

INTRODUCTION

By Erica Zora Wrightson

For my thesis, *Gathered Time: Hearing Change in Jazz*, I focused on the shift of narrative in jazz over time. I interviewed ten jazz musicians about their education and looked at how emotion and story are conveyed in their music. I wondered if the introduction of jazz studies into the university setting affected expression in music—emphasizing technical skill and memorization over creativity. My older interviewees voiced a strong concern that younger musicians miss the storytelling aspect of jazz, something not easily taught in a classroom. Many of them learned how to play from musicians in their neighborhoods, where music poured out of small clubs and basements. The history of their jazz education is written in their sound.

Oral history, like jazz, is a malleable and generous genre. It expects and accommodates change. Akin to jazz musicians, oral history narrators give us information about people or social groups whose written history is either missing or distorted.¹ As musical creativity rejects oppression, so oral sources challenge linear historical narratives, infusing them, through polyphony, with life. As Robert G. O'Meally says in his introduction to a collection of Ralph Ellison's jazz writings, jazz artists are "singers of the self and historians of levels of American experience not recorded otherwise." Jazz is an archive in itself, a form of living history. Scholar Kevin Gaines says that both jazz and oral history "preserve an embattled collective memory of oppression and struggle against those forces dedicated to erasing it from the public sphere. For musicians and audiences, jazz as a repository of cultural memory offers the potential to make a difference, that is, literally crafting it musically while undermining oppressive differences."²

Jazz's fluid compositional structure, buoyed by improvisation, channels a narrative of freedom through raw sound. As bass player Charles Mingus explained to writer Nat Hentoff, "In my music, I'm trying to play the truth of what I am. The reason it's difficult is because I'm changing all the time."³

Identity, like jazz, is elastic—challenged and reinforced by those we live with and live without. This concept drives *Identities are Changeable*, the latest album from Puerto Rico-born, New York-based saxophonist, composer, bandleader, producer, and educator, Miguel Zenon. For the project, Zenon interviewed seven fellow Puerto Rican transplants about their ethnic and national associations and their perceptions of home, and then wrote music around and through their voices. The result is an ethnography of Nuyorican experience that traces the intricacies of identity and belonging.

¹ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (New York: State University of New York, 1990), 47.

² *Ibid.*, 206.

³ Nat Hentoff, *The Nat Hentoff Reader* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2001), 99.

The project was inspired by “The Diaspora Strikes Back,” a book by the late NYU Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis and Director of Latino Studies Juan Flores. In it, Flores dives into the ongoing Dominican and Caribbean diaspora process through interviews with people from Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. Flores writes about “ambivalence and divided loyalties,” of cultural remittances—the ensemble of ideas, values, and expressive forms introduced into societies of origin by remigrants and their families as they return home, he says, sometimes for the first time.

Both Flores and Zenon explore what it means to be Puerto Rican, but, more broadly, definitions of home and how we belong. Through the voices in *Identities Are Changeable*, we learn that this is a complex process, shaped not only by self-identification but by the language, opinions, and behaviors of the communities in which we live; a choreography of human perception, experience, and time.

The narrative of Zenon’s interviews is carried by the warm voice of his saxophone backed by the Identities Big Band, a twelve-piece brass ensemble. The first track, “De Donde Vienes?,” serves as an overture for the six-part song cycle, in which each interviewee reveals their name and place of birth while band swells behind—an attentive audience, or a village—a familial sound lifting them up.

The album celebrates the freedom and explores the limitations of identity as tied to place. One interviewee talks about being perceived as “black” because of his non-whiteness and about identifying more with the difference that other people seemed to define him by than with his proximity to them. Another admits he feels little connection to his parents’ homeland and doesn’t speak Spanish or know exactly where they’re from. “Being Puerto Rican didn’t really matter to me,” he says. For others, Puerto Rico is inherently home, a core part of who they are, even though they have never set foot on the island. As the Puerto Rican poet and performance artist Mariposa says in her poem “Ode to a Diasporican,” No naci en Puerto Roco/Puerto Rico nacio en mi
I wasn’t born in Puerto Rico, Puerto Rico was born in me.

Zenon’s voice surfaces through his horn and when he asks questions, “Tell me your name, where you were born and raised, and where your family is from,” but we never hear his personal story. That’s because this is not a work of memoir, but a portrait of a community.

In an interview with Zenon in the spring, he told me that music was a part of daily life in Puerto Rico.

“You hear music all the time. in the street, on street corners, in the store,” he said. “Even within my own family—my mom would be singing all day and my dad played a little percussion. I had an uncle who played bass. It was never like I would go see a play. Music was part of life. And now that I think about it, it was super subliminal. It was just there all the time. And all my family is super musically inclined. They can sing, keep time, and they’re good with rhythm.”

Miguel Zenon was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 1976. He describes the neighborhood he grew up in as “rough” but his family as protective and close. When his parents separated, his father moved permanently to New York City.

He recalled, as a child, visiting his father and other family members from Puerto Rico who had made their lives there:

“I was shocked about this idea that people spoke my language and they ate the same food, but then you look outside and it looks different, some people speaking different languages, it's like, What's going on?,” he said.

From a young age, Zenon studied music. At school, he sang in choir and played recorder. When classmates told him that there was a guy from another neighborhood teaching music fundamentals and theory to kids in his community, Zenon’s grandmother enrolled him in lessons. For years, Zenon studied with Ernesto Vigoreaux in the Residencial Luis Llorens Torres, a housing project where he spent most of his childhood. His plans to join the neighborhood marching band changed when he was accepted into Escuela Libre de Música, a middle and high school for performing arts, where he studied classical saxophone for the next six years. Although he enjoyed playing in ensembles, Zenon said, he didn’t consider becoming a professional musician until he discovered jazz through Charlie Parker tapes passed around by his friends.

“I was blown away,” he said, “and became really kind of obsessed with understanding what was going on. That changed the course of my life from that point on and I decided that that’s what I wanted to do.”

Zenon moved to the States where he earned a bachelor’s degree in Jazz Studies from Berklee School of Music and a master’s in jazz performance from Manhattan School of Music. He has been the recipient of Guggenheim and MacArthur fellowships. A founding member and bandleader of the SF Jazz Collective, Zenon is also an educator and cultural ambassador. In 2011, he founded a free, public jazz concert series in rural areas of Puerto Rico.