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Review

Roda Carioca

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by Bruce Gilman

Pianist, composer, and multi-instrumentalist Jovino Santos Neto falls into that select group of musicians who have a massive dose of talent and an original vision. A self-professed disciple of Hermeto Pascoal, with whom he played for 15 years, Santos Neto displays a similar angularity, rhythmic asymmetry, and combination of the traditional and the revolutionary.

His music can be equally as dissonant, surprising, and intriguing, and like his mentor's, unfold with kaleidoscopic swirls of ongoing improvisation. Putting his fingers where his thoughts are, Santos Neto has the ability to send melodic lines in any direction at any moment, which may be a leftover of Hermeto's inevitable influence, but more truly indicates the spirit of his musical intuition and his identifiable compositional style. Santos Neto's capacity for harmonic fantasy and his quixotic sense of adventure are unmistakable throughout his new CD, *Roda Carioca*.

Santos Neto is a believer in giving as much creative freedom as is practical to his musicians, and as a consequence the quality of his work depends to some extent on his sidemen. On *Roda Carioca*, he is well served by players who, rather than splitting the seams of his tunes, enhance his original conception.

Rogério Botter Maio (acoustic bass) plays beautifully throughout, eschewing the impulse to overplay and fill in too many gaps, and Marcio Bahia (drums and zabumba), having an acute appreciation of the variety of sounds capable of being produced from a drum kit, is the soul of assertive drive.

Although these three have not recorded a trio album before, they are simpático and long-standing colleagues whose playing sits together seamlessly. Tingling with exuberant invention, *Roda Carioca* also makes judicious use of a number of soloists, with Hermeto himself being the most persuasive in that role.

The disc's unusual timbral palettes and its variety of forms - baião, coco, choro, and marcha rancho as well as odd-metered sambas - set out a radical program somewhat similar to music Santos Neto delves into on prior recordings. As wide-ranging in form and imaginative in content as they are, his earlier albums give only a partial account of his talents.

The tunes in this varied program display Santos Neto's incredible ear not only for instrumental blends, but also for angular designs, which is nowhere more evident than on the odd-metered opener "Estrela do Mar" (Starfish). Here, Rogério Botter Maio's bass solo, superbly inventive, is consistently lyrical, his dancing lines punctuated by percussive stabs by Marcio Bahia whose

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value as a sensitive painter of rhythmic sounds emerges. Voicings, colors, and polyrhythms are masterful.

Following it up is "Marfim" (Ivory), an unabashed baião with Santos Neto executing sinuous and unpredictable lines on both melodica and piano, and Marcio Bahia floating comfortably across bar divisions and jousting with Botter Maio while still providing exemplary group punctuation.

After those first two tunes, any other would seem to be anti-climatic, but each additional piece has reasons for further fascination. "Gente Boa" (Nice Folks) is a feast of penetrating playing by two masters of their instruments, Santos Neto and Hamilton de Holanda, who blur the boundaries between improvisation and composition.

Another pairing, that of two transcendent Brazilian lyricists, Joyce and Santos Neto, is one of the great exemplars in the art of intimate conversation. Their lacing up Moacir Santos's "Naná," is an illustration of focused spontaneity. Says Joyce, "We did it all live, of course, as it should be, and had great fun. The trio was amazing; it was a real joy to work and interplay with them."

On "Festa de Erê" (Children's Party), a samba in 3/4, Santos Neto produces driving keyboard excitement, letting his fingers and feet dictate colors, and projecting notes with pinpoint velocity. Harmonically shrewd and rhythmically daring, this tune is virtually an aural drama on its own terms.

One of the most memorable and impressive tracks is "Coco na Roda" (Coco in the Circle), Santos Neto's tribute to Jackson do Pandeiro, which acquires instrumental texture not only from its multi-tracked flutes and accordion, but also Fabio Pascoal's percussion contributing so much to the rhythmic depth and complexity of the tune. Botter Maio and Bahia are hand in glove on "Homeopatia" (Homeopathy). Their anticipation of each others' moves marry tension to an inexorable flow giving the dialogue between piano and rhythm section a balanced mixture of the prepared and the extemporized.

Juvenal is Hermeto's nickname for Jovino. Grumari is Jovino's favorite beach in Rio. "Juvenal no Grumari" (Juvenal in Grumari) is a 7/4 theme that Hermeto used for exchanging a string of solos at rehearsals for O Grupo, raising then relaxing tension while constantly building momentum and placing soloists under pressure.(1)

On Roda Carioca, Hermeto, demonstrating his ability to build detailed, thematically linked solos from sounds beyond the scope of convention (a gum wrapper, a euphonium mouthpiece, a glass of water, a melodica), works out his ideas and develops them (joking with quotes) into a logical whole, making this a performance to put nearly all others in the shade.

Guitar player Marcos Amorim, whose gift for lyric invention, his lines seeking out unusual harmonic nuances, brings a lithe elegance to "Rancho Azul" (Blue Ranch). With its dreamy groove, insinuating minor mode, and underlining rhythm derived from syncopated marching band traditions, this arrangement, sustains an infectious flow with sparkling detail.

Inspired by J.S. Bach, the choro "Bach-te-vi" is a superb demonstration of Brazil's young lion of the harmonica, Gabriel Grossi. Alternating reverie with passion, Grossi brings knife-edged clarity to each phrase in focused bursts of melody. Cementing it all together is the ESP-like rhythm section whose inquisitive spirit and risk-taking provides a constant source of heat.

"Cerca do Macaco" (The Monkey Fence) is a feisty, tight trio performance named after the site of the Palmares quilombo and packed with musical empathy.(2) Botter Maio, a bass player who reads his colleagues well, is smart as a whip, Bahia balances his work from whisper to shout with both taste and subtlety, and Santos Neto is, as always, unfussily virtuosic, aggressive without

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being bombastic. This is a trio in the truest sense of the term - like-minded musicians at work, each making important contributions to the whole.

All true musicians recognize performances of special magic and integrity. From the opening notes of *Roda Carioca*, the listener knows he is in for a memorable musical experience. Aside from the balance between compositions and their arrangements, there are standout trio and solo contributions throughout.

One of the disc's most absorbing features is hearing those inimitable harmonic fingerprints that define Santos Neto's musical personality not only the vast imagination he possesses, but also the effortless technique at his disposal.

Beautifully crafted and expertly played, *Roda Carioca* reveals a complete artist - composer, arranger, soloist, multi-instrumentalist, and ensemble leader - whose artistic sensibility and poetic playing creates a hypnotic authority that haunts the memory.

Notes:(1) O Grupo endures as an ensemble whose individual strengths and stylistic innovation was a musical strike of lightning, its influence echoing still, its repetition, unlikely.

(2) Palmares was a remarkable politically and economically thriving community of fugitive slaves in Alagoas state between 1630 and 1697.

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