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Miguel Zenón and the Rhythm Collective
Oye!!! Live in Puerto Rico (Miel Music)

The life of a jazz musician is often about fusing life experiences, creative coalitions, new ideas about rhythm, content, flow and innovative musical languages. Saxophonist Miguel Zenón has long been occupied with finding common musical threads in the North American jazz tradition and the music of the African diaspora in the Caribbean and Latin America, and his newest project, Oye!!! Live in Puerto Rico, is his latest triumph in this quest.

Taking a break from recording with his usual quartet, Zenón's own Miel Music is releasing a live recording with the Rhythm Collective, a group that first came together in 2003 to participate in the Jazz Ambassadors Program, sponsored at the time by the US State Department and the Kennedy Center.

"We made that trip about ten years ago and got the opportunity to tour several countries in West Africa for about a month and a half," said Zenón. "All the music on this album was either developed during that trip or inspired by the experience." The Rhythm Collective is comprised of Tony Escapa on drums, Aldemar Valentín on bass, and Reinaldo de Jesús on percussion; all of them native Puerto Ricans and some of the most coveted musicians in their respective fields.

Recorded in 2011 at Taller Cé, a short-lived performance space in San Juan, the album is a riveting, dynamic shift from much of Zenón's previous work.

"I've always enjoyed the sound of the chord-less jazz trio, but I wanted to do something different with it and incorporate Caribbean and Puerto Rican music," said Zenón. "The idea for this band was to focus more on the rhythmic aspects of the music. There are no chordal instruments used, in other words no pianos or guitars stating the harmony. This makes the music a bit more open harmonically, giving more importance to single melodic lines. But at the end of the day, the drums and the percussion are what drive these tunes."

The palpable energy that emerges from the recording represents Zenón's quest to bring greater jazz awareness to Puerto Rico. After winning the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (also known as the "genius grant") in 2008, Zenón has sponsored a series of concerts in small rural towns around the island designed to educate audiences about the music of jazz greats such as John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk. Although the Rhythm Collective concerts were not part of that series, the shows captured here at Taller Cé were recorded in part with funding from the MacArthur Fellowship.

Rather than the hard-driving intensity of Zenón's work with his regular quartet, the Rhythm Collective is sparer in approach, more about creating an atmospheric space where rhythmic pulses created by different members of the group could connect.

The album begins with two unorthodox covers—Tito Puente's cha-cha-cha Oye Como Va, which was in turn remade into a Latin rock classic by Carlos Santana, and Cuban trovador Silvio Rodríguez's El Necio.

Kicked off by a string of soulful Zenón riffs, the opening track's rhythmic structure is derived from changüí, an Afro-Cuban song form that preceded the son, laden with African influence from that island's Oriente province. "The rhythmic accents fall right before the beat instead of on the beat," said Zenón. "The idea was to go back and forth between the changüí feel and the original feel, creating an illusion of where the beat actually is (before the beat) and where it sounds like it is (on the beat)."

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El Necio, a song originally recorded by Rodríguez with just a guitar accompaniment, serves as a perfect vehicle for Zenón and company. "Silvio is one of my favorite musicians," said Zenón. "We wanted to make it a tour de force, shifting between an Afro feel and a swing feel. We stayed true to the original melody and improvised on the form using a more modal approach."

The effect is similar to Pat Metheny's debut recording *Bright Sized Life*, with Zenón's sax substituting for the guitar. By allowing bassist Valentín to riff in a way that transforms the electric bass into a melodic instrument, the ensemble makes its own statement on the original song's idealism and self-reflection.

Hypnotized was inspired by a Paul Motian Trio performance that Zenón had attended some years back—he literally felt hypnotized by the drummer's strategic use of repetition in his compositions. *JOS Nigeria*, named after a city in the Nigerian plateau, is a tune with strong intimations of Fela-style Afrobeat and an attempt by the Collective to capture the good times and infectious energy they experienced while traveling in West Africa.

Finally, *Double Edge*, is another ambitious fusion of abstract rhythmic ideas with the ground-level praxis of Afro-Caribbean song form. "We play around with the idea of putting various short rhythmic patterns within a larger phrase and creating a flow within that," said Zenón. "It's a complex pattern that falls in odd places in terms of accents, eventually followed by a bridge that breaks into a more continuous feel. In this case the bridge connects all the different elements within the composition, leading into a transition that brings us back to the original drone."

In the end, *Oye!!! Live in Puerto Rico* fulfills the listener's desire for a new spin on a familiar rhythmic tradition, from a loftier, improvisational perspective. As a live performance, the recording contains the energy created by the interaction with the audience, raised on Afro-Caribbean dance music, but yearning to break free to a new space.

"In this band we all happen to be Puerto Rican and grew up around this kind of music," said Zenón. "Even though what we're doing here is centered around a rhythm thing, the experimental part was second nature to us. We are all already interested in fusions between material that could be considered edgy, so it was fairly easy for us to push things a little bit; just to see how far we could take the combination of all these elements while still feeling comfortable within our individual musical personalities."

So on this experimental stage, in the heart of the Caribbean, Zenón and his comrades find old grooves lead to newer directions. Latin standards yield different kinds of musical memories, ancient dances become drone-y meditations, but the converging lines of rhythm keep pushing straight ahead.

Oye!!! It's time to listen.