

Fantastic Landscape:

Benji Kaplan and Rita Figueiredo Transfix with Bright, Nuanced Portraits of a Hidden Brazil on Benji & Rita

Brazilian music has a keen ability to tie the magical and surreal with the grounded and historical. New York-based composer Benji Kaplan and Brazilian singer and songwriter Rita Figueiredo pick up that vibrating, multicolored thread and weave it into fantastical new portraits of Brazil and New York on Benji & Rita (release: May 10, 2019), their album-length debut as a duo.

Cinematic and refined, Benji & Rita channels the scents and sounds, the flora and fauna of the couple's homelands, drawing on everything from samba and baião, to waltzes and pop catchiness, much as Brazilian popular composers have over the last five decades.

"We were going forward and backward, back to the origin," explains Benji, "so we could share those worlds, the raw version of ourselves and then some fantasy, paintings, and stories. The arrangements reflect that, and some are simple, while some are very complex. We crafted the album to merge those two worlds and give people the fuller picture."

"Some lyrics I wrote after Benji created the arrangement," Rita says. "I could see images because when you have just a simple melody, you have more freedom to create things. With an arrangement, though, you see landscapes and stories in more detail. Both ways, I felt the narrative." And that narrative, of Amazonian rivers and crazy megalopolises, of sparkling love and quiet grief, shines through the duo's exquisite songs.

{full story below}

For Benji, "Rita was the missing link." He had immersed himself utterly in the music and language of Brazil, writing and releasing his own compositions inspired by the world he came to love. Then he met the songwriter, singer, and animator in Rio after a show. They swiftly began sharing musical ideas. Then they decided to share a life.

They both had substantial creative lives when they met. Son of a Cuban percussionist and American visual artist with four albums under his belt, Benji, although having had formal training at the New School for jazz guitar studies; He is almost entirely self taught as an arranger, composer and guitarist of European and Brazilian classical, and popular music in which he seamlessly blends his musical passions into nuanced pieces. He has performed and studied with artists such as Junior Mance, Chico Hamilton, Bernard Purdie, Rodney Jones and Barry Harris, to name a few.

Rita was a classically trained singer who shifted to popular forms, recording a 2013 debut album rich in stories that made numerous "best of" lists. (She has dedicated decades to animation and illustration, with works featured in more than 20 international Festivals, had cartoons and vignettes featured on MTV Brazil and USA, Nickelodeon, TV Cultura and many other networks. Her visual arts crossed over into a more music-specific realm when she created visual elements and videos for artists such as Marisa Monte, Ed Motta and Cássia Eller, among others).

Rita's vivid penchant for storytelling proved the perfect complement to Benji's musical worlds. On Benji & Rita, they explore the tensions and possibilities of the duo, often extending

dramatically beyond their two instruments of voice and guitar, into big, polychrome worlds. “The album has arrangements meant to take you out of the voice and guitar realm, but we also kept things simple with more traditional tracks, where you’ll just hear guitar, voice, bass, and drums,” Benji notes.

“Piocerá” chronicles an epic journey through several Brazilian provinces, told from the perspective of someone boating down the Sao Francisco River, to the sway of the baião, the rhythm of Brazil’s northeast. “When I heard the melody for the first time, I wanted to create a story about a guy who lived in the Northeast and uses the boat to ride past the two states, Piauí and Ceará, that make up the name of the song. I use these wonderful expressions from northeastern Brazil, words that might not be clear to people who aren’t from that area,” but that convey the character of the place. The regional vibe is further enhanced with the zabumba, a percussion/bass instrument popular in the area.

The story needs the sounds, and vice versa, even when it’s telling a tale closer to the couple’s current home of New York. “Memorial Day” dives into the tensions of patriotism and pride, and war and betrayal, to the sound of a muted trumpet. “We wanted to evoke all those emotions: pride, joy, patriotism, betrayal, suffering, and for the music to reflect the lyrics,” recounts Benji. “When I wanted to arrange it, I started listening to those reveilles on trumpet. I knew I had to start the song out with that. Then it goes crazy and the arrangement gets all psychedelic and messed up. It takes listeners through the story.” “No one wins in war,” Rita adds, “but there was such beauty to this holiday, from my perspective. I wanted to capture both feelings.”

A diverse group of musicians, many part of seasoned ensembles Benji had worked with previously, brought the vision and imagery to musical life. The two dozen performers included a wind collective where each player has mastered several instruments, a string quartet--and Benji’s percussionist father, who added elements like the dumbek on “Zenite e nadir.”

Though some of the settings are complex, conjuring a sense of place, capturing the curious details that make a song live and breathe come easily to the duo. It’s their way of sharing the beauties of a country and its music, the elements that defy the brazen cry of headlines and politics. “As a lyricist, I always find I’m telling very visual stories and creating these panoramic scenes,” Rita reflects. “This album is trying to share the hidden gems and observations about Brazil that aren’t in everyday conversation.”