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Jazz sax appeal: Brazilian uses African rhythms

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NEW YORK — Brazilian saxophonist Ivo Perelman's elastic music stretches from the chaotic frenzy of his native Sao Paulo to the influences of other places he's lived: Boston, Los Angeles, Rome, New York.

American free-form jazz and candomble — Brazil's African spirit cult chants — may appear incongruous, but Perelman successfully makes music out of such combinations.

"I have always seen music as a type of universal expression. And this music that I'm doing now combines my experiences in a global way," Perelman said.

His is a distinct voice in the new "batucada generation" — musicians who incorporate African rhythms in modern Brazilian music. His recently released second album, "Children of Ibeji," thrives on the nascent style, which he says is new only in its approach.

"Many of these candomble chants already were mixed with Portuguese religious music; many Indian musical ceremonies already were influenced by European music," he said.

Perelman has introduced his style in various engagements around New York, including the Blue Note, the well-known Greenwich Village jazz haunt.

His set begins in a hushed, darkened room with a lone birimbau — a single-stringed bowlike instrument — twanging a jagged melody. Then veteran jazz vocalist Flora Purim intones candomble chants.

The congas, shakers and bass join in before Perelman — his unkempt, wavy brown hair tied back and draped over a shoulder — begins blowing his reedy sax.

Close your eyes and imagine you are in a chic jazz club in Sao Paulo's bohemian Bixiga district. Then the vocals carry you away to a sweaty candomble ceremony in northeastern Brazil, where chanting accompanies birimbau and bongos, animal sacrifice and frenzied feet slapping dirt floors.

Candomble was introduced by African slaves to invoke pantheistic deities. The electrifying ceremonies



Ivo Perelman

attract impoverished rural blacks in northern Brazil, professional whites in southern cities and millions of others in between in the world's biggest Roman Catholic country.

"I'm not black, nor am I African, but it's in my heart, my insides," said Perelman, who was raised by Russian and Polish Jewish immigrants in Sao Paulo, Brazil's center of commerce and finance.

His mother, a classical pianist, exposed her son to Chopin, Brazil's home-grown classical composer, and Heitor Villa-Lobos as well as of Roberto Carlos' sugary pop ballads.

So ricocheting from one style to the next comes naturally to Perelman. After playing the piano as a child, Perelman moved to the trumpet, trombone and clarinet before finally falling in love with the saxophone in his late teens.

Now 30 and a bachelor, Perelman said he was immediately hooked after blowing his first notes on a sax: "I felt like it was my voice, that I was talking through a living creature."

His music is a departure from Brazil's two best-known styles: samba, with its African-influenced rhythms, and bossa nova, the softly sensuous music which incorporated '60s cool jazz.

But African chants are not Perelman's only musical genre. His first album, "Ivo," jazzified traditional Brazilian children's songs.