



## Raul Midón *Bad Ass and Blind*

**“A one-man band who turns a guitar into an orchestra and his voice into a chorus.”**  
— *The New York Times*

Ever since the 20<sup>th</sup> century turned into the 21<sup>st</sup>, singer-songwriter and guitarist **Raul Midón** has earned renown as one of music’s most distinctive and searching voices – “a one-man band... who is spiritually connected,” according to *The New York Times* and “an eclectic adventurer,” in the words of *People* magazine. Artists from Jeff Beck to Al Di Meola to Jason Mraz are on record as big fans and Midón has collaborated with such heroes as Herbie Hancock, Stevie Wonder and Bill Withers, along with contributing to recordings by Queen Latifah, Snoop Dogg and the soundtrack to Spike Lee’s *She Hate Me*. The New Mexico native, blind since birth, has released eight albums since 1999, including the hit studio productions *Don’t Hesitate* (Mack Avenue/Aristry 2014), *Synthesis* (Decca/Universal 2009), *A World Within a World* (Manhattan/EMI 2007) and *State of Mind* (Manhattan/EMI 2005). Midón also released the captivating CD/DVD *Invisible Chains – Live from NYC*, which documents an intimate concert in Joe’s Pub from 2012. Attuned listeners can hear the inspirations of Donny Hathaway and Richie Havens in his work as well as Sting and Paul Simon. But Midón’s questing musicality makes him, as the *Huffington Post* put it, “a free man beyond category.” Attesting to his enduring ambitions is Midón’s ninth studio album, ***Bad Ass and Blind***, due for release via Mack Avenue’s imprint, Aristry Music, on March 24, 2017.

Search for “Raul Midón” on YouTube and you’ll find a clip of him appearing on *The Late Show With David Letterman* in 2006. Performing “State of Mind,” the title track from his major-label debut, Midón unveils what would become his signature combination of silky tenor voice and percussive guitar style. His guitar playing is a syncopated, flamenco- and jazz-infused wonder in which bass, harmony and melodic lines fly from the fretboard in a way that seems to belie the fact that all the music is being produced by just two hands. If that weren’t enough, Midón busts out his improvisational mouth-horn technique, in which he creates a bebop “trumpet” solo entirely with his lips, earning himself a spontaneous burst of mid-song applause from the audience in the process. It’s the sort of performance that led the *Huffington Post* to describe how “he plays with such freedom and joy that his hands smile.” *Billboard* called him, simply and aptly, “a virtuoso.” Subsequently, Midón’s live 2012 rendition of John Coltrane’s jazz classic “Giant Steps” – which sees him fly through all 12 keys – has earned more than 1.2 million views via FaceBook, with no less than fusion guitar hero Al Di Meola giving the performance a thumb’s up.

Midón’s upcoming ***Bad Ass and Blind*** album – the title a description of its maker that soul icon Bill Withers endorsed – finds the artist expanding his range compositionally, tapping into the linear modal harmony explored by such jazz composers as Miles Davis and Wayne Shorter. Album highlight “Wings of Mind” utilizes this technique with a sophistication that brings to mind jazz-savvy pop acts like Steely Dan. “As a listener, you don’t need to know anything about the Phrygian or Dorian modes to get this music – it just sounds different, intriguing, exotic,” Midón explains. In early 2016, the guitarist was invited to cross the U.S. as a featured artist in the Monterey Jazz Festival On Tour company that also included the likes of jazz stars Nicholas Payton, Ravi Coltrane and Gerald Clayton. The tour culminated in a weeklong run at New York City’s Birdland. It was an acclaimed live collaboration, with *JazzTimes* remarking on how Midón became “the undeniable focus” whenever he came onstage and praising his “acrobatic... note-perfect” performances, as well as the “new, swinging ‘Wings of Mind’.” Inspired by his encounters with top jazz improvisers, Midón tapped some of the Monterey players to form a band for several tracks on ***Bad Ass and Blind***. “It was the realization of a dream to have my music performed by players of this caliber – they really took the tunes to a higher plane, adding their own art to the songs,” says Midón, who produced the album himself. “Guys like these are never just hired guns – listen to the killing trumpet solo Nicholas plays on ‘Wings of Mind’.”

Another notable track on ***Bad Ass and Blind*** is Midón’s multi-layered cover of the Steve Miller Band’s FM staple “Fly Like an Eagle.” As a boy, he had bought the original LP featuring the song at a Woolworth’s in Santa Fe, New Mexico. “It was the first record I ever bought – I remember that it was only \$5.99!” Over the years, the song has

retained its appeal for Midón: “The lyrics have some social consciousness and there’s a groove and simplicity about the song that I think are beautiful. I changed the key, re-harmonized it a bit, changed the tempo – customized the song for the way I feel it now.” Reflecting on the exploratory grasp of past and present represented by ***Bad Ass and Blind***, Midón says: “Like with all my records, this album is for those who are interested in going beyond notions of genre – it’s for listeners with open ears, open minds, open hearts.”

***Bad Ass and Blind*** follows Midón’s 2014 studio release, *Don’t Hesitate* – a tour-de-force featuring starry guests across multiple genres. The *Wall Street Journal* declared the collection “dazzling,” while *Guitar World* judged it “a personal and musical milestone... fantastic.” This recording was the first to find the singer-guitarist adding producer-engineer to his portfolio of talents, with special computer software for the blind enabling him to engineer sessions on his own in his home studio. Along with some of the most adventurous solo music of his career, *Don’t Hesitate* includes a songwriting collaboration with Bill Withers (“Mi Amigo, Cubano”) and stirring duets with Grammy®-winning jazz star Dianne Reeves (“Make It Better”) and R&B singer-songwriter Lizz Wright (“Keep Holding On”), as well as performances by funk-jazz bassist Marcus Miller and Cameroonian jazz bassist Richard Bona. There are two numbers in Spanish, including the collaboration with Withers, a song that Midón was seen crafting in *Still Bill*, the documentary film on Withers. Ever curious, Midón drew sonic inspirations from other cultures, incorporating Latin American percussion and playing the *charango*, the 10-string Andean lute. He also ventured a solo cover of The Who’s “I Can See For Miles,” a rock classic about “internal vision” that Midón found inspiring, both its message and its harmonic depth. In turn, *Billboard* found his Who cover “arresting.” About the album’s overall energy and innovation, he says: “I’m very proud of *Don’t Hesitate*, as my first self-produced record and as a showcase for some amazing collaborations. The sound is eclectic and dynamic – it jumps around and goes places.”

Going places in music has long been Midón’s *raison d’être*. The son of an Argentinean father and an African-American mother (who died when Midón was young), Raul was born prematurely in a rural hospital in Embudo, New Mexico, where he and his twin brother, Marco, were blinded as infants after spending time in an incubator without adequate eye protection. “At the time, they didn’t know you have to protect the eyes from the oxygen of the incubator,” Midón explains, “so a generation of people were blinded in that way.” His brother now works as an engineer, while Raul followed a musical path inspired by his father, a professional Argentine folkloric dancer with a diverse record collection that ranged from the classics of Beethoven and Mozart to such progressive composers as John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen to jazz greats Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and Sonny Rollins.

“We were the kind of family who would put on a record and sit and listen to it, not have it play in the background and go about our business – it was like an event,” Midón recalls. “Very early on, I knew I wanted to play music. I’d be riding in a car and I’d listen to the rhythm of the turn signal. I heard music in everything, from a car horn to the crickets.” Young Raul began playing hand drums at age 4 before shifting his focus to guitar while he and brother attended a school for the blind from ages 5 to 15. “I don’t believe that blindness makes you a better musician,” Midón says. “I think perhaps it focuses you in a very pragmatic way. I knew I had limited job possibilities, but the Midóns don’t believe in backup plans – like, ‘Do music, but get your teaching degree in case it doesn’t work out.’ That’s never been our *modus operandi*. I knew that I had this talent, so blindness focused me on developing that talent. But I don’t think it made me play better. After all, most of the great musicians I know can see.”

After completing his final two years of high school at a Santa Fe prep school, Midón attended the University of Miami, which he selected for its prestigious jazz curriculum. He remained in Miami after graduating and became an in-demand backup singer, working primarily in the Latin-pop world for such artists as Julio and Enrique Iglesias, Shakira, Ricky Martin and Alejandro Sanz. He also worked the club circuit, sprinkling the requisite cover songs amid the original tunes he was beginning to write. *The Miami Herald* marveled at how “music oozes from his every pore.” Yet, in 2002, Midón walked away from his lucrative work as a backing singer to pursue a career as a solo artist in New York City. “I was making a living as a professional musician, but I wasn’t pursuing art,” he says. “In Miami, you played your songs in a seafood restaurant as background music, and at some point, you would get the request for ‘Margaritaville.’ It’s very different from playing in New York, where people go to hear original music.” Yet Midón’s first year in Manhattan didn’t pan out as he had hoped (a period he chronicles on *State of Mind*). His experience singing backup on countless Latin-pop records didn’t mean automatic work, so he found a gig playing in between sets by a Top 40 band at a club in the West Village – and that’s where he began to develop his show-stopping performance style.

“I took on this warrior approach to playing guitar,” Midón says. “Like a ‘You have to pay attention to this because you’ve never heard or seen anything like it before’ kind of thing.” It was this kind of attitude that eventually led *Rolling Stone* to observe: “Raul Midón takes pride in extracting an entire orchestra of sounds from his guitar.” He began to attract real attention, eventually landing a monthly residency at highly regarded downtown club Joe’s

Pub. In 2003, he was approached backstage to perform at a show called “The Movie Music of Spike Lee” at Carnegie Hall, alongside such stars as Cassandra Wilson, Bruce Hornsby, Angie Stone and Terence Blanchard. Midón received a standing ovation, rave notices in *The New York Times* and, eventually, a meeting with iconic producer Arif Mardin, who signed him to Manhattan/EMI as a career-capping discovery (having enjoyed a golden touch over the years with artists from the Bee Gees to Norah Jones). Mardin co-produced *State of Mind*, with Midón’s studio debut garnering worldwide accolades for its heady fusion of old-school soul with timeless folk-pop, plus Latin and jazz accents.

*State of Mind* was an audaciously original debut not only in its sound but its sensibility, with a buoyancy of the sort that caused National Public Radio to marvel over how Midón “injects a rousing optimism into the grooves of his music.” The overarching feel of *State of Mind* is one of earned optimism – that despite the dark days there can be a light. Upon the album’s release, Midón said: “To me, part of any artist’s mission, besides entertaining, is to convey something positive, without preaching, to the audience, whether that audience numbers in just hundreds or in the millions.” Charmed by Midón’s idealism, *Entertainment Weekly* said: “His supple blend of soul crooner, folk bard and Latin *sonero* melts our cynicism.”

*State of Mind* opens with the rousing title track, a song about Midón’s first months as a struggling musician in New York; other highlights include the spirited “Everybody” (written as an empowerment response to the heroes of 9/11) and the love song “Waited All My Life,” which Midón wrote for his wife. Another dedicated song is the bright, brisk “Sittin’ in the Middle,” a tribute to Donny Hathaway. The album features a guest turn from Stevie Wonder, who contributes a harmonica solo to “Expressions of Love.” Midón duets with Jason Mraz on their co-written reggae-inflected number “Keep on Hoping.” Top-class session musicians add to the wide sonic palette, including Latin jazz flutist Dave Valentin, harmonica ace Gregoire Maret and percussionist Cyro Baptista. Jazz vibraphonist Stefon Harris helps color “All in Your Mind,” which finds Midón opening a window on what it’s like to be blind. He says, “I wrote ‘All in Your Mind’ to talk about how, when you’re blind, you perceive everything through your imagination.”

Over the next several years, Midón made a name for himself touring throughout the U.S., Europe and Japan. A rapt critic for the U.K.’s *Guardian* newspaper wrote: “Midón has a lovely voice, a beautifully controlled tenor that can express anything from tenderness to passion... And the guy can play. His strumming has a flamenco flourish, but after a while, you realize he can do every kind of accompaniment he needs on acoustic guitar.” In 2007, Midón released his second studio album, *A World Within a World*. With its insinuating grooves and lyrics with a social consciousness, the disc further established him as an artist “who contributes something lasting to the musical landscape,” as NPR said. *Guitar Player* called Midón “one of those rare musical forces that remind us how strong and deep the connection between man and music can sometimes be.”

Although the title of *A World Within a World* was perhaps a reference to the status of pop music within the culture as a whole, it also described the expansive interior realm Midón created for himself. One of the album’s high points is “The More That I Know,” which is equal parts love song, message song and modern-day spiritual. “On one level,” Midón explains, “the song has to do with traveling and being away from home – ‘The more that I know, wherever I go, I want to be close to you’ – but it also uses metaphors in a different way. As someone who has never seen, I’ve always felt at a disadvantage in that writing is very visual and image-driven. People really relate to images and I’ve never seen images. So what I realized is that you have to write from what you know – and I hear, touch and feel, other experiences that most everyone can relate to. The song is me starting to get into another way of writing: It’s very much about my experience and not trying to describe a sunset that I’ve never seen.”

*A World Within a World* includes images of beauty but also its opposite. “Tembererana,” which employs elements of Argentinean music, pits the threat of environmental annihilation against “the power of creation.” And the culminating “Peace on Earth” places the radical humanism of John Lennon’s “Imagine” in an unsettling contemporary context. Reflecting just before the album’s release, Midón said, laughing: “I got a few people accusing me of being naïve on the first album – I don’t think I’ll necessarily get that this time.” Musically, Midón’s sophomore studio disc brims with diversity. The opening “Pick Somebody Up” weaves a theme of uplifting social consciousness into an infectious groove and the sort of lush, uptown soulfulness that distinguished classics by Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye. The multi-tracked a cappella number “Ain’t Happened Yet” references the immediacy of street-corner doo-wop and the exuberance of the Beatles. “Song for Sandra” – a piece Midón wrote about the mother he lost so young – features a solo by veteran Latin jazz clarinet superstar Paquito D’Rivera. “Save My Life” updates the silky ’70s soul of the Stylistics and Delfonics, along with some of the deep funk of the same era thanks to guest bassist Me’shell Ndegeocello and Midón’s wah-wah electric guitar part.

For his third studio release, 2009's *Synthesis*, Midón switched labels, to Decca/Universal, and producer, to the famed Larry Klein (noted for his work with the likes of Joni Mitchell, Herbie Hancock and Peter Gabriel). As ever, Midón crafted a genre-defying musical blend of soul, pop, folk, jazz and Latin elements, but *Synthesis* saw Midón return to a more acoustic-based production. "I wanted to get back to organic recording," he says. "We had done a lot of programming on the previous record, and I wanted to feature more real musicians playing. So it was guitars, bass, drums, vocals and not a lot of effects." The band included such session stars as Vinnie Colaiuta (drums), Paulinho Da Costa (percussion), Dean Parks (guitar) and Larry Goldings (Hammond B-3 organ), as well as Klein on bass guitar. The result was an intimate, classic-sounding album, and the kind of work that led *The Guardian* to praise Midón as "a strong, individual and totally musical mind."

*Synthesis* also showcased Midón's evolution as a songwriter as he set some of his more biting insights about betrayal, fear, loss and the American Dream to deceptively swinging rhythms and catchy melodies. "Don't Take It That Way" and "Invisible Chains" crackle with tart observation, even as such songs as "Next Generation" and "When You Call My Name" strike a more uplifting tone. "Larry encouraged me to write from a different perspective than I have in the past," Midón recalls. "I had written a lot of songs about hope and inspiration and that sort of thing, which is cool, but there are other aspects to life. I was expanding my repertoire a bit. It wasn't a record about trying to enhance somebody's understanding of my woes. It was more about trying to go deep into just how it is to live life and feel all the different things you feel. Like how you can be very angry at somebody and still love them, or how you meet people who teach you things, but you don't want to be like them. I was talking about how I feel about the world and how I fit into it."

*All Music Guide* praised *Synthesis* at length: "If you want to learn the magic of soulful troubadour Raul Midón in just five easy minutes, you'd be hard-pressed to find a better example than the opening track, 'Don't Be a Silly Man.' The lyrics read like an essay about meeting your idols, but the singer's old-school phrasing and a jazzy backing band turn the words into a sing-along, and soon Midón's rather personal story becomes something any given listener can adapt to their own world. This balance harkens back to Bill Withers and the California singer-songwriters of the '70s... Being blind also seems to have given the man a gift for seeing past ulterior motives and aging humanists who feel truth is a value that's just not valued enough anymore will find plenty of comfort here. Add a worthwhile, minimal cover of the Beatles 'Blackbird' and the attractive, oddball lounge number 'Everyone Deserves a Second Chance' and you've got a laid-back throwback that's highly rewarding."

After 15 years in Miami and seven in New York City, Midón has called Maryland home for the past five years. But he has many homes away from home on the global road. "My three major-label albums gave me a worldwide fan base, from Indiana to India, from Amsterdam to Tokyo," he says. "I even played a show in Bulgaria, where I didn't know I had any fans – but they were all singing the songs back to me. That's a wonderful thing." One of the keys to Midón's success is his ever-evolving performing style. Following a spring 2013 concert at Lincoln Center's David Rubenstein Atrium, Lincoln Center director of public programming Bill Bragin said: "Even after over a decade of us collaborating, when you think it can't possibly get any better, Raul takes it up a few more notches." Midón explains, "My jazz education not only gave me this great base of harmonic knowledge – it gave me the ability to improvise, so that I'll sing a song a different way every night. Not only does that keep it fresh and interesting for me; it keeps the audience coming out, to see how it's going to sound *tonight*."

A vibrant presence on screen, Midón can be seen in the documentary on Herbie Hancock's star-studded album *Possibilities*, to which he contributed. The singer-guitarist demonstrated his progressive techniques by performing for the series of "TED Talks." He has long had an open invitation to perform on *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno, and Midón also appears in *All My Friends Are Here*, a documentary on Arif Mardin. The DVD of Midón's *Invisible Chains – Live from NYC* showcases both his soulful virtuosity and charming stage presence as he ranges from live-wire renditions of early favorites "State of Mind" and "Sunshine (I Can Fly)" to such highlights from *Synthesis* as "Don't Take It That Way" and the newer tune "Listen to the Rain," which he performs on the piano.

Ever since being told by some when he was a child that his blindness meant that "you can't do this, you can't do that," Midón has lived a life devoted to beating the odds and shattering stereotypes. After three major-label albums, Midón has seized the day with his latest indie productions. "I'm so excited about the music I'm working on now," he insists. "There are challenges in today's music business like never before. But in this brave new world, an artist has the advantage of being able to realize his or her vision in a pure, self-directed way. Collaborating with a high-profile producer like Arif Mardin or Larry Klein is wonderful, but working on your own does give you the luxury of more time and control – you're not working on someone's studio clock. I have my own production aesthetic and am free to follow my muse, whether it's Latin or rock or jazz. These days, my records are totally *mine* like nothing else I've done and the possibilities are so inspiring. I want to bring my fans along on this journey – they'll hear the freedom I feel."

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