



Cyro Baptista: Banquet of the Spirits (2008)

By Sean Patrick Fitzell | July 21, 2008

Exotic percussion, string and keyboard instruments were strewn across the stage of Joe's Pub in New York City on May 29th. Cyro Baptista rapped out a pattern and casually live-looped it to play against himself with handclaps, drums and birdcalls. His approach of maximizing each person's sound fuels his new group and CD *Banquet of the Spirits*. Drummer-percussionist Tim Keiper, bassist-oudist Shanir Ezra Blumenkranz and keyboardist-accordionist Brian Marsella added to the leader's sonic blend, slowly teasing the introduction and launching their rendition of the late trumpeter Don Cherry's "Bird Boy."



Opening with unhurried oud, vocals and percussion, the tune ignites for Marsella's organ run before becoming an amorphous sound exploration, spotlighting guest cellist Erik Friedlander on the CD, but handled live as a collective improvisation. Abrupt stylistic shifts are a hallmark for musical omnivore Baptista. His "Macunaima" boasts a rollicking Brazilian opening that dissolves into a fleet jazz run with cascading piano and a loping bass line, only to be rent by the alto sax shrieks of guest John Zorn. In concert, the leader manipulated bird calls for his best Zorn impersonation and Blumenkranz processed his bass to sound like a guitar for the raving surf interlude and later section of metal bombast, the broad genre hops flowing without irony.

Baptista's willful amalgamations respectfully borrow from their sources to pursue novelty. The influence of Cherry's early embrace of global sounds is acknowledged with covers of his "Malinye" and sitarist Collin Walcott's "Mumakata," recorded by their trio Codona. The percolating groove and lilting vocal melodies of the latter tune are irresistibly charming, the high harmony ably handled live by Keiper in the absence of the CD's backup vocalists. With vocals and tambourines, the drummer and Baptista matched wits introducing the hypnotic "Argan." Blumenkranz' oud was featured for its Middle Eastern tinge, minus vocalist Hassan Ben Jaffar from the recording.

Though lacking the costumes and overt theatrics of his Beat the Donkey ensemble, Baptista's streamlined quartet is no less engaging: constantly changing instruments and styles to crank out high-energy romps with contagious enthusiasm. "Anthropofagia," their original band name and dramatic mission-statement, explains it's a Brazilian thing to devour influences: "And we eat them all and again and again..."