

Brazil's Mercury Rising

Contributed by Bruce Gilman
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Daniela Mercury, the "Queen of Axé" broke into stardom at the beginning of the 90's rippling her petite body and wavy elbow-length, reddish-brown hair from the heights of the trios elétricos. Recently, with familiar purpose and with her sights on the ever-changing marketplace, Mercury released *Carnaval Eletrônico*, a collection of up-tempo electronic dance music.

Taking on an urban sound - heavily influenced by hip-hop, house, trance, and techno - the twelve tracks are dominated by drum and bass rhythms, but personalized by prominent Brazilian syncopations and polyrhythms.

The result is a very immediate and clear opposition between refinement and ferocity. On Saturday, October 15, Daniela Mercury brings her dynamic sound continuum to Los Angeles, electrifying UCLA's Royce Hall.

Often referred to as the "Queen of Salvador" and the "Queen of Samba-reggae," Mercury moved beyond these disposable labels and left the axé music ghetto for the international market in 1996 when she released *Feijão com Arroz*, a project that revealed a Daniela Mercury more attentive to the details of production.

The elaborate repertoire had been researched for over a year and a half by Mercury, collecting and scrutinizing hundreds of compositions that displayed an inventory of unique Brazilian rhythms.

Disassociating the fiery Daniela Mercury from the accentuated Bahian percussion that had vibrated throughout most of her music was hard for some fans, and listeners may experience a subtle tension upon hearing *Carnaval Eletrônico*, which moves absorbingly between turbulence and poetic reflection.

But like fellow Bahians Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, Mercury is a musical "cannibal" who never vacillates when absorbing diverse musical elements.

At a time when electronic dance music tends to have deliberately artificial, robotic, and repetitious drum beats mixed with sampled drum loops, for *Carnaval Eletrônico*, Mercury uses a highly respected pool of DJ/producers chiefly as providers of a sound palette.

Rather than just mimic arrangements playable by live musicians, the producers, in striving to achieve a listenable, dance floor-friendly balance, build layers of syncopated, rhythmic harmonies and mingle them together in an palette of compatible textures, bringing layers of sound in and out, and equalizing the effects to create ever-more hypnotic and propulsive combinations.

The project's strength derives from its extraordinary variety of textures, ranging from light washes of synthesized sound to muscular backdrops, against which Mercury delivers her lyrics with power and conviction.

The project, nominated for the Latin Grammy, opens with Carlinhos Brown's "Maimbê Dandá," a tune that swept the Best Song awards at Bahia's 2004 Carnival and became one of the biggest hits in the history of Bahian Carnival.

Its quixotic combinations continued to resonate throughout Brazil as one of the most performed songs during the 2005 Carnival festivities. "Que Baque é Esse?" (What beat is this?) finds Mercury dovetailing well both with singer/songwriter Lenine and the tune's sharp-cornered arrangement.

Although her delivery can sometimes have the caged animal intensity found in "O Canto da Rainha" (The Singing of the Queen), this is contrasted by a rendition of Gilberto Gil's "Amor de Carnaval" (Carnival Love) where the lyrics are perfectly cushioned by the arrangement.

Rather than just adding a veneer, Mercury gets deeply into the wide range of Brazilian percussive and electronically-influenced grooves. Not an easy strategy, but *Carnaval Eletrônico*, as sensuous as it is complex, packs infectious energy. And Mercury, in sparkling form, opens a new chapter and captures a fresh space within Brazilian electronica, one that guarantees visibility and affirms her groundbreaking image.

From her early days, the fiery young singer seemed completely at home giving her interpretations the solid foundation needed to move freely, spontaneously, and, at critical moments, to take off. Her voice was full and her elasticity of phrasing and confident control of it remarkable.

Not surprisingly, concert promoters rushed in to engage this gifted singer, and record producers pricked up their ears. Her debut recording literally burst upon the musical world and was soon followed by her first contract recording for Sony.

Mercury's intensification of dynamic and rhythmic momentum remains one explanation. Performing every show as if it were her last, she injects her listeners with vitality. Her spontaneity and total commitment to the audience, something she first demonstrated aloft the trios elétricos, is magical and something that comes to her naturally. It is also part of the reason she got to the top and has managed to stay there.

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.

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