

# DANIELA MERCURY'S

BY MARTY LIPP

“When one of us dances, it’s beautiful to see,” says Daniela Mercury. “But when we dance together, the earth moves, the ground shakes and we can make a revolution. And today the revolution is to be happy.”

These may hardly seem like fighting words, but Mercury says them with conviction. And the charismatic Brazilian singer has devoted her preternatural energy to fomenting that revolution of happiness around the world, audience by audience.

Mercury readily admits that her brand of pop is “happy music.” And that exuberance, she says, is inextricably linked to her home town of Salvador, Bahia.

“The Bahiano knows how important happiness is,” she says. “Happiness is essential. The human being has to chase after happiness. It’s necessary for life. Amid all the hardship you have in life, music can bring positive energy into people’s lives—especially when the music is good to dance to—and that is my intention when I sing. When people can dance, it gives them a closer relationship to the music and they can become part of the revolution.”

The singer also connects this revolution of happiness with the music scene in her home base. “In the past 10 years the music of Bahia has given a self-esteem to the people and really lifted up the cultural environment in the city of Salvador and crossed new frontiers.”

Mercury’s latest album, *Feijao Com Arroz* (Beans and Rice), is a high-energy manifestation of Mercury’s goal of energizing her listeners. Notably, this disc—her fourth—is her most musically accomplished, with each cut done in a different style. In addition, the Brazilian star brought aboard numerous guest stars, from Chico Amara! of the rock group Skank to the all-woman percussion group, Banda Dida. The disc—which Mercury says took her over a year to research—covers a range of rhythms, from the reggae of “Nobre Vagabundo” to the Rio-style carnival song “Vide Gal” to the aptly named galope style of “Feijao De Corda,” which she performs with the group Bragada. On “Dona Cano”—a song about Caetano Veloso’s mother—she mixes the jazzy style of *chorinho* with percolating Bahian drums. Elsewhere, she does one song in Spanish and another in Japanese.



PHOTO BY MARIO CRAVO NETO

The singer called the disc *Feijao Com Arroz* because that "is the national dish of Brazil. You can find it anywhere, but with different kinds of seasoning. Like beans and rice, samba can be found all over Brazil in different variations . . . and samba is the basic rhythm from which this record developed."

evidence of her dance training. Dance, she says, "was my first connection with music." But when she was 13, she recalls, "I discovered I had a pleasant singing voice."

"After I was 15 or 16," she continues, "I began to have opportunities to sing in clubs in Salvador. When I was 19, I began singing in *trios elétricos*."

Trios elétricos are small bands that play atop flatbed trucks that drive

# revolution of happiness

Calling herself a "pop sambista," Mercury says, "I want to bring samba into dance clubs and outdoor concerts. This is my re-reading of samba...Even when the samba is not present in [*Feijao Com Arroz*'s] rhythm section, it's present in the lyrics because it's so much a part of me. Even the way I speak is samba."

Last summer, Mercury appeared at New York City's Lincoln Center. She performed her usual explosive set and turned the usually staid hall into a pretty good imitation of Salvador's street carnival, sending the audience into the aisles and the fire marshal into a fit. Mercury acknowledges that she is not very interested in doing ballads on her own albums, though she was happy to perform quieter songs on other projects, such as Joao Bosco's album, *Da Licenca, Meu Senhor*.

"For many years, when I was a nightclub singer, I performed MPB," the 32-year-old songstress says. "At the present time, I will have to wait for my spirit to calm down in order to do more peaceful or slower music."

Some observers have pointed to the superstardom of light-skinned stars from Bahia, such as Mercury and Banda Eva's Ivete Sangalo, and questioned why the careers of darker-skinned performers have languished in Brazil. Mercury says that on her album, she wanted to call attention to the mixture of cultures in Brazil and to show their respective values. Her cd cover, in fact, shows her hugging a black woman, and "*Feijao Com Arroz*" in Brazil means *black* beans and *white* rice, a playful reminder of the unity that can come from embracing diversity.

Mercury herself has embraced black culture. "So much of the energy, the drums, the vibrancy [in Brazilian music] is part of the enormous influence of black culture," she says. "I call myself the whitest black girl in Bahia, because my main inspiration is my relationship with the people of Bahia. The mixture of the races can be in your soul if not in your skin."

As a young girl, then known as Daniela Mercuri de Almeida Povoas, she had intended to become a professional dancer, taking everything from ballet to African dance classes. Certainly, anyone who witnesses her non-stop choreography in concert can see the

slowly through the streets of Salvador during carnival. Mercury's big belting voice and high-energy style, she points out, are influenced by "the street music of Salvador."

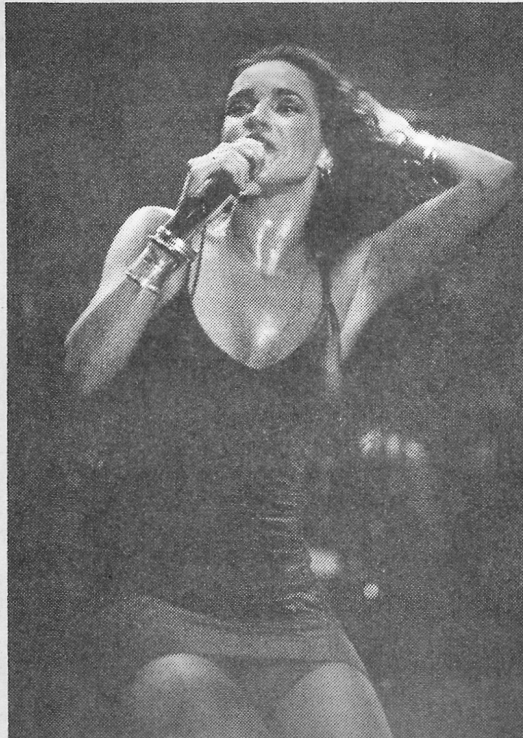


PHOTO BY HAROLDO ABRANTES

After scoring a hit in 1991 with the percussion-laced samba-reggae of "*Swing Da Cor*," Mercury topped the charts with her second album, *O Canto Da Cidade*, which was Brazil's first diamond record, with sales of 1 million copies. And now, with *Feijao Com Arroz*, Mercury has scored big again. Her song "*Rapunzel*" was a huge carnival hit in Bahia last year and the cd has sold hundreds of thousands of copies.

With her breakneck concert schedule, does she see some rest and relaxation in the future? "I love being on stage, performing live and traveling and having a new challenge each day," she says with enthusiasm. "Last year, I was doing three shows each weekend and every two years I have been recording a cd. Obviously, sometimes for health reasons, I need to take a holiday. It will be easier to do that now that I have carved out a niche, now that I have conquered my space in Brazil and—who knows?—in other countries too."

The popular singer has also used her time in the limelight to call attention to several causes. Last year, she headed a campaign to fight against child prostitution and she has worked as an ambassador for UNESCO in Brazil.

Mercury also sees herself as a spokeswoman for her home state of Bahia. In recent years, the Pelourinho, the central historic district of Salvador, has been refurbished, which Mercury attributes to popularity of Bahia's *axé* music. "It was the power of the music that called attention to the fact that this place was falling apart. The music brought more tourists to Bahia and it caught the attention of the people from the rest of Brazil. And that [persuaded] the government to invest more in the area."

While talking about the *axé* music of Bahia, she says, "tourists should come here and see how warm the water is, just like the music." Inviting her North American fans to her homeland, she says, with her own home-grown warmth and energy, that Bahia is "the mother who knows how to hug you." ★

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