

Saxophonist Miguel Zenón touches on Puerto Rican tradition and more at Annenberg Center

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by **A.D. Amorosi**, For DoTHIS

With every album of his since 2005's *Jibaro*, saxophonist-composer-educator Miguel Zenón has reached deeper into his Puerto Rican heritage, marinating the flavors of that lineage in the musical stew that is the United States, playing behind legends such as Charlie Haden and collaborating as a founding member of the SFJAZZ Collective.

Zenón's albums have examined the African origin story of Puerto Rican music (2009's *Esta Plena*), teamed his homeland's popular song with a free-jazz-meets-classical feel (2011's *Alma Adentro*), and responded to Argentine writer Julio Cortazar's novella on indigenous spiritualities (2012's *Rayuela*).

"There is a progression, especially when you consider that my last decade has found me focusing on being Puerto Rican, looking into the entirety of Latin American culture and putting it through a jazz filter," says Zenón. "*Jibaro* and the like are very specifically themed, focused as if they're thesis projects. There are connections, though. Conceptual, yes; just not on a grand scale. In the case of this new one, though, I wanted to paint a portrait of where we are now as a band."

Zenón's restlessly vibrant new album, *Típico*, with his longtime quartet does all of the above and more, while focusing the sax man's attentions on the decade-plus relationship that he has shared with pianist Luis Perdomo, bassist Hans Glawischnig, and drummer Henry Cole. As *Típico* translates into that which is customary to a specific group of people, Zenón penned its emotive, dexterous tracks while considering that which identified this union as a unit, along with highlighting each instrumentalist's sonic signature.

"Oh yeah, there's definitely a through-line, personally and professionally," admits Zenón. "I wanted to be able to just do what I do and never have to explain," he says of a sense of intuition that makes the members of his quartet into the sonic equivalent of a muscle memory. "I was looking for definite musical personalities when I put this band together, especially in terms of a rhythmic understanding, a sensibility." Zenón also looked for a similar set of vibes when it came to relaying some of his music's more folkloric sensibilities, as well as well-rounded chops.

Part of his personable leadership abilities comes from having become the de facto musical director of the SFJAZZ Collective. "You learn to make people comfortable," he says. Putting time into the collective and its various members also honed his ability to look for a player's skills – the tics and tells, just as in gambling. "It's exactly that – I picked Henry because of his risk-taking. That's his thing. Hans is rhythmically accurate. Luis has the ability to pull all musics together. He's totally bilingual."

And what of Zenón, a Guggenheim and MacArthur Fellow whose musical output is as intellectually rewarding as it is deeply groovy?

"I like for everything to be tidy and nice," he says with a laugh. "Even at home, in my everyday life."

As wild as its flights of musical fancy, *Típico* too has great order and symmetry, with its title track coming from homespun folkloric cadences, while its last several tunes -- "Entre Las Raíces" ("Amongst the Roots") and "Las Ramas" ("The Branches") -- are rooted in nature.

"I just listened to my band playing and those were the feelings I got, of nature," says Zenón. "This is how they inspire me. I thought of this album as a metaphor for the organic, for all that is nature, an organism that constantly progresses. That's our biggest tell."

Miguel Zenón with Luis Perdomo, Hans Glawischnig, and Henry Cole play Saturday, Feb. 11, at 7 and 9:30 p.m., Annenberg Center Live, 3680 Walnut St. Tickets: \$40. Information: 215-898-3900, AnnenbergCenter.org