

Caricature and Conqueror, Pride and Shame

While Carmen Miranda was an effervescent vision for Americans of what lay south of the border, at home in Brazil she was controversial, not least because of her popularity in the United States.

"Carmen Miranda," a music and performance-art piece about the singer and dancer, will be presented Wednesday, Friday and Saturday at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The world premiere, part of the Next Wave Festival, is built around Arto Lindsay's contemporary arrangements of the sambas and carnival songs the performer made famous. They will be interpreted by four Brazilian singers — Gal Costa, Bebel Gilberto, Aurora Miranda and Elza Soares — with a band led by Naná Vasconcelos and vignettes performed by the Brazilian comedian Regina Case. As part of the program, the multimedia artist Laurie Anderson will appear in "Brazil/America Facts."

In this essay, the Brazilian composer and popular singer Caetano Veloso analyzes Carmen Miranda's myth and legacy.

By CAETANO VELOSO

FOR THE GENERATION OF BRAZILIANS who were adolescents in the second half of the 1950's and became adults at the height of the Brazilian military dictatorship and the international wave of the counterculture — my generation — Carmen Miranda was, first, a cause for both pride and shame, and, later, a symbol that inspired the merciless gaze we began to cast upon ourselves.

She was a typical girl from Rio, born in Portugal, who, using a blatantly vulgar though elegant stylization of the characteristic baiana — Bahian dress — conquered the world and became the highest-paid woman in the United States. Carmen conquered "white" America as no other South American had done or ever would. She was the only representative of South America who was universally readable, and it is exactly because of this quality that self-parody became her inescapable prison. It was, therefore, easy for us to understand the profound depression she experienced in the 50's, the abuse of pills, the destruction of her life, which ended in 1955.

In 1957, the recordings Carmen Miranda made before she came to the United States in 1939 sounded archaic to our ears, and those that she made in the United States seemed ridiculous. "Chica Chica Boom Chic," "Cuanto le Gusta" and "South American Way" were the opposite of our craving for tastefulness and national identity. Instead, we listened to singers who have perhaps never been heard of in the United States, but who to us seemed superior to her — and in a sense they were: Angela Maria, Nora Ney, Elza Soares, Maysa. We could almost foresee the coming of bossa nova — and João Gil-

This article was translated by Robert Myers from the Portuguese.



W. Eugene Smith/Black Star

Carmen Miranda, circa 1939—a complex relationship between a rich music from a poor country and the rest of the world

berto, our musical wizard.

At the same time, Carmen had become one of the formative personalities of postwar American life, influencing not only fashion but the style of a generation. Nowadays, we are fascinated to discover that she is mentioned as a favorite of Wittgenstein's. In the late 50's, however, it carried considerable weight simply to know that she was the only Brazilian artist recognized worldwide, and to hear our elders assert "not undeservedly so."

We kept our pride about her to ourselves, which is not so different from the way we react when we hear the name Pelé outside Brazil or see the drum band Olodum playing with Paul Simon for hundreds of thousands of people. But as we were more inclined to see Carmen Miranda's grotesqueness instead of her grace, the easiest and most frequent attitude was simply to ignore her.

Nevertheless, in 1967 Carmen Miranda reappeared as a central figure in our esthetic concerns. A movement that came to be known as Tropicalismo appropriated her as-

**To Brazilians,
Carmen Miranda was
at once a disgrace
and a deity. She was
also, finally, an artist.**

one of its principal signs, capitalizing on the discomfort that her name and the evocation of her gestures could create. The movement's founders — members of my generation and including myself — derived its title from an installation by the visual artist Hélio Oiticica. Tropicalismo was inspired by both the 1967 film "Terra em Transe" by Glauber Rocha, a baroque allegory of Brazilian intellectual life under the military dictatorship, and the Artaud-like theater of José Celso Martinez Correia. It was mainly concentrated, however, in popular music. "Tropicalia," a song I wrote that bears the same name as Oiticica's work, became its manifesto. It ends with an exhortation: "Carmen Miranda-da-da dada." We had discovered that she was both our caricature and our X-ray, and we began to take notice of her destiny.

Today, anything associated with Brazilian music in America — or with any music from the Southern Hemisphere in the Northern — makes us think of Carmen Miranda. And to think of her is to think about the complexity of this relationship: Olodum on Paul Simon's album, the collection of Tom Zé's experimental sambas released by David Byrne, Naná Vasconcelos and Egberto Gismonti, Sting and Raoni, Tânia Maria, Djavan and Manhattan Transfer, Milton Nascimento. Carmen is present everywhere.

When bossa nova burst on the scene in the United States — i.e., the world — we felt that

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Brazil had finally exported a highly refined quality product. But the fact that the style had been inaugurated by a single on an album by Stan Getz and João Gilberto created the impression of a cool jazz Carmen Miranda. The song was "Garota de Ipanema" ("The Girl From Ipanema"), beautifully performed in English by Astrud Gilberto. Not only does Astrud's voice spring like a luscious fruit from Tom Jobim's dense harmonies, the character praised in the song, the girl from Ipanema, seems to be wearing fruit on her head. This image isn't forced, it's in the air.

Recently, on the night of a gala benefit for the Rain Forest Foundation, emceed by Sting and starring Tom Jobim himself, there was a rumor that when Tom and his band played the Ipanema song, Elton John would appear dressed like Carmen Miranda. It didn't happen. But it is revealing that the rumor circulated. She is present everywhere. Airto's shaking balangandãs — the huge ornate earrings Carmen wore — in Miles Davis's band in 1971. Flora Purim and Chick Corea.

She is also present because there is, as the Tropicalists soon had to consider, the quality of her art. Before she became the international fake Bahian woman and later the goddess of camp (the bananas coming out of the top of her head, a vision Busby Berkeley created, are confirmation of a deity), Carmen Miranda had already left in Brazil abundant evidence of her reinvention of samba. Later, after bossa nova had matured and been ex-

ported, Carmen's old records no longer sounded like antiques.

A collection of these recordings was released on CD in Brazil several months ago (it wouldn't be a bad idea if the same thing happened in the United States). Her dextrous and spontaneous style sets off the dazzling repertory superbly. The agility of diction and the sense of humor tossed into the rhythm are marks of a nimble mind from which we had much to learn.

The recording of "Adeus Batucada" ("Goodbye Samba Group"), a prophetic samba by Synval Silva in which Carmen Miranda bids farewell to her companions in the samba circle, saying "I'm going to leave you all valuing the rhythm of samba," is one of the most beautiful ever made in Brazil. This song ended up echoing in another year later, by the same Synval Silva (who was her driver and an extraordinary composer), written in retaliation for the icy reception she received from the crowd at the Casino da Urca nightclub in Rio during her first performance after her success in the United States: "Disseram que eu Voltei Americanizada" ("They Say I Returned Americanized").

It's a good-humored settling of scores with the public and the Rio critics who resented her adulteration of Brazilian rhythms. American musicians had had difficulty adapting and, in their impatience, perhaps not paid proper attention, inevitably giving them a Cuban stylization. Today, after bossa nova and Milton Nascimento, one can at least count on the attempt by American musicians to

capture the peculiarity of the music from Brazil.

In Carmen's day it was enough to make a percussive din that was recognizably Latin and Negroid. By bringing the musicians from Bando da Lua (The Moon Band) with her to the United States, however, she represented less the adulteration alleged by her critics than a pioneering role in a history that is still unfolding. It is the history of the relationship between a very rich music from a very poor country and musicians and audiences from the rest of the world.

The Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade, of the modernist movement of

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1922, once said, "My country suffers from a cosmic incompetence." Carmen seemed somehow free of this curse. What strikes us when we look at her films today is the definition in the movements, the coordination of the hands with the eyes, the extreme clarity and polish of her gestures. Much of what comes out of Brazil is notable for its magic, its mystery, its joy; very little for its competence. When I'm asked why Carmen Miranda pleased Americans as much as she did, I say I don't know. But I still ask myself whether her talent for the finished product, her ability to design extremely stylized samba dancing, as though creating a cartoon figure, isn't the decisive factor in her popularity.

Competence is a word that well defines the American way of evaluating things. Carmen excelled in it. Gal Costa, Maria Bethânia, Margareth Menezes are Bahian women and great artists of joy and mystery. Carmen's gestural style, however, is identical to Elis Regina's post-bossa-nova vocal style: high definition in attacking the note, clarity in phrasing, the pitch of a computer — competence. Perhaps the United States today isn't as enthralled by this quality. As for Brazil, there were those who said that Surrealism was the only realism possible in Latin America, since everyday life in misery is surreal.

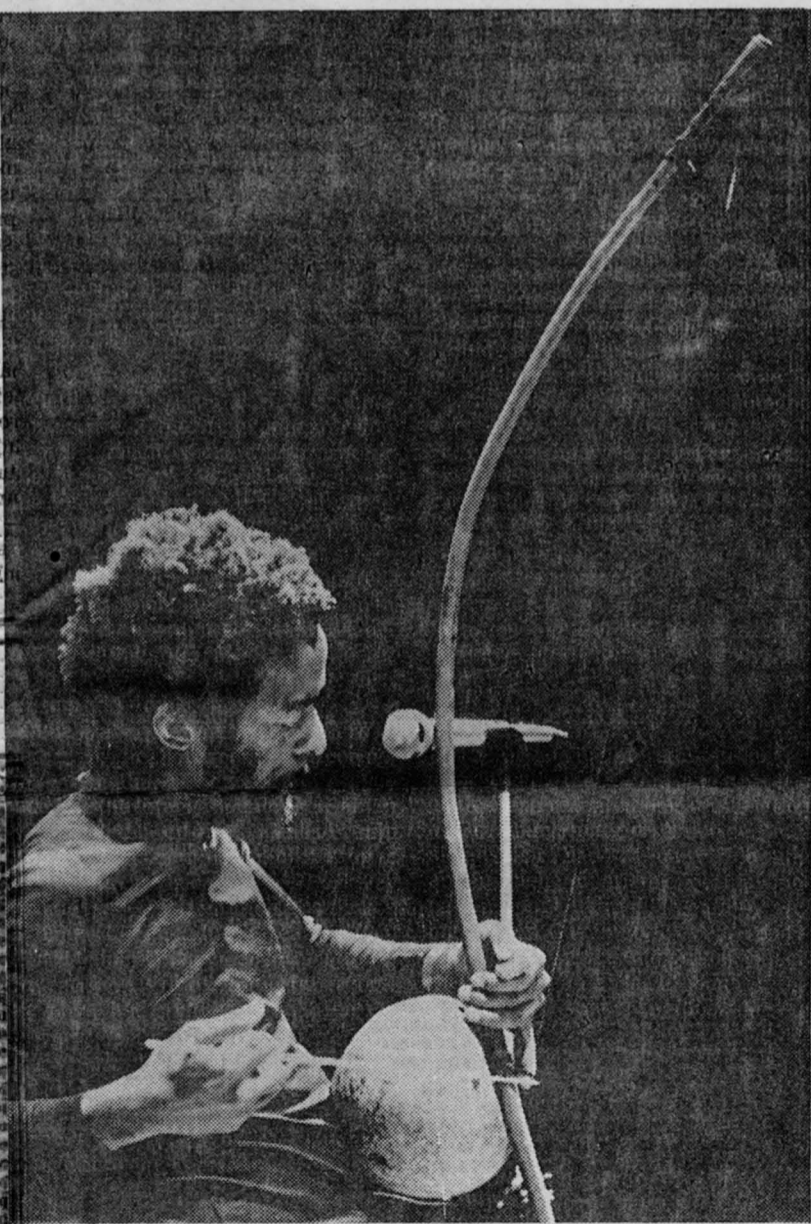
We, the Tropicalists, in a period in which the highbrows and the lowbrows caroused together to the consternation of some middlebrows, believed that Dada had more to do with us than Surrealism. Dada was the unestheticized unconscious, the no-explanation of the inexplicable. It was also the opposite of binding ourselves to a formalized absurd, and it was the choosing, above all, of liberty as a fundamental theme. Clearly we weren't Dadaists. We were a handful of kids from Bahia, the children of

bossa nova who were interested in 60's English neo-rock-and-roll. Some of us had been to college. After we moved to São Paulo we met the Campos brothers, Augusto and Haroldo, leaders of the mid-50's Concrete Poetry Movement, with whom we came to share an easy rapport and who offered the parallel between Dada and Surrealism, which we used.

I was in exile in London in 1971 when I first saw that well-known photograph in which Carmen appears in a dress but without underwear — her sex involuntarily exposed. It reminded me of the first Portuguese who, arriving in Brazil and seeing the Indians nude, noted in their letter to the King of Portugal that "they don't cover their shame." I thought it particularly significant that our representative was the only one among all the figures of the Olympus of Hollywood to show her shame, and that she should do it inadvertently, innocently.

Shame is a word that echoes in this article from the very first paragraph, but the sight of the photograph caused more pride than embarrassment. Rushed into the arms of Cesar Romero for a round of picture taking after she had started to disrobe in her dressing room, with a smile of Hollywood purity on her lips, she has been shot from below surrounded by lights full of purpose and control, and everything about and around her seems obscene next to the innocence of her sex.

The lighting, the set, the pose, the fantasy was Carmen Miranda. Her exposed sex was Dada. □



ECM Records

The percussionist Naná Vasconcelos—a salute to Miranda at BAM



Mark Lennihan

The singer Gal Costa—interpreting samba and carnival songs