

MUSIC

Porto's call

Fernanda Porto's siren song reinvents samba for the drum 'n' bass generation **By Michelle Mercer**

On Fernanda Porto's international dance-floor hit "Sambassim," she asks in Portuguese, "Is this really samba?" before answering her own question: "Yes, it is." But Porto's music is not the earthy, familiar samba of Rio's Carnival parades. There are traditional elements in it: You hear the samba school whistle, a talking *cuica* drum and the beat's emphatic accent on the two and the four. But it's enlivened by choppy breakbeats and drum 'n' bass production touches. This is the samba of Porto's ultramodern hometown, São Paulo, Brazil, which has the frenzied pace of New York.

Brazil's native samba, bossa nova and tropicalia styles—collectively known as *Musica Popular Brasileira*, or MPB—have long been the country's musical calling card, so European electronica wasn't easily accepted into the mainstream there.

"Drum 'n' bass can adapt Brazilian music in a sincere way—even the holy rhythms of samba," affirms Porto, who makes her NYC debut this week at Joe's Pub. And she proved her point: This year, Porto's

artist ignores her multifaceted background. At 16, she was the youngest student ever admitted to the University of São Paulo's music department, where she studied with Hans-Joachim Koellreutter, a teacher of bossa-nova legend Tom Jobim (who is so revered that Rio's airport is named after him). After college, in the '90s, Porto earned a reputation as a film composer, writing music for more than 400 movies



BRAZIL NUT Jill-of-all-trades Porto plays most of the instruments in her music, both on record and—more daringly—onstage.

and winning several awards at Brazilian film festivals. At the same time, she felt the tug of the nightclub scene; but when it came to pop music, she struggled to find her own style. "I was always asked to sing

don's clubs, and I knew how powerful they'd be combined with Brazilian rhythms."

Bewitched by the possibilities, Porto began working with drum 'n' bass tracks. It actually helped that she didn't have an album out at the time: The void only increased demand for her singles in São Paulo clubs. In 2001, one of the city's top DJs, Patife, remixed "Sambassim," and his pulsing beats gave it the necessary boost for the dance floor. "Patife's remix had immediacy and drive, with a dance-friendly beat," Porto says. And word got out: Back in the U.K., the tastemaking DJ Gilles Peterson pushed "Sambassim," helping it become Britain's top drum 'n' bass single of 2002, selling more than 30,000 copies.

Naturally, a wave of imitators has cropped up in the wake of the track's success. "It's trendy in European [clubs] right now to simply

have a Portuguese singer over a drum 'n' bass beat," says Sean Marquand of the NYC-based DJ crew Brazilian Beat. "But Fernanda stands out—her tracks are completely integrated [musically] and have lots of life." That sense of authenticity is important enough to affect Porto's entire method of production. "I don't want my music to sound cold, so I don't use many loops," she

explains. "In the studio, I play each instrumental part—guitar, piano, sax, whatever—from the beginning to the end of a song, and then program them all together."

Porto uses a similar approach onstage—she usually performs solo, singing and alternating instruments and a laptop, but she'll also make use of whatever strikes her fancy: Don't be surprised if Japanese *taiko* drummers join her onstage this week, as they did at a recent performance in Miami. "The taiko drummers find lots of little grooves within the master groove, like Brazilians do," she says, before adding emphatically: "Taiko drummers and laptop programming are just as valid as bossa-style guitar. Brazilian music isn't defined by clichéd elements: It's a state of being."

Fernanda Porto plays Joe's Pub Mon 22.

Top live shows



Kid Dakota
Southpaw: Tue 23
Sin-é: Wed 24

It's the second-oldest love story in music: Boy meets drugs. It happened to Darren Jackson and, as in so many other love stories, somebody got screwed. Several years ago, the artist who calls himself Kid Dakota left his hometown of Bison, South Dakota, for East Coast academia, only to fall headlong into heroin addiction; it was then, and during a subsequent relocation to Minnesota—the land of 10,000 lakes and nearly as many rehab clinics—that his elegiac 2000 EP *So Pretty* came together. Chairkickers Union, a small imprint run by the formative slow-core outfit Low, rereleased the record with additional tracks last year; as a full-length, it garnered local acclaim but remains largely under the radar.

That's a shame. *So Pretty* is a gorgeously sprawling fever dream laced with some of the most evocative addiction imagery since Elliott Smith's darker days. Jackson, along with musical partner Christopher McGuire and sometime guest (and Low bassist) Zak Sally, double-tracks bleak vocals with woozy guitar and stark, bare-bones percussion—including rattling ice-cube trays—to haunting effect. "Smokestack" peels back an initially idyllic lovers' moment with the pleading, defeated refrain: "I promise to quit / If you promise to stay"; on the title track, he sings softly, "Well, it's dull and it's bent and I can't read the numbers / But nevertheless, it's my friend."

It would all be too unremittingly grim if Jackson didn't have such a sure sense of melody. The affair may be long over, but he's written a memorable good-bye letter. —Leah Greenblatt

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"The beats I heard in London are powerful when combined with Brazilian rhythms."

self-titled debut CD (which will be released in the U.S. early next year) went gold in Brazil, earning her a Latin Grammy nomination for Best New Artist in the process.

But the 36-year-old Porto is many things—a composer who also produces, sings and plays several instruments, as well as the possessor of an onstage presence akin to Astrud Gilberto playing in the *Star Wars* cantina—and the term *new*

bossa nova in clubs," she says, "but I was tired of MPB, so I avoided it."

In 1997, though, Porto discovered drum 'n' bass, and traveled to the U.K. to check out the club scene there. Oddly enough, the trip led her back to her Brazilian roots. "Drum 'n' bass made me want to work with my native bossa nova and samba again," she recalls. "Rhythm means the world to me—I was inspired by the beats in Lon-