

pexbaA

Tracing experimentalism in Brazilian Popular Music

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Only a handful of people managed to hold out until 2:30am to hear pexbaA's entire set at the 2002 South by Southwest Music Industry Festival in Austin, Texas. Of the four bands scheduled to play in the Brazilian showcase, Cravo Carbone never arrived due to visa problems and Valv was held up by a faulty amplifier for over an hour earlier in the evening. The technical difficulty gave me ample time to talk to people in the crowd, and I heard the same refrain from almost every Austinite present. People were dismayed that the first two bands played rock—not what the audience was expecting from a Brazilian showcase. Many scoffed at Valv's use of English, suggesting the band's sound was a pale imitation of U.S. grunge from the 1990s.

The final act of the evening pexbaA, riveted the audience. PexbaA's lead singer, Rossano Vittorio, possessed an imposing stage presence: nearly motionless, his eyes looked toward the heavens like an old religious painting as his mouth articulated words I couldn't understand. Once I realized that he wasn't singing in Portuguese, I thought for a moment that it was English so accented that it was unintelligible.

This paper contextualizes the place (Brazil) and the time period (1998-2003) of efforts by the band pexbaA to avoid being labeled in terms of time and place. Composing all of their lyrics by picking letters randomly out of a bag, pexbaA plays fragments of many styles at once, in a highly disciplined approach to chaos. These musical decisions are traced to an experimental vein running through Brazilian music during much of the twentieth century. PexbaA's stance is described as a response to the perceived threat of foreign cultural products, as well as a reaction against rigid notions of authentic musical Brazilian-ness.

During one song, he shifted the register of his voice back and forth as if he were having a conversation with himself. Surrounding his voice—and occasional trumpet blasts that began as atonal melodies and fizzled into musical muttering—were electric guitar, bass, drums, and samples. At certain moments, the guitar and bass sounded as if they were following twelve-tone techniques, but at other times, unusual dissonance resulted from playing two clashing rock riffs in different keys. PexbaA's sound was a dizzying combination of discipline and randomness. The speed of the musicians' playing and their jagged, interlocking rhythms of three-against-four and two-against-three required athletic musical technique and a lot much of practice, while the end product teetered between catchy popular music and cacophony. What held together the harmonic disarray was a sense of rhythmic groove; if one could somehow play these songs on percussion instruments without varying pitch, the result would be fairly coherent and even danceable. The texture and rhythm of the music was constantly shifting from one song to the next and between the various sections of individual songs. The songs were structured on a bare-bones semblance of verse-chorus pop song form, yet they never returned to a section in exactly the same way. Synchronized samples and video projections on the wall behind the band indicated that many of the songs that sounded largely improvised and bordered on chaos were actually highly planned. The drummer listened to a click track (a recorded metronome pulse) and the videos were exactly the length of the songs. My strongest first impression of the band was its peculiar mission of strict discipline in the service of chaos.

PexbaA's brief set piqued my curiosity. What is the musical training and history of the band members? How did they develop this style that bursts the boundaries between jazz, punk rock, modern Western art music, and indeterminate so-called "ethnic" styles? How do they view their musical project? How does this project relate to previous experimental musical efforts in Brazil?

Music without Adjectives Sounds Better?

In the paragraphs to follow, I will contextualize the place (Bra-

zil) and the time period (1998-2003) in which the band *pexbaA* made efforts to avoid being labeled in terms of time and place. I announce this from the outset, as I am all too aware of its press release stating that music without adjectives sounds better.¹ *PexbaA* reiterates the fundamental tenet of oppositional subcultures — the impulse to, as Dick Hebdige quotes Franz Fanon, “say no to all those who attempt to build a definition of him” (1988:139). As a result, readings of popular culture like this one always run the risk of being “regarded by the members of a subculture with just as much indifference and contempt as the hostile labels imposed by the courts and the press. In this respect to get the point is, in a way, to miss the point” (Hebdige 1988:139). Beyond just missing the point, Hebdige goes as far as to say that, as scholars of popular culture, we “...threaten to kill with kindness the forms we seek to elucidate” (1988:139).

So why insist on laying out a theory of *pexbaA*'s musical predecessors and influences? Why complete the remaining paragraphs, as opposed to simply sitting back and letting *pexbaA*'s layers of musical noise wash over me? Musicians often shun words precisely because of their ability to shape people's reception of a given style of music, affecting notoriety and delineating audiences. I defend a written exploration of the aesthetic undercurrents leading up to *pexbaA* because I find the rhetoric of avant-garde popular music elusive and full of contradictions. The drive to differentiate product A from product B, combined with escalating rhetoric of negation from one successive style to the next can lead to an exaggerated “we've-arrived-out-of-the-blue” narrative. In this paper, I will try to sort out some of these issues, remaining skeptical of any band's attempts to thwart all description. I start from the assumption, in Steven Feld's words, that all “knowledge is acknowledge” (Feld and Keil 1994:viii), resisting the notion that, by outlining the influential sounds and ideas of previous avant-garde Brazilian musicians, one drains the power from *pexbaA*'s music.

A Brief History of *pexbaA*

In the mid-1990s the members of *pexbaA*, under a different

name, began playing heavy metal and punk rock in the industrial state capitol of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, in southern Brazil. After a few years, they became impatient with how codified the conventions of heavy metal and punk rock had become. As they sharpened their musical chops, they began learning about techniques of jazz improvisation, serialism, atonality, and aleatory techniques like those of John Cage. Singer Rossano Vittorio explained it this way:

We've always wanted to experiment with new musical roads.
We've always wanted to try to mix things up. We never
wanted to find ourselves prisoner to a style.²

In an effort to unlearn what they learned through conventional musical training as children, they began holding sessions of group improvisation that they called the *escola mineira de disfunção* (The Minas Gerais School of Dysfunction). The band members deliberate over the details of their musical process, which begins as group improvisation and leads to layer after meticulous layer of overdubs in the recording studio. Their one recording took two full years of studio tinkering to complete.

When they changed the band name to *pexbaA*, the musicians committed themselves to composing all of their lyrics by placing letters in a bag and drawing them one by one until they create random two- or three-syllable words. They use randomly chosen letters as meaningless imaginary words, strung together as if they were a language. The resulting nonsense "sentences" become the structural starting point for a given composition. Vittorio explains why they use this technique:

This way of creating lyrics gives us more freedom for phonetic experimentation because each language, from whatever country in the world has its...phonetic clichés and vices of expression. Every language is characterized by its phonemes. There are some that use lots of consonants, while others use lots of vowels. This kind of lyrics gives us more freedom to be able to do anything without attaching it to a fixed meaning. It's communication more through sensation than through meaning. As a result, another kind of communication, without the rational side...because, any person from anywhere in the world can imagine what the lyrics mean by way of the climate of the music and the expression

of the voice singing...³

Audience reactions to a piece of music are always personal, he argues, and he doesn't want to needlessly limit people's interpretations. Also, singing in a meaningless, imaginary language allows the band to sidestep the issue of whether to sing in English or Portuguese, a political question that relates to nationalist concerns.

When I asked the members of pexbaA to describe their music to someone who had never heard it, they retorted, "it consists of sounds between 20 hertz and 20 kilohertz [the range of human hearing]." Refusal to sing in any language or ally themselves musically with the conventions of an established genre is a conspicuous act in a place where musicality and the nation are so linked in people's minds, both within Brazil and internationally. Yet, it is not unprecedented: pexbaA's music contains within it echoes that chart back to the 1950s, with philosophical roots that go back even further, to the 1920s and 1930s. I will now outline the relevant issues within *tropicalia*, *rock brasileiro*, *mangue bit*, jazz, and art music before concluding with a discussion of pexbaA's view of its relationship to these prior musical movements and tendencies in Brazil.

Musical Mixture and the Nation: The *Tropicalistas*

Brazilian popular music has long reacted against a generally perceived threat of American cultural domination. Awareness of cultural imperialism is widespread — it is not just a concern of academics. In the 1920s and 1930s, public intellectual Gilberto Freyre argued that cultural and racial mixture were the source of the nation's strength (the *mestiça* nation). This idea of essence through mixture remains relevant in Brazil, where there exists an ongoing tension between maintaining a cohesive national identity and embracing aspects of Western modernity. What, when, and how influences from without can be incorporated legitimately into an evolving *brasilidade* become significant questions, as artists continually test the shifting boundaries of the "national culture." What language to sing in, or whether to sing in a known language at all, becomes a key question to certain individuals

on the avant-garde fringe of the popular music scene.

The late-1960s Tropicalista movement spearheaded by Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, Tom Zé, Gal Costa, Os Mutantes, Rogério Duprat, and others was short lived. However, their attitude toward musical influences epitomized by the slogan “É proibido proibir” (It’s prohibited to prohibit) has had lasting repercussions for musical groups in the following 30 years of Brazilian popular music, including pexbaA. In the following quote, Veloso outlines the basic dilemma that the movement sought to resolve: whether or not the hippie/rock-and-roll counterculture reigning in the United States and Europe at the time should be seen by Brazilians as possessing liberating potential, or whether it was just another American style being stuffed down their throats, confirming oppressive U.S. cultural hegemony.

A movement that wanted to present itself as an image of overcoming the conflict between the awareness that the version of the Western project offered by U.S. mass popular culture was potentially liberating—recognizing symptoms of social health even in the most naïve displays of attraction for this version—and the humiliating horror that the capitulation to the narrow interests of dominant groups represents, at home or in terms of international relations (Veloso 1997: 11).

Almost a decade before, similar arguments raged regarding the jazz component within bossa nova. While some dismissed bossa nova as capitulating to foreign interests, others argued that jazz was a rebellious product of the African-American minority in the United States, and shouldn’t be seen in the same light as other products invading Brazilian shelves. A decade later, the tropicalistas borrowed early 20th-century poet Oswald de Andrade’s idea of “cultural cannibalism,” proclaiming that foreign influences can and should be selectively consumed, digested, and spat back out as fully Brazilian, not a pale copy of the original. Extending the Freyrean concept that mixture is the essence of the nation, de Andrade, and later the tropicalistas, insisted that the appropriation of foreign ideas, musical styles, and instruments do not necessarily signify capitulation to foreign interests, but can be placed in the service of articulating symbols of the modern Brazilian *mestiça*

nation. The legacy of the tropicalistas in MPB (*música popular brasileira*) manifests in the fact that electric guitars — which once carried strong connotations of cultural imperialism — no longer cause a commotion in Brazil.

Tropicalia's eclectic approach led to greater acceptance of experimentation in the recording studio and the use of new musical technologies. The tropicalistas ironically juxtaposed rural and urban, local and foreign styles to shock the bourgeoisie. After the shock and irony faded, however, different stylistic fusions became standard within MPB. The floodgates opened to myriad permutations of national styles such as samba, *forró*, and bossa nova, fused with international pop styles such as rock, funk, soul, hip-hop, and country. Brazilian rock became more and more prevalent in the late 1960s and through the 1970s, and by the 1980s, with the inauguration of the Rock in Rio festival, became one of the most popular musical styles in Brazil.

Rock Brasileiro: A Bleaker Image of Brazil

Não sou brasileiro, não sou estrangeiro, não sou de lugar nenhum. [I'm not Brazilian, I'm not a foreigner, I'm from nowhere.]

-Titãs⁴

Brazilian rock in the 1980s exhibited a more pessimistic and ambivalent attitude toward the nation than tropicalia's complicated but ultimately nationalist viewpoint. Hermano Vianna describes 1980s and 1990s rock lyrics as more often ones of “irony, disgust, disenchantment, and horror” toward the nation, not celebration (1988:137), although increasing genre differentiation within *rock brasileiro* makes it difficult to generalize. On the related question of language, what it means for a rock band to sing in English or Portuguese has shifted since rock and roll first came to Brazil in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Early rock and roll, known as the Jovem Guarda or *iê-iê-iê*, was almost exclusively sung in Portuguese. By the early 1990s — spurred, in part, by the worldwide success of Brazilian heavy metal band Sepultura — a large number of bands preferred to sing in English (Vianna 1998:143).

The South by Southwest festival showcase in Austin, where I heard pexbaA, began with one rock band from Belo Horizonte singing in English, and another singing in Portuguese.

“Mangue bit is tropicalia that has learned the lessons of hip-hop and punk rock”

-Renato L., “Minister of Information” for Chico Science⁵

In the mid-1990s, Chico Science e a Nação Zumbi and other bands developed a style that they called *mangue bit*, juxtaposing the mangrove swamps of its members’ hometown, Recife, Pernambuco, with the computer bit, symbolizing high technology. Using the image of a satellite dish anchored in the shantytown swamps, the band combined the local styles of *maracatu*, *côco*, and *ciranda* with heavy metal, punk rock, hip-hop, and dancehall reggae. Chico and company reintroduced and updated the tropicalista ideas of selectively appropriating elements of foreign styles and placing rural and urban styles side by side. The foreign styles the band appropriated, hip-hop and punk, however, distanced it by a generation from earlier musical fusions. Mangue bit’s debt toward tropicalia, as well as Chico Science’s distance from its elders is underscored by the band’s sampling of songs from this earlier style. While tropicalia strived to represent the modern nation in all its contrasts and contradictions, mangue is less nationalistic and more concerned with the regional (inside the nation) and the global (beyond the nation). Mangue musicians speak as Pernambucans (their home state), Nordestinos (northeasterners), and citizens of the world as much as they do as Brazilians.

Experimental Brazilian Music: Dismantling MPB Assumptions

Another piece in the pexbaA puzzle derives from the experimental vein that runs through much of 20th-century Brazilian music. Twelve-tone and serialist techniques, as well as experimental musical-instrument construction can be traced, in many accounts, to a German avant-garde music professor Hans Joachim Koellreuter⁶ who lectured at the Conservatório de Música do Rio de Janeiro between 1938 and

1940 and later established a music school in Bahia. Koellreuter was responsible for the *Música Viva* movement that opposed the vogue of nationalist folklorism at the time. Koellreuter taught both Tom Jobim and Tom Zé, among others. Another important figure in experimental Brazilian music is Swiss cellist Walter Smetak, who created an instrument-making workshop in the basement of Koellreuter's school in Bahia. Smetak attracted the attention of the tropicalistas, and interest in homemade instruments continues through jazzman Hermeto Pascoal and the group Uakti.

These developments originated in modern Western art music (*música erudita*), but by the second half of the 20th century the boundary between experimental *música erudita* and *música popular* became increasingly blurred. In the late 1950s and early 1960s Jobim introduced new dissonance and touches of atonality into his bossa nova compositions (see “Desafinado,” among others). In the late 1960s, the tropicalistas included elements of twelve-tone composing, dense modern harmony, and layers of noise with the help of classically trained arranger Rogério Duprat. Tropicalista Tom Zé made instruments out of blenders and power drills, and his songs featured chromaticism, nonsense syllables, and angular, dissonant riffs. Later, in the 1980s, Arrigo Barnabé combined rock with twelve-tone techniques and navigated popular and art-music venues, playing concert halls, jazz festivals, theater accompaniment, and movie soundtracks. Arrigo Barnabé's brother Paulo brought Arrigo's ideas to the punk rock scene with the Patife Band.

pexbaA's Position Toward Their Past

If someone were to randomly choose five-second excerpts of music from pexbaA's recording, or if they had the original multi-track sound files and could isolate individual instruments, they would hear sounds that would remind them of tropicalia, *rock brasileiro*, *mangue bit*, free jazz, atonal art music, and even Eastern European rhythms. PexbaA's members see it as their mission to place everything they listen to in a compositional blender and mix it up:

Regarding “famous influences,” the map of what interests the group consists of all types of sonorities utilized or invented by man, from around the world and throughout time, or the sounds in which we are simply submerged. That is, we can say that we are influenced by everything that we have managed to capture between 20 hertz and 20 kilohertz...From this experience between listening and composing, the result is...music. Almost always, music without adjectives would sound better, or perhaps — in the atonal (de)combination of ex-signifiers, in the structuring of improvisations, an “omnivorous-jazz-Dada experiment,” as someone defined it (pexbaA press release).

The members of pexbaA expressed their respect for the *mangue* movement, agreeing with the mangue image of a satellite dish in the mud of shantytown swamps,⁷ but without the mud. Regarding tropicalia, the musicians consider it just another of the many influences that they place into their mixture. Tropicalia and mangue celebrate mixture as a reflection of the reality of a place — be it the nation, or a region—saturated by mass-media sounds. Its practitioners use musical hybridity to shore up a cobbled-together yet somehow coherent national or regional identity, rearticulating Gilberto Freyre’s concept of a *mestiça* nation. PexbaA, in contrast, admits the reality of the saturation of mass media and the dizzying global circulation of sounds and refuses to ground this circulation in a kind of brasilidade or even mineiro identity. Vittorio muses:

...the important thing is to music by its musical characteristics, not by its nationality, because when one says that so-and-so plays Brazilian music — what is Brazilian music, anyway? It’s music that comes from Africa, from Europe, from the United States, from Asia, from Vladivostok...Nowadays, a pressure exists to evaluate the concept before appreciating the artwork...the press release often ends up coming out first, only to be followed later by interest in the painting or the music itself.⁸

PexbaA seems to be responding to the pessimistic Brazilian rock attitude summed up in the Titãs quote “I’m not Brazilian, I’m not a foreigner, I’m from nowhere” by, in effect, agreeing with the statement,⁹

and extending it by erasing any musical allegiance to the United States that rock can potentially convey. PexbaA employs previous art-music techniques, such as twelve-tone composing and nonsense syllables, used to negate previous musical languages and their clichés.

The roots of 1960s tropicalia stem from the ideas of 1920s modernist poets Mario de Andrade and Oswald de Andrade. The roots of pexbaA can be traced, in part, to the arrival of German avant-garde music professor Hans Joachim Koellreuter to Brazil in 1938. Just as tropicalia drew inspiration from Oswald de Andrade's notion of "cultural cannibalism," pexbaA owes a debt to Koellreuter's 1940s *Música Viva* movement, which opposed nationalist folklorism in order to develop new musical ideas within Brazil.

PexbaA can be seen as staking out an extreme postmodernist stance within the arena of Brazilian popular music, as evidenced by: (1) the way the band downplays the nation and view the world as increasingly deterritorialized as a result of globalization, (2) its focus on the impact of mass media on our sense of self, (3) its use of overlapping shards of recognizable styles — a junk heap of signifiers drained of their meaning, and (4) the way the band blurs high and low cultures — *música erudita* and *música popular* — both in terms of its sound and the venues it plays in. Yet I agree with Georgina Born that postmodernist and modernist aesthetics have, ironically, as much continuity as they do difference (1995:46). PexbaA also displays many characteristics of modernist aesthetics, including: (1) negation of previous musical languages to avoid cliché, (2) atonal, serialist, and aleatory compositional techniques, (3) a Dadaist fascination with nonsense, and (4) a scientific fascination with the latest technologies (Born 1995:46).

Decisions within the arena of commercial popular music are a result of a combination of the artist's sensibility and market concerns. In the case of pexbaA, all of its rhetoric about transcending national boundaries can be seen as a legitimate protest against the pressure to "sound Brazilian" from foreigners who want music that fits their idea of what Brazilian music should sound like.¹⁰ However, the band's negation of the ground below their feet can also be seen as a move to become more universal, and thus, more internationally marketable.

Paradoxically, within the political economy of exotic products, signifiers of the local have proven to be profitable when selling to international audiences.¹¹ Music as incomprehensible as pexbaA's is to the average listener, however, isn't recognizable enough to have mass appeal. If they succeed to break beyond a local art-rock market, they will be limited to a relatively specialized, international niche of experimental music lovers.

In recent years, many theorists have been critical of the sensationalist views of postmodernists who claim that the concept of the nation is obsolete because the world is increasingly deterritorialized by the global circulation of people, information, goods, sounds, and images. They dismiss the argument as hyperbole due to the fact that capitalist development worldwide is uneven, since different places occupy different roles in the international division of labor. As the U.S.-Mexico border attests, national boundaries obviously continue to be highly powerful and to pretend otherwise mystifies power relationships between nations.

Personally, I have a mixed reaction to pexbaA's music. I can sympathize with many of its members' arguments — the pressure to “sound Brazilian” is an unjust one compelling Third World artists not to stray too far from what their audience hears as an authentic tradition, while the imaginations of First World performers are less shackled by this obligation. I can understand pexbaA's rebellion against it. Yet, attempts to completely negate the musical and spoken languages within which one grows up can easily become monotonous. It is as if, by trying to refuse to say something that has already been said, one risks saying only one thing over and over: No! No! No! No!

Now that I have finished this essay, I am going to send it to the members of pexbaA. Considering their distrust of words, I doubt that they will see its value. I am writing words and invoking labels surrounding a band against labels and words. Yet, despite band members' aversion to writing and talking about music, I believe it is worthwhile to explore the shoulders that pexbaA is currently standing on.

ENDNOTES

1 Full quote in Portuguese: “Quanto às ‘famosas influências,’ todos os tipos de sonoridades utilizadas ou inventadas pelo homem, ao redor do mundo e no decorrer do tempo, ou os sons nos quais simplesmente estamos submergidos, traçam o mapa de interesse buscado pelo grupo. Ou seja, podemos nos dizer influenciados por tudo o que temos conseguido captar no intervalo entre 20 hertz e 20 kilohertz... Dessa experiência entre ouvir e compor, o resultado é... música. Quase sempre, desprovida de adjetivos soaria melhor, ou às vezes - na (des)combinação atonal de ex-significados, na estruturação dos improvisos, um ‘experimento jazz-Dada-onívoro,’ como definiu alguém.”

2 I interviewed the entire band in March, 2002 in Austin, the day after their South by Southwest performance, and again, by phone, February, 2003. I translated this and the following passages from our original conversations in Portuguese: “A gente sempre teve vontade de experimentar novos caminhos musicais. A gente sempre quis experimentar misturar as coisas, a gente estava afim. A gente nunca quis ficar preso num estilo.”

3 “Este tipo de letra, ele nos dá maior liberdade de experimentação fonética, porque todo idioma de qualquer país do mundo eles tem seus...cliches fonéticos e vícios de expressão. Cada língua e caracterizada por um tipo de fonema. Têm alguns que usam muito os consoantes, outros que usam muito os vogais. Este tipo de letra nos dá liberdade de poder fazer qualquer coisa sem se prender ao significado. É a comunicação mais através da sensação do que do significado. Então é outro tipo de comunicação sem a coisa racional.”

4 Quote from Vianna (1998:137).

5 From a 1999 interview with the author.

6 For a useful summary of experimentalism in Brazilian music, see http://cliquemusic.uol.com.br/br/Generos/Generos.asp?Nu_Materia=30.

7 symbolizing the absorption of foreign influences while always remaining locally grounded.

8 “...mais ai é classificar a musica pelas características musicais, não pela sua nacionalidade, né, porque quando se fala fulano faz música brasileira, o que é que é a música brasileira? É a música que vem da Africa, da Europa, dos Estados Unidos, da Asia, do Vladivostok... hoje em dia existe muita necessidade do conceito antes da apreciação da obra de arte...então antes vem a release, depois vem a interesse na pintura ou pela musica.”

9 or reversing it by saying that they’re from everywhere.

10 The band’s 1999 recording’s liner notes read, in English “recorded in ’98-99 at studio pan—bh—mg—brazil—south america—earth—solar system—milky way—universe.”

11 See Erlmann 1996 for an analysis of the marketing of difference in “World Music” aesthetic

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