



Cyro Baptista, Le Poisson Rouge, NY

(Le) Poisson Rouge, NY, 14th November 2009

By Nick Klagge Artist: Cyro Baptista

Cyro Baptista's show begins with an eerie whirring noise, generated by flexible tubes spun by the ten or twelve members of his band **Beat The Donkey**. **Baptista** enters slowly, dressed in a flamboyant wizardly robe, and begins intoning chant-like syllables into the microphone. After a few seconds, the lights go up and the show starts in earnest, with **Baptista** and his band delivering their trademark blend of exuberant silliness and percussive virtuosity. Even without the wizard robe, though, **Baptista** comes off less as a bandleader and more as a Puckish magical spirit, marshaling the fantastical forces of his minions with glee and caprice.

In reality, the Sao Paulo-born **Baptista** is one of the world's most accomplished percussionists, having won multiple Grammy awards and recorded with the likes of **David Byrne** and **Yo-Yo Ma**. He is deeply aware of the traditions he upholds - at the outset of the show, he mentions how humbled he is to be playing at what used to be The Village Gate, a "sacred" stage where **Tito Puente** played. But when he's playing with **Beat The Donkey**, you get the sense that **Baptista** doesn't care much about polishing his resume. He'd rather take that resume, tear it into confetti, and shower the audience with it.

Beat The Donkey most closely resembles a Brazilian bateria, the large and varied percussion ensemble that accompanies the dancers of a samba school in Carnival parades. Two traditional Brazilian bass drums, called surdos, form the heart of the band, but **Baptista** adds in a standard drumset, electric guitar and bass, keyboards, and pretty much anything else that he can think of a way to bang on. Many of his instruments are homemade, with strange items strewn all over the floor around him. At one point, frustrated with a malfunctioning microphone, he produces from somewhere a bullhorn and sings into it. All the silliness, though, accompanies great musical skill, whether from the keyboardist wearing a chicken hat, the shredding guitarist in a full NASA suit, or the lightning-speed tap dancers.

The band play a few of **Baptista's** best-known songs, including '**Parar de fumar**', a sweet song about wanting to quit smoking "*so I can kiss you without an ashtray mouth.*" But to focus on individual compositions would miss the point of **Baptista's** performance style, which focuses on the physical act of creating music. It is only by tearing down the barriers associated with seriousness that he can bring his audience into the special world where he makes the rules, expressing his boundless and whimsical creativity through any medium he sees fit.

Percussionist Cyro Baptista takes his crazy big drumming talent to Kuumbwa.

By Curtis Cartier

World music. Never has a more ambiguous term been coined. If it's not any music made in "the world," is it feisty African tribal rhythms? Spicy Latin sambas? Guttural Celtic bagpipe jams? Maybe a little of each?

For Brazilian-born Cyro Baptista, "world music" may be the term most often settled on by frustrated journalists attempting to classify the jazz percussion freak shows he calls records. But, like most musicians in this position, that's the way he likes it.

In the 28 years he's been in America, Baptista has earned himself a place on the speed dials of a laundry list of musical greats who look to him whenever they need ghostly Latin-tinged soundscapes or wildly inventive beats that defy categorization. And with an upcoming gig at Kuumbwa Nov. 10, the 57-year-old beatmaster and his truckload of drums are looking to pound Santa Cruz into submission.

Baptista's latest solo album, *Banquet of the Sprits*, is an indefinable melting pot of jazz, rock, electronica, salsa, hip-hop and everything in between. Out since March on Tzadik Records, Banquet's standout tracks include "Bird Boy," which pits the lazy Old World squeeze of an accordion against the playful strumming of the Arabic oud before descending into utter jazz madness. The Latin-soaked "Macunaima" begins with sexy drums and delicate piano before taking a wild turn toward the beach with a surf rock guitar breakdown. And "Nana Tom" starts with childlike guitars matching tambourine shakes but quickly becomes a rump-shaking dance floor burner, complete with chanting vocals and rattling bass lines.

Some musicians seclude themselves in dark basements and messy hotel rooms, inventing songs like mad scientists in secret labs before unleashing their work on unsuspecting listeners. Others, like Baptista, are as much musical talent scouts as they are composers. A regular touring companion of Trey Anastasio and John Zorn, as well as Herbie Hancock, Baptista has also worked with Brian Eno, Carlos Santana, Sting and Yo-Yo Ma. He has helped record five Grammy-winning albums and has two that he won himself. His 2002 percussion and dance ensemble Beat the Donkey toured the world and garnered heaps of international acclaim. But it's been his solo albums, in which he's been allowed to handpick a dream team of international artists that has set him apart as a true musical pioneer.

CYRO BAPTISTA Monday, Nov. 10, at 7pm at Kuumbwa, 320 Cedar St. #2, Santa Cruz. Tickets are \$22 advance/\$25 door. (831.427.2227; www.kuumbwajazz.org)



April 2008

While Brazilian master percussionist **Cyro Baptista** appears on many Tzadik recordings, and is nearly ubiquitous in John Zorn's stable, this is only his third recording under his own name on the imprint. Listeners last experienced him as a leader on the greatest party record most have never heard, *Love the Donkey*, at the end of 2005. He used a large cross section of players on that album and on its predecessor, *Beat the Donkey*, from 2002. On *Love the Donkey* he made urban music -- such as jazz, late-era samba, vanguard classical, and improvised music -- serve Brazilian folk forms, while on *Banquet of the Spirits* he widens his musical focus while paring his roster. Baptista fronts a new quartet here that performs as a group on most of these cuts, and uses very select guests on certain tunes. The core players are, of course, Baptista on more than is prudent to name here, Shanir Ezra Blumenkranz on various basses and oud, Brian Marsella on many keyboard instruments from pianoforte to accordion to melodica to Hammond B-3, and drummer Tim Keiper, who also doubles on various percussion instruments. Other players on various tunes include (but are not limited to) cellist Erik Friedlander, vocalist Hassan Ben Jaffar, and guitarist Cadu Costa (who co-produced the set with Baptista), and executive producer Zorn even bleats his alto saxophone for a change on one track. On the back flap of the handsome CD booklet (typical of Tzadik) is the term "Anthropofagia Equals Cultural Cannibalism," reflecting *The Anthropophagite Manifesto* written by Oswald de Andrade in 1928, which was so influential on Brazilian modernism and reflected a new phase not only in art from that country, but on the entire Western art world as well. Baptista breaks it down this way: "Anthropo: Greek for 'human being'; Phagy, Fagia: Greek for 'to eat.'" Sounds reasonable, and he uses this to form his own manifesto in the album's final track, which relates a history of the colonization of Brazil and the regurgitation of all that it has "eaten," with swelling B-3s, slide bass, sound effects, percussion, a drum kit, and a backing chorus. This is one that can be heard over and over again -- not a one-time spoken word deal at all.

The preceding 43 minutes are among the most sophisticated and yet simple and "primitive" Baptista has ever recorded. The latter aspect is inseparable from the former. Rhythm is the context, but the melodies that emanate from these rhythms are another, while harmonic and intervallic structures birthed from both are also inextricable, because they are something else now entirely removed from their original cultures and eaten by colonized and exiled cultures (Brazilian, Arab, Jewish, Aboriginal). This wild, haunting, elegant, humorous, sad, sometimes vulgar, and very accessible brew is a glue that not only does not hide its seams, but uses them as pathways inside this new world. It's almost ridiculous to try to describe any of the music here, but there is one moment, at its most absurd, where a brutalized beauty offers a look under its clothes and at the violent -- yet swinging and grooving -- portrayals of cultural cannibalism: "Macunaima" (translated as "A Hero, Warrior and Character"). Tough on-the-edge post-bop jazz piano meets samba, heavy metal, and Indian folk song. It's so hideously loud and obvious it can deceive. Yet, upon listening closer, it's simply ingenious. It also leads into the gorgeous vocal "Mumakata," where berimbau, mbiras, talking drums, balafon, piano, gimbri, tabla, and a vocal chorus cover the listener in multi-part chanted harmony and almost inexpressible poetic ecstasy (with a small trace of Scottish and Celtic folk melodies tossed into the mix courtesy of a muted oud), and transform themselves into a maqqam in the instrumental break. *Banquet of the Spirits* isn't just a step forward for Baptista, it's a leap; it's the record he's been hinting at since his debut, where he interpreted the works of Heitor Villa-Lobos. And as such, it is undeniable in how provocative, powerful, and deeply enjoyable it is as a listening experience. Whether one relishes "progressive," "modern," "primitive," "art," or "pop" music, this one's for you. ~ Thom Jurek, *All Music Guide*



6 Imaginary Place, Aberdeen, New Jersey, 07747 Phone: 732-566-2881 Fax: 732-566-8157 email: myles1@optonline.net



June 2008

By: Dennis Cook

A gyroscope of delighted, percussive fracture, **Cyro Baptista's** newest offering, ***Banquet of the Spirits*** (Tzadik), whistles and thumps and generally trundles with twisted smarts, a cumulative treat that brick builds a solid, fully unique "thing" befitting of the hyper gifted percussionist/visionary. A fixture of NYC's downtown jazz scene and Trey Anastasio alumni as well as a powerful hired gun for Sting and Paul Simon, Baptista reaches full maturity as a solo artist on *Banquet*. The most "Brazilian" outing yet for this Brazilian boy caught between the moon and New York City, this skitters like a fiddler crab on PCP – a little nervy, wild and bouncing with possessed motion. What differentiates this from previous solo works is the cohesion of his core band - **Brian Marsella** (keys), **Shanir Ezra Blumenkranz** (oud, bass, gimbri), **Tim Keiper** (drum set, percussion) and Baptista on percussion and vocals. Guests like **John Zorn** on sax and cellist **Erik Friedlander** certainly don't distract but it's the basic unit that swings in such an alluring way here. *Banquet* is precisely what the title suggests – a tasty steam table of soulful music – touched by a cartoon sensibility that makes room for shuddering non-sequiters, surf rock, trad jazz, devil horn metal and ritual music. The choice of material is top notch, too, dipping twice into Don Cherry's trick bag ("Bird Boy," "Malinye"), co-writing a pair with fellow Brazilian percussion whiz **Nana Vasconcelos** - both moves a direct nod to Cherry and Vasconcelos' groundbreaking '70s work in Codona - and generally sharpening his original compositions a good deal.

Wildness is swell but it's most effective (and satisfying) when delivered within a framework that maintains an internal logic. On *Banquet of the Spirits*, Baptista enters the rarified bizarro realms of Tom Zé and Os Mutantes, merging the tuneful and tweaked in ways that simultaneously celebrates and erases the differences between the strains. Bent things can be extra fun because they allow us to probe our world from new angles. *Banquet* is a fantastically malformed tool to burrow away with.

This is a printer friendly version of an article from theithacajournal.com
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[Back](#)

Article published Jan 17, 2008

Cultural cannibal Cyro Baptista rides Beat the Donkey to State Theatre

By Luke Z. Fenchel

Special to The Journal

What do you get when you cross Sao Paulo, Brazil with the Lower East Side in New York City?

If you answered Cyro Baptista, then you win a gold tinsel star and a circus suit. Baptista is a percussionist that eats your favorite drummers for breakfast, and does it while dining in a bathtub full of rose petals. Though he is an avantgarde musician, he isn't afraid to compose sound effects for animated opossums. And though he has recorded more than 25 albums with preeminent New York downtown composer John Zorn, his musical chaos is more circus than obtuse. And this Sunday, Jan. 20, Baptista brings his anthropofagistic—or “people eating”—Beat the Donkey to The State Theatre to close this year's Light in Winter festival.

For a musician with such an experimental pedigree, Baptista's record, “Beat the Donkey” couldn't be more accessible: it opens with a strain of Led Zeppelin's “Heartbreaker.” The song is also infused with a Brazilian concoction that makes even Os Mutantes seem a bit straight. The rest of the record, and its follow up “Love the Donkey” combines strains of music as varied as rock and roll, cutting edge jazz, Tropicália and pretty much anything you might find in a kitchen sink. If you're still at a loss, try to imagine one part Blue Man Group and two parts “Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite” (which Baptista's band covered for the Julie Taymor's recent film, “Across the Universe”).

Baptista's two most recent albums have been released on John Zorn's Tzadik record label. Zorn established his own label in 1992 ago to promote experimental musicians, and Baptista had been serving as one of Zorn's in-house drummers for years before that. In addition to being a part of the rotating group Masada, Baptista recently recorded with a Zorn-led project called The Dreamers. But his resumé doesn't end there: the list of collaborators includes Yo-Yo Ma, Herbie Hancock, David Byrne, Laurie Anderson and Trey Anastasio.

Baptista was kind enough to speak with me from his home in New Jersey. Dogs barked in the background as he explained his cannibalistic tendencies over breakfast.

Q: So, if I have this correctly, beating the donkey in Portuguese doesn't involve beating any actual donkeys?

Baptista: No! Beat the donkey is like an expression we use in Brazil: “Let's do it! Let's go! Let's make this happen!” We use it for the band because of how we see music. Music is something that brings transformation; or at least I hope it does—music can bring about something new. With Beat the Donkey we have movement, and with movement comes transformation. But you know, things never happen the way you planned...and people are writing me to tell me how much they love the donkey, and that she shouldn't be hurt. But what can I do?

Q: One of the best things about Tonic was the way in which it encouraged experimentation. Can [Zorn's new performance space] Stone or other venues fill the void?

Baptista: I think the Stone is a good place to start. We cannot complain, because when we started all of this, we had no idea it could be successful. Now it is time to give back. Together, we are helping to make this space. And a lot of the younger players are much like us in the beginning; it's not really different—it's just in a different place. Stone is good because there is no place for club owners won't say "your band is too loud," or "you don't play this kind of music," or "you play with a blender going on," or whatever. You need places for people to perform. Another good one is the Abrahamson Center: it's a theater on Grand Street. But it will continue.

Q: I heard you are composing for Nickelodeon. How do you like composing for children? Do you focus on them?

Baptista: Yes! I did some work for a character—like a little opossum; some little guy and every time he shows up I make a noise. And it was great. Part of the reason I travel all over the world is to work with new people and play new instruments. I have been working with kids for a while, and I have always loved that. I do a lot of workshops, for elementary schools—like re-create the rainforest, and so on. Now I'm working with Jonathan Demme on a film and he is pretty open to ideas. I play a band that plays in the film, and he'll say, "let's do it this way." But then I'll suggest something else, and he'll agree. It's kind of a downtown-ish thing.

Q: Well, we're lucky in Ithaca to have the downtown come to us!

Baptista: Hey, you know, I remember Ithaca. I played that GrassRoots Festival, a little while back [in 2005]. And it was one of these amazing gigs where you step in the stage and everything happens, and bang! And I was also there with Trey Anastasio. And a little while after that, the Corning Museum offered to fly me out every week to design glass instruments. But I'm looking forward to playing Ithaca. I know it's cold and we're looking forward to bring people to shake their booty.

Q: I hope you don't get in trouble with PETA. Is this your first "band"? How did you decide to form your own group? Did you conceive of them as a visual collective, or did that happen more naturally?

Baptista: My first group, but we have been together for 10 years. When I started this thing, I wanted to have a group that was doing percussion. I had been doing drumming for so many years, there were already Stomp and Blue Man, and this sort of thing. And I wanted to do something that had elements of theater, dance and percussion. And that was the first idea. But by now, the group has become like a family thing. People have brought the ideas, and even the mistakes are great—and in a sense, that is what it's all about. Art movement in Brazil anthropofagia, it's translated as "eating people." And it is not that we are eating anybody—but rather that we are eating culture. I have this idea that is so clear for me, that we are eating each other all the time—trying to just to learn things. Brazilians: we eat the French Revolution, the American Constitution, and John Coltrane and Miles Davis, and Jimi Hendrix. And this happens in America as well—they eat Italians and Chinese and Koreans, and this happens in rock and roll and everywhere. This happens also in classical music as well. Somebody stole it for somebody and someone ate somebody.

Q: That rings quite true! For instance, when I first listened to "Beat the Donkey," the first thing I noticed was the strain from [Led Zeppelin's] "Heartbreaker."

Baptista: Right—and even that wasn't my intention. When we were recording, we brought in [cellist] Eric Friedlander—and he had patience to record with eight percussionists. And in the end, the cello didn't sound to good; and Zorn came to the mixing, and put the cello through a Marshall amplifier. And what was a Brazilian melody turned into "Heartbreaker" from Led Zeppelin. We try this live as well. The compositions are like a body of work, and every night we come up with something new. You know, we are always starting again. I try to bring some struggle to the stage. That's why we came to planet: to be alive.

Q: You were speaking about John Zorn's help with recording your album. Can you tell me how you first got involved with him?

Baptista: That was a case of being in the right place at the right time, but for the wrong reasons. When I came in 1980 to America, people were playing to be famous, and planning to live in the Village. And people wanted to play at the Blue Note, and live on Bleecker street or whatever. I—however—couldn't really afford this: an apartment for \$600 a month? Crazy! The only place for me to live was to go to the Lower East Side—with the junkies and on the cheap. Zorn was living there and Marc Ribot, and so we all said, "f#\$k it, let's do this!" Let's make our own music. I found that, with Zorn, I didn't need to be "Brazilian" with a pineapple in my hand—I could make what it meant to be Brazilian. And we started to work together. And now we have done more than 25 records. And now I can look back, and there's been the Knitting Factory, and Tonic, and everything is history. And we did this together. And now we're working on a new project called "The Dreamers."

Q: Yes, please tell me about this. A fellow at the Downtown Music Gallery [a New York record store and label archive for Tzadik] mentioned this as Zorn's new project?

Baptista: The Dreamers was originally supposed to be a continuation of Electric Masada—but anthropofagia has got out of hand! Sometimes Zorn has planned everything out; but sometimes experimentation takes control.