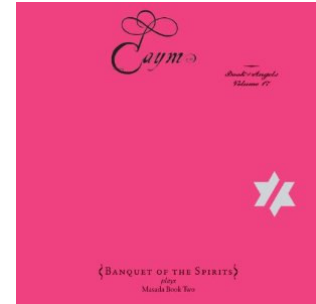




Cyro Baptista's Banquet of the Spirits Caym: The Book of Angels Vol. 17 (2011)

By Warren Allen | April 29, 2011

Brazilian master percussionist Cyro Baptista first encountered composer John Zorn back in the early 1980s. Baptista, who has since gone on to work with everyone from singer Paul Simon to cellist Yo Yo Ma, at the time was only recently arrived in New York from Brazil. He and Zorn evidently recognized some common artistic craziness/genius between themselves, and since then Baptista's wide array of traditional and homemade instruments have been prominently featured in Zorn's own eclectic ensembles. At the same time, Baptista's own wild world music ensembles have had numerous releases on Zorn's Tzadik label.



The Book of Angels is the second volume of Zorn's *Masada Songbook*, a collection of several hundred compositions written in 2004 and basically built entirely around two Middle Eastern scales. Since then, Zorn has handed off collections of the songs to various musicians to be arranged and performed anew in a wide variety of contexts. These have ranged from power rock trios and prog rock bands to old school jazz quintets, string chamber groups, and solo explorations. *Caym* is the seventeenth such volume, and features Baptista's Banquet of the Spirits, a quartet that has turned out exuberant and eccentric grooves for the past five years.

This union of Zorn's compositions and Baptista's joyously tight band and world aesthetic makes for one of the most wonderfully exciting and eclectic releases in the series. Shanir Blumenkranz, one of the more exciting bassists in Downtown New York and another veteran of Zorn's music, produced arrangements of the tunes the band selected. The four musicians then worked out the kinks at home and on tour, before settling into the recording studio. The end result contains a huge variety of musical traditions, as well as a truckload of instruments.

Amidst the panoply of world grooves, the listener finds mystical chants, astral bells and swirling keys. It starts to sound like a kind of wonderfully supernatural tribal music from a not-too distant future. The clash is beautifully bizarre—perfectly exemplified by "Matafiel," which opens with drones of pump organ and jaw harp, before blending Brazilian choro with Middle Eastern modes and Hebraic chants. To top it off, there's a killer solo from Tim Keiper on the *ngoni*, a percussive West African lute.

Keiper also plays drum kit and provides extra percussion to back up Cyro. Blumenkranz breaks out his spectacular oud playing, including a lovely solo feature on "Flaef." Keyboardist Brian Marsella runs the gamut with dizzying statements of equal parts blaring funk harpsichord, spacey organs and exotic piano bop.

The album is, in some part, jazz. But it's also everything else—from traditional Moroccan music to Balinese gamelan playing—along with the heavy Brazilian, Middle Eastern and even electronica influences. Marsella's superb piano work makes for some McCoy Tyneresque moments on "Hutriel." Then the scattering of birdcalls that open up "Natiel" gives way to mellow exotica with chimes and glockenspiel. Finally, the album gets a decidedly unexpected coda as the organ and melodica (it could be an accordian) join forces to play Zorn like a Bach fugue.

Of course, Cyro is everywhere. On top of the orgy of rhythms and the Portuguese chants, the layered textures and the controlled insanity of so many different sounds, the energy humming here goes back to his leadership. Anyone who has seen him live before, or had the chance to catch this band at Zorn's recent Masada Marathon at the New York City Opera, will recognize that the electricity humming off every track here has its roots in Cyro. The band that he has pulled together produces a diversity of sounds and colors that can't be found anywhere else. This is global exotica of a kind so wonderfully weird and cool that it's a must-listen for 2011.