

LIVING IN MY SUITCASE

INTERVIEW **CLAIRE NELSON**
PHOTOGRAPHY **JOE HOWARD**



EDUARDO

The three-time Latin Grammy-nominated jazz pianist reveals how Puerto Rico inspires his work

ZAYAS

In every Puerto Rican family, somebody plays an instrument. If all that was available was a stick or stone, people would grab one and try to play it. Making music is a part of our culture.

I've been playing the piano since I was about five years old. At that age, I was more interested in video games, but my dad wanted me and my three brothers to all learn music. He wanted to teach us discipline like he had been taught in the military, but through a creative hobby instead.

Learning piano was hard: I had to read and write music, learning it from scratch rather than just imitating my teacher. But when my dad started taking me to concerts, it all made more sense to me. At a certain point, everything just clicked and I fell in love with the process of making music.

When I started university, the Puerto Rico Conservatory of Music didn't have a jazz syllabus, so I was studying maths and psychology. One day, my dad called and said, "Hey, look at the newspaper – the Conservatory has opened a Jazz and Caribbean Music programme!" I was the only pianist to audition for it, and later I was the first pianist to graduate.

I love the complexity of jazz, but I also love finding something that people can identify with – that they can dance to, groove to, or cry to. When people hear an instrumental version of a song they know and start singing along... It's beautiful to get that connection through what you're doing.

Most of the time I'm performing around Puerto Rico, though sometimes I'll travel to play at jazz festivals. My name is Eduardo Zayas, but my artistic name is Zayaz Music. I always pack noise-cancelling headphones and some recordings to listen to – not just for pleasure, but so that I can study the playing and the communication between the musicians.

You might say I'm a bit of a homebody. When I'm not performing at gigs, I like getting into nature around the island: places such as El Yunque National Forest, or the mighty Cañón Blanco in Utuado. I'll go to Playa Vacía Talega in Piñones, or any beach on the island of Culebra. And seeing the bioluminescent activity at Mosquito Bay in Vieques is an amazing experience.

We have such a diverse landscape in Puerto Rico, so I'm trying to tune into nature more and feel the energy from the island. For me, it's become part of the creative process.

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