



Zahili Zamora

PIANIST - COMPOSER

Zahili Gonzalez Zamora, a brilliant Cuban-born, Afro Cuban jazz pianist, vocalist, composer, bandleader, arranger and educator, is releasing a landmark new album.

Entitled **Overcoming**, the album explores her extensive inner journeys through the challenges of her very personal apprehensions that might have held her back from stardom—until now—and finally releasing this album—as a vision of her true self. The five songs on *Overcoming*—composed by Zahili and arranged by Zahili and bassist Gerson Lazo—take on deep introspections. “Rumination,” “Blissful Sorrow,” “Despair,” “Duality Embrace,” and finally, “Negra” take listeners inside the heart-searching pieces of her very personal odyssey, creating a beautiful and beguiling landscape into the deepest metamorphosis of her inner soul.

Recorded in New York City at the prestigious Power Station—once the key recording studio home for artists such as Springsteen, Bruno Mars, Lady Gaga, Bob Dylan and Tony Bennett—the album features a formidable

cast of some of today's jazz finest musicians: **Sean Jones** on flugelhorn, **Pedrito Martinez** on percussion, **Keisel Jimenez** on percussion, **Yosvany Terry** on sax, **Gerson Lazo** on bass, **Julian Miltenberger** on drums and **Yandy Garcia** on drums.

Zahili was born in Manzanillo, Cuba, a port founded in 1784. The city is a commercial and manufacturing centre for the fertile agricultural district to the east and north, which produces sugarcane, fruit, rice, cattle, and a variety of other items. The city contains sugar refineries, sawmills, tanneries, canneries, and cigar factories.

She started playing piano at the age of six—practicing 10 hours a day—and graduated from the National School of Music with a performance degree in classical music.

Now, she feels most defined by her Cuban heritage and her status as an immigrant and newly confirmed citizen of the United States. Zahili's passion for music has taken her to Canada, to South East Asia and then to the United States – a land of immigrants. She is always moving forward, guided and driven by her music and the need to grow as an artist and a person, to share her music and her love of life with others. She aspires to inspire—to be a messenger for a journey that is not only her own, but one that deeply resonates with others. She's an artist who's out of her comfort zone – her home – for the sake of her work. Her rich musical background, career experience and extraordinary improvisation skills render her as not only a leader in the modern Latin jazz idiom but also, an influential, emulated musician.

Zahili speaks about her journey . . .

"I left Cuba in 2002. I was barely 22 years old and I was performing with an eleven piece female Cuban band called D'Talle. We played anything and everything from traditional Son Cubano to Timba Cubana. Female bands like this in Cuba were very, very common and they still are, but there was almost a revolution of female bands when I left in 2002 – they were literally everywhere and they were comprised of very, very high caliber female musicians . . . they were on stage in clubs and concert halls and presenting a very high-level of performance. So D'Talle was a band that I had frequently toured with outside of Cuba and one time we just decided, when we were in Canada, that it was a good decision to stay!," says Zahili.

"So, in talking about the difficulties of leaving Cuba permanently, I cannot speak for the whole band—and obviously we each were all in different places—some were married and their husbands were back home and some had family back home. I wasn't really in that kind of position, so for me, it was more of a deliberate and easy decision because I wanted to upgrade myself as a musician. And in Cuba, there had been a lot of things that had created difficulties—like just having the freedom to say what you wanted to say—or to decide, 'okay, I want to go here and there and I want to have this.' I wanted to have this extended freedom and I

wanted to be able to express myself. There were quite a few things like that, that were already piling up and so with the possibility of staying in Canada and the opportunity to create a new life and expand my career—it just made a lot of sense.”

“With that being said, we had already stayed in Canada for quite a lot of time before we even made the decision to stay. We finally made that decision in 2003 and we continued to perform with the band and so we stayed together for another five years. But as life goes, you know our individual priorities changed. Definitely things were better then and there were more opportunities and I personally was able to begin to collaborate with various musicians from other cultures, so that was very new for me. Suddenly I was playing with a guy from Ecuador or playing with a guy from Togo and I began exploring different kinds of music that were completely new to me—so that also opened the doors to many other musical alternatives.”

“D’Talle eventually broke up because some of the members’ priorities changed. Some members started building families while others met their significant others in Canada. Some in the group decided music was not their path after all and they went into other careers. You know, 5 or 6 years down the line we finally had our Canadian citizenship and then for the first time, we had much more freedom to leave the country and to go to other places. In fact, I was offered a contract to perform in South East Asia in Macao for three months, and that launched another very interesting chapter of my life!”

“I went to Macao in 2008 for that three month contract and soon that evolved into a seventh month contract which was something I didn't expect to happen! With the friendships I was able to make in Macao, China, I learned the value of networking and because I was meeting musicians from lots of other bands, this gave me the opportunity to obtain contracts with several different bands and then that morphed into chain of other contracts, all in South Asia. I continued this for six years! I was able to play in Macao for the most part, but also I went to Hong Kong and to Singapore as well for a while. And whenever I had a break, I would just go to the nearby cities and kind of fulfill the dream of seeing incredible places like the Great Wall of China and for me, the sky was the limit when traveling like that.”

“That was an eye-opening experience for sure, but the best thing about my time in Asia was that it taught me how wide the musical label Top 40 music was and with that, I became familiar with musical groups and artists such as Earth, Wind & Fire, Stevie Wonder, Gloria Estefan, Daddy Yankee, Don Omar and all of those classic Top 40 and Latin Pop groups. And, I was performing at dance clubs inside casino hotels and performing for four hours six nights a week for three to six months straight! But the first set in these clubs and other venues was always a slow jazz set and that was the first time that I consciously began to know that jazz was what I really wanted to play. And that was really great.”



Zahili continues, "It was while I was in Asia that I just fell in love with jazz and I wanted to play it more and more! So, I put myself to the test and a few years later, when I had a break between contracts, I went to New York and recorded an album just to see how far I could get! That was also the first time I had recorded any music and this was all original music too. I just put myself in front of the piano and started composing. I was thinking about so many sounds! And you know—I knew lots of music by then. Obviously I had been playing since I was six years old, but in terms of the style, this was really unknown territory; I was just really testing the waters and that really was the impulse! So my first album was released in 2012 and it's called **Z-isms**."

"A lot of the musicians that I had been playing with in Asia were musicians who had graduated from Berklee College in Boston and they were the ones who helped me to gravitate into performing many styles of jazz, and they told me that if I ever wanted to study it more, Berklee might be the school. And so, that planted a seed in me. I applied to Berklee and I received a scholarship to come to Boston and attend Berklee College. That was 12 years ago."



Residing now in Boston full time, in 2018, with funding from The Boston Foundation, Zahili's Afro-Cuban Jazz Trio, known as **MIXCLA**, released its self-titled album. This album also fully features some of Zahili's original music, others by Gerson Lazo as well as arrangements of other composers' works. It has received critical acclaim and earned the attention of major agents locally and internationally. The album has thus far advanced in the world of jazz, adding to her accolades two nominations from the Boston Music Awards in 2018 and in 2019.

MIXCLA has headlined at Scullers Jazz Club in Boston several times since 2018. A jazz landmark, Scullers has welcomed such greats as Shirley Horn, Christian McBride, and Wynton Marsalis, among others. The band also performed at the 59th Monterey Jazz Festival, the 2016 Stave Sessions as part of The Celebrity Series of Boston, The 2015 Montreal International Jazz Festival and other highly respected venues and festivals.

Some of the artists Zahili has now had the honor of working with include flutist Orlando “Maraca” Valle, Juno Award winning trumpeter Ingrid Jensen and Grammy® award-winning guitarist/film scorer Claudio Ragazzi. In 2017, Zahili graduated from Berklee College of Music, summa cum laude, with a dual-degree in Jazz Composition and Jazz Piano Performance. In addition, while still a student at Berklee, she won the 40th Annual Downbeat Magazine Music Award for Outstanding Performance as well as The Duke Ellington and The Wayne Shorter Awards for her outstanding creativity and musicianship.



In 2019, she joined Berklee’s Piano Department and she’s now an Associate Professor and also teaches the Master’s Program. In addition, she teaches private piano, basic keyboard for non-piano principals as well as Advanced Latin Composition Technique.

In the spring of 2024, Zahili was presented with her band live in concert in WGBH’s Fraser Studio in

cooperation with JazzBoston. The program was hosted by Callie Crossley in celebration of International Jazz Day.

–Bio expanded and edited by [Sue Auclair](#)