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Cyro Baptista

Banquet of the Spirits



By Thom Jurek

While Brazilian master percussionist Cyro Baptista appears on many Tzadik recordings, and is nearly ubiquitous in John Zorn's stable, this is only the third recording under his own name on the imprint.

Listeners last experienced him as a leader on the greatest party record most have never heard, *Love the Donkey*, at the end of 2005. He used a large cross-section of players on that album and on its predecessor, *Beat the Donkey*, from 2002. On *Love the Donkey* he made urban music -- such as jazz, late-era samba, vanguard classical, and improvised music -- serve Brazilian folk forms, while on *Banquet of the Spirits* he widens his musical focus while paring his roster.

Baptista fronts a new quartet here that performs as a group on most of these cuts, and uses very select guests on certain tunes. The core players are, of course, Baptista on more than is prudent to name here, Shanir Ezra Blumenkranz on various basses and oud, Brian Marsella on many keyboard instruments from pianoforte to accordion to melodica to Hammond B-3, and drummer Tim Keiper, who also doubles on various percussion instruments. Other players on various tunes include (but are not limited to) cellist Erik Friedlander, vocalist Hassan Ben Jaffar, and guitarist Cadu Costa (who co-produced the set with Baptista), and executive producer Zorn even bleats his alto saxophone for a change on one track.

On the back flap of the handsome CD booklet (typical of Tzadik) is the term "Anthropofagia Equals Cultural Cannibalism," reflecting *The Anthropophagite Manifesto* written by Oswald de Andrade in 1928, which was so influential on Brazilian modernism and reflected a new phase not only in art from that country, but on the entire Western art world as well. Baptista breaks it down this way: "Anthropo: Greek for 'human being'; Phagy, Fagia: Greek for 'to eat.'" Sounds reasonable, and he uses this to form his own manifesto in the album's final track, which relates a history of the colonization of Brazil and the regurgitation of all that it has "eaten," with swelling B-3s, slide bass, sound effects, percussion, a drum kit, and a backing chorus. This is one that can be heard over and over again -- not a one-time spoken word deal at all.

The preceding 43 minutes are among the most sophisticated and yet simple and "primitive" Baptista has ever recorded. The latter aspect is inseparable from the former. Rhythm is the context, but the melodies that emanate from these rhythms are another, while harmonic and intervallic structures birthed from both are also inextricable, because they are something else now entirely removed from their original cultures and eaten by colonized and exiled cultures (Brazilian, Arab, Jewish, Aboriginal). This wild, haunting, elegant, humorous, sad, sometimes vulgar, and very accessible brew is a glue that not only does not hide its seams, but uses them as pathways inside this new world.



(Continued...)

It's almost ridiculous to try to describe any of the music here, but there is one moment, at its most absurd, where a brutalized beauty offers a look under its clothes and at the violent -- yet swinging and grooving -- portrayals of cultural cannibalism: "Macunaima" (translated as "A Hero, Warrior and Character"). Tough on-the-edge post-bop jazz piano meets samba, heavy metal, and Indian folk song. It's so hideously loud and obvious it can deceive. Yet, upon listening closer, it's simply ingenious. It also leads into the gorgeous vocal "Mumakata," where berimbaus, mbiras, talking drums, balafon, piano, gimbri, tabla, and a vocal chorus cover the listener in multi-part chanted harmony and almost inexpressible poetic ecstasy (with a small trace of Scottish and Celtic folk melodies tossed into the mix courtesy of a muted oud), and transform themselves into a maqqam in the instrumental break.

Banquet of the Spirits isn't just a step forward for Baptista, it's a leap; it's the record he's been hinting at since his debut, where he interpreted the works of Heitor Villa-Lobos. And as such, it is undeniable in how provocative, powerful, and deeply enjoyable it is as a listening experience. Whether one relishes "progressive," "modern," "primitive," "art," or "pop" music, this one's for you.