

The Samba Experience

In examining and researching a foreign culture, there are two ways one may go about conducting the research: 1) reading and studying printed or recorded materials, or 2) living within the culture and experiencing it firsthand. But, sometimes the best research is a combination of the two, drawing from the theory of what should be and then comparing to what actually is practiced. The analysis of the similarities and the differences can sometimes be quite interesting. With this balanced method of research, I looked at Samba through a theoretical lens, analyzing its origins, studying the culture behind it, and examining its current history. Then, I attended a Samba concert in Cambridge, MA to see this style of music from the other lens – in practice. The goal of this experience was to understand firsthand what the music was, who the performers were, how the audience interacted, and what was the role of community in the practice and development of the music.

The concert I attended with my wife was officially called “Halloween Halloween – Brazilian Music Festival: Samba Tremeterra” and featured the Samba Tremeterra group along with Ana Borges, the lead singer. The event was on Sunday, October 29, 2006 right before Halloween. It was held at the Middle East Downstairs club, which featured a large dance floor, a semi-large playing stage, two bars along the sides, and some scant seating. It was scheduled to start at 8:00 PM and go until around midnight.

The first thing we noticed when we arrived was that the music had already started. Having expected a party atmosphere in anticipation of Halloween, the music playing was really a surprise. It was slow, calming, melodious, and smooth. It did not display any of the obvious

characteristics of a party atmosphere, such as loud blaring music and trembling bass sounds. Instead, the music seemed very serene and peaceful. Though I did not understand the Portuguese words, the music seemed to be speaking about something or someone beautiful, graceful, and revered. The music, at least the texture and timbre, seemed to correlate very well with the theoretical idea previously researched that the Samba music lyrics told stories of women and love. The words flowed from the performer's mouth with such grace that they could only have been talking about the beauty and love of a woman. The few words that I did catch sounded very similar to the Spanish *amor* or "love," which was another clue that the words were speaking about women and love.

The instruments themselves were also gracefully played and produced beautiful music, though again, not the party atmosphere reminiscent of Carnival I had expected. The guitars stroked slow rhythms, with only a few faster tempo sections. They also had rather simple patterns, without any of the complex strumming one might see in a rock concert. The percussion also played softly and delicately. Every cymbal clap was soft and smooth, every drum beat was controlled, and the bass was a small constant drone in the background. As for the Samba drums, they were used also for the slow sections, clapping out a series of beats in a very delicate fashion. For the faster sections, the drums had complicated patterns of hand beats and produced some great rhythms. Again, as opposed to a rock concert where the percussion is usually loud and prevalent, the drums here were used to keep beat and keep a melodious background to the singing.

The music played tried to affect the soul of the listener, as opposed to solely stimulating the body's sensory system. The music tried to accomplish this not only through the melodious rhythms played by the guitar and drums, but by the mood the words set. The words were sung so

beautifully and with such passion, one would be remiss if they were not touched by the songs. The music really felt deeper than just an ordinary listening experience – it was a full body experience involving all the senses as well as the soul.

Much of the reason the music was so soulful was that the performers performed the music so beautifully. The performers were visibly dedicated to making the music part of themselves, through hand gestures, body movements, facial expressions, and other intangibles. The lead singer, Ana Borges, a native Brazilian, had such graceful, flowing hand movements that magnified the meaning of the words she was singing. At points in her performance, she would close her eyes, sing the words, but let her hands and arms do the real singing. She would wave her hands up in the seemingly positive points and would elegantly move them down during the low points in the song.

The rest of the band followed in much the same manner as did Ana. The guitarists (both of them, who appeared to be Latin American) would also at different points close their eyes and just feel the music enter their spirit. They exuded such an aura of passion that it was hard for the audience to not follow suit. The drummers, however, kept a lower key, playing what needed to be played, but without the passion that was seen in Ana and the guitarists. I believe, as their dress and look may have indicated, they were not native Brazilians or native Samba players, so their connection with the truth of the music may not have been as great, though they had mastered the playing techniques so they were still able to play very well.

Another important part of the musical experience was the audience – who was in the audience and how did they participate? When we first arrived, the audience was quite small, only about thirty people or so, though by the end it had grown to about 100. On the dance floor, there were even less – two couples dancing the Samba. Those two couples danced really well

and were probably intimidating others who may have wanted to join in. However, as we found out later, they were actually professional Samba dancers and were teaching Samba lessons during the performance. These professionals, all dressed in white, appeared to be of mixed ethnicities. There was one man who appeared to be a white American, but was probably the best dancer of the group. The professional women dancers all appeared to have some Brazilian roots – their skin was slightly darker and we overheard them speaking Portuguese.

The rest of the audience was predominantly Brazilian, and they all seemed to know each other. My wife and I sat on a side bench to watch the event, and we could see that the people who were coming in all centered around this big group, hugging and kissing everyone as they entered. Those who were not part of the group usually stood near the tables and the bars and were predominantly white. Of course, there were others at the event, though the classifications seemed to concentrate on those two groups.

As the music continued throughout the night, and as we had a chance to check out the professionals' moves, more and more people started making their way onto the dance floor. My wife and I jumped in and tried to mimic the dance moves, so that we could join in with the other half of the Samba experience – the dancing. I, not being a very good dancer, could not quite get the steps right and it seemed as though my wife had to lead most of the time, even being seven months pregnant at the time. But, people kept approaching the dance floor attempting to dance the Samba style. As I scanned the floor, it seemed to me that everyone was either dancing in Samba or attempting to, rather than just dancing to the more popular club styles. The reason for this was probably because the dance moves were relatively simple and elegant and the music was not of the type that could be danced to as one would at a regular pop club.

In addition to the music performed, the performers performing it, and the audience participating in it, there was an additional component – the culture and community from which the music originated. Samba has been around for a very long time and has had a huge affect on the people of Brazil and Latin America. It is the trademark music of Carnival, a big influence in the development of many other musical styles, and a national symbol of musical pride. All of those aspects could be seen at the Samba concert we attended.

First, since the concert was held the night before Halloween, it was a good excuse for people to get dressed in costumes. Those of Brazilian descent who did wear costumes, and there were quite a few, dressed in extravagant, colorful costumes reminiscent of the costumes worn during Carnival. It was obvious to me that those wearing their costumes did so not because of the upcoming Halloween holiday, but rather as a way of remembering the Carnival celebrations of back home.

During the concert, the music selected was said to be Samba. However, it was probably borderline *bossa nova* because of its slower tempos and more sophisticated lyrics. Regardless, there was a blending of the ever-popular Samba and the new hit *bossa nova*, which highlighted the far reaching impact of the traditional Samba music with the new pop hits.

You could also see the pride and joy the artists and the audience had for the Samba music, dance, and tradition. Everyone felt so connected to the music, their souls singing and dancing rather than their mouths and feet. After every song, the audience would clap fervently to show their appreciation for such a wonderful Samba rendition. The cultural symbol of Brazil was definitely prevalent and pervasive at the concert that night.

This Brazilian music festival was a treat to attend. It was entertaining and interesting, and provided a lot of insight into how the tradition is practiced back home and how it is now

applied outside of Brazil. From the Samba dance lessons, to the Carnival-like costumes, to the soulful feeling of the Samba music, the event seemed as authentic as was possible in a dance club in Cambridge, MA. The artists and the audience made us forget we were in Cambridge and brought us back to their homelands, much like one feels when they eat at a truly authentic Mexican restaurant or attend a truly authentic Greek wedding – one feels immersed in the culture. It was an awesome experience to participate in because we got to see the culture and music firsthand and see how the theory and history of Samba come together during a live performance to create such an amazing atmosphere of happiness, joy, and cultural remembrance.