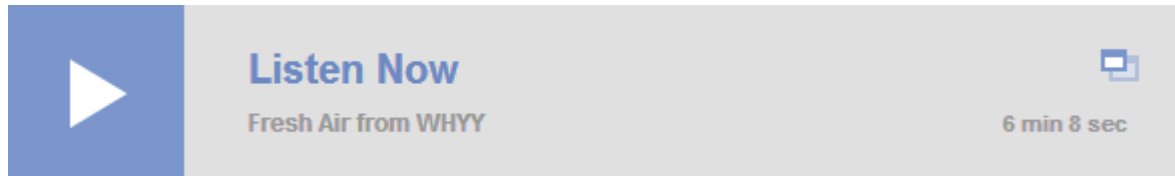




Cyro Baptista: Sounds From Everywhere, Evoking Home

By Milo Miles | March 18, 2011



Back in the heyday of world-music fusions in the 1980s, tradition-minded players and fans worried that too much mixing of styles would result in a dreaded generic "worldbeat" that was a bit of everything and a lot of nothing. The neo-traditionalist movements that countered runaway fusions were worthy attempts to keep old styles alive in specific regions and languages. And, eventually, the idea of huge crossover hits in world music faded away.

But the ideal of blending diverse styles never disappeared. One of the most enduring proponents is percussionist and bandleader [Cyro Baptista](#). He's from Brazil, but his real native land is the recording studio and on stage. Baptista is a regular collaborator with [John Zorn](#) and, like Zorn, you never know quite what his records are going to sound like. Indeed, *Caym*, Baptista's latest project with his group Banquet of the Spirits, uses a dozen themes written by Zorn as starting points. But all the tracks take off in unpredictable, though satisfying, directions



In the first cuts, Baptista and Banquet of the Spirits evoke and play around with the sounds and textures of North African gnawa music and even the horn-driven clamor of Morocco's Jajouka musicians. But just when you think *Caym* is settling into a pan-Middle East mode, the album swerves into a delightful evocation of Indonesian gamelan.

Most impressive is that all this variety comes from just a quartet. Producer and arranger Shanir Ezra Blumenkranz plays oud and the gimbri African lute, as well as bass. Tim Keiper does drums and percussion, as well as the ngoni guitar from Mali, and Brian Marsella excels on piano, harpsichord and pump organ. Leader Baptista plays a slew of instruments that throb and rattle, including some of his own invention. Everybody does some affable chanting from time to time.

But, more than virtuosity, it's the harmonious, positive spirit of *Caym* that makes it a fine introduction to Baptista's way of performing. The session ends with a number called "Phaleg," featuring Marsella wailing on the pump-organ in a workout that's both witty and eerie, a sort of Phantom of the International Opera.

The strong group unity and interaction helps *Caym* avoid the typical downfalls of eclectic world-music albums — fancy, empty playing and superficial dabs of exotic styles. Instead, you feel like you're listening to a captivating travelogue, as told by a group of nomads who are at home everywhere.