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de ver!!

MUSIC



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Dorival Caymmi, the Brazilian singer and songwriter, in 1952 (far left), and Tito Puente, the New York timbalero and bandleader of Puerto Rican heritage, in 1960.

Ageless Latin Stars Who Embraced Their Roots

By BEN RATLIFF

THESE days in America, we have a vampirish relationship with popular music. It is constantly put in front of us; we suck it dry and discard it. We identify with it on an interior level — with aspects of sex, with glamour or scuffiness, with banging beats or layered productions that sound old in six months' time. It's hard to remember that there is such a thing as popular music that defines a culture and just stays around, acquiring deeper meaning as its disciples keep brushing against it.

These are thoughts prompted by CD boxed sets of two giants in Latin American culture. One is Dorival Caymmi, the Brazilian singer-songwriter who may be second only to Antonio Carlos Jobim in establishing a songbook of this century's Brazilian identity. The other is Tito Puente, the New York timbalero and bandleader of Puerto Rican heritage who died last June at 77. His music strengthened the connections between Puerto Rico, Cuba and Africa and wound up being one of the jewels of American culture.

The work of Mr. Caymmi, who is 87, wasn't vast in volume or subject matter. But the breadth of style collected in "Caymmi Amor e Mar," a seven-CD set from EMI Brazil — and the complicated depths of Mr. Caymmi himself as a songwriter — makes up for those shortages. In the different formats of the 12 original records that the set collects (solo, duets, orchestrations, percussion ensembles) the same songs are returned to over and over,

sounding different each time. They amount to a popular iconography of Bahia: its African-based food ("Vatapá"), the movement of women's hips ("O Que É Que a Baiana Tem," or "What Is It That a Bahian Woman Has?"), its fishermen and the sea ("História de Pescadores"). And in the 1940's and 50's, when the practice of candomblé, the West African religion that came to Brazil with the slaves, was generally repressed in Bahia, in northeastern Brazil, Mr. Caymmi's songs made accurate references to it. Over the years candomblé became mainstream culture in Brazil, helped, surely, by Mr. Caymmi's work.

Mr. Caymmi (pronounced kah-EE-mee) is difficult to classify. He can't be condescended to as some sort of regional figure, the kind of natural songster who reminds an industrialized country of its earthy roots. He sang with a rich, romantic, Bing Crosby-like baritone. He wrote songs for Carmen Miranda and even, it is said, taught her how to dance like a proper Bahian woman, with arms and hips. He learned from the harmonies of Debussy; there is a musical connection between "La Mer" and Mr. Caymmi's own tragic fisherman's tale, "O Mar."

The quasi-modal sections of his songs on his 1954 solo voice-with-guitar album, "Canções Praieiras" ("Beach Songs"), were hints of the harmonic freedom to come in the work of later Brazilian pop icons like Milton Nascimento. Taken as a whole, that's modernity; and his sophisticated version of folk music is a major reason vanguardist Brazilian musicians today are so curious to incorporate the traditional arts of their country into their work.

Mr. Caymmi didn't produce his own

New CD's show how Tito Puente and Dorival Caymmi helped shape their cultures' music.

records, which may account for the zigzagging of musical styles in the set, from simplicity to kitsch and in between. But the quality of his records didn't decline after he became famous. Two records called "Caymmi" — one from 1965, one from 1972 — are killers. The first, recorded in New York, arranged and orchestrated by Bill Hitchcock, is a kind of space-age pop, with the help of the Brazilian close-harmony singers Quarteto em Cy. Bill Hitchcock's work was influenced by Nelson Riddle, and the orchestrations are wedded to samba percussion, which swings viciously: Jay-Z could have a hit if he sampled a bar of the capoeira samba that opens up the version here of "Samba da Minha Terra."

The 1972 album, on the other hand, is the most African music Mr. Caymmi ever made, with drums straight out of candomblé ceremonies garlanding his guitar and voice. One song, "Canto de Oba," written with his friend, Jorge Amado, is a prayer to Xangô, the thunder god of Yoruban religion, to protect himself and his family.

"Latin music" is an enormous category, and Tito Puente was a thoroughly different entertainer from Mr. Caymmi. He was a bandleader of Afro-Cuban music and a percussionist, not a songwriter. He was influ-

enced by swing, which Mr. Caymmi wasn't. As a composer, he was not known for melodies as much as for arrangements. But both men worked during the same period, and both recognized Xangô — or, in Puente's case Shangó; Puente was a practitioner of Santería, the Puerto Rican version of the same Yoruban religion.

This connection is worth mentioning for a few reasons. In both cases their references to Yoruban religion widened their frame of reference among their own people: a popular religion helped them create a popular music. Both were well-honed popular entertainers who seized on Yoruban religious music, in its fairly undoctored state, as something they could present to the public. If Mr. Caymmi did it with his 1972 "Caymmi," Puente did it with "Top Percussion," a 1957 all-percussion album, which included straight Cuban religious music, with the sacred, double-headed batá drums and without horns.

Three tracks from "Top Percussion" are found in a recent six-disc boxed set, "Tito Puente: The Complete RCA Recordings, Part 1" (BMG U.S. Latin 74321-78911-2). A note to consumers: BMG U.S. Latin has taken the curious path of slicing Puente's original RCA albums more or less in half and releasing them in two parts; Part 2, finishing the job, is to be released later this year. And as North America moves into an era of obsession with Latin culture that rivals the 1950's, we should recognize that Puente's RCA material is some of the greatest American music around.

He had a large audience to satisfy during the 1950's. There was a run on Latin culture of all kinds: LP's of bullfighting music for

armchair exoticists, Desi Arnaz on television and Carmen Miranda in films, Miles Davis and Gil Evans's "Sketches of Spain." So Puente was on the knife edge of popular culture, playing kitsch like Nat (King) Cole's "Calypso Blues" at the same time as terrifying monuments of layered sound like "Ran Kan Kan" and "Mambo Gozon."

As a symbol of "Latin" culture at the time, Puente played Brazilian tunes, too: Ari Barroso's "Brazil" and "Baixa do Sapoteiro" are part of the set. (This wasn't only for commercial reasons; Puente knew the natural connection between rumba and samba. Even Brazilian musicologists have claimed that Mr. Caymmi's "O Que É Que a Baiana Tem" is basically Cuban music.)

AND he was serious about his connection to jazz, on albums like "Revolving Bandstand," in which his and Buddy Morrow's orchestras shared the studio, tossing arrangements back and forth in single tunes. All of it, as heard on the boxed set, connotes refinement: of jazz, of Cuban music, even of kitsch.

Salsa, one of the great contributions of Puerto Rican culture, still follows the basic guidelines of Puente's Afro-Cuban dance music from the 1950's. And Mr. Caymmi is still considered relevant in Brazilian music — if more for the conceptual beauty of his songs, his roots-into-pop sensibility, than for the sound of his albums. Their music created an iconography of a people as much as, or more than, it attracted attention to the musicians' names behind it.

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Querido Caymmi

Nós não somos deslumbrados com o "lá fora" e outros além mares, mas é bom ler e divulgar o que gente como agente já está farta de saber (isto é que a sua genialidade tão brasileira é sem fronteiras).

Isto devia ser publicado e lido por tantos "batacas" desta terra (especialmente nestes dias em que andam eufemizando tanto João Gilberto e congêneres).

Agarrá (com sua licença) Nosso Pai!

Jyja e Marcelo



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