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NY CULTURE

Jazz Man Revisits His Two Homes

Alto Saxophonist Miguel Zenón Presents a Multimedia Piece at Carnegie Hall

By LARRY BLUMENFELD

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When the alto saxophonist Miguel Zenón arrived in the U.S. in 1996 to attend the Boston's Berklee College of Music, he wasn't thinking much about the *bomba* and *plena* music of his childhood in the Santurce neighborhood of San Juan, Puerto Rico, or the *jibaro* songs popular around Christmas.

"I was focused on learning how to play jazz," Mr. Zenón said during an interview near his Washington Heights home. "That became my identity."

It is one he has worn well. When Mr. Zenón, who is 36 years old, was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in 2008, the organization cited his potential for "creating an entirely new jazz language for the 21st century."



Jazz saxophonist Miguel Zenón in New York last month KEITH BEDFORD for *The Wall Street Journal*

How he does so reflects a bilingual identity, rooted in his Puerto Rican heritage and his New York home.

He'd spent time in the city as a boy visiting relatives, yet only after moving to Manhattan in 1998 was he struck on a personal level by Puerto Rican flags hanging from apartment windows, and by more subtle hints of the island wherever he turned.

"I realized there was a culture from my homeland here," Mr. Zenón said, "that there were ways to be Puerto Rican without being born in Puerto Rico."

Such revelations anchor "Identities Are Changeable: Tales From the Diaspora," the 90-minute multimedia piece Mr. Zenón will present at Carnegie's Zankel Hall on Saturday, for which he expanded his working quartet into a 12-piece ensemble and collaborated with the video artist

David Dempewolf.

Mr. Zenón found inspiration in "The Diaspora Strikes Back: Caribeño Tales of Learning and Turning," a book by Juan Flores based on interviews with emigrants who returned to Puerto Rico from New York.

"I thought I could incorporate this interview strategy in my music," Mr. Zenón said. "I just had no idea what that would mean."

The chance to find out arrived in 2011 via a commission from Montclair State University's Peak Performances performing-arts series. Mr. Zenón began by videotaping interviews with seven Puerto Rican Americans, all friends or acquaintances, including Mr. Flores, who directs Latino Studies at New York University; Sonia Manzano, the actress who played Maria on "Sesame Street"; bassist Luques Curtis and percussionist Camilo Molina; and Mr. Zenón's sister, Patricia.

"I asked pretty much the same things to everyone," he said, "the essential question being 'What does it mean to be Puerto Rican?'" As Mr. Zenón analyzed his footage, themes emerged: Do you speak English or Spanish? How is tradition passed on?

"These themes became compositions," he said. He played that music at quartet gigs even as he set about scoring it for a larger ensemble. He met Mr. Dempewolf, who had worked with pianist Jason Moran on "In My Mind," a multimedia piece about Thelonious Monk.

Mr. Dempewolf photographed key spots in the lives of Mr. Zenón's interviewees—a Bronx staircase, the mural outside the Lower East Side's Nuyorican Poets Café. He manipulated these images, often to abstraction, and combined them with Mr. Zenón's edited interviews to create the short films that complement the work's seven musical sections.

"What surprised me," said Mr. Dempewolf, "was the level of rigor Miguel applied to his ideas, and how well they interact with his music."

Mr. Zenón sought "to use the interviews almost like an instrument," he said.

In a YouTube video of one performance, the words "bomba" and "plena," as spoken by Mr. Molina, become rhythmic elements—slowed down, sped up and cued by Mr. Zenón through foot pedals.

He first played the work in Montclair in 2012 and performed it most recently at San Francisco's SFJazz Center, where he serves as a musical director. "But in many ways," he said, "those performances were preparation for this one. This is ultimately about New York as much as Puerto Rico."

For the pianist Luis Perdomo, who has performed with Mr. Zenón for more than a decade and who moved to the U.S. from his native Venezuela in 1993, the project had personal impact. "It made me realize for the first time that I straddle two very different worlds," he said.

As Mr. Zenón goes back and forth between Puerto Rico and New York, his career mirrors Mr. Flores's academic focus. He produces concerts in rural Puerto Rican towns, each focused on the legacy of an iconic American jazz musician. Though his signature quartet is New York-based, his 2013 release, "Oye! Live in Puerto Rico" (Miel), was recorded at a San Juan club, with a quartet of Puerto Rican players.

The tension between contrasting rhythmic cycles, prevalent in all of Mr. Zenón's music, becomes an organizing principle in "Identities Are Changeable," and metaphor for a contrapuntal life.

"The thing I've learned from this project is that Puerto Rican identity doesn't mean just one thing," he said. "And though I've never been a flag waver, I realized I'm a little more proud of mine than I thought."

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