

By Rosalind Cummings-Yeates

BRAZIL, BEATS, & HIP-HOP

Despite *Austin Powers'* groovy musical imagery, the swingin' '60s weren't just about psychedelic rock riffs. The sounds of Brazil, from "The Girl From Ipanema" to various samba and bossa nova hybrids, also ruled, and Sergio Mendes and his group, **Brazil 66**, were at the forefront of the movement. From the moment they burst onto the scene in 1966 with the anthemic "Mas Que Nada," a tune with a swirling mix of jazz undertones, bossa nova beats, and a soft pop melody, a musical love affair between Brazil and the U.S. ignited. Mendes and Brazilian-influenced music dominated radio and domestic pop charts for the latter half of the '60s but dwindled until the lambda craze of the '80s and Mendes' 1983 comeback hit, "Never Gonna Let You Go."

Although Mendes remains internationally popular, his musical presence in the U.S. has been scant, as evidenced by the "Seinfeld"

well-versed fan of his music, Mendes decided maybe it was time to make another album. "It was one of those great meetings," he says of his introduction to will.i.am. "I'm very curious. I'm always looking for something fresh for inspiration and there it was! I thought, let's take the great Brazilian melodies and combine it with the hip-hop and urban world."

Mendes has been mixing and combining genres for decades. A classically trained pianist who abandoned classical for bossa nova and jazz as a teen, Mendes' early music always seemed to straddle the space between international pop and watered-down elevator music. His covers of The Beatles' "Fool On The Hill" and Simon & Garfunkel's "Scarborough Fair," with their light jazz tone and simpering vocals, came dangerously close to sounding like rhythmic lullabies. Thankfully, there's none of that on *Timeless*.

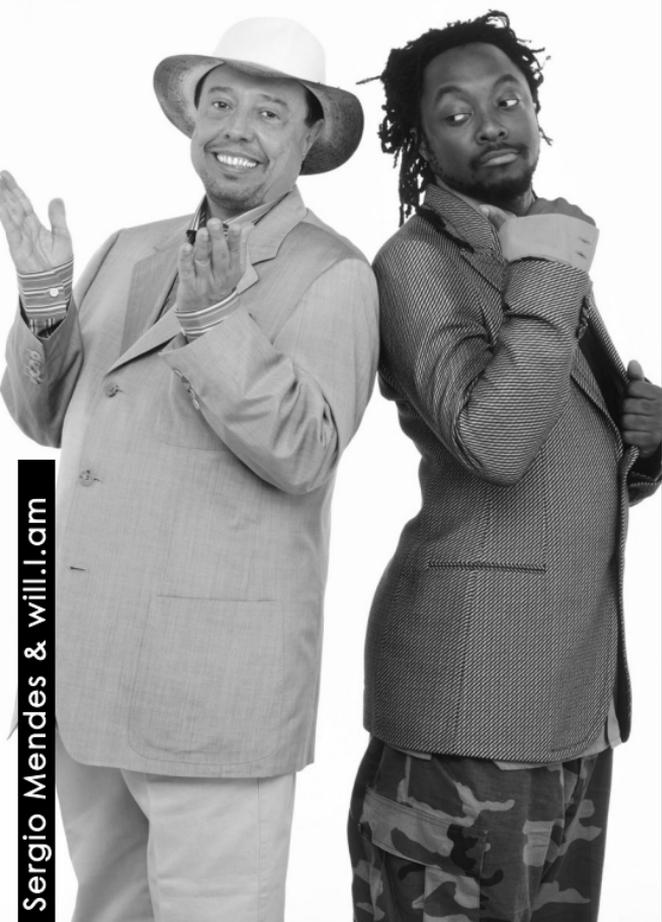
All of the songs, from the revelatory "Mas Que Nada," to the sensual title track, retain the essence of Brazilian samba, choro, and bossa nova rhythms coupled with hip-hop beats for flavorful results.

Opening with Mendes' slow tickling of the ivories, "Mas Que Nada" slams right into a percolating samba beat with the Peas rapping over it for an urban update: "Mas Que Nada/Black Eyes came to make you hot/ter/blubblin' up just like la/va/rhythmically we massage ya/with hip-hop mixed up with sam/ba." The highlight is Fergie's jazzy Portuguese singing, which firmly identifies Mendes' signature tune as the original Latin crossover hit. On the other hand, "That Heat" is a total re-working of "Slow Hot Wind," with a bangin' hip-hop beat coupled with Badu's languorous crooning and will.i.am's rapping. The only glimpse of the initial song is a sample, which reveals its original polished, jazz lounge feel. Perhaps the most innovative makeover is "Bananiera (Banana Tree)," which boasts a hot

dancehall riddim with popular Jamaican DJ Mr. Vegas providing a scorching toast that forever joins Brazilian samba with Jamaican reggae.

"I think melodies are the key for me," says Mendes about connecting Brazilian music to other genres. "The strength of a song is in the melody, it doesn't really matter if it's in Portuguese or English or Swahili. Although some songs deserve English lyrics because it's such an international language, that's the only real adapting I've done with my music. Everything else is very spontaneous."

Summing up the impact of his music as a legacy of the varying nature of Brazilian music, Mendes insists all he has ever focused on was having a great time. "What makes Brazilian music so interesting is its diversity," he says. You go to Rio, you'll hear one thing, to São Paulo another and still another along the Amazon region. Africa is where all the rhythms come from but Brazilians mix them with everything else. "I just keep rolling and keep my curiosity alive."



Sergio Mendes & will.i.am

episode "The Old Man," where Kramer attempts to get more money for a used Mendes LP by reminding the record store clerk of the Brazilian's "cult following." The Valentine's Day release of *Timeless* (Concord), however, points to the power and longevity of Mendes' American influence. Produced by the Black Eyed Peas' will.i.am and featuring a hip-hop and R&B who's who including Erykah Badu, India.Arie, John Legend, Black Thought, and Q-Tip, the 15-track album seamlessly blends classic Brazilian rhythms with contemporary American hip-hop and R&B. Although most of the tunes are almost 40-years old, they still manage to sound fresh and infectious, which is a definite reflection of Mendes' musical insight as well as will.i.am's skilled ear.

"I really wasn't thinking about making a record, I've made so many records through the years," says Mendes. Although he was busy touring internationally, Mendes was drawn back into the record-making scene when will.i.am invited him to play piano on "Sexy" from the Peas' 2003 release, *Elephunk*. Discovering the East L.A.-bred MC was a