

CARMEN MIRANDA



The fruit-laden lady is probably one of the most iconic figures in Latin music. **Sue Steward** explains her appeal

Next time you're down Rio way, hop over to the Parque do Flamengo gardens, and among the tiled walkways and tropical vegetation you'll see an incongruous concrete bunker with high slit windows. This insultingly ugly building houses the Carmen Miranda Museum, but it's a fascinating, intimate place, decorated with some personal belongings of Brazil's most famous singer – suitcases, dresses, shoes, fruit-laden turbans, and a small photo gallery documenting her rise from shop girl to Hollywood's highest paid star.

Carmen Miranda was born in 1909, in Portugal, and moved with her parents to Rio, a year later. As a teenager, she worked in a milliner's shop, a useful training for creating the headdresses concept she exported worldwide. Miranda came of age in the 20s as tango began to sweep the world, and samba was moving out of Rio's *favelas* and into high society dances. She made her name singing in Rio's bars while Orson Welles was trying to make a film about samba (RKO films mocked the idea, and it was never completed). A series of radio sessions in 1928 launched the 19-year-old, who sang sambas and related *choros* with a small guitar band which included the plinky, high-pitched *cavaquinho*, and a clarinet.

In 1939, while resident at the Urca Casino, Carmen Miranda was spotted by the influential New York impresario, Lee Schubert, who invited her to join his forthcoming Broadway musical *Streets of Paris*. She insisted on taking her Banda da Lua, and they followed her career, even backing songs in the Disney cartoons where she sang in crazed, screechy voices and nonsense phrases and did jungle calls. On Broadway, Miranda wore the outfit Schubert had seen in Rio, its headdress inspired by the black women from Bahia who carried fruit in baskets on their heads. Her fruit-laden turbans brought her the nickname "The Lady in the Tutti-Frutti Hat".

By then, New York was already hooked on Latin music – Don Azpiazu had introduced a full Cuban dance orchestra in 1931, and premiered 'The Peanut Vendor' and records of the new *rumbas*, tailored to American tastes, were hits around the world. Miranda was the first Brazilian star to strike the US, and add samba to the cocktail of Latin styles.



In 1940, Miranda returned home for a charity concert, but received a devastatingly cool reaction: Brazilian fans felt betrayed by her departure. But back in the US, her zany sambas – camp, flirtatious, and packed with catchy, tongue-twisters, onomatopoeic phrases and quasi-English words sung with a strong Carioca accent – matched the newly Americanised arrangements which concealed a samba beat.

By the 40s, Miranda was a household name everywhere. Her red-lipped, wide smile and eccentric outfits were escapist treats in the austere war and post-war years, and her catchy, kitsch songs with fast-rapped choruses of fragmented, onomatopoeic words, bits of English and Portuguese, were irresistible to dancers everywhere. She appeared in 16 Hollywood films, beginning with *The Gang's All Here* (1943) which featured Brazil-themed Busby Berkeley routines. She sang from a cart of bananas, and danced with chorus girls wearing obscenely swollen banana skirts, and repeatedly broke box office records. She sang, without irony, '*Bananas are my business*,' a title recently adopted for a

documentary about the singer's life, which explores Hollywood's construction of the Latin stereotype – which is taking decades to demolish. It also contains vintage live footage of Miranda singing 'Disseram Que Voltei Americanisada' (they say I've become Americanised). But her recordings allow us to see through the fruit bowl to her brilliance.

Miranda's films successes included: *That Night in Rio*, *Down Argentine Way* and *Weekend in Havana* which launched more hit songs and tours of Europe. In 1948, she topped the bill at the London Palladium, performing 'I Yi, Yi, Yi, Yi' and 'Chica Chica Boom Chic'.

Success waned in the 50s, and Miranda's smiles concealed frustration at being trapped in these quasi-Latin songs, which left her exceptional voice, with its wide tonal range, sharp improvising skills, and naturally rhythmic vocalising, seriously under used. But, 50 years after her death, she is still known – at least in looks – to every age group and clones flock to carnivals around the world in all their fruity glory. In eclectic Latin clubs, her songs still fill the dance floors, and sound remarkably modern.

BEST ALBUMS

Imperatriz do Samba (Empress of Samba)
(Rice Records)



A compilation from the decade before Miranda moved to the US. She draws from beyond Brazil in the vocally complex 'O Samba e o Tango' (recently reinvented by Caetano Veloso), while 'Tic Tac do Meu Coracao' (tic tac goes my heart) is light-hearted. The sprightly take on Ary Barroso's 'Na Baixa do Sapateiro' inspired Bing Crosby's hit 'Bahia'.

South American Way (Jasmine/Rice Records)



'Have you ever danced in the tropics, in that gay, notorious, souse American way?' This is how we remember Carmen Miranda – the flirty, chirpy, high-pitched vocals, catchy scats in Portu-English, Americanised sambas, choros and *chorinhos*. Tremendous backing from male voices, guitars, muted trumpets, and boogie piano, on a stream of hits, including 'Chica Chica Boom Chic,' which Caetano Veloso wove into a song (he called her a *tropicalismo* emblem), and 'Weekend in Havana' – a rumba. Andrews Sisters' harmonies add to the mix. Gorgeous, irresistible, stereotyped Hollywood Latin.

Carmen Miranda, 1930-1945 Vol 2 (Harlequin)



This is Miranda in her prime, in the years before being overwhelmed by clichés. Sambas like 'Mama Nao Quer', 'Amor! Amor!' and 'Malandro' are still around today.

LIKE CARMEN MIRANDA? THEN TRY...

Yma Sumac, Voice of the Xtabay (Rev-Ola)

Carmen Miranda's Latin exotica spurred on other producers, including the prolific West Coast soundtrack composer Les Baxter who worked with Yma Sumac – the 'Inca Princess' to Miranda's 'Brazilian Bombshell'. This is quintessential Baxter, constructed like an impressionistic sound collage around Sumac's truly extraordinary, five-octave voice.