

# review music

this week's essential reading

'Young rural women in India chase big city dreams' by Ellen Barry, The New York Times

'I will go to Bangalore,' Prabhati told her parents. 'If I come back, then you can get me married. If I don't come back, you can't get me married'

The group Graveola's third album, *Camaleão Borboleta*, leans towards Brazilian tropicalia of the 1960s and 70s. Photo by Tamas Bodolay



## Sounds of Brazil

Four Brazilian releases brilliantly capture the country's beauty and dark underbelly by mixing experimentation with rousing vocals. **Andy Battaglia** is impressed



Samba artist Elza Soares. Courtesy Mais Um Discos

**B**razil – home to otherworldly beauty and all too worldly distress, land of enchantment but also despair. How could so much be so right and so wrong at the same time? How could signs of that “so much” be both euphoric and emphatically sad at once?

Among the most prominent signs of Brazil, of course, is its music – so lush and sumptuous, but also laced with emotions of more complicated kinds. There's pining, yearning, regret – always a flip side to celebrating all that is by mourning what is not. Awareness of one means nothing without the other. For light to shine, there must be darkness to be illuminated.

It's easy to hear all that in the voice of Elza Soares, sometimes in a single note. Or, more often, clusters of notes she makes cascade and expand to tell stories of triumph, frailty and defiance in the face of both. *The Woman at the End of the World*, Soares's new album, opens with a disquieting cappella exercise, or maybe exorcism, with a shaky, shaken voice singing out in silence, alone. The words are from a poem by Oswald de Andrade, a founder of Brazilian modernism in the early 20th century, and the lines, in Portuguese, allude to a “red light district” in Rio de Janeiro where traffic from prostitution trades and slave ships crossed.

It's seedy material, hard-bitten and the sentiment is clear even without the translation and explanatory notes at hand. The second song, also the title track, finds Soares down and dirty in a mix of searing strings and gritty electric guitar, with drums slinking around like passers-by peering in with suspicion. “My lament is as fleeting as Carnival,” Soares sings (again in Portuguese), “like a samba teardrop on the asphalt.”

Soares sounds like she has seen a lot and weathered it all, with a

healthy reserve of nerve and resilience left – not bad for an artist who is 79 and in the twilight of a hardscrabble life. In Brazil, she has become a legend for the way she rose up as a star from a childhood in Rio's favelas, or slums, and channelled her experience into a sound that has been described as samba sujo, or dirty samba. Such is her stature that she performed before the world at the opening ceremonies of Brazil's recent Olympic Games. But Soares is not one to sit back and let her legacy work on its own.

*The Woman at the End of the World* was recorded with a cast of experimental musicians from São Paulo and the result is both familiarly Brazilian and gloriously fractured, scattered and abstract. Some songs take on a hip kind of post-punk vibe, almost like an indie riot-grrl band, while others work incursions of alien electronics into more traditional elements such as acoustic guitar and the cuica, the wonderfully bizarre Brazilian percussion instrument that sounds like a squeaky straw in a fast-food cup.

Mais Um Discos, the record label behind Soares's fantastic offering, focuses on the happy fact that playfulness and experimentation are integral to Brazilian music, and another new release, by the agile band Graveola, follows the same line further out. *Camaleão Borboleta*, the group's third album, tips toward Brazilian tropicalia of yesteryear – that fertile period in the 1960s and 70s when treasures such as Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil and Os Mutantes created colourfully antic and radical masses of sound, and more modern affiliations in mind of contemporary Brazilian rock.

So much spirit abounds. *Maquinário*, the opening song, moves through different weightless movements, with acoustic instruments mixing in with electric ones and a sense of relaxed

adventure. The band dubbed it a “psychedelic maracatu”, in reference to a particular musical style from northern Brazil, and the lyrics evidently include butterflies and aeroplanes talking to each other about the wind. Other songs float through hazy spells of hypnotic beauty, such as *Lembrete* with its rousing vocal harmonies, and *Back in Bahia*, a mesmeric ode streaked with bass, trumpet and bewitching singing by Luiza Brina.

Another new album with a much different kind of Brazilian air is *Garagen Aurora* by Telebossa, a duo made up of Brazilian-born, Berlin-based musician Chico Mello and his German collaborator Nicholas Bussmann. Set up in a strange station between lively samba and serious, austere chamber music, Telebossa songs centre on automated player pianos programmed in alternately traditional and abstract patterns. Certain tracks breeze by with little to suggest anything other than naturalistic means of instrumentation, while others feature dense, fast masses of notes that could not have been played by human hands.

Mello sings melliflously on top, while Bussmann's piano programming – credited in the liner notes to “robot piano play-

er” – mixes with occasional additions of woodwinds, harmonium, electronics and other musical elements. It really could levitate a classical chamber hall with sounds so careful and refined, but then it has an easy-going mood that makes it welcoming and entrancing, too.

From the older-school of Brazilian music is a new and very welcome reissue of José Mauro's 1970 album *Obnoxious*, called a “top 5” favourite record by the burgeoning London-based electronic-music artist Floating Points and “a holy grail” by fabled record-collector/crate-digger Gilles Peterson of the BBC.

The album is lush, warm and suffused with a kind of restive and celebratory soul unique to Brazilian music through the ages.

Another prime document of that same legacy is the simplest and most elemental of all: a recent double live album recorded by Veloso and Gil during an on-going tour by the two old friends and peerless, world-renowned legends of Brazilian music. In New York this past spring, they silenced a normally noisy audience that is notoriously hard to please with a concert in which no note went less than fervently appreciated.

On the tour (still active on occasion all over the globe) and its recorded document, titled *Dois Amigos, Um Século de Música: Multishow Live*, it's just the two musicians with a pair of acoustic guitars. Beautiful interlocking vocal lines, flitting guitar parts, sections when Veloso and Gil start tapping their instruments for an influx of rhythm – not a moment of the nearly two hours of music lacks for total and transfixing spirit and verve.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Frieze*, *The Paris Review* and more.

There's pining, yearning, regret – always a flip side to celebrating all that is by mourning what is not

### the playlist three more brazilian gems

#### A Tábua de Esmeralda

Jorge Ben  
(Philips, 1974)

Sumptuous and soulful perfection, with swooning strings and swinging acoustic guitar, from a luminary who continues to thrive today. The release was ranked by *Rolling Stone* as the sixth best Brazilian album of all time.



#### Milagre Dos Peixes

Milton Nascimento  
(Abril Coleções, 1973)

Dark, brooding and experimental but with a levitated touch never too far away, this masterpiece by one of Brazil's most distinctive voices summons its own world of sound. It is also a meditation on life under a dictatorship.



#### Marcos Valle

Marcos Valle  
(Odeon, 1974)

This self-titled album by a sharp songwriter and singer from the 1970s is funky and buoyant, with a sense of purpose and spaciousness to it, too. Valle is known for fusing styles, including Bossa Nova and samba.

