

Brazil's Daniela Mercury Raises Emotions and the Audience in Philly

Contributed by Jared Goyette
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Daniela Mercury played in Philadelphia Saturday night, and at least one patron was furious at the result. "This music makes my seat vibrate!", said an older gentleman by the ticket counter. "I can't stand this, please, move me further away."

He would have been able to find plenty of seats in the balcony section, because at that moment a herd of twenty-somethings was rushing down the steps and in an attempt to enter the main hall. There they hoped to join their peers, who were dancing in the aisles.

A stern looking woman stopped them, demanding the appropriate tickets. As the crowd grew so did their complaints, but a superior intervened and let the impatient youth through.

Then a debate that could have been ripped from the script of the Brazilian telenovela "America" ensued when an irate staff member challenged the directors decision,

"There are people dancing in the aisles! Aisles are supposed to be aisles and you are supposed to be controlling them! What kind of message does this send.... ", and so he went on, but the instigators were long out of earshot.

If a certain element in the audience was slow to warm to the rhythms of Mercury's electronic infused Axé, it was in part because the show was the emphatic conclusion of "Bahia Week", a three-day exhibition of Bahian culture hosted at the Annenberg Center of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

Most of the preceding events - film screenings, lectures, and art exhibitions - were rhythm free and had attracted a reserved and intellectual curious crowd. Their tense smiles turned to sincere applause when the set reached its slower and more melodic section, in which Mercury tried out songs from new album "Clássicos".

The highlight here was her cover of the Beatles' song "And I Love Her". The song began down tempo, with Daniela's rich and gravelly voice alone with the bass guitar, before she was joined by the full band in a free wheeling jazz style complete with funky bass licks and a long scat section off the word "love".

The juxtaposition that occurs in an audience with vast differences in age, culture, and dancing ability is familiar to anyone who has seen Brazilian musicians tour in Europe or the United States.

It presents a challenge to Brazilian and Bahian musicians who have to lead a hodgepodge audience though a show whose arc can go from pounding axe rhythms to romantic ballads and the occasional traditional samba.

In a post show interview, Daniela addressed how she has learned to deal with this phenomenon when touring abroad, "In the first shows I got tense from the formality of the places, the differences made me uncomfortable, but later I learned to deal with it in a different way. I think the fact that I go joking and playing with the audience, with a light touch, makes the people come closer and end up involved with the music."

Of the three new albums Mercury had released this year, one in particular, "Carnaval Eletrônico", uses a musical language engineered for international audiences. The techno production is an attempt by Mercury to follow Bebel Gilberto's electronic footprints into the US market, except with an approach more suited to the artist once known as "The Queen of Carnival".

Mercury teamed up with Brazilian DJs and producers in songs that mix Brazilian rhythms and samples to create driving, club friendly dance tracks. In her interview, Daniela expressed the idea that "Carnaval Eletrônico" might reach the US audiences through DJs,

"I think (nightclubs) are a good route because where people dance, where there are parties, where the gay public is open and when African- Americans can come and see the relationship between our Africaness - the Afro-American and Afro-Brazilian. I think these points of identity are places where we can come closer in a humanistic and political sense through culture and pleasure"

By the end of the night, Daniela had conquered all the hearts and hips in attendance. When a few remaining holdouts refused to stand for the encore, she implemented a well practiced theatrical maneuver by cutting her Carnival anthem "Maimbê Dandá" silent in the middle of the first refrain.

Turning to the confused audience, she pointed and said with imploring deference, "Hello, you over there. Pleeeease,

stand up". With a smile, the formerly reluctant obeyed Mercury's outstretched hand and the unspoken wish of their neighbors by rising to their feet.

This approach took an embarrassing turn for Mercury when the final object of her plea seemed at first stubborn, but then he struggled to his feet, leaned on a friend, and held a crutch up in the air. "Oh, um.. I know it must be difficult, you can do whatever you wish" she managed to say in English before returning to her set.

Once the downbeat came and the band kicked back into the refrain, everyone in the audience took Daniela's advice and did exactly as they pleased in the most extravagant fashion possible. Viva Bahia!

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