

## Brazil's Baptista Brings a Handful of Wild Sound Cards

Contributed by Bruce Gilman  
Monday, 14 February 2005

After numerous sanitarium sojourns, an attempted suicide, and his consequently long period of recuperation, poet, painter, and pianist Arnaldo Baptista, founder of Os Mutantes, returns with his first solo disc in almost twenty years.

Disassociating Baptista from Os Mutantes (The Mutants), one of the most experimental and revolutionary Brazilian bands between 1968 and 1970, is difficult, as he was its mastermind. In addition to a faithful legion of fans, Os Mutantes has acquired what can only be described as mythological status.

The avalanche of press material about their discovery decades later by musicians like David Byrne, Beck, and Kurt Cobain, even the release internationally of albums cut from the Brazilian catalog, has ironically brought back neither Baptista's solo recordings nor those by Os Mutantes.

But Baptista's iconic presence as a composer continues to be felt, enduring as a cult figure in bars, at music festivals, in academic centers, and on recordings of his music by artists from the mainstream to the underground.

Insomuch as Baptista's jumping from a mental institution window left him comatose for several months, suffering serious cerebral injuries, and with a prognosis of never developing creatively, few expected him to record again. Under these circumstances, the appearance of *Let it Bed*, a disc that finds him celebrating new affiliations, is an event affirming the brain's rejuvenating capacity.

Although several artists had invited him to record, budget and studio time pressures were for Baptista distressing. The idea of recording only started to materialize when John Ulhoa, a musician who responds dynamically to Baptista's imagination, installed new audio software in Baptista's computer.

Ulhoa and Rubinho Trol (who created three videos encoded on the disc) tutored Baptista in the possibilities of new digital tools and systems that had only been available in the finest studios. The disc, revealing his own material executed in his own way, is Baptista's encounter with the latest recording technology, not electronically manipulated samples of his playing.

Fragments are refigured then overdubbed, edited, orchestrated, and processed into richly-textured collages of sound with finishing touches supplied courtesy of John Ulhoa, a producer who ensured that the details of his own contributions had no intrusive effect.

It is a curious CD whose concept melds *musique concrète* with pieces distantly reminiscent of seventies style psychedelic pop. There are times, however, when the thematic material and connecting tissue seem somewhat stretched. In poker terms, the CD is a handful of wild cards.

Despite his impressive reputation, Baptista doesn't grab the CD by the scruff of the neck and make it work through the sheer force of his personality. Some songs, or better, vignettes, are very old tunes that he had never recorded.

His adaptation of the mournfully expressive Negro spiritual "Nobody Knows (de Trouble I Seen)," has a contrastingly zany quality. "Cacilda," came from an old voice and piano demo-tape over which John Ulhoa, attempting a synthesis of forms, built an arrangement with added piano parts, an orchestration, and supplemental strings doubling many of the piano's phrases.

"Everybody Thinks I'm Crazy," from the 1941 Woody Woodpecker cartoon soundtrack, triggers memories of the typically Os Mutantes kind of humor, but the inane lyrics tend to wear thin. Inspired by science fiction, "Imagino" (I Imagine) is an attractive miniature of metallic resonance that gives rise to complex sonorities and unearthly halos. It speaks of life after death, love without sex, mythical entities replaced by thought, and immortality via DNA.

"Tacape" (Bludgeon), an old recording with some audio restoration, recalls the stone age and the paradox between it and modern culture. And "Carrossel," tracking in at twenty seconds, is a profoundly forgettable concoction of piano étude and merry-go-round music that incorporates a phrase from the 1978 "Emergindo da Ciência" (Emerging from Science).

Among the new songs, "To Burn or Not To Burn," a tip of the hat to the famous soliloquy in Shakespeare's Hamlet, uses the currently fashionable Big-beat groove and is cleverly programmed to be as contemporary as one could wish; nonetheless, it sounds stuck in the mid-eighties.

The lyrics of "Deve Ser Amor" (It Might be Love), like the CD title, allude to one of Baptista's heroes, John Lennon, but is a rather stodgy affair, hinting almost at parody. Aside from the obvious, "LSD" is full of puns and pays tribute with the lyric "Louvado Seja Deus" (Blessed be God) to J.S. Bach and by free association to John Lennon ("Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds").

Its electronic component is a witty composite of distorted echoes and tiny patterns developed within the limits of an unchanging modality and steady beat. "Encantamento" (Enchantment) talks about a being with two heads and the desire for wisdom and satisfaction. Its evocative effects achieve a dense, shadowed atmosphere.

"Gurum Gudum" is based on an old folk tune Baptista learned from his grandfather and is quite pictorial in its clangorous effects. Capturing the country lifestyle, he blends folkish melody, barnyard noise, and circuitous electronic sound imagery with acoustic guitars and an accordion, assimilating the electronic to the natural sounds.

Unlikely to register serious commercial success, Baptista does bring a tangible desire to communicate emotionally, however sophisticated his own concepts may be. Given the (tongue-in-cheek) title of this highly personal program, which seems to have been collated more for contrast and mood rather than cohesiveness, it would be a mistake for listeners to approach this disc with too much hope of an emotional experience.

The heterogeneous collages, industrial noise, and wispy, disembodied electronics do, nevertheless, reveal the threshold of a style that could have wide resonance, as they constantly hint at other dimensions. By this I am not endorsing, but suggesting that a strong talent with clear-cut ideas can sail close to the wind in any form.

Whichever direction Baptista is coming from, he can sail closer than most. His key talent is the quiet distillation of experience as if it has already passed, when in fact, it is still happening. That is a special talent, a special intensity, and an acquired taste. It might be worth your while to acquire the taste for this disc, or simply Let it Bed.

Artist: Arnaldo Baptista  
Title: Let it Bed  
Label: L&C Editora (L&C 003/04)  
Date: 2004

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