

## Brazil's Planetary Troubadour

Written by Bruce Gilman

Monday, 14 August 2006 10:16

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Like the medieval troubadours, poet musicians who conveyed news in the form of song, Lenine is a contemporary town crier who chronicles the people, the problems, and the spirit of our times. His incomparable gifts for floating lines of torrential poetry, for sustaining an ironic intimacy, for mixing no-hope pessimism with self-realization, and for offering insights into the human condition are spine-tingling.

With more than 500 songs, well-nigh 100 recorded by artists as diverse in generation and style as Chico César, Zizi Possi, Maria Bethânia, Gabriel o Pensador, Fernanda Abreu, Daniela Mercury, Elba Ramalho, Zélia Duncan, Milton Nascimento, O Rappa, Maria Rita, and Jane Duboc; Lenine exemplifies a present-day bard, envisioning news and events as song.

Lenine's voice, wrenching, deliberate, and with a slight haze at the edges, was made for our time. Outwardly evocative and penetrating, yet clouded with a vague sense of unease, it fits to perfection. When it comes to rhythm, his fearlessly funky pocket - raw, aggressive, and loaded with subtleties - pushes assumptions about tight, syncopated guitar riffs to the margins.

Blending traditional Northeastern rhythms with an atmospheric fusion of electronic textures and rock sensibilities, his compositions, alongside a wealth of melodic and harmonic invention, reveal an astonishing combination of infectious freshness as well as an instinctive understanding of what lay musically ahead.

If you're unfamiliar, try *Lenine*, a collection of 15 tracks judiciously chosen from recordings Lenine made for BMG-Brasil between 1997 and 2002. Previously available only as imports, these tasty morsels are breakthroughs of spirit and artistry that illustrate what is creatively possible when integrating a musical imagination with an innate ability to deliver the emotional core of a lyric.

Although his career has been slow to establish itself in the United States, Lenine's work has had

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a profound influence on the international pop music scene, and this mouthwatering program attests that few musicians have a more assured and driving feel for rhythm, and fewer still whose lyrics are more genuinely thought-provoking.

Born in Recife, Pernambuco, on February 2, 1959, Osvaldo Lenine Macedo Pimentel grew up as a rock enthusiast until his late teens when the music of Gilberto Gil and Milton Nascimento fostered his interest in Brazilian popular music (MPB), which at that time was a highly artistic post-bossa style performed on acoustic instruments with carefully crafted lyrics that drew from Brazilian traditions.

Abandoning his studies at the Conservatório Pernambucano, Lenine moved to Rio de Janeiro in 1980 where he participated the following year in TV Globo's *MPB 81* festival with "Prova de Fogo." The tune was released as a single by Polydor/Polygram and appears on his first album, *Baque Solto*, a duo effort with Lula Queiroga whose title refers to Recife's rural style of maracatu.

Lenine "arrived" on the Brazilian music scene with the groundbreaking album, *Olho de Peixe* (Eye of the Fish), a duo with percussionist Marcos Suzano. Considered one of the ten best Brazilian recordings of 1994, *Olho de Peixe* signaled the emergence of a truly significant "voice" within MPB.

Confounding expectations at every turn, this gloriously multi-textured confection continues to sound as fresh and vital as it did when first released and demonstrates two musicians' extraordinary rapport. From this early stage in his career, Lenine gives very clear indications of his genius for working in the studio, for making sound come across in the best possible fashion, and for creating the ideal ambiance for an artist.

Shortly after *Olho de Peixe*, Lenine, Suzano, and Denilson Campos produced the first CD for Mestre Ambrósio, a Northeastern group whose music drew on global, urban, traditional, and rock-influenced styles and was loosely associated with the mangue beat movement.

Recorded between September and December 1995 at the Conservatório Pernambucano de Música, Recife, and released in January 1996, the disc's multiplicity of musical styles, many of

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which had little national exposure at the time, were interpreted with varying degrees of transformation and brought the band national prominence as well as a contract with Sony for their second CD.

Lenine's production company, Mameluco, continues to provide him with opportunities to draw back from the roles of composer and performer. Most recently he has produced recordings for Maria Rita, Chico César, Elba Ramalho, and Portuguese composer João Pedro Paes.

Also in 1996, Lenine appeared on Chico César's *Aos Vivos*, a landmark recording embracing punctuated, often sinuous melodic lines, intimate lyrics, and muscular Jamaican, Caribbean, and Bahian rhythmic mixes; it received the Prêmio Sharp (a Grammy equivalent) for Best Regional Discovery.

The following year, initiating his solo career, Lenine released *O Dia em que Faremos Contato*, a pile-driving fusion of Northeastern rhythms, samba, acoustic instruments, electronica, and fascinating insights in a dynamic and discreetly propulsive sound continuum that altered the direction of Brazilian popular music and earned two Prêmios Sharp (MPB Revelation and Best Song for "A Ponte").

Among its tunes "Distantes Demais" lingers in the mind like an engulfing and melancholy mist. Accordion virtuoso Toninho Ferragutti accompanies without stealing the limelight, yet so ravishingly as to command attention, his flawless rapport in perfect sync with Lenine's voice.

The sense of unhurried invention and worldly experience pervading Lenine's delivery of "O Marco Marciano," supported by his 10-string guitar, is stylistically located in that indefinable hinterland between traditional Northeastern music and international pop.

Achieving a close and very special cohesion, the rhythm section of Suzano (percussion) and Liminha (bass) hits intoxicating, unrelenting grooves that pack tremendous punch on both "Hoje Eu Quero Sair Só" and "O Dia em que Faremos Contato." Three of the tunes from *O Dia em que Faremos Contato* were engaged for television soap operas and a mini-series. Some recordings withstand the test of time; this is one of them.

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Two years later, Lenine was set to record a second solo CD for BMG-Brasil, but feeling that the material prepared was dated, began writing from scratch and, as multinational record companies don't like delays, literally "under pressure." The result was *Na Pressão*, a work of musical sorcery that teams samba, rap, coco, maracatu, funk, rock, xaxado, techno, and xote with a lot of coherence and creativity.

Arranged by Lenine as a sonorous chronicle, it faithfully x-rays the people of Brazil at the end of a decade, a century, and a millennium. The opening track, "Jack Soul Brasileiro," celebrates Brazil's master of the coco style and one of its percussion gods, Jackson do Pandeiro. Infused with samples of Jackson do Pandeiro's recorded work, the track gives a clear sense of his energy and enthusiasm. It will come as no big surprise to many Lenine admirers that it is also the first item on the new Six Degrees compilation.

There is a wide and satisfying emotional range of material here, from "Paciência," a hymn to the frenzy and anguish of contemporary life, to the assured and driving "Tubi Tupy" (To Be Tupy), adopted as the principle theme for the satirical film *Caramuru - A Invenção do Brasil*

This second solo effort is all about communication, bearing all the hallmarks of Lenine's personal as well as cultural roots and vividly bringing out intensely seductive moods and fiery playing from, among others, Siba (Mestre Ambrósio), Davi Morais, Pedro Luís e A Parede, Naná Vasconcelos, Carlos Malta, Dominginhos, and Marcos Suzano.

A berimbau, talking drums, digital samples, and complex rhythmic programming, organized in percussive loops, create musical textures as sensuous as they are complex. Lenine's arrangements are evocative, supplementing each tune's illustrative story and helping the listener submerge into the music's fabric.

"The material I write," says Lenine, "is MPB: Música Planetária Brasileira." Cited in the international press as one of the Best World Music Recordings of 1999 and nominated for the 2000 Latin Grammy, *Na Pressão* propelled Lenine's career far beyond Brazil's borders to the international crossroads of Japan, Canada and Europe.

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In 2001, Lenine's formal presence was marked in film and theater, and fittingly so, as music, theater, and cinema are intimately connected in Brazil. Aside from the aforementioned historical satire (2001) and a prior contribution to the romantic comedy *Woman on Top* from Venezuelan film director Fina Torres (2000), Lenine took on the musical direction of

*Cambaio*

, a work of musical theater, a pop-opera, by Chico Buarque and Edu Lobo whose pre-bossa nova sonority was inspired as much by classic Hollywood film scores as it was by the works of Villa-Lobos.

Since then, Lenine has contributed soundtrack material for numerous soap operas and children's programs, including TV Globo's *Belíssima*, *As Filhas da Mãe*, *O Clone*, and *Sítio do Picapau Amarelo*

as well as a score for the Brazilian ballet company Grupo Corpo.

On Lenine's third solo album, *Falange Canibal*, the title, content, and all-star cast capture the essence of a small bar in Lapa where once a week during the late eighties habitués savored an artistic free zone, devouring music, poetry, and theater in excited encounters of experimentation and improvisation, without compromise or rules.

Winner of the 2002 Latin Grammy for Best Contemporary Pop Album, *Falange Canibal* is an innovative journey through presumed language and cultural barriers guided totally by intuition. Replete with special guests and openly flirting with experimental sound, it carries on Lenine's dialog between international pop and Brazilian musical traditions and furthers his concept that recording is a pretext for making music with friends, a view Lenine has maintained since his earliest recording.

Among the 12 pieces, "Rosebud" (o Verbo e a Verba) features desire, remorse, forbidding, and Brian Lynch's multi-tracked trumpet strutting with a streetwise swagger keyed to the rhythm of the third world in a tale about the relationship between the "verbo" (verb, word, speech) and the "verba" (money, funds, cash). Says Lenine, "If you count from the sun - Mercury, Venus, Earth - you realize that we, all of us, are the third world."

The tune was chosen by Lenine as his contribution to *Drop the Debt*, a project organized originally by Bono (U2) in 1999 that brings together leading artists from developing countries for a recording whose profits are reverted to renegotiate, pardon, or cancel the external debt of

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"third world" countries, that is, for popular music to have its effect in the fight to reduce world inequality.

There are also luminescent takes that find a direct path to poetic truth like "Sonhei" and bracing forays like "Lavadeira do Rio," which, added to its funk-rock foundation, brings electronically generated planes of sound, drum programming, two members of the group Skank, and the Velha Guarda da Mangueira; it is a tune Elba Ramalho included on her 1998 album *Flor da Paraíba*.

"Nem o Sol, Nem a Lua, Nem Eu," a folkloric ciranda, provides a pleasing, yet unusual textural base for Will Calhoun of the New York rock band Living Colour on wave drum and jazz trombonist and conch shell virtuoso Steve Turre who proves to be remarkably versatile and consistent in any situation. Alluding to director Roger Corman's chilling sci-fi classic *X: The Man with the X-Ray Eyes*, "O Homem Dos Olhos de Raio X," generates a throbbing, dark musical statement as well as a quote from Jorge Ben Jor's "Little Black Joe's Band."

In 2004, Lenine was the second Brazilian invited to the regal Cité de la Musique in Paris for its annual Carte Blanche project, which gives musicians unconditional artistic license in the creation of their shows. Prior to that time, Caetano Veloso, who coincidentally solicited Lenine to appear as his special guest, had been the only Brazilian to participate in Carte Blanche at Cité de la Musique.

To inaugurate his new label, Casa 9, (marketing, promotion and distribution by BMG), Lenine along with Cuban bass player/vocalist Yusa and Argentinean percussionist Ramiro Musotto, a Pan-American power trio capable of getting any European on his feet, generated Lenine's first DVD as well as a semi-acoustic live CD that includes twelve tunes, seven of which were recently composed, the samba "Virou Areia," which is more than a decade old, but had never recorded by Lenine; though, it had been recorded by the group Batacotô in 1993 and by Dionne Warwick in 1995, and material drawn from his last four albums - one tune each from *Olho de Peixe* through *Falange Canibal*.

Unlike industry norms where an artist makes a CD, which generates a tour at the end of the

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year that is recorded to make a DVD with the same repertoire as the CD, which, of course, fans already have; *Lenine InCité* was made as a DVD, from which the CD was extracted. To distance himself from his customary technological provisions, Lenine, the right artist at the right time to take advantage of evolving possibilities, employed only a midi-guitar system that permitted his instrument to converse with a stockpile of digital sounds. Overdue indications of Lenine's boundless creativity and ability to reinvent repertoire as well as mediums, both discs justify his quickly-growing reputation with profoundly satisfying, expressively versatile programs.

"It's difficult to perform in another country, in another language and get the kind of response you're accustomed to at home, says Lenine, "but that show was powerful, a command performance. The interesting thing is that all night I kept feeling Tom Capone's presence. Tom was a great musician, a bass player and producer who worked with me on *Na Pressão* and *Falange Canibal*. We shared a lot of information and a lot of good times. He died in a motorcycle crash here in Los Angeles hours after leaving the 2004 Latin Grammy telecast where he had been nominated for five Latin Grammy awards, the most ever for a Brazilian.

"The night of our Paris performance, I felt like Tom was at my elbow, making it happen as he always did in the studio. After our last tune, I left and didn't realize until the following day when I heard the playback that the crowd just kept applauding, cheering, yelling for close to ten minutes. That ovation, I felt, was Tom's, and so I left it on the CD. But because many people didn't understand the persistence of that applause, I've edited it out of subsequent issues."

*Lenine InCité* swept Brazil's annual Tim awards the following year winning Best Pop/Rock Album, Best Male Vocalist in both the judges' and the fans' polls, and Best Song for "Todas Elas Juntas Num Só Ser," a cinematic narrative characteristic of Lenine's work, whose lyrics cite numerous songs that declare love for the women, or muses, that inspired them and in which Lenine professes his love for Anna, his wife of 25 years. In 2005, *Lenine InCité* was awarded the Latin Grammy for Best Contemporary Pop Album and Best Song for "Ninguém Faz Idéia."

Lenine's influence on Brazilian popular music and beyond is quite incalculable. Each consecutive and richly rewarding release reaches rare and genuinely inspired heights. Taking listeners to the heart of his style, the *Six Degrees* compilation, *Lenine*, teems with his superlative artistry; it can be played from start to finish, all 62 minutes of it, in one session, and still leave you wanting more.

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Every track is absorbing, each has its story to tell and its special place in Lenine's discography. Were it merely to serve as an introduction, *Lenine* would be highly coveted. It is, however, essential in an overall assessment of his talent and of particular interest to those who have not invested in the innovative and seismically restless BMG recordings.

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### Selected Discography:

**Artist(s)**   **Title**   **Label**   **Date**

Lenine   *Lenine*   Six Degrees   2006

Lenine   *InCité*   Casa 9   2004  
(CD and DVD)

Francis Hime   *Brasil Lua Cheia*   Boscoito Fino   2003

Lenine   *Falange Canibal*   BMG-Brasil   2002

Various   *Drop the Debt*   Say it Loud!   2002

Various   *Cambaio*   BMG-Brasil   2001

Margareth Menezes   *Afropopbrasileiro*   Universal   2001

Maria Bethânia   *Maricotinha*   BMG-Brasil   2001

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Guinga *Suite Leopoldina* Velas 2000

Lenine *Na Pressão* BMG-Brasil 1999

Various *Brasil 2 mil* Ziriguiboom/Six Degrees 1999

Carlos Malta *Carlos Malta e Pife Muderno* Rob Digital 1999

Elba Ramalho *Solar* BMG-Brasil 1999

Various *Jackson do Pandeiro -* BMG-Brasil 1998  
Revisto e Sampleado

Carlos Malta *Jeitinho Brasileiro* Malandro Records 1998  
(Released as O Escultor do Vento in Brazil)

Jane Duboc *Todos os Caminhos* Movieplay 1998

Lenine *O Dia em que Faremos Contato* BMG-Brasil 1997

Fernanda Abreu *Raio X* EMI 1997

Pedro Luís e A Parede *Astronauta Tupy* Warner 1997

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Elba Ramalho *Leão do Norte* □ BMG-Brasil 1996

Marcos Suzano *Sambatown* □ □ MP,B 1996

Zélia Duncan *Intimidade* □ □ □ WEA 1996

Mestre Ambrósio *Mestre Ambrósio* □ □ □ Independent 1995

Chico César *Aos Vivos* □ □ □ Velas 1995

Lenine and Suzano *Olho de Peixe* □ □ □ □ Velas 1993

Lenine and Queiroga *Baque Solto* □ □ □ MP,B 1983  
(First issued in LP format by Polygram; reissued as CD in 1998 by MP,B)

**Journalist, musician, and educator Bruce Gilman has served as music editor of Brazzil magazine, an international monthly publication based in Los Angeles, for close to a decade. During that time he has written scores of articles on the most influential Brazilian artists and genres, program notes for festivals in the United States and abroad, numerous CD liner notes, and an essay, “The Politics of Samba,” that appeared in the Georgetown Journal.**