5. Miguel Zenón

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CHAPTER FIVE

MIGUEL ZENÓN

At the Hacienda Sabanera concert venue in Cidra, Puerto Rico, Miguel Zenón, a wiry man a few months shy of forty, with a shaved head and wearing a Pittsburgh Pirates Clemente[80] T-shirt, warmly greeted the all-star sidemen he had assembled for the afternoon's performance. It was August 21, 2016, and the three musicians had ridden here from their San Juan hotel together on a rented white bus. During that ride, guitarist Julian Lage and bassist Scott Colley looked over the Sonny Rollins charts they would be covering—music that Lage noted everyone learns in music school, then moves on and forgets what a "bad ass" composer Rollins is. Drummer Clarence Penn, sitting a few rows ahead of them, described having nearly been hired by Rollins years earlier, only to have the gig fall through when a second rehearsal persuaded Rollins that Penn's playing style didn't mesh well with that of his longtime bassist, Bob Cranshaw.

The venue was remote enough that the bus driver had needed to pull over a couple of times for directions, which jibed nicely with the point of the concert: Zenón was awarded a MacArthur Foundation fellowship in 2008 and used a portion of his grant money to introduce jazz to remote communities across his native Puerto Rico—a practice he has continued with help from other donors after his MacArthur money ran out. Each performance in his Caravana Cultural series is built around the music of a single jazz great (John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Joe Henderson, and Charles Mingus are some who preceded Rollins), with Zenón giving a short, pre-concert talk on how jazz works and outlining some career highlights of the featured legend.[81] A handful of local music students typically sit in with the pros for the concert finale.

Zenón recruits a different crew of sidemen, generally top talents he doesn't regularly work with, for each event. Colley, for example, recalls having been on tour in Europe with Zenón in Antonio Sánchez's band when Zenón got the call from the MacArthur Foundation, but they haven't worked together much since. Penn had worked with Zenón only once before, when he hired the alto saxophonist to play on Penn's birthday at the Manhattan club Jazz at Kitano the previous March; not long afterward, Zenón invited Penn to join him for his next Caravana Cultural event. Lage and Zenón had likewise worked together just once, when Lage sat in with the SFJAZZ Collective, but Colley and Lage have been colleagues for years, both in Gary Burton's quartet and in Lage's own trio. (Penn was familiar with both of them as well, having worked in various bands with Colley and recording with Lage on Burton's 2004 album *Generations* when the guitarist was not quite sixteen.)

In Cidra, the one-off quartet had a brief rehearsal, then sat down at a table beside the stage for a lunch of takeout chicken, rice, and *papas rellenas* (potato croquettes stuffed with ground beef). Audience members began trickling in, including a handful of young fans who chatted up Lage about his new trio album *Arclight*, which had been released that March. Soon, most of the three hundred or so plastic chairs lined up facing the stage were filled with concert goers, and Zenón launched his lecture.

Zenón, speaking in Spanish, began by noting that jazz, like various types of Puerto Rican music, involves improvisation, but that the musical language is different. He described Sonny Rollins as having come from Harlem, the "epicenter of African American life," and moved on to a career overview that emphasized a selection of Rollins's best-known collaborators and recordings. Zenón delivered his talk holding his alto saxophone in his right hand and his iPhone in his left, using the latter to check his notes and cue up music samples, among them parts of "Valse Hot," "Tenor Madness," "I'm an Old Cowhand," and the Caribbean-accented "Jungoso. " He ended with a recent recording of "Sonnymoon for Two," with Rollins joined by Roy Haynes, Christian McBride, and Ornette Coleman at a concert celebrating Rollins's eightieth birthday.

As he wrapped up, Zenón offered to take questions from the audience. A young man went first, asking if Zenón had ideas regarding the current state of jazz and where it may be headed.

"I think the most significant thing jazz has currently is its ability to incorporate elements that come from outside jazz," Zenón replied, without hesitation. "Conventional jazz is American, but it has opened up an ability to be very inclusive, incorporating elements of Latin American music, African music, classical music, popular music. In this case jazz, instead of staying sealed up within itself, has opened itself up to incorporate elements from other places. And I think this is the most significant thing, because jazz is not only bringing in music from other places but also musicians from other places—Latin Americans, Africans—who are attracting this inclusive character that jazz currently has, which I think is the most important element right now."

Zenón himself is a prime example of these developments. His Caravana Cultural concerts introduce straight-ahead jazz to Puerto Ricans, but his career has been built largely on the reverse: introducing a wide range of Puerto Rican music and culture to jazz. This was most overtly done on four projects: *Jíbaro* (2005), *Esta Plena* (2009), *Alma Adentro* (2011), and *Identities Are Changeable* (2014).

Jíbaro, Zenón's third album as a leader, celebrated *La Música Jíbara*—the purebred folk music of Puerto Rico's rural interior, whose spirit he captured in pieces he composed for his quartet. *Esta Plena,* Zenón's Guggenheim-underwritten tribute to the hand-drum-propelled indigenous music of the modern island's urban melting pot, arrived four years later. *Plena*, he points out in the disc's liner notes, "was not only influenced by bomba and jíbaro music, established genres of Puerto Rican folk culture, but also by music coming from the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Cuba, and other Caribbean islands." Supplementing Zenón and his stellar longtime quartet on the album is a fiery *plena* group led by master *panderetero* and vocalist Hector "Tito" Matos. *Esta Plena* earned Zenón his first two Grammy nominations, for Best Latin Jazz Album and Best Improvised Jazz Solo.

His next album, *Alma Adentro: The Puerto Rican Songbook,* switched things up. Zenón had written all the music on *Jíbaro* and *Esta Plena*, including the lyrics that appear on half of the latter's ten tracks. *Alma Adentro* consists entirely of his instrumental arrangements of Puerto Rican pop standards, two apiece by each of five historic composers. Zenon's quartet is supplemented with woodwinds orchestrated and conducted by the outstanding Argentine composer and bandleader Guillermo Klein. The album earned Zenón another Grammy nomination, this time for Best Large Jazz Ensemble.

All five *Alma Adentro* composers, like so many natives of Puerto Rico, spent some of their lives living in New York City. That Zenón himself had settled in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan, married, and recently become a father helped inspire his next major project, *Identities Are Changeable*. A multimedia work commissioned by Montclair State University's Peak Performances performing arts series, the project examined evolving Nuyorican identity through English-language interviews Zenón conducted with New Yorkers of Puerto Rican descent, among them jazz bassist Luques Curtis, New York University Latino studies professor Juan Flores (author of *The Diaspora Strikes Back*), actress Sonia Manzano (Maria on *Sesame Street*), and his sister Patricia.

Zenón composed a six-part song cycle, framed by the overture/outro theme "¿De Dónde Vienes?" (Where are you from?), that used complex interlocking rhythms to convey the complexities of dual identity raised by the interviews in relation to six themes—such as race ("Same Fight" couples the similar challenges faced by Puerto Ricans and African Americans), language, and culture. The music is performed by his quartet plus a twelve-piece horn section, with excerpts from the interviews woven into the music. The full-fledged production—also performed at San Francisco's SFJAZZ Center and at Carnegie Hall, and with a student horn section at Boston's New England Conservatory[82]—includes a video component by David Dempewolf, recommended to Zenón by Jason Moran, whose *In My Mind* tribute to Thelonious Monk's 1959 big band performance at Town Hall also featured a video by Dempewolf.

The album version of *Identities Are Changeable* included the audio sans video and earned Zenón another Grammy nomination for Best Latin Jazz Album. A live big-band version was performed without the interviews a few months before the album's release at the 2014 Newport Jazz Festival and aired soon thereafter on NPR's *Jazz Night in America*.[83] The music had also been field-tested early on by the quartet in clubs including the Village Vanguard.

I caught one of those Vanguard sets in late spring 2013, having spoken with Zenón earlier that day in one of three lengthy interviews he granted me in restaurants near his home. At the first of those interviews the year before, his newest album had involved him shifting his attention from Puerto Rico and his quartet to the Julio Cortázar novel *Rayuela*, in a project Zenón co-led with the French pianist and composer Laurent Coq. But he had recently premiered *Identities Are Changeable* in Montclair and said he was looking forward to recording it. I asked if he planned to continue mining his Puerto Rican heritage for musical inspiration.

"The way I see it," he replied, "is that for a while I was trying to find a way to learn more about myself through Puerto Rican music and just try to understand what being Puerto Rican meant to me. I found a way to do that though exploring a lot of those traditions and a lot of folklore and trying to filter that through what we do as a band or what we do when I write music and conceptualize things. I've been doing it for a while, done a couple projects, and I can't really say I'm going to do this forever, but there's definitely a lot more for me to explore."

When I suggested that his doing so gave his music a distinctively strong voice, he agreed. "I think something that's undeniable about folklore in general is that it's so connected to our core as human beings. I can play you some Puerto Rican music, or something in our music that comes out of folklore, and you might not be familiar with it, but you still recognize something in there that sounds more rooted than just chords and notes and stuff. Something that came out of human nature, out of people. I think that's the greatest thing about it, to explore this thing. It's almost like a universal thing, and I feel that it grounds me better—the more I know it, the more I explore it. It makes me more connected to the real source of music and inspiration. Because, like you said, a lot of us went to college and to school, and we learned the language and the rules and blah blah blah. But all of us started playing music because it called us. There was a call for us. It wasn't because of the notes and the fancy rhythms and all that; it was this call to express ourselves. And a lot of us are trying to get back to that—that initial attraction, just a pure attraction, like childhood."

Zenón's call to music came in childhood. He grew up the eldest child in a working-class family in San Juan's Santurce barrio, in the Residencial Luis Lloréns Torres housing project. ("Here you would call it a project," he clarified. "In Puerto Rico, it's organized differently, but it's the same thing.") It was there that he got his initial music instruction, starting at age ten, from Ernesto Vigoreaux, an elderly man who traveled to Lloréns Torres daily to work with the kids there. That led to his enrolling at Escuela Libre de Música, the performing arts middle school and high school he attended between ages twelve and seventeen.

That Zenón wound up playing alto saxophone there was accidental.

"What I actually wanted to play was the piano," he told me. "But the first day of school, where you have to enroll in the classes, I was a little late for some reason with my mom—and when we got there, everyone had the same idea, of course. Everybody wanted to play piano. So I had to pick something else, and I think there was someone in my family or something that had a saxophone lying around. So I just picked the sax. But I think I was a lot more interested in music in general than in a specific instrument."

School days were split between classical music instruction and the usual run of non-music subjects. Zenón excelled at both.

"I was always good with academics," he recalled. "I would say for the first three or four years, I never really considered music as a choice of life—it was just a hobby for me, like playing basketball or all this other stuff I did. I was seriously interested in the natural sciences, and I was really into math, physics, stuff like that. But then I discovered jazz, through friends: Charlie Parker here, Miles Davis there. And I started seeing, not the concept of improvisation—like I said before, improvisation's kind of what's all around—but the idea of improvisation tied to a language that was so integrated and so developed as it was in jazz.

"Plus, that tied to a specific dexterity that was connected to the instrument. When I heard Charlie Parker play for the first time, I couldn't believe it was improvised, because he was playing so clean, so fast, with such great technique and sound. Which is what I was being taught in school: the proper technique and being able to play fast. So that kind of pulled me toward wanting to know more about what that was all about, listening to more records, getting more and more into it."

But it was jazz improvisation itself more than technique that hooked him. Zenón became so enthralled that he declined a scholarship to the island's best engineering college, the Recinto Universitario de Mayagüez, in favor of studying jazz on the US mainland. ("I sort of changed my mind last-minute," Zenón admitted. "My family wasn't too happy about that.")

"As a saxophone player I was really impressed with Charlie Parker," he recalled, "but the idea of improvisation was what was really the catalyst for me. That drew me in, because when you actually realize that that's what they're doing, it's mind-blowing. From that the interest grew, and I made up my mind I wanted to follow that path and eventually made it to Berklee."

It took Zenón a year and a half to get to Boston, time he needed to raise funds via scholarships, financial aid, and assorted paid gigs on the island. He arrived for spring semester 1996 and spent the next two and a half years earning his degree under the tutelage of stellar professors such as Bill Pierce and Hal Crook.

He also honed his music skills off campus. He played Latin-oriented world music in the popular local group Mango Blue, his Israeli Berklee classmate Anat Cohen beside him in the front line on tenor sax. ("So I'm standing by Miguel and it feels great the way he plays. How do I get that?" remembers Cohen of their time together and how it helped shape her feel for Afro-Cuban rhythms. "Miguel was a big influence for me.") He toured with Boston's progressive Either/Orchestra, some of whose other notable alumni through the years include John Medeski, Matt Wilson, and Jaleel Shaw.

But Zenón's most important off-campus connection during his Boston years was with pianist Danilo Pérez, then teaching at New England Conservatory (he now oversees Berklee's Global Jazz Institute). Pérez, a native of Panama, had gone from playing in Dizzy Gillespie's United Nations Orchestra to recording his own albums, the first two of which included his Gillespie orchestra mate David Sánchez, who had preceded Zenón by several years as a saxophone student at Escuela Libre de Música. A third Pérez album, his Thelonious Monk tribute *Panamonk*, would be released toward the end of Zenón's first semester at Berklee.

Pérez and Sánchez were already both key inspirations to Zenón, two recent successes at coming to the United States and mastering modern jazz while retaining their Latin roots. Jazz has always had Latin connections. Its self-proclaimed inventor, Jelly Roll Morton, spoke of early jazz's syncopated rhythms as his music's "Spanish tinge." The Puerto Rican trombonist Juan Tizol co-wrote the Duke Ellington classics "Caravan" and "Perdido." Dizzy Gillespie hired the conga player Chano Pozo in the late 1940s and launched Afro-Cuban jazz. Stan Getz had the 1964 bossa nova hit "The Girl from Ipanema," and Sonny Rollins successfully explored both bossa nova and calypso. Latin Jazz as its own category came to include those things, mambo, salsa, and more.

What set the music of Pérez and Sánchez apart when they joined Gillespie was that jazz was already their primary focus. So much so, Pérez once told me, that he needed to be reminded of his origins by another Gillespie alumnus, the Cuban clarinetist and saxophonist Paquito D'Rivera. "He was actually the first one to hit me in the head saying, 'You're Latino and you sound just like a jazz player. You got to go back to your roots,' " Pérez recalled, laughing. "It's funny, because I really just wanted to play swing, and my life was going that way. But something kept pulling me the other way, too."

Not long after D'Rivera's admonition, Pérez released his second recording as a leader, *The Journey* (1993). A concept album whose theme is built around the introduction of slavery to Latin America, *The Journey* was a big influence on Zenón. Pérez recalls Zenón describing it to him in great detail during one of the younger man's many visits to play and discuss music together at Pérez's home, visits that began after Zenón, despite being a self-described "shy guy," bounded onstage after a Pérez performance in Boston to introduce himself. Pérez had already been alerted to keep an eye open for Zenón by the Puerto Rico–based music writer Carlos Iramain.

"I remember the thing about the concert," Pérez confirmed, "but I also remember clearly him coming [to my] home and saying, 'I'm Miguel.' We actually played a little bit. He showed me a couple things, and I said, 'Show me what you've been doing.' I remember giving him an assignment immediately. I said, 'This is all good, but you need to check out Johnny Hodges.' So I had him working in my home for hours, transcribing Johnny Hodges and playing. I don't remember the song I gave him, but my house was like a little cultural center where a lot of musicians came through."

Pérez does remember Zenón being hardworking, disciplined, studious, persistent—an impression the young man made on him very quickly. Pérez boasts of having singled out Zenón as someone people would be hearing from soon in a joint interview he did with David Sánchez for the November 1996 issue of *DownBeat*. When interviewer Eugene Holley asked about jazz musicians of Latin origins from their own generation who had influenced them, Sánchez rattled off "John Benitez, Richie Flores, Eddie Simon, some younger guys," at which point Pérez chipped in, "We met a saxophonist at Berklee named Miguel Zeno [*sic*]."[84]

Zenón graduated Berklee a couple of years later, in spring 1998, and, like many of his classmates, relocated to New York. But he didn't just move there looking for gigs. He was also pursuing a master's degree in jazz performance from the Manhattan School of Music.

"I just went there because I wanted to learn more about jazz," he recalled in one of our conversations. "I had never had a formal jazz education. Everything I knew before Berklee about jazz, I had learned on my own from CDs, reading a few books here and there. And then when I finished that, some people said, 'You should try going to New York, see how it goes.' But I didn't want to just come here and just kind of *ehhh*. So I decided, 'Maybe if I do a masters, I can have an excuse to be in New York: I'm *doing* something. And while I'm doing that, I'll go to jam sessions and I'll meet people.' Basically, that's exactly what happened. I was there, but I was always playing, and I was meeting people. It was a good transition just to get into a scene here—meet a lot of people through school, and meet a lot of people through just being in New York and going to jam sessions and going to spots here and there."

Chief among those spots was Smalls Jazz Club, which in the late 1990s was where a new generation of jazz artists was honing its craft late at night in front of audiences paying a $10 cover. Joshua Redman, Brad Mehldau, and Kurt Rosenwinkel were among the many influential rising stars to have performed there in those years, as did Norah Jones before her 2002 album *Come Away with Me* made her famous. The Argentine pianist/composer/band leader Guillermo Klein lived nearby and had a weekly gig at Smalls, as did Israeli bassist/composer Omer Avital and Jason Lindner, who besides leading his own bands now plays piano and keyboards in the quartets of Anat Cohen and Donny McCaslin. Zenón would eventually perform and record with both Klein and Lindner. He would also get together with many of the people he was seeing there to pick their brains.

"One of the things that was great about New York for me was that I realized this actually could happen," Zenón said. "I moved here, and I remember going to gigs at Smalls or wherever, and I was just new in town. I would go up to Mark Turner or Seamus Blake or the guys that I liked. Greg Osby or whoever. And I'd just be like, 'Hey man, my name is so and so.' You know, some kid. But I was really blown away by how open they were to sharing. It's like, 'Man, maybe we can get together sometime and just talk about music.' And I got together with all of those people at some point. Just play together, talk about music, what are we checking out, play a session, listen to music. That had a big impact on me. Not only was I able to get a lot from those conversations with more experienced players, and players who I admired greatly—but also, I kind of said, 'Man, it's actually OK to share and feel part of this community.' "

This, he noted, was in contrast to his undergraduate days in Boston, where the students would overhear bits of one another playing in neighboring practice rooms but mostly stayed focused on their own individual development. In New York he found a greater opportunity to woodshed and talk music and other matters with fellow musicians.

"There were a lot of specific things, musical things, of course," Zenón remembered. " 'Check out this record. This is what I got from this and that.' But I think, in general, it was more intangible kinds of things. Just talking with them about how they thought about music, talking to them about certain experiences they had playing with so and so, or on the road. For me, a lot of it, too, was just realizing that they were regular guys. They like basketball, they like food, they're cracking jokes. It was more about, 'OK, so these guys whose records you listen to, you're transcribing, now you're talking to them about boxing or something.' That kind of thing was a big part of it, too."

Two such New York connections proved especially important for Zenón. The first person he looked up upon moving there was David Sánchez. Pérez had already introduced the two of them, and had recommended that Sánchez consider hiring Zenón for his band. "David had talked to me about making some changes in the group, and I said, 'Man, you got to listen to this saxophonist,' " said Pérez. "That was a sort of like his first apprenticeship."

"I met David through Danilo while I was in Boston," Zenón said. "He was kind of the same way Danilo was in Boston. I'd go over to his house, and we'd play and listen to music all day. He brought me to his shows, met a lot of people through him, eventually started playing in his band. Another mentor figure. And I would say those two guys, they were really the guys that I looked up to. They were the people whose road I wanted to follow."

"I'll tell you exactly what happened," Sánchez later told me. Zenón was studying with Pérez at the time, and Pérez asked Sánchez to listen to Zenón play and give him some sax-specific pointers. "He played for me," said Sánchez. "I'm almost sure it was at Danilo's place, and if it wasn't, definitely Danilo was there. So he played and we talked a little bit about the instrument and the sound."

Sánchez was in town to perform with his band at Scullers, and asked Zenón if he would like to sit in with them on a tune or two.

"Back in the day I was playing originals most of the time," Sánchez recalled. "But he said, 'I know some of the stuff.' Then it turned out that he pretty much knew the whole recording, and interestingly enough, on that recording—that recording I made with Danilo, it's called *Street Scenes*—I wrote something for two saxophones." That track, titled "The Elements," had Sánchez's tenor trading lines with guest star Kenny Garrett's alto.

"It was alto and tenor, so [Zenón] knew the parts. I was very impressed with not only his talent, but he seemed like a very dedicated person, right away. We also discovered that he played with some of the bands that I played with in Puerto Rico. And he was interested in the folklore! I'd never met anyone that was interested in the folklore, and he's that much into jazz at the same time. That's basically where I come from. I came from Afro-Puerto Rican rhythms from the start, from my first recording. So I told him, 'When you finish [Berklee], if you are coming to New York, make sure you call me.' "

Zenón, of course, was eager to do so. And he made the most of the opportunity.

"He came to Brooklyn and we started actually working on pieces together," said Sánchez. "These are things that I'm actually working on. The next week he would come and play the stuff incredibly. Better than me! And I thought, 'This guy's quick!' Not only that, he wrote a piece based on the sounds I was working on."

Zenón joined what became Sánchez's sextet, and that tune, "El Ogro," appeared on the album *Melaza* ("Molasses," 2000). He stayed with Sánchez for two more high-profile albums, *Travesía* (2001) and *Coral* (2004), contributing two compositions to *Travesía*. But the association paid other dividends as well. Zenón recruited his fellow Sánchez band sidemen Hans Glawischnig and Antonio Sánchez for what became his own quartet, joined by pianist Luis Perdomo. That group played its first gig together at an East Village dive on September 4, 2000, according to an old calendar that Perdomo dug up (Zenón believes that another David Sánchez associate, Adam Cruz, played drums that first night), and the quartet stayed together until Antonio Sánchez's schedule became crowded leading his own band and touring with Pat Metheny. Henry Cole, a fellow Puerto Rican whom Zenón had gotten to know through mutual friends, took over on drums in 2005, and that version of the quartet remains intact.

It was also through David Sánchez that Zenón met Branford Marsalis, who co-produced *Melaza* for Sánchez in the A&R job he then held with Columbia Records. When Marsalis later left to form Marsalis Records, he signed Zenón to a recording contract that led to his next five albums, ending with *Alma Adentro*.

Marsalis told me that what attracted him to Zenón was the younger man's intelligence. "His *musical* intelligence," Marsalis clarified. "A lot of the music that I hear now, there's a lot of intelligence, but it's more like mathematical intelligence, not musical intelligence. He has the mathematical intelligence as well—you can hear it in a lot of the music that he writes, in the structure. But when it comes to the simple things that our hearts are learning, he can do all of those things with ease. He can play a ballad and not have to play it in double time. He can play 'Great Is Thy Faithfulness' with a certain amount of passion in his sound. The fact that his band stayed, so that the music challenges them. He's the real deal."

Right at their first meeting Marsalis zeroed in on another important influence on Zenón, a contemporary who, as Marsalis had before him, once spent some time touring with the rock star Sting.

"Yeah, he was playing with David," Marsalis recalled of Zenón, "and I noticed that he had done something which was really difficult. He'd been checking out Steve Coleman's music a lot. I could hear it in his playing. Steve's playing is very, very intelligent, scientific, and clinical. And he was able to take that information and still make it sound like Miguel. I think a lot of people trying to play like Steve would have a difficult time doing that. Because it's so specific. And I just walked up to him and said, 'You been checkin' out Coleman, huh?' And he kinda grinned. He says, 'Yeah, man.' I said, 'That's tough shit.' But it sounded like him when he did it, and I'm like, 'All right.' "

Zenón's connection to Steve Coleman was indeed crucial, and went beyond merely listening to his music. It began around the time he was forming his quartet.

"I've played with him a little bit," Zenón said, "and I've hung with him a lot. He's one of those guys, he's really into just getting together and just talking and playing. I remember—I haven't done it in awhile—but I remember just spending all day with him. Just talking and playing, and listening to music, and playing some more, and talking. We'd look at some books. He's into that. A lot of people see him as this sort of guru figure that's leading the way."

"I think Steve is probably the most influential jazz musician of the last twenty years," Zenón elaborated. "Seventy-five percent of the guys that you talk to now are going to bring up his name. And I think it's because he encompassed very early on—I mean, he's been doing this for *thirty-five years*—and he very early on was able to put together this balance between something that's very intellectual and something that's very earthy and has to do with groove. That got to a lot of people with time, especially now with this music becoming so global and so exposed to so many pieces of information coming from everywhere. People are reaching outside of music to find things to bring to music. Like the thing that David Gilmore did [the live album *Numerology*, on which the guitarist was backed by Zenón, Perdomo, Christian McBride, and others], for example, and a lot of other stuff. Some of the stuff that people are doing with art and literature. But Steve's been doing this for years."

Inspired by Coleman, Zenón has been doing a good deal of that sort of thing himself, whether tapping into Puerto Rican folk music on *Jíbaro* and *Esta Plena* or exploring life beyond music on *Identities Are Changeable*.

Coleman, Zenón noted, "was very influential in the sense that when you heard his music, there was obviously something there that wasn't necessarily coming out of music. So it made it interesting. It was a study of natural sciences or a specific kind of religious thing or spiritual thing, or music coming from another place in the world. I think that was the thing that for me, and a lot of people from our generation, that kind of opened the door. It's not that he was the first one that did it, but he was very clear about what he was doing. He was treating it almost like a research project, like a scholar in a way. And that was the thing that a lot of people in my generation grasped on. And, like you said, he's a guy that's so well rooted in tradition as well—not only jazz, but funk, James Brown, and all that stuff, too. So his music, even though it can be very intellectual, it can be very fun to listen to because he grooves, and he has something for you to grab on. So he had a very nice balance, and it represented a lot of things a lot of us were trying to find."

That rootedness in tradition is critical for taking music to new places, in Zenón's view, which explains why he believes that the narrower, neoclassical approach to jazz tradition espoused by Wynton Marsalis and others also had a lasting, salutary effect on his generation.

"I wouldn't necessarily totally detach the stuff that's happening now from the stuff you were talking about in the '80s, with Wynton and the new traditionalist kind of vibe," he explained. "I think that also opened the door to a lot of stuff that's happening now. I feel that trying to create something different just for the sake of it, to me, is a lot less interesting, and it doesn't last as long as something that's well rooted. It's coming from a place where you start somewhere, and that makes you blossom into a personality. It happened with Charlie Parker, Coltrane, Steve Coleman, a lot of these great musicians. They started imitating their idols, and that brought them to discover themselves. I think that specific thing is a lot purer than just saying 'I'm going to do something different' as a sort of revolutionary act. It's purer when it comes out of a source.

"I even feel that the generation before me—like the Brad Mehldaus, the Mark Turners, the Kurt Rosenwinkels, Brian Blade, Christian McBride, those guys—they had, at least for my taste, an even better balance of these two worlds. They were really the best. They said, 'OK, so we've got all this stuff down. We can swing, we can play the blues, we can play changes, all this stuff.' Whereas now, I think we're kind of springboarding off what they did. But those guys, they were the first guys who had feet in both worlds and could do both things real well. Still when I hear those guys that's what speaks to me the most. When I hear Brad or Kurt, they're really dealing with tradition, but at the same time, you hear their personality. They're still swinging, they're still connected to that. But at the same time, you still hear modernity and all this stuff that you connect with. Same thing when I hear Steve and Greg Osby, guys from that generation. It happens to me a lot more with that generation than the current generation."

Zenón is doing what he can to help see it happen in the coming generation. He has taught music at numerous clinics around the world, and beginning in fall 2009—a couple of weeks after the release of *Esta Plena* and fresh from receiving his MacArthur award the year before—he became a permanent faculty member at New England Conservatory. That gig, like Moran's and Iverson's, entails his traveling to Boston seven times a semester to work with NEC students.

Zenón's teaching came up during one of our early chats in Washington Heights.

"I don't have preconceived things for me to tell them—aside from basic things," he told me. "Especially with saxophone players: I find at that age, most of the stuff they need to work on is really basic things. Because part of the problem I encounter with students that age, at the college level—who are good—is that they want to be part of the present. You know, they want to sound like the guys they admire, the guys they hear on the record, the guys they go see at the club. They want to be able to do that, so that's what they practice, and that's what they write, and that's what they listen to. But they have a lot of holes, in terms of their formation—not only stylistically, but also in their instrument, too. So a lot of the stuff I do is basically finding these holes that they have and working out specific ways for them to fill them up. Because that's kind of the way I learn, too."

I told him his remark about the young players being overly focused on the present reminded me of something Robert Glasper had told me about not wanting to sound like musicians from the 1950s and '60s, because music should reflect his own life and times.

"Yeah, I agree with that," Zenón replied. "It's not that I want to play like Charlie Parker or Johnny Hodges, or whoever. I'm not going to play like them because I'm not them. But I do feel that there's a certain lineage in the tradition that has taken us up to the point of where we are now. It doesn't matter what music you play—it could be jazz or hip-hop or funk or whatever—it just didn't happen out of nowhere. It developed into something. And for me, at least, I feel that the more I know that lineage, the better I'm going to be as a musician, and the more rooted I'm going to be as a musical personality. The more I'm going to be able to express myself in an honest way, if I know, 'This is what happened before me, and this is what's been done.' I kind of take it from there."

Zenón contrasted the younger generation's obsession with making an immediate mark on the present with his own student days at Berklee in the mid-1990s.

"I'm not really that much older than them," he said, "but I remember when I was coming up I wouldn't even think about writing my own music. My whole thing was, 'OK, I've gotta check out these solos.' And all my friends were like that. The whole thing was 'learn tunes,' and maybe it's a generational thing, but I think maybe that had something to do with the changing of the guard and it being a lot more crowded."

To succeed professionally, the well-trained musicians being churned out by the country's many jazz programs eventually need to develop distinctive voices. But Zenón tries to keep his students from getting ahead of themselves. Their musical personalities will emerge most fully and naturally, he believes, with a thorough mastery of both history and technique.

"The problem is not necessarily that the students lack personality," Zenón explained. "It's just that I feel that they're missing a lot of basic knowledge, a lot of basic stuff. And, you know, it's common. It's normal. It happened to me, too. It's happened to everyone. And I feel like, for me, what did it was realizing in time that I needed to fill up these deficiencies that I had. Once I did that, I felt more comfortable, I felt more relaxed, and I felt I could get to a personal thing in a more organic way. But then again, it's different for everyone."

I got a taste of how Zenón helps students overcome their deficiencies one sunny September afternoon at NEC, observing him conduct hour-long private sessions with three students. These included Alex Quinn, a trumpeter from South Portland, Maine, and Kenny Cha, a guitarist from South Korea. But the lesson that stuck with me most was with an alto saxophonist from suburban Chicago named Jonah Philion, and not just because he and Zenón play the same instrument.

Philion, in his third year of a five-year dual degree program that would earn him a bachelor of arts from Harvard College (where he was majoring in physics and math) and a master of music from NEC, arrived a bit winded from having bicycled over from Cambridge. He was wearing a T-shirt touting a youth program overseen by the Maywood Tennis Association, where he had worked as a volunteer after playing the sport at nearby Oak Park and River Forest High School. I found out later that he had also taken Vijay Iyer's creative music seminar at Harvard.

What stuck out about the lesson was how willing this young overachiever was to devote the first twenty-plus minutes of his hour with Zenón to working on something that appeared, on the surface, to be quite rudimentary. Zenón had been having him practice working on equalizing the air stream he was utilizing at different volumes and registers. Far from objecting, Philion arrived at the lesson praising what the exercises Zenón had given him had already accomplished.

"I'm already feeling myself get a lot stronger," he reported. "It's one of those things you can feel an improvement immediately. It's already getting stronger so fast. It's also a realization of how much I have to grow in that regard, right?"

"That's very cool," Zenón replied. "You want to start with those exercises and then we do this?"

Philion made several series of whole notes, moving slowly up and down a scale, eventually adding some overtones to the drill, Zenón offering advice after each attempt.

"When you attack the note first, try not to waste so much air. Just try to get it to come out right away without overblowing. Start with nothing. Relax the embouchure so the reed can vibrate."

"Let's try it now. I want you to hold it for four beats. When you get the overtone, try to hold it for the duration, so that you can get the note focused. Get it clean. Control it."

They tried a slow ballad next, "Misty," Zenón comping lightly but credibly on piano. But Zenón was still listening to correct Philion's air stream.

"That's good," he said as they finished. "That's getting a lot stronger. As you keep working on this, the key is focusing now. Focus on the air stream. Never shifts. Loud, soft, whatever it is—it's always the same. Even that last note you played, keep the air flowing through it."

"It sounds weak, right?" asked Philion.

"It just sounds inconsistent," Zenón clarified. "You play in the middle one way and the high register another way. It sounds inconsistent. So this is a good exercise. Do your exercises. Blow notes, overtones, octaves. Then you play a melody. When you play melody, pay attention to all those things. How those exercises brought you to a sense of self-awareness about your sound."

The final half of the session was the fun part, a chance to run through the transcription Philion had been assigned of Cannonball Adderley's solo on "Love for Sale," from the Miles Davis album *'58 Sessions*, one of Zenón's favorite Adderley solos.

Zenón comped again as Philion played it the first time through.

"That's nice," he said as they finished. "For now, concentrate on your phrasing and feel."

Zenón grabbed his own horn and demonstrated, as Philion looked on smiling at the ease with which Zenón did so.

"Let's hear it for a second," Zenón said, as he prepared to cue up the recording Philion was working from for a close listen. "You know those little inflections and swirls, those turns and all that stuff? That's really the key to the solo. And also the way he feels the eighth note."

As they went through the recording, Zenón paused it here and there to analyze snippets of Adderley's phrasing in close detail.

"See how it pulls back on the B flat?" he observed at one point, singing the lick to demonstrate. "That's a Charlie Parker trick. Charlie Parker used to do it here."

Zenón demonstrated again using his horn, and they moved on to the next fine point Zenón wanted to call attention to.

"Keep working on this, exaggerating a little more on the phrasing," he instructed, after having Philion play the solo through a final time. "The idea with this stuff, we have to bring it as close as possible to become them. Everything they're doing we're trying to emulate, capture—sound, articulation, attack, if they laid back—the whole thing. So for next time a little more of this. Try and see if you can memorize it next time."

As Philion's session wrapped up, he and Zenón discussed whom Philion might be able to get to play with him for Zenón the next day. Being at Harvard made that a little tricker for Philion than other NEC students, but Zenón assured him that he could get by with another musician or two, possibly plucked from the sign-up sheet outside the relevant classroom door.

Playing with other musicians is essential to Zenón. "As much as I like playing with my band," he once told me, "I wouldn't feel complete if I didn't play with anybody else."

"I would say I've kind of reached a certain point where I don't have to take every gig," he clarified, "so I just take the gigs that I want to take. But I feel that if I just played with my band and didn't play with anybody else, I don't think I'd be able to deal financially the same way. I actually need to play with other people in order to keep it going. And I like it too, which is cool. But it has to be a balance for me, at least at this point in my life. Like I said before—maybe it's me, the kind of person I am, but I would sort of consider my musical career a failure if I didn't play with other people, if I just played with my band and I just organized everything around me being a leader. Because to me, that's not what it is. You want to be part of something greater."

As we walked toward his hotel after the final lesson that afternoon at NEC, I asked about a performance he had coming up in Chicago in a couple of weeks. He told me that he would be premiering his commissioned work for saxophone and string quartet, "Yo Soy La Tradición" (I am tradition), with the Spektral Quartet, the brilliant ensemble-in-residence at the University of Chicago. Zenón's modest description of the event that day made it seem a relatively small thing. But Howard Reich, longtime jazz critic of the *Chicago Tribune*, had effusive praise for both the piece and the performance:

> *Commissioned for the occasion by the Hyde Park Jazz Festival, the piece elegantly blurs distinctions among jazz, classical and folkloric music. Substantive yet accessible, rhythmically intense but often melodically soaring, "Yo Soy La Tradicion" shows Zenon—as in previous work—finding inspiration in the musical, cultural and religious rituals of his native Puerto Rico. Yet this is no kitschy appropriation of familiar dance forms. Instead,*

> *Zenon has crafted a vast work in which meter, tempo, texture and instrumental technique are in constant flux. Certain passages bristle with complex interactions between Zenon and the Spektral Quartet. Others prove disarmingly direct by virtue of their poetic melodies or buoyant rhythms or extended passages of hand claps for all the musicians. Zenon has built forward motion into the string writing so deftly that you never really miss the rhythm-section accompaniment that typically drives small-ensemble jazz. It's a major work that ought to be recorded, and Zenon should enter it for the Pulitzer Prize music competition.*[85]

"Yo Soy La Tradición" was actually Zenón's second collaboration with the Spektral Quartet. The first had come when the French accordionist Julien Labro emailed Zenón during a run at Chicago's Jazz Showcase to say Labro and the quartet were recording an arrangement of Zenón's "El Club de la Serpiente" and wondering if he would like to sit in. He did so, and the piece appears as a track on the 2014 album *From This Point Forward*. "I went in and the whole thing was super fun," recalled Zenón. "When I approached was by Kate [Dumbleton] from Hyde Park a bit later [about the commission], I thought it might be nice to involve a Chicago-based ensemble and reached out to Spektral."

Zenón had recorded the original version of "El Club de la Serpiente" with another Frenchman, the pianist and composer Laurent Coq, as the climactic final track of their 2011 collaborative album, *Rayuela*. Inspired by the renowned novel of that title by Julio Cortázar (*Hopscotch* in its English translation), *Rayuela* resulted from Zenón's love of the book, he and Coq having long discussed finding a project to work together on, and Zenón having finished his five-album commitment to Marsalis Music.

The first time I met with Zenón, *Rayuela* was recently out on Sunnyside Records and another album, *Oye!!! Live in Puerto Rico* (made with the Rhythm Collective, a group of Puerto Rican percussionists with whom he had toured western Africa for the US State Department several years earlier), was a year away on his own soon-to-launch label, Miel (Miel is a mashup of the first names of Miguel and his wife, Elga). He was also well into his *Identities Are Changeable* project, having premiered it in Montclair and its Carnegie Hall performance scheduled for that fall.

Rayuela was a particularly intriguing project, for both its connection to literature and its unusual instrumentation. Cortázar already had links to jazz through his short stories "El perseguidor" ("The Pursuer"), with its protagonist modeled on Charlie Parker, and "Las babas del diablo," which inspired the Michelangelo Antonioni film *Blow-Up* (1966) and its music score by Herbie Hancock. *Rayuela* was Cortázar's experimental masterpiece, a deeply philosophical novel set in Paris and Buenos Aires that famously offered its readers an alternative method of hopscotching from chapter to chapter rather than reading them in numerical order.

"Cortázar is just so creative," Zenón enthused when we spoke that afternoon. "It's almost like he's trying to find new ways to write to keep himself on his toes while he writes. I just thought he was really refreshing, and I still do when I read it now. I always find new things."

The novel has jazz associations as well. The "Club de la Serpiente" that inspired Zenón's composition is a group of Paris-based characters that gathers to discuss the arts, philosophy, and other intellectual matters while spinning jazz albums. And the artistic liberties Cortázar employs in organizing the book have their own connections to the music.

"There are definitely similarities," agreed Zenón when I suggested as much. "Some of that character definitely attracted me to it. Just the freedom to experiment and to try things and give you different roads to one place or to different places."

It had been Zenón's notion to focus the Coq collaboration on the novel. "We were trying to come up with an idea, and I suggested this might be a way to go just because of all the connections in the book already, with France and Latin America, something that's really present in a lot of characters in the book," he said. "That's the whole plot. And you know how jazz is so present in the book, and how Cortázar is such a big fan of jazz and music in general. Laurent didn't know the book, so he read it, and we started to come up with ideas about what we could do with the songs and what he wanted to do with it and what I wanted to do with it—and we came up with an instrumentation that we thought could make this a project and not just something that was more abstract. This was actually like a band that functioned specifically for this project."

Zenón and Coq brought some of their own playfulness to the album. The track sequence doesn't correspond to either reading sequence offered by Cortázar, and the two composers flipped expectations of which of them wrote pieces based on what scenes: Zenón wrote the five set in Paris, and Coq wrote those set in Buenos Aires.

"We did that on purpose," Zenón confirmed. "We just thought it would be too obvious if he did the Paris and I did the Latin America, so we switched it around. And what was interesting is that even though I've been to Paris many times, because of work and stuff, and he has never been to Buenos Aires—Laurent doesn't know the city at all, so he was writing this music based on the ideas he was getting from the book itself—it brought it to a different level. It was interesting how he sort of perceived the city and the ambience from the city just by reading a book and looking at pictures and stuff like that. It was interesting just to hear him talk about it."

As for that unusual instrumentation, Zenón and Coq rounded out their quartet with two of Zenón's former Manhattan School of Music classmates: Dan Weiss on drums and tabla and Dana Leong on trombone and cello. "It gave us a lot of space to work, and a lot of configurations we could deal with—make it more chamber, something more of a jazz configuration, different things."

Zenón knew both men well from having attended the Manhattan School with them. Weiss had recently taken up tabla in those years, and his mastery of the instrument is used to careful effect on *Rayuela*.

"Dana was a little younger than we were," Zenón recalled, "and when I met him he was a trombone player. We played in ensembles and combos together in school, and he was so talented. And eventually I found out through someone else he also played cello, and was like, 'Really?' We never talked about it. He never mentioned it. It was actually his first instrument. And the way he came to it actually was, he was playing around and Henry Threadgill, the saxophonist, composer, was looking for a cellist and somebody else said, 'I think Dana plays cello.' Now that's kind of his main instrument."

"I think Dan has read it," Zenón said. "I don't know about Dana. I don't think any of them were as deep into the book as I was. I think part of it, too, was the book was inspiring the compositions themselves, but the plan—we're just playing, basically. Compositions and the idea of the project were inspired by the book. But when we play, we play."

Rayuela was a one-time collaboration. Another Zenón collaboration has been going since 2004. According to David Sánchez, Joshua Redman dropped by a London club to check out Sánchez's sextet. "I remember him saying, 'Who's the alto player that you're playing with?' And I said, 'Oh, you don't know him. It's a guy, Miguel Zenón, from Puerto Rico.' A month after that, I heard that [Zenón] got the call to be in the SFJAZZ Collective."

That group's home base is now the SFJAZZ Center, a West Coast answer to Jazz at Lincoln Center that opened in 2013. The collective is an evolving eight-piece all-star ensemble whose members each year celebrate a top composer with fresh arrangements of the composer's works and tribute pieces of their own. Redman was the group's artistic director initially, and Zenón is the only original member remaining. These days Sánchez works beside Zenón in the frontline, having succeeded Redman, Joe Lovano, and Mark Turner as the collective's tenor saxophonist in 2013. The group is very much a collective, with its members divvying up the composing, arranging, and stage announcements equally. But judging by a March 2017 performance in Rockport, Massachusetts, the others appear to defer to Zenón as the senior partner among equals. The collective's thirteenth album, focused on Miles Davis, was released that same month.

Zenón has also been among the high-profile artists-in-residence hosted by the SFJAZZ Center over the years. Jason Moran was another artist-in-residence the year Zenón served, as were Bill Frisell, Regina Carter, and John Santos. Vijay Iyer and Esperanza Spalding, also profiled in this book, have since received the honor, for which the recipient spends several nights showcasing a range of his or her work.

In Zenón's case, his series began with an opening night alto sax/piano duo set with Danilo Pérez, who had just arrived on a flight from South Africa but gave a strong performance nonetheless. Tito Matos and his five-piece Viento de Agua played a first set on night two, then after an intermission Matos and two of the *plenaros* joined Zenón's quartet for four tunes from *Esta Plena*. Brazilian vocalist Luciana Souza joined Zenón's quartet for night three, which featured her singing a mix of her compositions ("Filhos de Ghandi," or "Children of Ghandi"), his ("Sangre de mi Sangre," a celebration of Zenón's wife and young daughter), and covers. The residency ended on night four with Pedrito Martinez sitting in with the quartet on congas and voice.

I was fortunate to be there for all of it, and to my mind the highlight among many was Zenón and Martinez coming out for a duo performance of Juan Tizol's "Caravan" as an encore. As I wrote in an account of the week for *JazzTimes*, "Zenón kept referring to and taking liberties with the familiar melody, gently lyrical one moment and taking things out a bit the next, and he did what amounted to comping on his alto when Martinez took the lead on congas. The encore didn't last long, but nothing could have sent the audience home happier."[86]

Zenón continues to accept occasional sideman work. He's on *Authority Melts from Me*, Bobby Avey's 2014 suite for jazz quintet inspired by Haiti's 1804 slave revolt and its more recent political tribulations. Two other notable recent projects saw him working beside the guitarist Lionel Loueke in bands led by pianist Kenny Werner and drummer Jeff Ballard. Ballard, best known for his longtime association with Brad Mehldau, had been leading Zenón and Loueke on trio gigs in New York before they recorded *Time's Tales*, his debut album as a leader, which also came out in 2014 and led to the trio performing elsewhere. I caught them in Boston at Scullers, where they added a surprising and thoroughly engaging cover of the Frank Sinatra hit "A Very Good Year" to the repertoire from the album.

Ballard also plays with Zenón in Guillermo Klein's Los Guachos ensemble, Zenón's most involved and long-standing sideman role by far. Zenón had become familiar with the group from their weekly performances at Smalls before he played with Klein for the first time in the late 1990s, subbing on a trio date. Fernando Huergo, a friend of Zenón's from Berklee who, like the vocalist Luciana Souza, commuted between Boston and New York for many of those weekly gigs with Los Guachos, made the introduction.

"We were playing trio with sax and bass," Klein told me, "and then one day the sax player couldn't make it. Fernando said, 'Why don't you call this guy?' So I called Miguel, and he came to play this restaurant gig. What really captured my attention is he played some of the tunes without reading them. And those were my tunes, they weren't standards. I asked him, 'How did you do that?' And he said, 'Well, I heard them at Smalls.' This was in, like, '97, '98."

Not long afterward Zenón subbed on alto for one of Los Guachos' three tenor saxes. "He sounded so good I asked him to stay,' " Klein recalled. "So instead of three saxophones, they became four saxophones. And I would make new parts. I would tell Miguel to double some parts. I just wanted him to be in the music because he made the band sound better. That's the magic he has: wherever he goes, he makes the band sound better."

"He mastered the instrument from an early age," Klein added. "I barely saw him practicing the instrument, actually, but I heard him playing very long notes and focusing on the sound. That aspect makes the band tune better as well. Everybody in my band has a great sound. I experience that playing with other people, like the chords wouldn't sound that good. I know, for example, that every note Miguel plays he knows what it means in the chord."

Russ Gershon, the leader of Either/Orchestra, has told of Zenón's unusual focus and maturity as a young man, and of how he himself would sometimes look to Zenón for cues onstage. Zenón serves a similar function as a sort of adjunct leader in Los Guachos, according to Klein.

"I recently wrote this suite for *Los Guachos V*, our latest record," he explained. "One of the pieces is a twelve-tone piece, and he had the lead of the piece, kind of a feature. It's very challenging to hear it while we play. I thought the only one who could really play that was Miguel. It's very interesting how he organizes the band to his playing. I've seen Chris Cheek following Miguel. Chris Cheek is one of the most talented musicians on Earth, and when we play he follows Miguel for time and cues. He has *presence*."

That presence in Los Guachos extends beyond alto saxophone to flute and vocals. I remember being surprised to see him singing on one tune when I caught the band at the Village Vanguard. "Everybody sings," he told me, laughing, when I asked him about it afterward. "But not everybody does it in public, I guess. I've been singing since I was a kid. I'm not Plácido Domingo or whatever, but I can hold a pitch, I think."

"I think he has a beautiful voice," was Klein's take. "Sounds like an angel, you know? After the gigs, I would hear him singing the tunes, just humming the tunes or humming his parts or singing. One day, on one tune, I said, 'Man, it would be nice if you could sing this as an alto, because I can't reach it.' That may have been the tune you heard him singing. I want to do more of that, an alto [voice].

"In the band he plays flute as well," Klein added. "That's a really great thing. Here is this lion, like in the jungle, and he plays saxophone and all the animals follow and so on. Give him the flute, where he barely practices, you know? We do it so it puts him in a different place. It's a great sensation, too. It's a very different timbre. I'm glad he allows me to experiment with that. This is the only life we have, and we have to experiment. He's totally open for that."

Zenón and Klein have become close friends and collaborators. Aside from Los Guachos, Zenón backed Klein and pianist Aaron Goldberg on their co-led album *Bienestan* (2011). And Klein tells of Zenón having recruited him to write the woodwind arrangements for *Alma Adentro* while the two shot pool during a Zenón stopover in Barcelona, during a period in which Klein held a teaching appointment in San Sebastián, Spain. Zenón was looking for something similar to what Klein had written on commission for the MIT Woodwind Ensemble and their Los Guachos bandmate Bill McHenry. Klein's job on the Zenón project was to add orchestration without altering the melodies and harmonies Zenón was providing him.

"I remember one tune, there was a chord that sounded really bad," recalled Klein. "I tried to make that chord work, and I couldn't find it." Rather than simply fix it himself, he phoned Zenón and discovered that the chord had been copied wrong; the chord Zenón had intended fit perfectly. "That tells you how much clarity he has in what he wants," Klein explained. "I would totally highlight that part of his persona. He's very clear, he knows what he wants. He has a work ethic that is remarkable."

Zenón has similar praise for Klein, and has even gone so far as to write a composition for him. Klein, who left his teaching job in Spain and settled in New York's Hudson Valley, got his first inkling of Zenón's tip of the hat to him at a show near his new home.

"He was playing at the Falcon, which is a club in upstate New York close to my house," Klein recalled. "I think he opened the set with that tune, and I started recognizing some chords that I play—some chords and some devices that I use and some lines. They were intertwined in a way, and I was like, 'Man, this is so cool.' I didn't think that was related to me. I was kind of feeling that the language was there. There was a sort of language in common. And then the rhythm came, and when they started playing this clave that I used on many tunes, I was, 'Oh man, he's giving me a nod here. He's waving hello, that kind of thing.' When the tune ended, he said, 'I just wanted to play this tune that is dedicated to my friend who is here in the audience. The name of the tune is "Cantor." '

"When he said 'Cantor,' I felt so honored, man. Such a big emotion. Because 'cantor' means 'singer,' and that's the deepest thing a musician can name you: a singer. You can sing with the voice and you can sing with piano and you can sing with the orchestra. It's just a beautiful statement. It says a lot about our mutual understanding. You can have all techniques and all the weapons and everything, but if it doesn't sing then there's something missing. Even the rhythm has to sing, you know? That was quite a beautiful gift from him."

"Cantor" came out on Zenón's quartet album *Típico* in February 2017. That album's theme was more self-referential than the handful that immediately preceded it. There were a couple of tunes that arose from teaching exercises Zenón employs at NEC and an instrumental version of "Sangre de mi Sangre," Zenón's tribute to his wife and daughter. But the album was primarily a celebration of Zenón's long-standing quartet.

The title track referenced the Latin roots of three of the four band members. The outlier, Austrian bassist Hans Glawischnig, is featured on "Sangre de mi Sangre," plucking counterpoint to its lullaby-like melody and then building a contemplative solo from it that becomes the track's centerpiece. Zenón's fellow Puerto Rican Henry Cole is featured on "Las Ramas" (The roots, a nod to Cole's own 2012 album *Roots Before Branches*), which Zenón wrote around a complex rhythmic pattern Cole often employs on drums. Venezuelan pianist Luis Perdomo is spotlighted on "Entre Las Raices" (Amongst the roots), whose melody Zenón derived from a Perdomo solo on the pianist's album *Awareness* and set up to demonstrate his mastery of the jazz styles that inspired him coming up in Caracas, bebop and free jazz, as exemplified by Bud Powell and Cecil Taylor.

That the quartet has remained intact since Cole joined the others in 2005 has been a blessing, allowing them to achieve an unmistakable group sound. Zenón credits the example of Branford Marsalis for holding a working group together: Marsalis has made minimal adjustments to his quartet—one apiece on piano, bass, and drums—since forming its original version in the mid-1990s.

"It's definitely an idea that's coming back," said Zenón. "Really having a group of people that you play with all the time and develop a sound as a group that makes the music better. [Branford]'s definitely one of those guys that ingrained the idea of a working band and the possibility of that being realistic. I've been lucky, too, that I've found guys that are into it."

When I mentioned this to Cole, and rattled off the other artists in this book who had managed to keep a group together for more than a decade (this was a couple of months before the announcement that Ethan Iverson would be leaving the Bad Plus), he countered that my examples were rare exceptions to industry realities. His point suggested it could be that I was drawn to the artists chosen for this book partly because their long-standing bands made them stand out rather than there being some new trend afoot for preserving bands.

"You're picking the right people in terms of that," Cole said, "but that's not common. Everyone will tell you how hard it is to keep a band—any band—together. Not even for guys like Michel Camilo, Joe Lovano, or [John] Scofield. They change all the time. The promoters don't want to hear the same band, so in order to find work, they need to say, 'OK, come up with some kind of concept project.' "

In any case, *this* quartet has endured, and it played an invigorating set at Boston's Villa Victoria Center for the Arts on *Típico*'s release date, which coincided with Cole's birthday. There was a celebratory vibe to the event. José Massó, host of the popular local radio show *¡Con Salsa!*, was there and told me a story about having seen Zenón play the same venue with David Sánchez's sextet early in Zenón's career. When Massó told Sánchez how strong his playing was that night, Sánchez responded that he had no choice: he was looking over his shoulder at the young alto player charging up behind him. (Sánchez laughed and confirmed the story for me a few weeks later.)

The quartet moved on to a six-night run at the Village Vanguard the next week, followed by a short US tour that concluded in late March at the Puerto Rico Heineken Jazz Fest in San Juan. From there, Zenón spent April touring with the SFJAZZ Collective in support of its Miles Davis project, with a stop at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival in early May. That Memorial Day weekend, he would join a new Guillermo Klein sextet for performances at New York's Cornelia Street Cafe and at the Falcon, the same Hudson Valley venue where his quartet had introduced Klein to "Cantor." Four months later, he was in a Chicago studio recording *Yo Soy La Tradición* with the Spektral Quartet, with an all-star benefit concert he was overseeing for Puerto Rico and the victims of Hurricane Maria planned for Berkeley, California, shortly thereafter.

Zenón would like people to see a through line in all of this, and in those deep dives he takes into jazz tradition on his Caravana Cultural excursions as well. At that Sonny Rollins event in Cidra, he and the sidemen he'd assembled whipped through a handful of Rollins classics with artistry and aplomb. Then four local high schoolers joined them onstage to jam on "Tenor Madness." Cidra's mayor, Javier Carrasquillo, offered an official thank you and handed Zenón some flowers, after which the student musicians and several of their classmates gathered around Zenón for their families to take photographs.

"It's really about being honest with yourself and saying, 'This is what I am,' and trying to represent yourself," Zenón once told me of what he would like his art, in all its variety, to accomplish. "Hopefully after a while you'll be able to connect all the dots together in a logical way so that people will be able to see you through the music."

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