

Brazil's Choro Brotherhood

Contributed by Bruce Gilman
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Choro, what Villa-Lobos called the integral translation of the Brazilian soul in the form of music, developed from European forms, African rhythms, and a classical spectrum of harmony. The erudite brother of samba, choro is the most sophisticated of Brazil's musical expressions.

Every significant Brazilian musician has written or performed choro, but only the outstanding instrumentalist can execute its very specific structure, extreme melodic leaps, unexpected modulations, breakneck tempos, and improvisational language.

Choro Famoso is a tightly knit ensemble with a loose, relaxed feel built around the powerful musical imagination of mandolin virtuoso Mike Marshall, and though led by a forceful musical personality, it is essentially collaborative.

If you're not already aware of this group's collective pedigree, their CD, Mike Marshall & Choro Famoso, with its unmistakable coherence and enthusiasm merits a place in your collection.

Showcasing a cleverly chosen mixture of well-known and unusually challenging choros with plenty of variety to seize listeners' attention, the disc richly rewards repeated listenings.

If you're a "chorophobe" with a friend who isn't, after hearing what a wonderful feeling for line each of these players has and what an incredible, perfectly matched and blended ensemble they produce, give him or her a copy of this disc as a present.

"Um Abraço Seu Domingos" (A Hug Mr. Domingos), written by pianist/composer Amilson Godoy, demands virtuoso playing; anything less is ruthlessly exposed.

Marshall and Andy Connell, on clarinet, begin by alternating melody statements intermingled with some unison playing over the unusual three-part form, which harbors a baião midsection, before Marshall solos, displaying his strong lyrical sensibility and rhythmic daring; Connell, on soprano sax, his enviable assurance and multiphonic turbulence.

After solos, Connell is back on clarinet, harmonizing with a creative flair. Pixinguinha's "Cochichando" (Whispering), has a standard rondo form with the addition of a pandeiro introduction and coda.

Connell and Marshall again alternate freely interpreted melody statements--a typical practice when a group has more than one soloist--before Connell solos. With a tone of polished glass and impeccable technique, he makes it an object of wonder and fascination for the listener and of despair for aspiring clarinet players.

Marshall, keeping close to the melody line on his first chorus, shines on his second, and the music's temperature rises accordingly. Underpinning each foray and bringing his own magic on 7-string guitar is Carlos Oliveira, an excellent foil.

Marvelously conveyed, Paulinho da Viola's free-floating "Sarau para Radamés" (Tribute for Radamés), evinces the polish and economy of a unique compositional voice; its many moods and colors, shaded with different hues by percussionists Brian Rice and Michael Spiro, are characteristic of its creator.

On "Receita de Samba" (Recipe for Samba), the celebrated two-part samba-choro by Jacó do Bandolim, Connell is back on soprano exchanging melody statements with Marshall while Oliveira, whose command of intricate rhythms and harmonies is never less than masterly, creates especially stimulating counter melodies on the 7-string guitar.

Marshall takes an exhilaratingly lithe solo over the second section, and Connell over a G major/ C minor vamp that segues into Oliveira's arrangement for four clarinets before building to a climax. "Choro da Gafieira" (Dance Hall Choro), Oliveira's composition, has just one section as opposed to the standard two or three-part form and is performed in traditional jazz style: head--solos--head.

Unsurprisingly, technical superiority enables these players to bring extra finesse to this form, and Marshall's discreetly eloquent solo is a perfect response to Oliveira's proclivity for opaque textures and dense voicings. Beautifully written, its passion is undeniable, but cannot disguise the fact that Oliveira's music is well prepared.

Satisfyingly rich with a varied spectrum of tone-color, "Choro Negro" has a simple ternary form, but a magical, intimate poetry that transfixes the attention from the very first note. Offering a refined display of how lyricism and rubato combine, Marshall's improvisation bears a grace of movement one can't imagine foregoing for something more clinical.

And Connell's uncanny ability to make his instrument sing is expressed with the extended tonal palette and soulful dignity of his solo. Coming across like the shifting textures of an animated and clever conversation, "Espinha de Bacalhau" (Codfish Bone), illustrates the group's instrumental bravura within a challenging context.

The sixteenth notes they can produce with a swaggering sense of swing and without the hint of missing a note or even the whisper of a semi-tentative approach to a phrase is the kind of thing that must make other ensembles green with envy.

Special mention must be made of the rhythm team of Michael Spiro and Brian Rice who, understanding the best ways to balance their support roles, weave a magic carpet on which Connell's clarinet soars, sails, and dips with delight. The freedom and invention used to re-fire this virtuoso showcase is to be taken as rare wine.

The program closes with three immediately arresting tunes recorded by Choro Famoso's earliest incarnation, a sextet. "Noites Cariocas" (Carioca Nights) features Marshall's fluid musicality, exciting enough, but entirely the servant of his prodigious imagination.

These talents are matched by Harvey Wainaple's adrenaline rush on soprano sax in which every note is cleanly and creatively driven. He fully merits the excellent rhythmic support he enjoys here. "Não me Toques" (Don't Touch Me), full of wit and good humor, reflects an ensemble that is relaxed and self-confident. Again, agility is a keyword.

Wainaple, a conspicuously first-class clarinet player even at the most daunting up-tempos, shows perfect intonation and graceful phrasing on the propulsive "Luis Americano na P.R.E. #3." (Luis Americano on the Radio), a tune with a simple, yet virtuosic and crisply rhythmic melody.

The performances throughout are past praise in their sensitivity, emotional scope, and remarkable range of color. Particularly pleasing is not just the group's natural choice of tempos, but also how they clearly enjoy themselves, relishing the more raucous moments, each player contributing a clearly-defined personality to his role.

Popping with edgy sounds of surprise and solos that dance with manic glee, this is a finely played, uniquely loose-jointed set by a group serious about enjoying themselves. If you do not already have these pieces, start here; if you do, these are more than viable alternatives, going far beyond craftsmanship to the outer edges of instinct, tastily served by Mike Marshall & Choro Famoso.

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Journalist, musician, and educator Bruce Gilman has served as music editor of Brazzil magazine, an international monthly publication based in Los Angeles, for close to a decade. During that time he has written scores of articles on the

most influential Brazilian artists and genres, program notes for festivals in the United States and abroad, numerous CD liner notes, and an essay, "The Politics of Samba," that appeared in the Georgetown Journal.

He is the recipient of three government grants that allowed him to research traditional music in China, India, and Brazil. His articles on Brazilian music have been translated and published in Dutch, German, Portuguese, Serbian, and Spanish. You can reach him through his e-mail: cuica@interworld.net.