

4

New York - Nearly 30 years after helping create the radical music of tropicalia in his native Brazil, artist Tom Zé says he's glad to be "disinterred."

His new album, "Com Defeito De Fabricação (Fabrication Defect)," out Sept. 22, greets a growing number of Zé devotees in pop music who are excited by the artist's off-the-wall intelligence, inscrutable humor, and edgy Latin sound.

David Byrne searched out and signed the artist, now 62 years old, to his Warner-distributed Luaka Bop label in 1990 after finding one of Zé's albums in a Brazilian record store. Zé had been without a recording contract since the '70s, working odd jobs to stay afloat and playing music on his own in his spare time.

"For so many years I was walking on the outside without any light shining on me," says Zé through a Portuguese interpreter. "I was at the point where I was thinking of going to work in my nephew's gas station in my hometown of Irará when David Byrne contacted me."

"Tom Zé was a big discovery for Luaka Bop," says label president Yale Evelev. "For us to find someone avant-garde and unusually fantastic who comes from another country was a surprise."

The 1990 collection "The Best of Tom Zé: Massive Hits" and the newer material on 1992's "Hips of Tradition: The Return of Tom Zé" posited Zé as a contemporary artist while cementing his place as a pioneer of progressive sounds.

In the late '60s, Zé and Caetano Veloso, Gal Costa, and Gilberto Gil, among others, began using electric guitar, free jazz elements, and radical political lyrics to challenge the country's right-wing military government, earning themselves jail sentences and, in many cases, exile.

"Only Gal Costa and I were able to stay in Brazil," says Zé, who was jailed twice for his music. "We performed in fear and would sometimes pull songs from our shows just to avoid problems with the police and censors."

An artist who once reportedly created a bussized instrument based on floor sanders and household appliances, Zé found that his taste for musical experimentation soon alienated him from even his cohort's more accessible musical ideas.

"After five years, tropicalia was being forgotten, and after 10 years I was being taken out of pictures, like Stalin used to take people out of pictures," quips Zé.

But "Fabrication Defect" is evidence that popular music has finally caught up with Zé's vision. The album combines Brazilian rhythms, Zé's alternately gruff and lyrical vocals, layers of guitars, and eyebrow-raising additions like exaggerated cartoonish voices. Lounge and jazz harmonies and fusion-type basslines show up in Zé's songs alongside African-style percussion and chants, scratchy violins, and power tools. No track on "Fabrication Defect" is like the track before.

TROPICALIA MASTER TOM ZE RETURNS ON LUAKA BOP

Since Zé doesn't listen to popular music regularly but uses literature and his keen observational skills as his muse, his politics and intellectual pursuits are a vital part of his music.

Zé explains that "Fabrication Defect" refers to a theory of his about "First World" domination. Each album track corresponds to a different "defect" of nonindustrialized culture, from genetics to curiosity to dance - "defects" that those in power try to squelch. Zé, of course, knows this dynamic firsthand.

But the artist is careful not to let his serious subject matter bog down him or his listeners. "I make my music with the hope of diverting people, to give some mechanism for people to exercise a joking way of thinking," says Zé.

Through Warner Bros, "Fabrication Defect" will be released worldwide after Tuesday (22). The label has no plans for Zé to tour but will explore other avenues designed to increase Zé's recognition among the young and independently inclined.

An album of Zé remixes by some recognizable names in indie and dance music is due at the end of the year. Conceived by Luaka Bop executive Jeff Kaye, the disc is set to include remixes by the High Llamas, Sean Lennon, U2, Tortoise, and possibly Stereolab, all of whom are avowed Zé fans.

Luaka Bop's Evelev notes that "pop music with intelligent words and complicated musical structures" like Zé's resonates with a new breed of musicians and listeners under 30 who are eager to explore music across genres.

Regarding his band's remix for the compilation, Sean O'Hagan of the High Llamas remarks, "When you're working with such a rich period in music and a rich genre, it's very exciting. I'm a huge Brazilian fan, and that whole period [of tropicalia] has been cruelly overlooked and ignored. People are now realizing it's of value, it's a place to go for inspiration."

Zé, however, jokes that "to understand the music on the music on the remix album, I'll have to remain in quarantine" because the culture shock will be so great.

Special radio and retail will be key to Luaka Bop's plans for Zé. Rick Wojcik, buyer/manager at Chicago-based import specialist Dusty Grooves, a small store that does much of its retail business over the Internet, says he perceives a "huge interest in Brazilian music from the '60s right now."

"The problem with Tom Zé, like a lot of artists from his period, is that a lot of the work is not available," says Wojcik, pointing out that even Zé's earlier Luaka Bop releases are now out of print.

But Windy Chien, owner of Aquarius Records in San Francisco, sees great potential for both Zé's new album and the remixes. "Luaka has label recognition - people will buy something on Luaka Bop, especially if we say it's good."

Ariana Morgenstern, assistant music director at NPR station KCRW Los Angeles and producer of the syndicated "Morning Becomes Eclectic," says that tracks from Zé's new album have been receiving light airplay on the show, to encouraging response. Excited by the prospect of the remix album, Morgenstern says, "I think it's a really smart thing to do - crossover is what it's about."

Zé, who is without a publisher, manager, or booking agent, is puzzled and gratified by his renewed notoriety. "It's strange because I'm used to being on the outside, and now they're treating me like an old idol. I think, 'Could that be possible?' And then I realize that, yeah, maybe I do deserve all this." ♡

44

16