching the overall sound of the project, half of the tracks in Esta Plena have lyrics and are sung. "At first, I was not going to write any lyrics," says Zenón. "I had intended to write instrumental songs. But the more I listened to the music, the more I became interested in writing lyrics. I realized that this was very different from *Jíbaro* because jíbaro music is actually a big family of styles from different regions while plena has only one rhythm; there are no variations. So, I was trying to find different ways to use that rhythm and bring variety to the music. Adding lyrics helped me do that."

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To his surprise, Zenón found that, when writing the charts for *Esta Plena*, he “didn’t really feel that the saxophone was the focus of the music. It was all about the panderos – and everything was built around it,” he explains. “Of course, it’s my recording so I take solos, but when I wrote the music, everything came from those drums and that pattern that defines plena. The saxophone is there to add texture, especially in the songs with lyrics.”

As personal as it was for Zenón, musically, reclaiming music with deep folk roots also evokes a jazz tradition. Even beboppers, while creating some of the most complex and intellectually challenging popular music ever created, held on close to the blues, both as a reference and a place to connect with their audience.

“Having the folk roots gives the music a firm ground and gives me a lot of freedom to try a lot of things but still have that solid base,” says Zenón. “That folkloric root is so essential in music. It’s the purest music. It’s not music played by trained musicians but music played by regular people. This is music from the people. This is music that can start a party anywhere. It’s simple and basic, and accessible, but at the same time, it’s so deep. That’s what we want to do with this record: try to keep the music out, in the street.”

For Zenón, *Esta Plena* represents not just another trip back home, but a rediscovery.

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ABOUT MIGUEL ZENÓN

Miguel Zenón was born in Santurce, a district of San Juan, Puerto Rico, on December 30th, 1976. He has played music since the age of 10. "There was an old guy in the project where my family lived who would give free music lessons if you passed his test, and I sought him out," he recalls. He taught me to read [music], solfege, and those kinds of things. We had already been given recorders in elementary school, and when my music teacher at school heard how much I had learned, he suggested that I apply to Escuela Libre de Música, San Juan's music high school."

At Escuela Libre, and for the next six years, he studied saxophone with Angel Marrero. By 11th grade he had discovered jazz, but there was no jazz training at the school and he "had to learn jazz harmony by ear." A year later, he was accepted by Berklee College of Music, in Boston, "but my family couldn't afford the tuition... so I decided to stay in Puerto Rico and study music at home."

As it turns out, the following year, in the spring of 1995, Berklee sent faculty to Puerto Rico to conduct its first workshops and award its first scholarships on the island, and Zenón won a scholarship that allowed him to enroll in the school.

While at Berklee, Zenón not only received his first jazz instruction but was also thrust into a world of young, talented musicians who shared his musical hunger, such as Panamanian pianist and composer Danilo Pérez. In 1998, encouraged by Pérez, he moved to New York to study for a Master's Degree at the Manhattan School of Music. This led to meeting fellow Puerto Rican

saxophonist David Sánchez, eventually becoming a member of his sextet, and also working with artists and groups such as bassist Charlie Haden, the Mingus Big Band, the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, saxophonist Steve Coleman, Argentine pianist and bandleader Guillermo Klein, and The SFJAZZ Collective.

Zenón received his Master's degree in 2001. That year he also recorded his album debut as a leader, *Looking Forward* (Fresh Sound New Talent), and was on his way. He debuted on Marsalis Music in 2004 with *Ceremonial*, which was followed by *Jíbaro*, in 2005, and last year's *Awake*. In 2008, he received the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship and the MacArthur "genius grant" and recorded his fourth Marsalis Music release *Esta Plena*. This year finds him touring worldwide in support of his new release as well as returning to higher education, this time as a faculty member of the esteemed New England Conservatory.