

DRUM!

DRUMMING FOR FANATICS

Cyro Baptista: Ingesting A Musical Feast

By Jonathan Flax | Published August 2008

On the final cut of Brazilian master percussionist Cyro Baptista's album, *Banquet Of The Spirits*, a soothing voice with a thick accent imparts a history lesson. Underlined by spooky bulbul tarang (a type of Indian banjo), melodica, slide bass, and cymbal crashes – the latter spaced apart like waves pounding the shore – Baptista's wild tale introduces "the only law of the universe," Anthropofagia.

First developed in a 1928 manifesto by Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade, Anthropofagia theorizes the unique character of Brazilian culture as a remnant of tribal cannibalism. Just as the first Portuguese colonists in Brazil in the 16th century ate – yes, literally ate – Bishop Sardenia and the Catholic commissioners sent to moralize them and curb their rampant orgies, so too does the modern Brazilian consume with brio all things that arrive in the country. New foods, new politics, new art, new music, all of it is heartily digested, sometimes regurgitated, and in the end transformed into something new. Or so the theory goes.

"We ate the American constitution, we ate the French revolution, Jimi Hendrix, Shakespeare, Voltaire, Baudelaire, Donald Trump, JFK, George Bush, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker," Baptista bellows on the record's finale. And the list goes on as the music swells to a free jazz eruption.

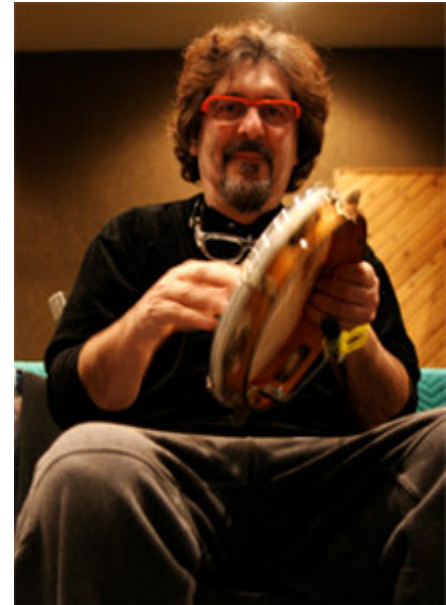
"We keep eating, and eating, forever and ever, we'll never stop!
We eat again, and again, and again!"

In many ways, *Banquet of the Spirits* is a soundtrack to Baptista's lifetime of cultural and musical feasts. The A-list percussionist has over the last 25 years shared the stage with Paul Simon, Herbie Hancock, Trey Anastasio, Laurie Anderson, Yo-Yo Ma, Wynton Marsalis, Sting, Cassandra Wilson, Kathleen Battle, Medeski, Martin & Wood, and many others, while his own theatrical percussion ensemble, *Beat The Donkey*, which has graduated several of its members to Stomp and Blue Man Group, recently celebrated a decade together.

Yet *Banquet Of The Spirits* also pays homage to an earlier time, before the phone started ringing with offers of high-profile gigs. Before, in fact, there even was a phone.

Down On The Farm

It's a rainy late Sunday afternoon when I arrive at Baptista's home studio in New Jersey, just minutes from the George Washington Bridge and the bustle of Manhattan. The building that houses the studio – and a veritable fleet of road cases – is almost entirely obscured by the leafy overgrown trees in Baptista's backyard. The only clues that point my way are a trail of unusual handcrafted percussion instruments, strewn about just outside the studio's front door, and the familiar sounds of Baptista practicing on an assortment of PVC pipes, using flip-flops for mallets.



"I first used PVC pipes in 1974," Baptista recalls with a laugh as he invites me into his comfy, cluttered workshop. "The Blue Man [Group] wasn't even born yet! And I think it's amazing that these guys now own Las Vegas with these PVC pipes. This is *amazing* that they did that!"

"Amazing" is a word Baptista uses a great deal. Like the man himself, it is infectious. And Baptista does not reserve the word only for his stories about globetrotting alongside the rich and well known. He expresses an equal amount of enthusiasm for the many financially lean years that followed his arrival in the United States from Brazil in 1980.

"This album [*Banquet Of The Spirits*] is in many ways about that time," Baptista explains, recalling his first experiences in America at the Creative Music Studio in Upstate New York. CMS had awarded a scholarship to Baptista, who had no idea what to expect as he made the journey from South America. "I was very lucky," he says. "CMS wasn't like a *school* school. It was like a farm, and the musicians that were not on tour would come and hang out there. That's where I met [fellow Brazilian percussionist] Nana Vasconcelos, my mentor. And that was the place of beginning for world music in this country."

The young Baptista would come into contact during that period with other CMS notables such as Trilok Gurtu, Don Cherry, Collin Walcott, and Jack DeJohnette. "And man, I just came from Brazil, and to fall into this place for me was incredible. I stayed three months, and I'm still trying to understand what I learned there."

Trumpeter Cherry's pioneering, proto-world-music trio, Codona, which also featured Vasconcelos and Walcott, was enormously influential to Baptista during his CMS residency. To learn up close from these musicians – so adept at synthesizing sounds and rhythms from disparate cultures to create a provocative new sound – had a profound effect on him. "Codona was the first to mix Brazilian music with Indian music, with folk American music, and with jazz," he says. Fittingly, *Banquet Of The Spirits* features not only Baptista's own eclectic compositions, but also three renditions of songs by Cherry and Walcott.

Vasconcelos' impact on Baptista, meanwhile, went beyond just percussion. "When I first saw Nana," Baptista says, "I thought that this guy is doing something that I really want to do. I became his shadow. And I learn so much with him, not just about music, but how to cook, about the business of doing music, and I was really lucky as a student to start playing with him."

From CMS, Baptista would decamp for New York, intent on spending the \$70 in his pocket before returning to Brazil. "And I'm here now 28 years with that \$70," he laughs.



From Here To There

For the genre-bending *Banquet Of The Spirits*, Baptista assembled a quartet that includes keyboardist and *Beat The Donkey* alum Brian Marsella, bassist and oud player Shanir Ezra Blumenkranz, and drummer Tim Keiper, also from BTD. Featured guests on the record were saxophonist and long-time Baptista collaborator John Zorn, who also served as the album's executive producer, and vocalist Hassan Ben Jaffar.

The four musicians did several gigs together to hone the material, and to prescribe a few set transitions within each arrangement. "It's very important, the transitions," Baptista says. "The way we

go from one thing to another is like making a connection and making a story about what we are doing.”

Most of the songs in their earliest forms included pieces of jams married to preexisting rhythms or melodies written by Baptista. Although the process was at times akin to a high-wire act, the results were often a happy surprise. “Sometimes it hurts when we make a mistake,” Baptista says. “But then it’s like, ‘Whoa! This mistake is amazing! Let’s play the mistake!’” By the time it came to put the music to tape, the band tracked a good portion of the record in one afternoon.



The standout *Banquet Of The Spirits* cut “Macunaima” provides a window into the method of Baptista’s madness. The map of the song looks something like this: Brazilian bayon, into traditional jazz, into guest John Zorn’s alto sax improv, into a breakneck ska groove, into more traditional jazz, into more Zorn-led free-form insanity, into some rather convincing heavy metal bombast, into French spoken word over bird calls and drum set soloing, back into traditional jazz, and culminating in the falling action of more bayon.

Baptista explains how this song was inspired by a musical improvisation game called “Cobra” that Zorn used to play with other performers back in the early ’80s, a time when musicians just outside the mainstream of the New York jazz scene – Zorn, Baptista, and Marc Ribot among others – lived and congregated on the lower-budget, Lower East Side of Manhattan.

“So this is the ultimate example of Anthropofagia,” Baptista says, “because you have all of these rhythms combined into a single song. It starts with the bayon, that’s me; then it have the jazz, that’s Brian, who is an amazing jazzman; and then Zorn, who was a guest. We just go from one story to the other, where each of us dominate different kinds of language.”

In the studio, the band executed these hairpin stylistic turns by using hand signals. “Like this,” Baptista says with a raised fist, “would mean improv, and this” – now making the familiar devil horns sign, but pointed downward – “is heavy metal.” Laughing about some rather gymnastic maneuvers employed in getting each musician’s attention, Baptista explains that it mattered little “where we *are*. What we know is where we *go*.”

The record draws upon many diverse cultures, as well as nearly three decades of Baptista interacting with musicians, not strictly as a “Brazilian percussionist,” but also as a New York musician. “I don’t think you’re going to see anyone describe this record as ‘Brazilian,’” Baptista says. “Maybe that is going to get me in trouble. My roots are for sure Brazilian, and I can go crazy and do all this stuff that I do, but always I can come back to my foundation. But I live [in New York] 28 years. I’m also from New York. That is also what I *am*. And I think that if you come to New York to live as a musician, or as a writer, or a poet, or any kind of artist, that’s what you are going to get here.”

Street Beats

What Baptista got when he first arrived in New York, with those \$70 burning a hole in his pocket, was a lot of struggle. Much of the ensuing years were spent playing on the street or in the subway, and couch surfing was the norm. Still, Baptista speaks wistfully of that time, which informs much of *Banquet Of The Spirits*.

Baptista's first street show consisted of little more than him playing berimbau on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Third. Soon, however, he hooked up with a roving VW van-full of percussionists from Brazil and toured the island of Manhattan with them daily. "It was unbelievable," he recalls. "We would start at 10:00 in the morning, and we would hit Washington Square Park, Winter Garden, Rockefeller Center, Columbus Circle – we played everywhere." Though police would often break up the impromptu gigs as crowds occasionally swelled into the thousands, the musicians walked away with a trap-case full of dollar bills and coins.

"One day I was playing snare with this group, and a guy start to look at me," Baptista remembers. "And I just arrive here and I didn't know nothing. And I'm doing a solo and this guy looking at me so *close*. And then somebody say, 'You know, that's Max Roach,'" he laughs. "And then ... I start to pee a little bit. My legs don't stop shaking I was so nervous!" Afterward Roach approached Baptista. "He told me, 'Man, you are amazing. Here is my card, please call me.' But I was so shy I never call him!" Sixteen years later, Baptista would run into Roach again in Italy. "I said to him, 'Max, I met you once,' and he just looked at me and said, 'Man, why you never call me?'" Baptista laughs.

"It would have made my life so much easier," he sighs.

But It Wasn't

Nonetheless, Baptista's life would begin to get a little easier after he was offered the role of an imprisoned percussionist in the 1987 Nick Nolte film, *Weeds*. Gigs with Zorn and other New York notables in the jazz scene would follow, and then a career-making call would come in 1990 from Paul Simon, a touring gig that Baptista would hold off and on for six years.

The Simon gig paired Baptista with Steve Gadd for the first time. "Playing with Gadd is incredible," Baptista says. "When I first played with him it was so funny, because I come from a country where you needed to play on top of the beat all the time. With almost all Latin rhythms, and especially in Brazilian music, you need to be on the *super* top, like, 'You think that you are playing fast? No! It's faster.' And if you play just a little behind, it's, 'Please don't come back to this place again.' I mean, you can lose a body part! People get really pissed with you. So I grew up with that."

Then, Baptista says, "When I first came to play with Steve, in the '90s, it was so hard for me at first, because he *abuses* the back of the beat!" Baptista demonstrates with a dead-on beat-box impression of a classic Steve Gadd-type groove. "Between every [hit] that he does, you can go off, take a shower, have a cup of coffee, make a telephone call ..."

"And then one day he said to me, 'Man, you don't know how to play behind the beat, do you?'" he laughs. "Man, I didn't even know it *existed*! And that was great for me. Because it is something that he controls so well, he is the master of that. I learned so much about feeling the music in another part of my body, because that's what it is. In Brazil, we feel so much here," says Baptista, gesturing below the waist. "We are the Southern hemisphere. When we count the music we do it with our feet. Here, you are [snaps fingers]: 1, 2, 3, 4. Here, you play basketball, baseball; we play soccer. It is two hemispheres, coming together. I don't say one is right and one is wrong."

Elsewhere on his loaded resume, Baptista highlights touring with Herbie Hancock around 2000 as perhaps the most satisfying and educational time in his career. "I learned so much with this guy," Baptista says. "Such an amazing musician and person."

It was Hancock, Baptista explains, who opened him up to taking big chances on stage. "One day Herbie say to me, 'Cyrto, you know, it's amazing. Everybody loves when you play. The audience loves you and everything is amazing. But you know what? In this band, you're never going to be fired if you make a mistake. But maybe you'll be fired if you *don't* make a mistake.' And that opened a door for me to really take a risk. And maybe is going to be bad, no? Or maybe is going to be something you never did in your life. But you've got to do it!"

The Good And The Bad

Baptista admits that he never imagined that he would play with so many world-famous artists. He seems relieved not to have had to do something static, or to always be “Brazilian,” or to repeat himself in one long-running gig. Yet balancing so much work with artists of every genre, how does Baptista the sideman constantly adapt and stay flexible for each new situation? “That is the million dollar question,” he says. “Because it’s true, one day I’m playing metal with Zorn, and the next I’m playing with Kathleen Battle, the opera singer.

“But I think this is why people want me,” he continues. “Because surely there are other percussionists who could play much better in a certain situation. But I think it’s that, these people want to bring a story to their work – my story. And maybe they call me but they *don’t* really know what I am. They say, ‘Maybe this guy will play tambourine there and a cowbell here ...’ and suddenly I’m playing a megaphone through effects pedals and they are like, ‘Whoa, what is *this*?’ And they either fire me right there, or they love me. They don’t have much choice!”

But although Baptista speaks warmly of most of his collaborations, such as his recent projects with Laurie Anderson, Wynton Marsalis, and Trey Anastasio, he seems determined now to focus his energies on his own work, specifically his new quartet, which will follow up *Banquet Of The Spirits* with a second album later this year.

“To tell you the truth,” he says, “I always have a little bit of a problem to be a good sideman.” It’s rarely the music that gets old for him. Instead, it’s personal issues like ego and politics that take a toll. “Man, this can be a nightmare,” Baptista admits. “People complain about, ‘Why you not listen to my bass drum in the monitor!’ People, very famous, having fistfights during rehearsals,” he laughs wearily. “I’m saying to myself, ‘These guys are millionaires! Why you not enjoying the situation?’ These bad sides, I try not to get involved with any of that.”

A Sense Of Home

Baptista finds himself in a seemingly endless loop while at once touring to promote *Banquet Of The Spirits* and performing percussion workshops across the country. “You go to a place, you do a concert, and get out,” he says. “Then go on to the next and the next and the next, and you really don’t have any connection with that. For me it’s getting difficult to accept this.”

The percussionist longs to balance it out by becoming more involved in his community, with music as his vehicle for communication. “Today, everything is so individualistic,” he sighs. “But music was originally about getting together around the fire. It was about ritual, about survival, about bringing us together.

“It’s part of the Anthropofagia – this idea of transformation. That through music, through this process, we can turn poison into medicine. It’s a very serious law, a sort of bible.”

Yet any authentic, lasting transformation involves a struggle, no? “Struggle is good!” Baptista bellows. “If you put up a fight, always you going to find a solution. I think music is not made for people to suffer; it is for making people happy. So that is the final result.

“And if you can get to that, it is *amazing!*”