

Moreno Veloso and Orquestra Imperial Make US Dance the Brazilian Way

Contributed by Ernest Barteldes
Monday, 19 September 2005

The campus of Montclair University became a big open-air "gafieira" (the name given to the old-school samba houses in Rio de Janeiro) as Orquestra Imperial - an 18-piece ensemble that includes Moreno Veloso, Wilson das Neves, Alexandre Kassin, Domenico Lancelotti and Rodrigo Amarante (of Los Hermanos) - took the stage in its U.S. debut with its mix of samba, boleros and other rhythms.

Within the first few songs, most of the audience at Montclair's amphitheater was up and dancing as the band played song after song without giving much of a pause in between tunes.

Most of the show was led by Veloso, whose voice has an uncanny resemblance with his father (his stage persona is pretty much the same to a certain degree), but other vocalists, such as veteran Wilson das Neves, Amarante and Nina Becker also had their chance to show their chops at the microphone.

Despite its lineup, Orquestra Imperial has no star attitude. The band members are not introduced (except when das Neves took the lead and was said to be "their mentor"), and everyone seems to have an equal status in the group. They are not "Veloso and the band," but a completely unified group whose members apparently check their egos at the door.

The set list was composed mostly of classic Brazilian songs, such as Chico Buarque's "É Bom Acabar Com Isso" (You'd Better Stop It) and "Aos Pés da Santa Cruz" (Before the Holy Cross), and others, mixed with Latin songs and some more contemporary sounds.

When das Neves took the lead, he took the audience through "O Samba é Meu Dom" (Samba Is My Gift) and Ivone Lara's "Sonho Meu" (My Dream a hit for Caetano Veloso and Gal Costa in the 80s), which he shared with Moreno Veloso and Nina Becker.

In between songs, he cracked a few jokes, but had little response as the audience was formed mostly by non-English speakers. Unfazed, he went on and delivered the songs with sincerity.

One surprise during the set was the inclusion of an instrumental version of Yes' "Owner Of A Lonely Heart", which had a Latinized beat with the inclusion of several elements of electronic sounds - think of a Carlos Santana song without the trademark guitar.

A strange moment was when the band took an 80s disco groove and included "Vem Fazer Glu-Glu", an obscure song composed by former kiddie show host Sergio Mallandro. The band played without a bit of irony, and seemed to have fun with it.

One of the best moments came during the Latin section of the show, when Veloso took the lead on the classic bolero "Piel Canela". He made the song his own, sounding incredibly comfortable with the Spanish-language lyrics. The band followed him well, and the audience felt as if we'd been jetted from Rio to a club in Havana.

The only singer that sounded a bit out of place was Rodrigo Amarante - as a vocalist with a rock band (he did not sing lead on their unstoppable hit "Ana Júlia", though), he sometimes didn't sound too comfortable belting out sambas - even his tentative tries at dancing looked as if he was just trying too hard.

After two hours of non-stop music, the band closed with "Eu Bebo Sim" (Yes, I Drink), an ode to those who happily imbibe while others don't and end up dying too soon. Ironically, there was no alcohol to be had at the show - the menu at the concert site only included water, soft drinks and some food, so the fun of the song was a bit lost to the audience, who didn't seem to understand why they all sounded drunk all of a sudden.

I must confess that I was surprised by the set list. Having heard the conceptual albums by Veloso, Lancelotti and Kassin on their + 2 series, I expected to hear more experimental stuff from them.

Instead, my ears welcomed songs that I hadn't heard in years - and that seems to be the orchestra's self-appointed mission: to bring to audiences music that hasn't been heard for some time, given the dominance that Axé music and pagode have over the Brazilian airwaves.

It is a very interesting project, and I hope to see them again very soon.

Concert Review:
Orquestra Imperial
Montclair State University
Sept. 17th, 2005

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