

Miguel Zenón □ – Esta Plena (2009)

Written by bluesever

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1 *Villa Palmeras* 7:05 2 *Esta Plena* 7:48 3 *Oyelo* 6:16 4 *Residencial Llorens Torres* 4:53 5 *Pandero y Pagode* 8:25 6 *Calle Calma* 4:38 7 *Villa Coope* 8:59 8 *¿Qué Será De Puerto Rico?* 8:01 9 *Progreso* 9:17 10 *Despedida* 6:50 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)

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).

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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. ---Mark F. Turner, allaboutjazz.com

Following the release of his previous album, 2008's *Awake*, Miguel Zenón was awarded both a Guggenheim Fellowship and a MacArthur Fellowship "genius grant," the latter alone putting half a million bucks in his pocket with which he could do anything he wanted. He used at least some of that cash to create *Esta Plena*, an album that expands on 2005's roots-conscious *Jíbaro* by linking traditional Puerto Rican plena music with modern jazz technique. In the album's liner notes, Zenón provides an in-depth explanation of the history and musical properties of plena, a folkloric style born of the poor class in a barrio in southern Puerto Rico. Its lyrics, he explains, tell of the lives and struggles of those people, and while the music has continually evolved since its inception, it still pays its respects to its roots. Here it evolves yet again as Zenón marries the time-tested form to his modern jazz sensibilities. He is a superb, dynamic alto saxophonist and a visionary bandleader, and working with a cast of ace contemporary players -- pianist Luis Perdomo, acoustic bassist Hans Glawischnig, drummer Henry Cole (all three of whom appeared on *Awake*), lead vocalist/percussionist Héctor "Tito" Matos, and background vocalists/percussionists Obanilú Allende and Juan Gutiérrez -- Zenón finds the place where the traditional plena and contemporary jazz, both of which share African roots, meet up and become something new together. From the fiery opening instrumental, "Villa Palmeras," through the vocal numbers, Zenón melds his well-defined melodicism with intricate rhythms and harmonies, allowing plenty of space for his fellow musicians and vocalists to contribute to the story. Perdomo, particularly, is a major factor: a masterful pianist, he virtually serves as a second leader here by co-crafting the melodic direction with Zenón. On tracks like the midtempo "Pandero y Pagode," the swinging "Oyelo," the sizzling "¿Qué Será de Puerto Rico?" (spotlighting drummer Cole), and the epic instrumentals "Progreso" and "Villa Coope," Zenón and his crew create music that is full of life, history, richness, and realness. ---Jeff Tamarkin, *AllMusic Review*

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