

PITTSBURGH CityPaper

Cyro Baptista brings voodoo jazz to the Warhol "We are in the business of eating people, no?"

By Mike Shanley | 2.26.2014

In terms of musical diversity, few musicians can top percussionist Cyro Baptista. Since he left his native Brazil for New York more than three decades ago, he has worked with acts ranging from legends like Yo-Yo Ma, Paul Simon and Herbie Hancock to musical iconoclast John Zorn. Today, he is speaking by phone from a place even more remote — a rainforest in Bahia, Brazil.

"My life here is very hard," he deadpans. "We don't know if we're going to drink coconut water or if we're gonna have juice of some tropical fruits." He punctuates the comment with a hearty laugh that will recur throughout the conversation.

The location of the call is significant because Baptista keeps referring to the rainforest as a metaphor for stints with his musical friends. "They are part of my rainforest, part of my environment, no? I love these guys so much before I played with them," he says. "And then they came to me! These people are so charged with nature inside them, an incredible force. That's something that I feel when walking around here [in] the rainforest."

Baptista came to New York in 1980, first visiting the Creative Music Studio on a farm in Woodstock. There, musicians from around the world traded ideas with open-minded jazz men like trumpeter Don Cherry, blending music of different countries long before "world beat" came into the vernacular. "It was the first place, maybe, that [musicians] said, 'Maybe if I take one note from my music and you put one note there, we can play together, no?'" he recalls. "This moment was so full of mystic energy. It opened the door for me, a really big door. ... I'm still high from that."

That eclecticism fuels his own projects, including *Banquet of the Spirits*, which he brings to Pittsburgh next week. On the band's 2008 album, released by Zorn's Tzadik imprint, Baptista describes the music with a term that originated with the 1930s Brazilian art movement: *anthropofagia*. "'Anthropo' is people and 'fagia' is eating," he explains. "We are in the business of eating people, no? Playing with Yo-Yo, playing with Zorn, I feel that I'm eating them. They start to live inside me."

"That's the way we explain how Brazil is the way it is. We ate all this culture — the American Constitution, the French Revolution, Miles Davis, Celine Dion, John Kennedy."

Musically, the four-piece group bears this out. In addition to Brazilian music, the members draw on Middle Eastern melodies. When Zorn's squalling alto saxophone guests on a track, the sound touches on the heavy free jazz of Zorn's band from the '90s, *Naked City*. More recently, the group released *Caym*, a set of Zorn's compositions from his second "Masada book," which also draws on diverse styles.

In Brazil, Baptista has been recently been playing *candomblé*, a style of Afro-Brazilian voodoo music which will inspire his March 5 show at The Andy Warhol Museum. "It's like a ceremonial thing. I'm gonna bring this energy to Pittsburgh. I hope we do some kind of voodoo there that makes everybody in Pittsburgh very ... happy," he drawls, adding that trademark laugh.

