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Miguel Zenón

PLIABILITY & THRUST

By Jim Macnie // Photos by Jimmy Katz

Seems like everywhere you go, Miguel Zenón is somehow involved with dance. Last summer at the Newport Jazz Festival, the saxophonist was tearing up an outdoor stage with a storm of alto lines. Lots of audience members were swaying in their seats, but one particular fan at the edge of the tent was lifting his heels in a truly committed way—turns out Joe Lovano likes to get his bounce on. No one can blame him; Zenón's quartet can be a fierce little swing machine when it gets going, stretching a post-bop lingo to fit some wildly propulsive time signatures.

The Puerto Rico native has no problem moving his body to music that he's stimulated by, either. On stage he renders a clockwork bob 'n' weave motion while flashing out those horn flurries. He even rocks when he's part of an audience. On a January night at New York's Jazz Standard, Zenón was spotted doing some shoulder-shaking while sitting in the front row of a show by Fly—drummer Jeff Ballard's snare commanding everyone to have some kind of rhythmic reaction.

But it's the rotund guy in an aisle seat at a recent Zenón show who's top dog when it comes to shimmying. Sporting a ski parka in a warm New Jersey concert hall, he couldn't resist the thrust of the plena drummers the bandleader had by his side. With pianist Luis Perdomo adding extra depth to the percussive attack by swooping his right hand up and down the keys, there was plenty of tension in the air. Mr. Ski Parka was a dude who—quite correctly—saw little reason to stay still. Finally, during an exclamatory conclusion to "Despedida" from Zenón's *Esta Plena*, he had to let go, leaping forward and bellowing "Puerto Rico!" The

woman behind him didn't follow suit, but she looked like she wanted to.

"It happens," says Zenón. "It's not our intent to make dance music, but yeah, some people really get excited. I can't ever remember seeing people actually dancing while we were playing—maybe at Newport—but if they were, I'm totally cool with it. If we can do what we do and still tap that feeling, fantastic."

Nope, the 31-year-old saxophonist doesn't play dance music per se. *Esta Plena* is a reeds-piano-bass-drums jazz disc bolstered by a trio of hand drummers—*pleneros*. Its feisty tunes are the result of cultural pride, a curious mind and a Guggenheim grant. Zenón's horn is known for its agility; there are solos on the album that fly at breakneck speed, stressing his fluency in bop idioms that stretch from Charlie Parker's frenzy to Cannonball Adderley's sensuousness. The dance elements bubble up because he controls the music's temperament by gracefully thrusting himself into the rhythm section's agitation. The roller-coaster pas de deux he performs with Perdomo on the opening of "Residencial Llorens Torres" is a jaw-dropper, blending acute teamwork and killer chops while riding the band's very intricate groove. The Boston Globe deemed it a "kind of Latin accent we haven't heard before." For Zenón, it's a present-tense approach to Afro-Caribbean cadences that lets listeners know he appreciates the traditions of his homeland but lives in a fully modern realm when it comes to musical design—even if the result does put a few butts in gear.

"I remember that day at Newport," laughs Lovano, "it was beautiful. Miguel has a joyous way of playing, and his rhythmic sense is powerful; it captures you. He was really letting loose,

and hey, I've been known to dance a bit. When you let the situation you're in completely be a part of what you're creating, then you're working in the moment, spontaneously creating ideas from the feeling in the band. If you let that happen, you will dance, and people will dance around you."

Esta Plena is Zenón's fifth album as a leader and second to investigate a Puerto Rican folkloric music; 2005's *Jibaro* applied itself to the comparatively rural style that comes from the island's central mountain region. Plena, built on a rhythm made by three distinct tub-less drums called panderos (think oversized tambourine), is a street beat prevalent in the barrios in the southern city of Ponce. Nurtured by non-professional musicians both black and poor, plena is often considered vulgar. These days it's everywhere, especially on the corners of San Juan, where lyrics about sex and politics are threaded through its cadences. Thanks to pliability and thrust it's become a bedrock rhythm for all sorts of party music.

You can catch its essence in Zenón's "Despedida," a rocking piece of reportage about an annual New Year's Eve bash that he and his friends attend at *plenero* Hector "Tito" Matos' Puerto Rico home. The lyrics contain loving gibes at pals who want to quit their revelry early or get too tipsy too fast. "Whatever happens at the party is in that song," says Zenón. "That's the spirit of the whole thing: working in the moment. A guy tries to leave? Sing about it. A guy falls down? Sing about it. You want someone to break out his instrument? Make up a song. It's all about improvising."

Zenón's not bad on the drums himself.

Chatting in his Manhattan apartment, he breaks out his own set of hand-made panderos and quickly sets up a rhythm. He's spending a February afternoon explaining some of the insights he brought back from his 2008 trip through Puerto Rico; it was there, on the Guggenheim's dime, he learned the nuances of plena—its musical particulars and its cultural impact. The island is 100 miles wide and 35 miles deep; thick mountains are in the middle. The saxophonist went everywhere from the libraries of San Juan to the back alleys of Ponce to absorb plena first hand. Reactions to his detective work were varied.

"Some people said, 'Man, I'm so glad you're doing this, because plena needs more respect; it should be in the symphony.' Other guys were more wary. 'What do you want, why do you need to know this stuff?' I went through people who would call the real-deal guys on my behalf. I'd go hear them—just incredible players—but I was still an outsider. They knew I played jazz, but some were still tough to crack."

Spinning some ancient tracks from the band Los Reyes de Plena and new things from more modern outfits, Zenón becomes genuinely excited in his living room. "This music is filled with all kinds of stories. A lot of people who wrote it weren't true musicians, just street players, grooving and gossiping. There's this one famous plena song about a new priest that

comes to town—he's a really good-looking guy, and all the ladies like him. The lyrics are slick about describing how he's got two or three girlfriends on the side. That's risqué stuff in the 1920s or '30s."

"This next song is by another group," he says, scrolling his iPod. "It's about a guy betting on a cockfight. If the rooster doesn't win he says he's going to cook it and eat it."

Matos was a crucial source when it came to Zenón's edification. Onstage with him at the New Jersey college gig, the respected drummer is a sparkplug; the same energy he uses to lead his Viento De Agua group is evident in his percussion work. Between Zenón's quartet and the *plenero* team of Matos, Juan Gutiérrez-Rodríguez and Obanilú Allende, the band moves through several passages that raise the roof. Even during the ballad "Progreso" there's a simmering intensity.

"Miguel's fun to watch," says Branford Marsalis. "I just saw him play in North Carolina. He doesn't feel the need to call attention to himself. So when he finishes a solo, he walks off to the back, and gives everyone some room. Look at the turnover ratio in his band. He's had one personnel change in 10 years. That means the dudes that are working with him *like* to work with him. Important stuff. And no disrespect intended toward [previous drummer] Antonio Sanchez, but when Henry Cole

came in the band, it really clicked. Antonio is from Mexico City—he *learned* the music. Henry is from the island. With him it's internalized. And he basically doesn't call any attention to himself during the entire show; his shit is just grooving. This is a band's band. It has all the subtle things I want to hear."

The esteemed tenor player is the boss of Zenón's label, Marsalis Music. But he's not the only person who believes in the younger musician's ensemble (bassist Hans Glawischign rounds out the quartet). *Esta Plena* was nominated for two Grammys this year: Best Latin Jazz Album, and Best Improvised Jazz Solo (for "Villa Palmeras"). Though neither won, both nods made sense. "While it's a full-blown jazz project, Zenón has managed to maintain the plena-like spontaneity, drive and street quality," said Descarga.com in its review of the disc. Miguel's former SFJAZZ Collective cohort Joshua Redman has been a fan for some time as well. He first heard Zenón playing in the bands of David Sanchez and Guillermo Klein. "Though it's complex, his music truly grooves," enthuses the saxophonist. "He may write something in 21/8 or whatever, but it's really lyrical. In jazz, the emotional content resides in rhythm and melody and the way they intersect. All the intricacy needs to serve a feeling. When I hear him play, I'm impressed technically, but more important, it moves me. You have to have that or you're lost. He definitely has it."

Marsalis has produced most of Zenón's records. "He made the mistake of sending me a demo tape of the first album, which I didn't listen to," he chuckles. "He said, 'What do you think about the music?' I said, 'I think it's great, man. I'll see you in the studio.' We get to the studio he says, 'You know that song such 'n' such?' And I said, 'No, how does it go?' He looked at me sideways and I said, 'I didn't listen to that stuff, man. You don't need me second-guessing you. To me, the musician playing has to have a style and a personality. If I've gotta invent it for 'em, I don't want no part of it. My job is to find a studio that makes me adequately recreate what they sound like in their live set. I'm not going to have an Alfred Lion formula—funky tune here, blues tune there. Just come in and do your shit. I don't believe in micro-managing artists—I'd rather hire people who know what they're doing and trust 'em. Matter of fact, *Esta Plena* I had nothing to do with. The guy did it all on his own."

The Guggenheim isn't the only foundation that sees value in Zenón's musical scholarship. In 2008 a representative from the mighty MacArthur machine dialed him up. The saxophonist was taking a nap, and when he awoke, though still a tad groggy, he hit the phone to check his messages. MacArthur was part of the parade. It was Sept. 16, the birthday of Zenón's wife, Elga. "My first reaction was that it was the Guggenheim guys—I'd already gotten that grant and I thought I might

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not have heard the message right and they were calling me to find out what I'd been doing on the project. But when I realized it was the MacArthur folks for sure, I thought maybe they wanted to ask me about a potential candidate. So I called him back and he says, 'Do you know about us, do you know about our grants?' I said, 'Yes, sort of.' He said, 'Are you sitting down?' That's when I started getting a 'wow' feeling. He said, 'You've won.'"

Half a million dollars and the term "genius" were now part of Zenón's life. The rep explained the mechanics of it, how there were no strings attached. When the saxophonist told his wife she began jumping and crying, but they couldn't let anyone else know until the MacArthur folks formally announced it—which was cool, because Zenón was definitely in shock for a few days. His family struggled financially when he was growing up in San Juan. They lived in the projects and were a large brood. He was without the funds to get to Berklee College of Music until a scholarship from the Puerto Rico Heineken Jazz Festival helped secure his tuition. The so-called "genius grant" is sweet for obvious reasons like the eradication of bills, but Zenón believes it's also a nice validation that presents an array of opportunities as well.

"If I want to teach, I teach," he explains. "Take a break? Go ahead. Write and practice? Sure. Plus, having that money buffer gives me confidence to try things. Maybe I'll write something and try it out. Pay the guys and not worry—I sure couldn't do that before. We went to Cuba last year, and the money wasn't right, but we wanted to go, so we did. And it was incredible, one of the greatest experiences of my life." Of course, Perdomo, Glawischnig and Cole tease him mercilessly. "I'll bring in a new tune to rehearse, and they'll say, 'Oh yeah, genius, this song structure is really intellectual.' But all kidding aside, I feel like I've



got a new responsibility. Like this has been put on my shoulder and I need to do it right."

Marsalis thinks the grant won't change Zenón at all. He compares his pal to a previous MacArthur recipient, Ken Vandermark. "All Ken wants to do is play music. Same with Miguel. It's like that old joke: The farmer wins the million-dollar lottery and they ask him, 'What are you going to do with all this money?' He says, 'I'm just going to keep feeding these cows until the money runs out.' That's what Miguel is going to do with his, that's what Ken did with his. He paid off his debts and started making records. I wouldn't be surprised that when our contract is up, Miguel just walks away and makes records on his own, because the business of music is occasionally frustrating to him. When he gets an idea, he wants to record it immediately. If he does split, I applaud that.

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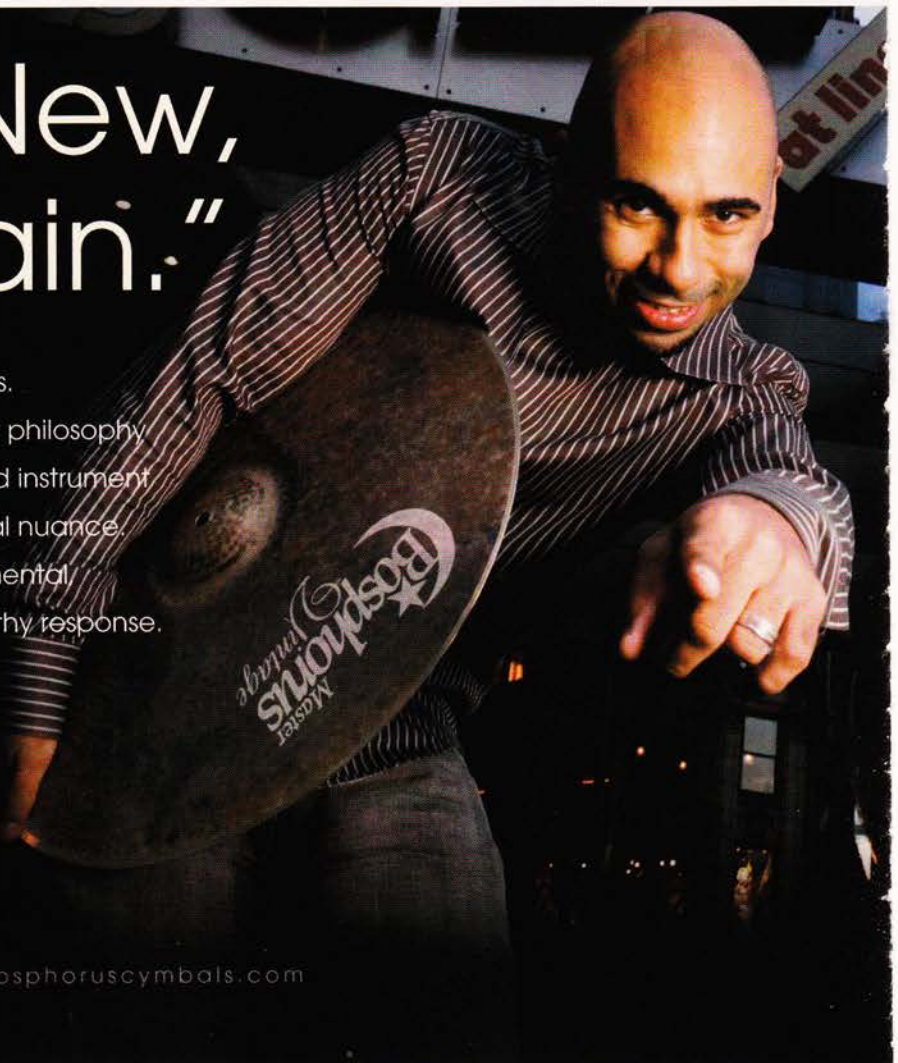
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He's in it for the long haul. For him it will be record after record, gig after gig, and some time, maybe when he's 40 or so, he's going to hit critical mass. Everyone will know."

The SFJAZZ Collective has begun its 2010 season, and Zenón has been part of the ever-changing team since its 2004 inception, spending a chunk of time each year in San Francisco. Members such as Brian Blade, Renee Rosnes and Dave Douglas have come and gone, the transitions speaking to the Collective's goals of fluidity and steady revitalization. Indeed, this year Zenón is the last of the original members to still be on board. The octet has conceived a formula that blends original compositions with arrangements of pieces by living masters such as Ornette Coleman and Wayne Shorter. This time 'round they're saluting the work of Horace Silver. And this time 'round there are several new faces surrounding Zenón. Edward Simon is the pianist. Mark Turner has been added on tenor saxophone. Avishai Cohen is in the trumpet chair. They join vets Stefon Harris, Eric Harland, Robin Eubanks and Matt Penman.

In the days before our interview, Zenón was checking his computer for mp3s and charts of tunes being composed and arranged by his mates. He likes to arrive in the Bay Area with good grip on what lies ahead. Joe Lovano, who spent three seasons working in the Collective, knows Zenón is up to the task of being the group elder.

"When I was there Miguel would lead us through his pieces, and they would turn out incredible because he had such a full scope of everyone's part. We all had different backgrounds as far as orchestration and composition goes. His organizational approach came to the forefront in a situation like that. I learned a lot. As a player, he's not just feeding off of one aspect of the piece. He's inside the piece, which is crucial for a leader. You've got to know everything around you. For a young cat, Miguel's a real natural at that."

Zenón is working up a spin on "Lonely Woman," a tune he knew he wanted to claim as soon as he learned that Silver was the master being celebrated. He credits Berklee for his arrangement skills, explaining that it took him a while to feel comfortable scoring charts, but the fact that the school demanded it definitely was a plus. "They made you write in Boston. You've got to develop that skill, because it helps you know the range of the instruments. For me, writing wasn't a priority early on; I just wanted to play well. Now it's definitely 50/50, it's really important."

Redman, who was the SFJC's initial artistic director, recalls just how rigorous Zenón's charts are. "If I had to pick one member of the Collective that I learned the most from, both as a player and composer, it would probably be Miguel. I don't know if I've met a musician more focused about his art. He's meticulous, methodical and conceptual, but he has the patience and skills to follow those concepts through to the most beautiful conclusions. Now he's the old vet on stage."

Turning chestnuts of the past into items with a personal perspective is the arranging job at hand, and Zenón's helped reassess the classic canon with luminous spins on Herbie Hancock's "Armageddon," McCoy Tyner's "Four By Five" and Thelonious Monk's "San Francisco Holiday." He enjoys reminding audiences about an iconic artist's stature. "You can never get enough of the stuff that came before you. When I get a chance to update a chart of a record that I love, it's like, 'Wow.' And if the audience knows the piece, there's certainly more of a reaction than there is to one of my originals."

But it takes more than great chops to account for the past while still keeping an eye toward the future ... and keeping those bodies shimmying in the seats. Seems like Zenón is a craftsman with a vision.

"We've got a lot of great trumpeters, saxophonists and drummers around right now," concludes Marsalis, "but very few musicians. You know a guy who can parlay all that technical know-how into actual musicianship? Shit, let him do whatever he wants—just as long as he keeps making those records. People react to Miguel because for all of that right-brain stuff he has, he's got this counterweight of the left side that a lot of the modern cats are without. That's what really hit me about him. Ultimately, that's why I said, 'Man, I love this guy.'" DB

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