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NEWS RELEASE

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Alto Sax Star Miguel Zenón Hits Creative Paydirt Delving Into California's Complex and Promising History With *Golden City*

Out August 30, 2024 via Miel Music, album features Zenón with Miles Okazaki, Matt Mitchell, Dan Weiss, Chris Tordini, Daniel Díaz, Alan Ferber, Diego Urcola, Jacob Garchik

Album release celebration November 14 at Columbia University's Miller Theatre, NYC

Over the course of his brilliant and groundbreaking quarter-century career, Grammy Award-winning alto saxophonist and composer Miguel Zenón has reveled in doing the hard work, whether he was transforming Puerto Rican plena into a vehicle for improvisation or writing a body of tunes inspired by the history of the American continent. But no project he's tackled has involved the kind of intensive, granular research required by *Golden City*, a sweeping suite inspired by the demographic and political evolution of San Francisco, from the pre-colonial period to the contemporary tech-dominated era. His 16th album as a leader, *Golden City* is slated for release August 30, 2024 via Zenón's Miel Music label.

Commissioned by SFJAZZ and the Hewlett Foundation, "Golden City Suite" premiered at the SFJAZZ Center in 2022 with a production designed for an unusual all-star trombone-centric nonet. The inveterately curious Zenón embraced the assignment by delving into California's history, "all the way back to the beginning with Native communities," he says. "All the way back to when it was Mexico, and the Gold Rush, and the waves of Asian migration. I talked to about 50 individuals and came out the other side with a lot more information to feed the creative process."

While *Golden City* isn't programmatic, it's a body of music deeply informed by the places and people Zenón visited. More than a musical presentation, the work became a multimedia production in collaboration with Opera Parallèle set designer Brian Staufenbiel and projection designer David Murakami, who created a visual environment for the evening-length work, which features 10 interconnected but independent movements.

While he went into the research without a sense of the kind of ensemble he'd be writing for, Zenón came to hear a brass and rhythm section nonet pivoting on the captivating guitar of Miles Okazaki. The group is built on the oft-paired tandem of pianist Matt Mitchell and drummer Dan Weiss, with whom he's often worked, and bassist Chris Tordini, who has sometimes expanded that trio to a quartet. The wild card is percussionist Daniel Díaz, "who I know from Puerto Rico," Zenón says. "I'm always trying to find ways to collaborate with him. He's a special musician who can play all the percussion, all the street stuff, and read anything."

The formidable horn section features trombonist Alan Ferber, Diego Urcola on trumpet and valve trombone, and Jacob Garchik on trombone and tuba. The instrumentation reflects Zenón's formative experience soaking up the sounds of Latin music innovators like Willie Colon, Los Van Van, and Rubén Blades. "There's something about the darker brass timbre of that configuration I really like, something that's punchy and dark and not too brassy," he says. "But really, it's about these musicians. I love all those guys and how they play."

The album opens an elegiac solo saxophone passage that evolves into “Sacred Land,” an incantatory invocation. The intricately interlocking themes woven through “Rush” evoke that epochal impact of gold’s discovery at Sutter’s Mill in 1848, “a before and after” that Zenón evokes with “this idea of layering space within space where it feels like a rhythmic puzzle,” he says. “It subdivides space into something that’s meant to symbolize lots of movement and people going in different directions.”

His deep research into the history of the Bay Area’s Chinese-American community informed “Acts Of Exclusion,” a punchy piece built on a long row of pitches that Zenón rearranged, restoring tonality to an atonal sequence inspired by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. He explores a very different atonal mood on the piano-and-bass driven “9066,” a title that refers to FDR’s notorious Executive Order that interned people of Japanese descent after Pearl Harbor. Mostly through composed, it’s a forbidding piece that uses the four numerals as the basis for rows, tones and rhythms. The whole form is played three times, with different layers added on each repetition.

“Displacement and Erasure” refers to the waves of gentrification that have swept through San Francisco’s working-class neighborhoods, a force Zenón witnessed firsthand during his 14-year stint as a founding member of the SFJAZZ Collective. The piece sounds like a theme from a gritty urban neo-noir film, with a misplaced pulse that shifts throughout the tune. The pulse is also what drives “SRO,” which starts with due deliberation and gradually gains momentum. Zenón explores a different kind of swagger with “Wave Of Change,” a Mingusy blues lament that lands with the inexorable power of tsunami.

Sinuous and inviting, “Sanctuary City” is a contrafact of “Sanctuary,” drawing on the melody, form and chord changes of Wayne Shorter’s classic piece introduced on *Bitches Brew*. It’s a respite that invites a celebration, which arrives with Caribbean flair on “Cultural Corridor,” a plena-powered piece celebrating San Francisco’s so-called “Cultural Districts,” such as Japantown, Calle 24, and SOMA Pilipinas. With “Power of Community,” Zenón concludes *Golden City* with a deep, calming breath, paying tribute to the culture workers and community activists “holding everything together,” he says. As a postscript, years after he completed the suite, Zenón added “Golden,” an epilogue track that reflects back on the journey and seems to offer a tenuously optimistic take on the region’s future.

The future couldn’t look much brighter when it comes to Zenón’s creative output. Born in San Juan, Puerto Rico on Dec. 30, 1976, he’s one of the most celebrated jazz artists of his generation. Recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship at the age of 31, he’s also a Guggenheim Fellow and was recently named a 2024 Doris Duke Artist. His previous album, 2023’s gorgeous ballad session with Venezuelan pianist Luis Perdomo *El Arte Del Bolero Vol. 2*, won the 2024 Grammy for Best Latin Jazz Album.

It’s been a fascinating journey as his musical move away from home ended up bringing him back to the island. Already a standout musician steeped in European classical music when he became fascinated by jazz in his mid-teens, Zenón spent the next decade immersing himself in jazz’s harmonic and rhythmic intricacies at Berklee and the Manhattan School of Music. But Zenón’s distance from home gradually brought Puerto Rican music into his keen focus.

He’s released a series of revelatory albums delving into various Puerto Rican traditions and the Latin American songbook. But his purview encompasses a far-flung constellation of musical idioms and situations, driven by his interest in history, people, and the forces that shape society. What sets *Golden City* apart is the way the music was informed by his interactions with the communities that have shaped the Bay Area. Leading by example, Zenón followed his own curiosity, delving into the history of one of the world’s iconic cities. More often than not the stories aren’t pretty, but the music finds the beauty and resilience that give San Francisco its soul.