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Feature

Miguel Zenon

Interview by Eric Nemeyer | Photo by Jimmy Katz

Hear Miguel Zenon at
Hostos Community College
Bronx, NY • Friday, March 20
Visit www.MiguelZenon.com

Ji: Could you discuss your 2014 CD *Identities Are Changeable* and the evolution of that recording from initial concept to completed work of art?

MZ: This recording is inspired by the idea of

national identity from the perspective of the Puerto Rican community in the United States, specifically in the New York City area. I wrote the music around a series of interviews with various individuals, all of them New Yorkers of Puerto Rican descent. Those conversations led to specific themes such as “Home”, “Language” and “Identity”. Those themes eventually turned into the compositions on the CD. The whole idea of “Identity” and the phenomenon that is the Puerto Rican community in New York City is something

that has interested me for a very long time. My father lived in New York for a long time and I have a lot family here from his side. When I was about ten years old I came over to New York City for the first time to visit them and got my first taste of the community here. It felt then as being around something very familiar—same language, same food, music, etcetera.—but very alien at the same time—high rise buildings, subway trains... Even at that young age it had a profound effect on me.

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Miguel Zenon

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Later in life, when I moved to the States for good, first to Boston and then to New York, I was able to experience these same feelings

“A lot of these lessons also had to do with what *not* to do: how *not* to treat your band mates, etcetera. You learn by example and by making mistakes, which I think is one of the greatest things about this music.”

from a more mature perspective. It was just amazing to me to see this level of commitment to an Identity, especially from individuals who could barely speak Spanish and had visited the island only a few times, if any at all. It all seemed contradictory to me at the

time—a feeling that has changed dramatically after working on this project. In any case, my interest in the matter continued growing the longer I lived here and away from Puerto Rico. About 4 or 5 years ago I met a gentleman by the name of Juan Flores after a gig in the city. We quickly realized that we had a lot of friends in common. Juan—one of the greatest academic voices on the subject of the

Puerto Rican community in the US, who sadly passed away a few months ago—gave me a copy of his book, *The Diaspora Strikes Back*. The central element of the book was a series of interviews he conducted with individuals with Caribbean heritage—Puerto Rican, Do-

minican, Cuban. On those interviews he would speak to them about their relationships with their specific countries and how that had shaped their identities as human beings. Around that same time I was approached by Peak Performances at Montclair University to write a commission for them, and it occurred to me to write something that would combine a large ensemble interacting with audio and video samples from interviews that dealt with the subject of Identity from a Puerto Rican perspective. David Dempewolf, a video artist who had worked with Jason Moran and was highly recommended by him, put together the video installment for the piece. We performed it in its entirety a few times before recording in early 2014.

JJ: What were the challenges to your musical passion and pursuits that you experienced growing up in a housing project in San Juan Puerto Rico?

MZ: I grew up in a place called “Residencial Luis Llorens Torres”, the largest housing project in the Caribbean—150 buildings and thousands of residents. Although it is considered one of the roughest places in the island if not the roughest, my childhood there was not rough at all. The people in my household made sure that I stayed on the right track and that I had a good circle of friends. Plus I was a disciplined kid, made aware early on about the

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consequences of poor decisions and bad company. It was in this neighborhood where I had my first formal exposure to music, from Ernesto Vigoreaux, a gentlemen who taught music to kids in the neighborhood free of charge.

JJ: How did your classical saxophone studies prepare you for your subsequent interests and developments in jazz?

MZ: I attended a performing arts middle school-high school called “Escuela Libre de Musica” from age 11 to 17. My training there was exclusively classical, but it was very good. I was trained extensively on ear training, solfege, classical harmony and ensemble playing. When I eventually came over to the states to study jazz all this training helped immensely, because I was very well prepared on all my fundamentals and on the technical aspects of the instrument.

JJ: What were some of the experiences, recordings or artists that sparked your interest in jazz and opened the door for you to develop your skills as an improviser?

MZ: My first exposure to jazz came around age 15. Some of my friends at school starting passing around tapes and I eventually got to hear Charlie Parker for the first time. I was very impressed by his control, technique and sound; but when I realized that he was mostly improvising I was blown away. The concept

JJ: What were the circumstances that led you to study at Berklee College of Music?

MZ: When I decided that I wanted to study jazz more formally it was quickly evident that I had to leave Puerto Rico to do so. There where no higher education institutions for jazz at that time, plus the scene was very small. I did a bit of research and it seemed like Berklee was the best option for I was looking for then. Unfortunately my family could not provide me with any financial support, so after graduating high school I stayed in Puerto Rico for about a year and a half, basically working and saving money. Eventually I was able to combine a few scholarships with my savings and moved to Boston in the spring of 1996.

JJ: Who were the artists or mentors with whom you connected in Boston that inspired you and perhaps opened the door for your move to New York City?

MZ: I got a lot from my teachers during my time at Berklee. People like Billy Pierce, Hal Crook and Ed Tomassi inspired me tremendously. Plus I was greatly inspired by my fellow students, most of whom were a lot more advance than I was in terms of the jazz language and indirectly forced me to push myself harder in order to progress musically. People like Avishai and Anat Cohen, Jeremy Pelt, Antonio Sanchez and Jaleel Shaw were all at Berklee while I was there. But the person who had the most profound effect on me while I was in Boston was Danilo Perez. Danilo was one of my greatest sources of inspiration back then—still is, actually. Not only because of his music, but because—as a Latin American musician playing jazz mu-



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sort of took his place as my mentor once I moved to New York City.

JJ: Could you share some of the words of wisdom or motivation that you received, or conversations that you may have had with artists or mentors in or out of the music world - that have developed as key understandings for you?

MZ: They are too many to mention, really. Some of the greatest lessons have come from my musical elders: how to present yourself on stage; how to organize a set of music; how to act as a sideman and as a bandleader; how to deal with the road, etcetera. A lot of these lessons also had to do with what *not* to do: how *not* to treat your band mates, etcetera. You learn by example and by making mistakes, which I think is one of the greatest things about this music.

JJ: How did your additional schooling at the Manhattan School of Music contribute to your development as a performer and or composer?

MZ: Once I graduated for Berklee I wasn't sure about what to do. Going to New York

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“I’m very aware that, although recognition might make me and my music more visible to some, it does not make me better as an artist.”

of improvisation is obviously not exclusive of jazz music and was not entirely new to me, but I had never witnessed at this level. Jazz in many ways represented to me the perfect combination of something that was both heartfelt and intellectual. From there I found others: Miles, Coltrane, Cannonball, Monk. I became obsessed with jazz and eventually realized that this was what I wanted to do with my life.

—he represented a lot of the things I wanted to achieve. I introduced myself to him after a concert and he was immediately very receptive and welcoming. I would get together with him constantly, to play or talk about music and life. I figured out a lot of stuff about myself because of his help, and will be eternally grateful to him for that. It was also through Danilo that I met David Sanchez, who

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made a bit of sense, because I had family there, but I didn't feel comfortable with moving there without a pre-set agenda. So I opted for graduate school, which gave me something to do while acclimating to the city. Manhattan School of Music was one of my first options and they gave me a good scholarship, so I went there. I got the most there from Dick Oatts, my saxophone teacher there, and again from my peers—guys like Dan Weiss, Miles Okazaki and Ben Gerstein. But I also got to take some survey and composition classes from the classical department there, which really opened up my mind and ears from a composer's perspective.

JJ: What have you discovered about conducting business from your various activities as a sideman, as a leader, as a record label artist, and so on?

MZ: I've learned that the creative and business sides of music are very different. The creative side is in many ways that ever-growing thing that keeps you going, and the business side is sort of like a game that you have to learn how to play in order to survive.

“Respect the tradition, respect your peers, work as hard as possible, be professional and responsible, have confidence without losing your focus, be honest about your music and be proactive when dealing with the music business side of things.”

Strangely enough, both are almost equally important, although it is very hard to stay on top of both.

JJ: What were the challenges that you experienced when you arrived in New York?

MZ: I would imagine that the challenges I encountered then are the same a young musician would encounter these days. Most of the musicians we admire are based in or around New York, so by being there you are basically in competition with them. Plus, there are a lot of young musicians like you, eager to make an impact and get better. So, being able to make a living from music becomes a lot harder than it would be elsewhere. It takes a lot of hard work and even some luck to be able to stay in the city for a long time. There were a lot of

great things about it also. Like being able to interact with some of your heroes and learn from them. Also feeling part of a community, a collective of individuals that, although very different, are all striving for the same things.

JJ: Having been awarded a MacArthur Genius Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, among other accolades and high profile media coverage, how have you maintained your balance and avoided allowing these experiences to inflate your ego?

MZ: It is, of course, very rewarding to be recognized for your work. In some ways it makes you feel that is worth the grind and that you're on the right path. But on the other hand I'm very aware that, although recognition might make me and my music more visible to some, it does not make me better as an artist. I'm a firm believer on being my own judge and not losing sight on what I need to work on to get better, all on my own terms.

JJ: What words of advice would you offer to other musical artists, in the jazz world, that might lead them on a path to develop their lives and experience the kind of notoriety you have attracted in the past few years?

MZ: This is what I feel has worked for me: Respect the tradition, respect your peers, work as hard as possible, be professional and re-

sponsible, have confidence without losing your focus, be honest about your music and be proactive when dealing with the music business side of things.

JJ: What are some of the noteworthy understandings that you have gleaned from your associations with members of the SF Jazz Collective—such as Bobby Hutcherson? Joshua Redman? Others?

MZ: Working with The Collective is probably one of the most fulfilling musical experiences of my life. It is a leader-less ensemble that functions as a true collective. We work on a new book of music every season, so it also works as a composer's workshop, something that has been very helpful to me. We are treated very well and with a lot respect by

SFJAZZ and get a two-week rehearsal period every season to put this music together. PLUS I've gotten to play with some of the greatest exponents of this music: Joshua, Bobby, Brian Blade, Nicholas Payton, Renee Rosnes, Dave Douglas, Joe Lovano, Eric Harland and many others. I personally couldn't ask much more out of a musical situation that what I have with this ensemble.

JJ: How has your heritage from Puerto Rico contributed to the development of your voice, sound and vocabulary as an improviser in jazz?

MZ: Even though I grew up in Puerto Rico, surrounded by a lot of music and culture, I didn't really start paying serious attention to that stuff until much later in life. It wasn't until after I graduated Berklee and starting taking my first attempts at writing my own music that I realized that I had never studied Puerto Rican music from a musician's perspective. So I made it sort of a personal goal of mine to go do just that, get a bit deeper into the development and history of that music. The more I did it, the more natural it felt. Eventually I started identifying elements from Puerto Rican, Caribbean and Latin-American music in general that I could incorporate into my music in an organic and honest way.

JJ: Could you talk about how your artistry and playing has developed from *Jibaro* (2005), and continuing with *Esta Plena* (2009) and *Alma Adentro: The Puerto Rican Songbook* (2011) (both Grammy-nominated), and *Oye!!! Live In Puerto Rico* (2013) and now into 2015—during the ten year period? What changes have you observed about yourself over this period?

MZ: Like I mentioned before, a lot of my own efforts as a band leader during the past decade have been concentrated on the music and culture of Puerto Rico, and the Caribbean, and finding ways to balance that with ideas that come from the jazz tradition. I still feel like I have a long way to go and many more things left to explore, but I feel comfortable about the road I'm in at this point in my life.

JJ: The core idea of your new CD *Identities Are Changeable* is based on a series of English-language interviews you conducted with seven New Yorkers of Puerto Rican descent—inspired after you read the book—*The Diaspora Strikes Back: Caribeño Tales of Learning and Turning*, a book by cultural theorist Juan Flores. What kinds of discoveries or enlightenment did you glean about human nature as a result of those interviews? How did that undertaking give you greater insight into yourself and your artistic pursuits and development?

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MZ: I went into the project with one big question in mind: What does it mean to be Puerto Rican? Or for that matter: What does it mean to be from anywhere? What defines our National and Cultural Identity? Of course I understand now that there is no “correct answer” to that question. It depends so much on each personality, each life experience, opportunities that are presented to us and what we decide to do with them. The variety of responses I encountered during the process was really the most enlightening thing for me. On top of that it made me think about my place here in the United States, having lived here now for more than half of my life. It also brought family into perspective: My daughter Elena was born in New York City, and even though my wife, who is also Puerto Rican, and I will do everything in our power to make sure that she’s exposed to as much as we were exposed growing up in the island, we do understand that eventually our daughter’s identity will be hers to decide.

JJ: *Identities Are Changeable* is composed and arranged for a 16 piece ensemble - big band instrumentation. Who are some of the

JJ: What kind of guidance and or inspiration did Charlie Haden provide you during your experiences on and or off the stage working with him?

MZ: I met Charlie in 2003 at the North Sea Jazz Festival. He came to listen to our band and we talked for a long time after the show, mostly about music we liked, like Charlie Parker and Silvio Rodriguez. He mentioned a few projects he had in mind that he would like me to be a part of: One was *Land of the Sun*, a project he was putting together in collaboration with Gonzalo Rubalcaba. The other was a revival of *The Liberation Music Orchestra*. Working with Charlie was a highlight of my life so far, not only musically but also on a personal level. He *loved* music, was incredibly passionate about it and we could talk for hours about specific musicians and recordings. And no matter what, when it came time to play he left it all there; gave it all to the music. A very special human being who will be dearly missed.

JJ: How do your activities as an educator at New England Conservatory of Music support or challenge your artistic pursuits?

MZ: I’ve come to really enjoy teaching. It makes me discover things (even things about myself) that I wouldn’t have discovered other-

MZ: Is hard to tell where is all going, since it seems to change almost daily. I try not to stress about it too much to be honest. Just stay the course, working hard and staying focus on the things that matter the most.

JJ: What are your perspectives on balancing a purity of purpose about creating music that you hear and want to see come to life, with the simultaneous attractor and consideration of trying to connect with and or please your current and potential audiences?

MZ: I think it is obvious that when we make music we want others to enjoy it and respect it. Sharing is sort of an essential part of what this is all about. But I feel that, from my creative standpoint, making music to please others is not only dis-honest but also counter-productive. The music we make should be an honest reflection of us as artists, and we should set our own standards in terms of what deserves to be shared and what does not. We should be celebrating the fact that we’ve been provided with a vehicle to express ourselves as artists. If, after taking all these things into consideration, our music is also recognized and accepted, then that gives us something else to celebrate. But it should not be our priority.

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arrangers and what are some of the big band, and or other compositions and scores that you have studied that have contributed to your own development as a writer?

MZ: It helped to get a lot of experience playing in large ensembles myself: The Village Vanguard Orchestra, The Mingus Big Band, Jason Lindner’s Big Band, Guillermo Klein y Los Guachos, and many others. That definitely put a sound in my head, and gave me an idea of how it felt to deal with something like that. When going into the project I did check out a lot music: from Duke Ellington, Bob Brookmeyer and Bill Holman to more modern composers like John Hollenbeck and Darcy James Argue. It helped me figure out what would suit both me and the project best.

wise and I feel it makes me a better musician. Plus I get the opportunity to share with younger musicians and maybe help them find the tools that could make them become better at what they do. And New England Conservatory is a really good place to teach. Students there are, for the most part, very talented, hard working and respectful, and the folks who run the department do a very good job at it.

JJ: Given the nature of the niche that jazz is, the current reality of this being a contracting market, the challenges of selling prerecorded music, because of illegal downloading, copyright infringement and so on—what kind of vision do you have for yourself about experiencing some of your hopes and goals in the next five or even ten years?

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