



Review: Miguel Zenon at Jazz Showcase

Howard Reich

October 10, 2009

Since its inception, jazz has been an international music, drawing deeply on influences from the Caribbean, Africa and Europe. But its global voice never has been more pronounced than in the past 20 years, thanks to the stylistic breakthroughs of Panamanian pianist Danilo Perez, Puerto Rican saxophonist David Sanchez, Chilean vocalist Claudia Acuna and many more. At 32, alto saxophonist Miguel Zenon is younger and less widely known than these great artists, notwithstanding the MacArthur "genius grant" he won in 2008. Yet he ranks among them for his insights in applying the musical rituals of his native Puerto Rico to jazz improvisation and composition. Zenon makes the point more intensely than ever on his newest recording, "Esta Plena" (Marsalis Music), its repertoire serving as the centerpiece of a revelatory show Thursday night at the Jazz Showcase, where he plays through Sunday.

The title of Zenon's recording translates to "This Is Plena," and, indeed, both the CD and Zenon's engagement at the Showcase likely will introduce many listeners to Puerto Rican "plena" music. Or at least a form of it, refracted through Zenon's jazz sensibility. Zenon, in other words, doesn't revisit age-old plena songs or cling entirely to its traditions. Instead, he has created original compositions that invoke plena song forms but also push well beyond them. Cultures converge in his music, a dynamic merger of Puerto Rican rhythm and its intricate jazz counterparts. As Zenon's songs unfold, audiences hear an ebb and flow of ideas between cultures, as if Caribbean music and its jazz offshoots were conversing. In some sections of this music, Zenon and vocalist Hector "Tito" Matos chant in unison, accompanying themselves on "panderos" (hand-held Puerto Rican drums). Though the tunes are newly penned by Zenon, they evoke singing styles that have flourished in Puerto Rico for roughly a century. Yet when the vocals subside and Zenon's instrumental ensemble takes the lead, the music bristles with harmonic sophistication and rhythmic complexity.

The music Zenon heard growing up in Puerto Rico essentially has provided a springboard for aggressive ensemble improvisation and freewheeling solos. The boldness of this music was apparent from the start, Zenon and the band launching their first set with the high spirits and exuberant rhythms of the recording's title cut. To hear Zenon and Matos finessing vocal lines that bobbed and weaved around the beat, while the band pulsed behind them, was to understand instantly the emotional power of this cross-cultural merger. Not all of this music, however, surged relentlessly from one offbeat to the next. In "Pandero y Pagode," Zenon and Matos sculpted gorgeously shaped vocal lines at a medium tempo, with gentle accompanying filigree provided by pianist Luis Perdomo. Here was the plena-jazz connection at its most accessible.

It's doubtful that Zenon could have incorporated plena music into jazz so dexterously without having worked with this same instrumental quartet for so many years. Luis Perdomo's warmly voiced pianism, Hans Glawischnig's sonorous but nimble bass and drummer Henry Cole's delicately articulated layers of rhythm represented a natural extension of Zenon's ideas. Though microphone woes sometimes caused an imbalance between vocals and instrumentals, one hopes the problem can be corrected quickly, for this music deserves to be heard at full cry.

Exclusive First Listen: Miguel Zenon, 'Esta Plena'

by [Josh Jackson](#)



Audio for this feature is no longer available. The album was released on Oct. 20, 2009.



[Enlarge](#)

courtesy of the artist

Of the 10 original compositions on *Esta Plena*, five are instrumentals, and five feature Miguel Zenon's lyrics.

RELATED NPR STORIES

Hear the Miguel Zenon quartet perform songs from *Esta Plena*, recorded live at the Newport Jazz Festival 2009:

[Miguel Zenon Quartet: Newport Jazz Festival 2009](#)

October 13, 2009 from [WBGO](#) - Saxophonist [Miguel Zenon](#)'s career has taken a relentlessly upward trajectory over the past decade. He's a 2008 winner of the prestigious Guggenheim and MacArthur fellowships, as well as a founding member of the [SF Jazz Collective](#). All the while, Zenon has investigated his Puerto Rican roots with a quiet resolve. On his new recording, *Esta Plena*, he's distilled his musical history into a clear conception: a cultural exchange between jazz and the folkloric form known as *plena*.

Plena is a historical contemporary of jazz, but developed independently. Spanish narrative song and African rhythms from the island's Southern coast contributed to early *plena*. It was performed by everyday people — some who migrated into urban centers like San Juan and Ponce, others who moved to New York. Songs can express a periodical news item, and social commentary is not uncommon ("Que Sera de Puerto Rico?"). Of course, sometimes the purpose is simply to party ("Pandero and Pagode," "Despedida"). As a feeling, *plena* is still part of the modern Puerto Rican identity.

The style also boasts a unique rhythmic component: three hand drums called panderos. The seguidor (bajo) is the largest, and it sets the bass notes with an insistent pattern on the downbeat. The segundo (punteador) plays another steady beat in counterpoint. The requinto is the smallest drum, and it is the lead improvising voice over the groove created by the two larger drums.

In this collection of all original material, Miguel Zenon methodically bridges *plena* to the language of mainland modern jazz. He takes the concept of three panderos as an organizing principle: variations of three, six, and nine are recurrent motifs in the form, phrasing, and intervals of Zenon's compositions. His working quartet for five years — Venezuelan pianist Luis Perdomo, bassist Hans Glawischnig, and fellow Puerto Rican drummer Henry Cole — pushes insistently on instrumental fare like "Villa Palmeras," "Villa Coope," and the blustery "Residencial Llorens Torres." And Zenon is an extraordinary saxophonist: solos pour urgently out of his alto saxophone.

The jazz combo melts into a texture when his three panderos take the lead. Hector "Tito" Matos, the requinto and lead vocalist, is a commanding presence. A member of Los Pleneros de la 21 and his own Viento de Agua, Matos sings with obvious pride. On "Oyelo," or "Listen To This," the pleneros sing, "Y tu no me puedes negar que mi plena te llega hasta el alma." ("And you just can't deny that my *plena* goes straight to your soul.") They're right.

Like many modern jazz improvisers from Latin America, Miguel Zenon is reaching into his culture to open a musical dialogue. But on *Esta Plena*, he may have stumbled upon the Rosetta Stone for modern jazz: a distinct, bilingual and personal stream of notated language. Oyelo.

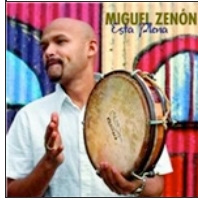


Esta Plena

Miguel Zenon | Marsalis Music

By [Mark F. Turner](#)

From the fruits of winning both a *MacArthur* ("genius grant") and *Guggenheim Fellowship* in 2008, alto saxophonist Miguel Zenón, expands his clear vision of modern jazz and Puerto Rican folk music in *Esta Plena*. With an incisive voice, his involvement with the [SFJAZZ Collective](#), [Guillermo Klein's](#) Y Los Gauchos and [Charlie Haden's](#) Liberation Music Orchestra is well documented, but his own recordings are what truly reflect his unique heritage and identity.



Where Zenón's *Jibaro* (Marsalis Music, 2005) explored the diverse folk Culture *Musica Jibara* (Jibaro Music), this project finds Zenón doing more Research and culminating with fresh interpretations of *la plena*, which is described as "a by-product of Spanish Colonization, combining African rhythmic syncopations with European harmonies and melodic cadences." More simply put: the musical equivalent of the H1N1 virus, it is delightfully infectious.

Joined by an excellent quartet for more than five years consisting of pianist [Luis Perdomo](#), bassist [Hans Glawischnig](#) and drummer [Henry Cole](#), these new explorations exhilarate with the added bonus of an authentic *plena* group which includes Hector "Tito" Matos, Obanilu Allende, and Juan Gutierrez on vocals and *panderos* (hand-held single-head drums).

The ten tracks are split between five instrumental and five vocal, with Zenón writing the music and lyrics. A delicate tightrope is traveled as urban street music fuses with the traditional; compositions that swing and sing, lighting fires as heard in the title ("This Plena"), sweet vocal harmonies in "Oyelo" ("Listen To This!!!"), socially conscious commentary in "Que Sera de Puerto Rico" ("What Will Become of Puerto Rico?") and a tale of celebration in "Despidida" ("New Year's Eve"), as the group quotes "Auld Lang Syne" before leading into enticing vocals and music.

Everything about *Esta Plena* embodies excellence--memorable performances from everyone, vigorous composition, and improvisational freedom--translated by Zenón's respectful handling of the "people's music," encouraging exploration of its history and present.

Track Listing: Villa Palmeras; Esta Plena; Oyelo; Residencial Llorens Torres; Pandero y Pagode; Calle Calma; Villa Coope; Que Sera de Puerto Rico?; Progreso; Despedida.

Personnel: Miguel Zenon: alto saxophone, background vocals; Luis Perdomo: piano; Hans Glawischnig: acoustic bass; Henry Cole: drums; Hector "tito" Matos: lead vocals, percussion (requinto); Obanilu Allende: background vocals, percussion (segundo); Juan Gutierrez: background vocals, percussion (seguidor).

[CD Review Center](#) | [Upcoming Release Center](#)

Click the BACK button to return to the previous page.

All material copyright © 2009 All About Jazz and contributing writers.
All rights reserved.

Miguel Zenón's "Esta Plena" at the Dakota: Concert review



Written by Pamela Espeland

Wednesday, 21 October 2009



The Miguel Zenón quintet © John Whiting

Alto saxophonist [Miguel Zenón](#) played the Dakota last week, two extraordinary sets, and I'm still thinking about them. (The house wasn't full and some of us stayed for both. That's a long night at the Dakota—the first set starts around 7, the second usually ends after 11.) The music was so intriguing, the rhythms so beguiling that I find myself returning to the evening—and to the CD, *Esta Plena* (Marsalis Music), for which Zenón and his group are currently touring. Its official release date is October 20; Zenón brought a box of 30 to sell at the Dakota. (Until Oct. 20 or shortly before, you can listen to the full album at [NPR](#).)

For *Esta Plena* (This Is Plena), Zenón went home to his native Puerto Rico, from whose indigenous music he also drew for *Jibaro* (2005), the album believed to have gotten the MacArthur Foundation's attention. (Zenón was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2008, shortly after winning a Guggenheim.) *Jibaro* is string-based music from the Puerto Rican countryside. *Plena* is vocal music associated with the coastal regions. Both are folk styles.



Except for maybe the encore after the last set, none of the tunes we heard was straight plena. All were plena wrapped in and shot through with modern jazz, which Zenón first heard as a teenager growing up in Puerto Rico, then studied at the Berklee and Manhattan schools of music. In 2004, just three years after earning his Masters in Saxophone Performance, he was invited to become a founding member of the SF Jazz Collective, one of the most prestigious jazz organizations in the USA. Current members include Stefon Harris, Joe Lovano, Robin Eubanks, Matt Penman, Dave Douglas, Renee Rosnes, and Eric Harland. Good company.

So *Esta Plena* is not folkie folk music—and yet, as another admirer seated beside us remarked, “Miguel, your roots are showing.” Somehow the music seemed rooted, grounded, traditional, yet brought forward into this moment, especially when heard live.

Zenón brought his working quartet, the four fine musicians he has worked with for years: Venezuelan pianist [Luis Perdomo](#), also a member of the Ravi Coltrane Quartet (can Perdomo pick saxophonists or what?), Austrian bassist [Hans Glawischnig](#), formerly a member of Kenny Werner's trio and quintet, now heading his own quartet (with Perdomo, Dave Binney, and Eric Doob), and Puerto Rican drummer Henry Cole (say koh-lay, not cole). For the new CD and the tour, he added vocalist and percussionist Hector “Tito” Matos, also from Puerto Rico. When he wasn't singing (and usually when he was), Matos played one or more panderos (hand-held Puerto Rican drums). Zenón also sang.

For the first set, we heard individual tunes, most of which Zenón introed or outroed: “Esta Plena,” “Oyola,” “Pandero y

Hans Glawischnig and Miguel Zenón © John Whiting
Pagoda,” maybe “Residencial Llorens Tarres” (something that began with a lot of percussion, then moved into a speedy section with Zenón and Perdomo in unison). The second set became one continuous piece of many rhythms linked together, during which Zenón played with such fire and fierceness that I thought his head would explode, or maybe everyone's. He had been more than warmed up for the first set; for the second, he was nuclear.

I found the music challenging, but in a good way; these are thick, thorny rhythms I don't know and can't begin to understand. Every so often I clung



to the bass line, hoping that Glawischnig would just keep time for a minute or two, but he was as crazy as the others. Whenever I thought I had figured out a rhythm, I was one or two beats off. I later read at NPR that "variations of three, six, and nine are recurrent motifs in the form, phrasing, and intervals of Zenón's compositions." No wonder I was a helpless cork bobbing in the water.



Luis Perdomo©John Whiting

The music was also melodic and



Hector 'Tito' Matos and Henry Cole©John Whiting

beautiful. Sometimes it was amusing. For the encore, "El Canto del Gallo," which Zenón described as a traditional plena song, Matos clucked like a chicken and crowed like a rooster. ("El Canto del Gallo" = "The Song of the Rooster.") In "Despidida," Zenón quoted "Auld Lang Syne." Before then, we heard sweetness and warmth from Perdomo's piano, tenderness and depth from Glawischnig's bass, and delicacy in Cole's drums.

At the shining center of it all: Zenón's saxophone. His tone clear and clean-edged, never fuzzy or blurry; it's as if each note is carved by a knife. No matter how many notes he plays—and often he plays a lot of notes, in rapid-fire runs filled with unexpected intervals, and he's not afraid to rear back and wail (so far back he seems to be blowing himself backward, or doing the limbo)—each one sounds pure and fully-formed. His technical proficiency is undeniable; so is his passion. He wants us to know the music of his homeland. First jibaro, now plena; what next, Miguel?

Pamela Espeland writes about jazz for MinnPost.com, blogs at Bebopified, and tweets at [Twitter](https://twitter.com). We recommend her [jazz calendar](http://jazzcalendar).

Add this page to your favorite Social Bookmarking websites



[Close Window](#)

newsday.com/services/newspaper/printedition/sunday/fanfare/ny-fflatin5968816dec21,0,347087.story

Newsday.com

Miguel Zenón's plena-jazz fusion

ED MORALES

E-mail Ed Morales at sonidoslatinos@edmorales.net.

December 21, 2008

Earlier this month, a crowd of jazz and plena enthusiasts packed the tight confines of the Jazz Gallery in TriBeCa to witness a new kind of fusion. Led by saxophonist and recent MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant winner Miguel Zenón, a band of four jazz instrumentalists and three plena percussionists-vocalists transported the audience into a different world.

"Esta Plena," a kind of jazz-plena symphony in 10 movements, fused stirring improvisational jazz with the choral lyricism of percussion-driven plenas, telling the story of a 21st century island bridge between New York and Puerto Rico. Zenon's emotional but technically proficient wailing would give way to the steady thumping of Tito Matos, who wielded his requinto, a tambourine-like instrument, like it was a magic wand.

"He wrote all the music, but I realized after a while that he was using me as a vehicle to tell the story," said Matos, who met Zenón several years ago through a mutual friend, saxophonist David Sánchez. "But everything was a challenge. I'm a street-corner singer and I don't know how to read music or reach a perfect pitch with such complex arrangements."

Zenón's conceptual approach was mathematical: Although the typical plena rhythm is 4/4, he wrote rhythms, harmonies and melodies based on 3 (coincidentally, that's the number of percussionists, or panderos, accompanying the jazz band). But the subtle structure of "Esta Plena" is no clue to the sense of elation created by the songs.

Backed by some of his longtime jazz collaborators, Luis Perdomo on piano, Hans Glawischnig on bass and Henry Cole on drums, Zenón mesmerized the audience with such instrumentals as "Villa Palmeras" and "Residencial Llorens Torres," tributes to the neighborhoods where plena is practiced. The songs with vocals, like "Óyelo," "Pandero y Pagode" (which was actually played as a Brazilian samba) and the moving "Que Será de Puerto Rico," filled the room with the exuberant tones of island



ONLINE DEGREES
Earn a Degree in as Few as Two Years

Choose From:

- ▶ Associate's Programs
- ▶ Bachelor's Programs
- ▶ Certificate Programs
- ▶ Doctoral Programs
- ▶ M.B.A. Programs
- ▶ Master's Programs

[Free-College-Info](#)

Spanish, transcending the language barrier.

"He kept very faithful to the rhythmic format of plena," Matos said, "and he let me sing about how I play my instrument and the joy it brings to me."

The final song, "Despedida," is an ebullient celebration of the Christmas parties held for a two-week period in Puerto Rico. It mentions guests that would typically appear at the houses of Matos' and Zenon's extended families.

For a moment, it seemed a real parranda, or traveling musical party had formed, and TriBeCa had been transported to the Caribbean.

Last-minute holiday gift guide

Pop-dance stars Belanova have released a deluxe edition of "Fantasía Pop" (Universal). ... Los Lonely Boys' "Christmas Spirit" (Epic) features six classic holiday tunes and some original ones. ... Ricky Martin celebrates his 17-year career with "17" (Sony), which includes the instant classic "I Don't Care" (with Fat Joe) as well as the obvious "La Vida Loca." ... Juanes' "La Vida Es un Ratico en Vivo" (Universal) includes live versions of two songs from the original, as well as Joe Arroyo's "Rebelión." ... In addition to his new release "El Malo Vol. 2," Willie Colón is making available "Asalto Navideño Live," a DVD of this 1993 holiday-themed concert. ... Gilberto Santa Rosa has an all-new holiday album out called "Una Navidad con Gilberto" (Sony). ... Victor Manuelle returns with "Una Navidad a Mi Estilo Edición Especial" (Kiyavi Records), adding two new songs to last year's holiday hit.

Copyright © 2009, [Newsday Inc.](#)



6 Imaginary Place, Aberdeen, New Jersey, 07747 Phone: 732-566-2881 Fax: 732-566-8157 email: myles1@optonline.net

Wall Street Journal

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT
DECEMBER 17, 2008, 9:39 P.M. ET

His Jazz Career's Rich Rewards

By **LARRY BLUMENFELD**

When **Miguel Zenón** began practicing his alto saxophone at home in the hardscrabble Residencial Luis Llorens Torres projects of San Juan, Puerto Rico, music was just a hobby. Sure, he enjoyed his study of classical repertoire at the rigorous Escuela Libre de Música. But math, in which he excelled, was more his focus and, he and his mother agreed, the key to a successful future. He had yet to try improvising, hadn't listened to much American jazz. And though he'd heard plenty of Puerto Rican folk music -- bomba and plena and the jíbaro songs that were popular around Christmas -- he hadn't thought to play that music either.

Twenty years later, from his home in New York City's Washington Heights, Mr. Zenón lives out his ambitions through his alto sax. And all those influences -- Puerto Rican folk music, jazz improvisation, mathematical calculations -- have intertwined along a path rich with possibilities. That path grew richer still when, in September, he was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, often referred to as a "genius grant" -- an unrestricted award of \$500,000, distributed quarterly over five years.

Some previous fellows drawn from jazz's ranks, such as Max Roach and Ornette Coleman, had amassed iconic bodies of work by the time of their awards. Yet others, such as violinist Regina Carter, who was named a fellow at 40, have been honored more for their promise than their past. In a phone interview, Fellows Program Director Daniel Socolow spoke of Mr. Zenón's potential in terms of "creating a new jazz language for the 21st century."

At 31, Mr. Zenón is at the forefront of a generation of musicians doing just that, or at least constructing their own dialects from equal parts jazz tradition, ethnic inheritance, and wide-ranging musical tastes. He has both benefited from and contributed to a deepened understanding of the bonds between Afro-Latin music and American jazz. And he is one of many jazz musicians for whom nonprofit arts organizations and independent music labels are, these days, more empowering than nightclubs and storied jazz imprints.

"Who expects such a call?" Mr. Zenón said of the MacArthur notification. "It's flattering. But what this means most of all is what all artists want, I guess -- continued opportunity and a sense that people appreciate what you're chasing through your work."

Mr. Zenón has already attracted significant institutional support and delivered on those investments. A New York State Council on the Arts grant funded "Jíbaro Journeys: Music From the Mountains of Puerto Rico," his exploration of the music of backcountry Puerto Rican troubadours. The piece debuted at Manhattan's Jazz Gallery in 2004 and formed the basis of his CD "Jíbaro" (Marsalis Music). Earlier this month, Mr. Zenón returned to the Jazz Gallery for the premiere of his "Esta Plena," based on another traditional Puerto Rican musical style of rural origin, plena, and commissioned through the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation.

"Although forms like plena and jíbaro music have been replaced as popular music over the years, the stuff is still around everywhere in Puerto Rico," said Mr. Zenón. "I was exposed to them, but I had no idea that they were special."

Plena's special qualities are expressed chiefly through the interplay of three different-size panderos (small hand drums, much like tambourines without cymbals) used to play variants on a basic four-beat rhythm, and via topical lyrics (plena is often called a "living newspaper"). For "Esta Plena," Mr. Zenón composed 10 new pieces: five instrumentals and five with lyrics, on subjects ranging from the Puerto Rican economy to the joys of hearing plena music at a friend's New Year's celebration. He added three veteran plena practitioners, on panderos, to his working quartet.

At the Jazz Gallery, each new composition sounded distinct: Some leaned toward modern jazz, others sounded more like traditional songs. Mr. Zenón worked in his full range of influences, from to bebop innovators to European composers, and made clever use of rhythmic tension between the panderos and the trap set. At the music's center, but never overly dominant, was his urgent, sweet-yet-tart alto saxophone sound. A cross-cultural concept piece of such grace is a major achievement that should be more widely heard (and will be, courtesy of Mr. Zenón's next recording).

For his jíbaro project, Mr. Zenón had drawn rhythmic and harmonic schemes from the décima, that style's strictly 10-line verse form. In "Esta Plena," he phrased and harmonized in threes, in reference to the panderos. His fascination with mathematical permutations derives from both natural inclination and a formative association with saxophonist Steve Coleman, whose music is as complex and as elegant as any natural science.

"Miguel writes all this complicated stuff, but he plays it with a passion and spirituality that belie his technical expertise," said Branford Marsalis, who made Mr. Zenón among the first signings to his Marsalis Music label, in 2002.

Dale Fitzgerald, who has made Mr. Zenón a fixture at his Jazz Gallery, appreciates Mr. Zenón's sense of purpose. "When I call my place an international jazz cultural center," he said, "what I mean is exactly what he's doing."

Mr. Zenón found his purpose gradually, beginning in Puerto Rico when, at 15, a friend handed him a tape of a Charlie Parker record. "Once I realized that he was making this up as opposed to working from a score, it made a big impression on me," Mr. Zenón recalled. "I had no idea you could do that."

At Berklee School of Music in Boston Mr. Zenón met saxophonist David Sánchez, also from Puerto Rico. And he began informal studies with an early mentor, pianist Danilo Perez, who was born in Panama. He's since distinguished himself as a player in Mr. Sanchez's quintet, Charlie Haden's Liberation Music Orchestra, and the SF Jazz Collective, among others bands. But it's his achievements as a composer and leader that are most compelling.

The inevitable question -- What will you do with the MacArthur grant? -- yields answers less about music than its context. Mr. Zenón dreams of a massive research project, tracing the African roots of Latin American and Caribbean music. And he'd long been thinking about bringing American jazz musicians to Puerto Rico for a series of free concerts in several cities.

"Growing up, I didn't have a lot of exposure to live jazz," he said. "I wonder what would happen if jazz could be heard in Puerto Rico -- not just as something for people who can afford it, but by anyone, as regular music. At first, I thought about going to various organizations and asking for support, not knowing if they'd listen or if I could do it. But now, I know they will, and I can."

December 4, 2008

At Home in Two Traditions: Jazz and the Sounds of Puerto Rico

By [BEN RATLIFF](#)

When the jazz saxophonist and composer [Miguel Zenón](#) visits his native Puerto Rico to see his mother and other relatives every year around Christmastime, he rarely hears any jazz. Instead he's surrounded by plena, a century-old Afro-Caribbean musical tradition, a kind of movable street-corner folksong.

Plena is made with three different-size panderos (like tambourines without the cymbals) and voices singing about island myths and scandals, cultural identity, political reality, love and plena itself.

"It's really common," he said in an interview last week in Washington Heights, where Mr. Zenón, 31, now lives with his wife, Elga Castro, a Ph.D. candidate in political science at the [New School](#). "And it's so simple that you find it at a basketball game, at church — anywhere."

Panderos are easily portable, as opposed to the barrel-shaped drums used in bomba, another island music. And the four-beat plena rhythm has also been part of the holiday-season ritual of parranda, which is akin to Christmas caroling: surprise late-night musical visits to the neighbors.

Part of the jazz tradition is using whatever's in front of you, and Mr. Zenón, a New Yorker since 1999, has done this before. His album "Jíbaro" (Marsalis Music), from 2005, dealt with the song form of Puerto Rican back-country troubadours, and it had a preoccupation with numbers, particularly in the *décima*, a 10-line stanza with specific rhyme schemes.

"Jíbaro" threads Puerto Rican folklore through small-group jazz played at a high level, led by Mr. Zenón's limpid and graceful alto saxophone sound. The album helped establish Mr. Zenón as one of the important contemporary revisers of Latin jazz and spread his reputation for delivering excellent music from a complicated premise, a reputation that reached the secret committees of the [MacArthur Foundation](#), which awarded him one of its \$500,000 "genius" grants in September.

This year Mr. Zenón also received a Guggenheim research grant and took a long fact-finding trip back to Puerto Rico. To ask for introductions to the living plena masters, he sought out Hector (Tito) Matos, a plena practitioner who has played with the long-running New York band Los Pleneros de la 21, as well as his own group, Viento de Agua.

Mr. Matos pointed him toward historians and older musicians like Modesto Cepeda and Ismael (Cocolai) Rivera so that Mr. Zenón could understand the music's origins and functions. He learned about the subtle differences, for instance, between the San Juan-style use of the open hand on the pandero and the slower-tempo "punta de clavo" fingertip style of Mayagüez.

An insight from Ramón López, an ethnomusicologist who has written about plena, helped Mr. Zenón with his work. "He said something to me about how the moment you put plena onstage, it's not the real thing anymore," Mr. Zenón said. "So he told me not to worry about it, because it's

already different from what it's supposed to be.”

Mr. Matos said: “That he decided to focus on plena for a whole recording and a whole research project, that surprised me right away. It's very important what Miguel is doing, to open the music we play to more ears around the world.”

Mr. Zenón used his research for his composition “Esta Plena,” a work in 10 parts: half instrumental, half with singing. (He wrote his own lyrics too: about the nature of plena, about an all-night New Year's party at Mr. Matos's house, about political corruption and the disappearance of cultural tradition.) It will be performed for the first time this week, Thursday through Sunday, at the Jazz Gallery in the South Village. The performances feature his working quartet — Mr. Zenón, the pianist Luis Perdomo, the bassist Hans Glawischnig and the drummer Henry Cole — as well as three extra musicians playing plena rhythms and singing: Mr. Matos, Juan Gutiérrez and Obanilu Allende.

Again in “Esta Plena” Mr. Zenón used numbers as an organizing principle. “There are three panderos in plena,” he said. “So I dealt with the number three. In terms of form I wrote a lot of phrases in three or six. Harmonically I started thinking in terms of major-third intervals and augmented triads, and from there I built melodies and chord progressions.”

That the basic plena rhythm is always in four — with the biggest drum accenting the one and three, the middle one accenting the three and four, and the smallest providing improvised accents — didn't deter Mr. Zenón. Through “Esta Plena” he has kept the four-beat percussive plena rhythm steady, while writing melodic cycles for the rest of the band in three or nine.

If you think that sounds complex, you're right. (Mr. Zenón graduated from Berklee College of Music in 1998 and had no formal math training beyond high school. Still, he has a math-and-science way of thinking.) Yet his compositions are always clear and organized, and when they're making references to folklore, they keep the feeling of dance in them.

The number three, incidentally, has no other significance than the three panderos. Mr. Zenón laughed at the notion that it could signify the trinity. “When I write anything, I need something concrete to help me, something outside of music,” he explained. “On another project it might be letters.”

After the shows at the Jazz Gallery Mr. Zenón will record “Esta Plena” for his next album. And — given the financial freedom of the MacArthur award — then what?

He has an idea. Recently, he said, he was watching the documentary “Heima,” about how the Icelandic rock band Sigur Ros thanked the fans in its home country by playing an unusual series of free concerts: in factories, small-town community centers and even in fields and caves. Mr. Zenón said he got the urge to do something similar in Puerto Rico, particularly in small towns and mountainside areas where jazz is almost never heard.

It could make a difference, he said, to play jazz of the sturdiest sort; not his own, but music by [Charlie Parker](#) or [John Coltrane](#) or [Miles Davis](#). He might also talk to audiences about improvising, play them records, offer clinics.

“When I grew up there,” he said, “there wasn't really any live jazz. It was usually background music, and it was always the same eight or nine guys in San Juan. So I saw this movie, and I started thinking: man, if I could do that, just play the music, without having to worry about the business part — tickets, publicity, who's going to pay the guys, are enough people going to show

up — it would be incredible.”

Miguel Zenón performs Thursday through Sunday, 9 and 10:30 p.m., at the Jazz Gallery, 290 Hudson Street, South Village, (212) 242-1063, jazzgallery.org.