

A Conversation with CéU
by Frank Goodman (7/2007, Puremusic.com)

I admit that I've started to pay a Lot of attention to the CDs that are being pushed at Starbucks/Hear Music. There are some people in that loop with pretty dang big ears and a keen sense of timing. Usually I just pick it up and check it out, but the woman on the front of this CD was so beautiful (only human) that I remembered to check out the music on iTunes when I was at home later. I was even more knocked by what I heard.

CéU (pronounced Sow, like wow) is being called no less than the future of Brazilian pop music, and that's by the press of her own country, a place with one of the richest musical traditions anywhere. She describes her record and her music as rooted in the traditions of bossa and samba, but very influenced by African music, reggae, and jazz. (It is less funk influenced, for example, and different than the drum'n'bass samba material that is less rare.)

CéU's full name is Maria do Céu Whitaker Poças. Her dad is a musician and musicologist who instilled in his daughter a sense of tradition and discipline. They are paulistanos, residents of the chaotic and diverse metropolis of São Paulo, home to a thriving musical underground of many skeins. When CéU talks about the scene, it makes you want to go, it certainly compels this writer to go someday soon.

Get on to CéU now, she's taking off. She was nominated for a Latin Grammy in 2006, and is the fourth artist and the first international artist in the Starbucks Hear Music™ Debut series. She was so winning on the phone from L.A., so sweet and so full of life and where it was going. She's what's on the turntable, so to speak, in my house, and that's how it's going to be for a while.... Get knocked out and check out the clips on the Listen page.

She's on tour with her small group at the moment, opening as a trio for the acclaimed Rodrigo y Gabriela, from Mexico. She'll be back in the fall with her sextet. Our new favorite.

TIM: Here you go, the lovely CeU.

[laughter]

Puremusic: The lovely, yes, you are lovely.

CéU: Thank you.

PM: So you're walking around looking at vintage instruments and stuff in L.A.?

C: They're rare in Brazil, expensive, so it's nice to see if--

PM: So you're looking at like old guitars and stuff, or what?

C: Moogs and so forth. [early synthesizers]

PM: Oh, Moogs!

C: And delays, analog delays, these type of things.

PM: Ah, I see, pedals and old keyboards, right.

C: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

PM: Now, I know that you, on top of being a great singer, are also an instrumentalist. What do you like to play these days?

C: Well, actually, I don't consider myself much of a player. I don't play well. I just understand the chords. And to compose I go into piano or, of course, the guitar. But I prefer singing.

PM: Right, prefer to sing. But you understand music and harmony and stuff, so you can talk about it?

C: Yeah, yeah. I understand. But it's pretty much intuitive, my relationship with music.

PM: Maybe that's best. I think that most Americans have either very little idea, or an out-of-date idea of what Brazilian music is, so I'd like to ask you a little bit about that. What's the live scene like in Brazil? Is it more of a concert atmosphere or more of a dance floor culture?

C: We have both, I think. In São Paulo, which is my city, we have a great scene now happening, underground music in Brazil. So I think outside Brazil people always think that we are much more into only Bossa Nova or Carnival Samba.

PM: Right.

C: But we actually do have a large culture around music, a lot of different rhythms. And we have old school samba, which is much more a philosophy than that carnival thing that you see on TV.

PM: Right.

C: So it's really, really rich. Brazilian rich. It's a mixture of three big cultures: our native Indians, Africans, and Europeans, especially Portuguese. So this mixture makes Brazilian music so rich.

PM: So in São Paulo are there lots of smaller clubs where live music is going on?

C: Yes. There are not a lot, not as many as we should have, I think. [laughs] But very-- there's an amazing scene, now, happening there.

PM: There's a big underground movement?

C: Yes, yes.

PM: Wow.

C: And in São Paulo especially, because it's the best city to work in Brazil, to show your work. So everybody is there now.

PM: Now, what do you think, is São Paulo an easy place for Americans to visit? Can you get along with English? For a person who wants to check out the underground scene and the music of São Paulo is it easy to just drop in and trip around and go to the clubs? It's easy for visitors?

C: Yeah, I really think so. I really do. It's totally easy. And I think Brazilian people are really receptive to foreign people. We have been anxious to get people feeling comfortable and show nice places. I really think so. Of course, São Paulo is a chaotic crazy city, so you must want to be around that.

PM: Yeah, you've got to be ready for something like New York; yeah, it's crazy, no doubt.

C: Yeah, it's crazy. But it's really interesting there. And I think everybody should go, yeah.

PM: Because your record is so amazing--I mean, if there's a scene in São Paulo that your record is representative of, we have to go and check it out.

[laughter]

C: What I think about my record and this scene is that we have a scene that looks a lot into the past music, the roots music.

PM: Right.

C: The old school kind of things in Brazil. And this is really rich. And we like to listen to this scene, and to combine it with our influences, which is a lot of the Jamaican music and Afro beat. So we do this mixture. My album is its own thing, of course, but there are styles that mix funk and samba, rock and samba, and like that, you know.

So yeah, I think it's really amazing. I wish that we could show, outside Brazil, our real music. But yeah, it's doing well. Slowly we will show. [laughs]

PM: It's amazing how your career is building steadily, but it seems to be gathering a lot of momentum right now. Starbucks did a lot of good, and you're selling a lot of records now. Isn't that right?

C: Yeah, it's amazing. It's really great.

PM: And so you just arrived to the States for this tour. Are you very excited? Is America an important place to conquer, or just another place to go tour?

C: We were actually here two months ago, with the whole band, which was really great. We love being here in America. And we love it because we were kind of--how do you say--apprehensive?

PM: Apprehensive, yeah.

C: Yeah. Because I consider America very unfamiliar with languages other than English.

PM: Right. That's true.

C: We've been to France already and Holland and in Europe, they have a lot of interest on Brazilian music. But everybody was really receptive with us here, too. We love it. And this tour that we are going to start tomorrow, it's just a pocket show, and I will be opening for other artists.

PM: Who are you opening for?

C: Rodrigo y Gabriela. [a great Mexican act, www.rodgab.com]

PM: Ah. And so when you open for them in this tour, will you be opening with a small band?

C: With a small band, only two musicians; because my band, we are six, actually, on stage.

PM: So when you're on the little tour with your two musicians, what do they play with you?

C: What do we play?

PM: Yeah, what instruments will the two musicians play?

C: There's a percussionist, who also uses a lot of samples and things, like effects. And the bass player of my band when we do the acoustic show, the smaller show, he plays the guitar.

PM: Wow, the bass player plays guitar in the small show, and the percussionist does all the samples. Any turntable stuff?

C: With the whole band we have a special guy that does the turntables, and he is a very important person because he also puts my own backing vocals in, you know, he do these crazy effects with my own vocals.

PM: Oh!

C: But on the opener show, it will just be really simple. It's different from the album because it's impossible to produce the same sound of the album with three musicians.

PM: Of course. But is it still fun, the small band? Because it's its own thing.

C: Yeah, I love it. They're all really close friends of mine, since we've played together since we were kids.

PM: Oh, really?

C: Yeah, so it's nice. We are always having fun together.

PM: Oh, that's so amazing. Hey, what is that beautiful little instrument at the beginning of "Malemolencia"?

C: That is a cavaquinho.
(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cavaquinho>)

PM: Is that like a mandolin?

C: It's kind of a mandolin. But cavaquinho is a really tiny guitar, acoustic. And it's a very traditional Brazilian instrument for samba.

PM: Right. That's a great sounding instrument. I got to get one of those.

Now, it's really amazing that on the World Beat chart that your record knocked the Irish women off the number one spot for the first time in years. That's incredible! I mean, first of all, that the number one spot was Irish for that long. I didn't know that.

C: Uh-huh.

[laughter]

PM: And it's like soccer, the Brazilians knock the Irish off, that's like soccer or something.

C: Yeah, it is interesting.

PM: I got a laugh out of that. How important was the Starbucks thing in getting over in America? Was that very significant, hooking up with them?

C: Well, what I think about the deal with Starbucks is that they helped me to show my work a lot, because they started this huge distribution in America, right?

PM: Sure.

C: And there is a Starbucks on every corner, so--

PM: [laughs]

C: --yeah, and it's interesting because I think the biggest problem, especially in Brazil, is distribution.

PM: Distribution.

C: Yeah. So for me, I see that Starbucks is a great opportunity to show the work.

PM: Yes, absolutely.

C: It's really a great opportunity.

PM: And I think the more that places like Puremusic and print magazines catch on to your great music, the faster it will spread. I really hope you get a big push, because your music is so incredible; I just love it.

C: Thank you so much, Frank.

PM: That's a beautiful cover of "Concrete Jungle" on your record. It's so hip, and it's so enlightened. Does his music, Bob Marley's music, mean a lot to you?

C: Yes, yes. And I was worried about recording a Bob Marley song, and such a classic song. I used to sing it a lot, this song. And this song talks about the reality of Kingston, the reality of Marley. But I can totally substitute the reality of Sao Pãulo, too, as it is a concrete jungle, a chaotic place with a lot of pollution. And it also reflects my reality, of course, with a different point of view. But it works also. And I think when you write a song it's to sing in whatever place it's sung in. I think the song just has to fly, and music is from the universe, it's not something that, oh, no, I won't record that song because it's Marley. I think Marley maybe would be happy to see a girl that loves his music and loves Jamaican music wants to sing his "Concrete Jungle." So I asked these guys from Brazil,

because they're the best band in Brazil, and actually my favorite band ever, called Nação Zumbi--or in English, Zombie Nation.

PM: Ah.

C: And I asked them, and they agreed to play with me. And they are playing on this track. So yeah, I love the result.

PM: Now, explain to me, if you will, how is it with Latin music, through Central and South America. What I mean is, is the music of Brazil, the traditional or the modern, is it popular throughout other countries in Central and South America, or only in certain ones?

C: You mean is our traditional music is popular in Mexico, or--

PM: For instance, right. Like the modern or the traditional, like the scene in Brazil, is it popular in Mexico? Is it popular in Ecuador?

C: No, it's not. It's so strange, because we are so close, but so far.

PM: It doesn't translate, does it?

C: Right. It doesn't translate.

PM: Culturally.

C: Yeah. So it's strange. I don't understand exactly why, but it is like this.

PM: So in a way it translates culturally more easily to America, or to Holland, than it does to Ecuador?

C: Maybe because it's possible to go to America. It's kind of hard to get through this barrier. It's really hard to have money to get your band into Ecuador. We don't have the structure.

PM: No bridge.

C: Yeah.

PM: Because there are all these people in America or in France that will book the act that will give you the gigs, and so you can go play.

C: Yeah, yeah.

PM: Right. And to get one even in Argentina, it's a whole different thing, right.

C: Yes, it is. It is.

PM: So are you what you'd call a spiritual person, CéU?

C: [laughs] Oh, yes, yes. I mean, it's a very complex question, but yeah, I consider myself a spiritual person. I try every day, I try to do my things with love. I think each day it's an important day to learn something, so maybe this is being spiritual. So in my own way I consider myself trying to improve, make myself better.

PM: Maybe I'll ask you last a question that I frequently ask first. And that is: What kind of a family and a home did you grow up in, and when did music take a hold of you as what you wanted to do?

C: I grew up in a very musical environment. My father really does love and he lives music. That's his language. So he taught me a lot about music, real music, traditional things, and to really listen to things. And my mom, she's more executive professional, but she loves to sing and she knows a lot of Brazilian stuff. My brother plays the piano and sings, too, so it helped me to fall in love with music.

PM: So they must be so amazed by your career and happy about what's going on with you, right?

C: Yes. They are really happy. They've helped me a lot. At first they were kind of worried because it's hard to make a living from music. But now they are really happy. [laughs] My father, he was, "Oh, my God! Are you sure you'd like to be a singer?"

[laughter]

C: But then he saw that things are going well, and yes.

PM: Well it's so nice to talk to you, CéU. I hope that your tour goes very well. There's nobody like you in America. There's no one on the American scene that is singing really groove-based music that's very deep like yours, and very beautiful. It's all much more shallow to my ears.

C: Thank you so much. Thank you.

PM: But I can feel what a deep and lovely person you are.

C: [laughs]

PM: It's right in somebody's voice, don't you think, in the way that they speak?

C: [laughs] Thank you, Frank. I'm really glad that you feel this from me.

PM: Thank so much for talking with us. Yes, I'm going to see if I can fly to one of your shows, because I want to see you live.

C: Yeah. I think we are going to come again in October with the whole band, that will be really nice. Because this is a half an hour show.

PM: Ah, right, it's just an opener.

C: Yes.

PM: Okay. Well, then when you come back with the big band, I'm going to get in touch with Six Degrees, and I'm going to come meet you and see a show.

C: All right.

PM: Thank you, CéU, for your time.

C: Thank you, Frank, for yours.