Text: Rui Miguel Abreu
Photo: Rita Carmo
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Images born from sound.

Bruno de Almeida: "I always feel like a director"

By the fourth chapter of “Cinema Imaginado,” there are no longer any doubts: what Bruno de Almeida initially described as "a film seen through sound" has become an autonomous territory within his work. A territory where the Cannes-awarded filmmaker—author of films that oscillate between fiction and documentary—exchanges the film camera, sets, and actors for a recording studio full of vintage keyboards, magnetic tape, and a mixing console transformed into a laboratory that he uses to direct and edit the performances of the musicians he gathers around him.

If, in the first volume, the surprise was his narrator's noir voice guiding the listener through an imagined (and very vivid) New York, in Volume 4 the reverse occurs: the voice disappears. What remains is the sound. What remains are the textures. The strictly musical material remains, yet it continues to be capable of making us imagine stories, something that the titles—such as “Parallax View,” “Mink Novak,” “Bad Lieutenant,” or “Kill the Piano Player”—greatly magnify.

Bruno de Almeida speaks of synthesizers like one speaks of film lenses. Of Studer tape recorders like one speaks of film. Of the Minimoog Model D and the Roland SH-2000 as instruments with “color, thickness, and body.” And he confesses that he has a rare condition—synesthesia—where musical notes automatically translate into colors and metrics.

In this new chapter, the concrete geography of ‘80s New York dissolves into a more abstract and less concrete space, where marimbas, vibraphones, “Ninja Players” strings, iPad-processed horns, and pianos played backward coexist as characters in a film that will never be projected, only listened to. And for this artist, the parallel with cinema is not a metaphor: it is a method. Writing dialogue corresponds to the musical score, the musicians are the actors, the studio is a laboratory, and the

editing is done in the final order of the songs. “I always feel like a director. In every phase,” he emphasizes.

CINEMA IMAGINADO (Volume 4) is not a deviation in Bruno de Almeida's filmography. It is its continuation by other means—more intimate, more physical, more free. Here, the image is born from sound. And sound, as he himself summarizes, “is physical matter.”

INTERVIEW

In the first volume of “Cinema Imaginado,” your voice appeared almost by accident and ended up becoming a central element of the "sonic film." In Volume 4, it disappears completely. Why did you decide to withdraw from the center of the narrative in this way?

I'm not exactly sure. The music that emerged on this album simply didn't call for a voice. I jokingly say that the narrator, the "New York flâneur" character, went on vacation. But it's likely he'll return in Volume 5. He's out there somewhere.

By giving up the spoken word, you are essentially "hidden" behind the keyboards. This is, in a way, the most instrumental volume and the most "performed" by you as a musician. Did you feel the need to disappear as the narrator to appear as an instrumentalist?

My contributions as a keyboardist are always in the background, as a colorist. I work with two excellent pianists, Óscar Graça and Luís Figueiredo, who are the ones who do solos and play up front. But since I write on the piano or synthesizer, sometimes I play and record the backing tracks myself.

What keyboards and synthesizers did you use on this album? Are they instruments that were already present on previous volumes, or was there a specific search for certain sounds for this chapter?

I've been introducing new keyboards (mostly vintage). Using the Minimoog as a bass line was a first. We also used ‘70s analog synthesizers like the Roland SH-2000, which has a very particular sound.

What attracts you to these instruments in particular? Is it the analog texture, the unpredictability, the memory they carry, or the possibility of "sculpting" sound almost like physical matter?

That's it! Sound as physical matter. I've invested in a small studio where almost everything is analog, including tape—Studer recorders—and compressors from the ‘50s/’60s. The sound is simply more beautiful and has a very different character than digital. You can't say "better," but it's warmer and has beautiful transients that come from the tape saturation or the fact that the machines have tubes, which gives body to the sound. I also started listening to music on cassette tapes. I can't quite explain why, but it makes you feels better physically. It's a phenomenon. And what we've been selling aren’t CDs, but cassettes! Younger generations have discovered cassette tapes and love them. Digital music only exists because it's practical; otherwise, it's tiring to listen to. That's why I can listen to an entire LP, but I switch to digital and after five minutes I get tired.

In cinema, you choose lenses, film, lighting to create an atmosphere. Is choosing a particular synthesizer or keyboard an equivalent gesture? Does each instrument have its own imagery?

Absolutely. It's color and texture, thickness, and body. For example, on this album I used marimbas and vibraphones on the track "Smurfing," which gave me a color I wouldn't have with keyboards. Or the use of electronics and effects, like a recorded piano playing backward in “Whale Song.” Graham Haynes also uses electronics; he runs the horn through an iPad. In the “Algorhythmic” piece, I mix two tracks—the clean horn and the processed horn. Then there’s the fact that I have a neurological

condition called synesthesia, where sounds are equivalent to colors and numbers too, so certain notes are automatically certain colors and certain meters.

How does a piece from this Volume 4 begin? Does it start with a timbre found on a keyboard, a harmonic progression on the piano, or a mental image that you then try to translate into sound?

Yes, I start with the keyboard I use to compose. In the string pieces, like in “Mink Novak,” I write the notes on sheet music. But unconsciously, they later become film images. In this piece, I directly acknowledged the influence of Bernard Herrmann and imagined the shots from Hitchcock’s Vertigo. It ended up being a tribute. In other albums I also referenced Morricone and Rota. And for the next volume I already have one dedicated to Don Ellis.

Do you work on these compositions like someone writing a screenplay, with structure and narrative progression, or like someone editing a film, in layers, cuts and successive overlays?

Both. Some themes stem from a narrative, such as "Smurfing," where I imagined a group of Smurfs walking through the city, combining it with the English word "Smurfing," which means a financial scam involving money laundering. In this case, the Smurfs rob a financial center run by gangsters on Wall Street. In the final sequence, there's a section in 5/4 time where the gangsters escape down the service stairs and then enter the subway. The listener will obviously never think about this, but the fact that I tell the story to the musicians matters. Musicians are like actors; they absorb the characters. In other themes I construct them from layering or manipulation. In fact, I always tell the engineers that it's as if we're in a laboratory, not a mixing studio. The sonic matter is inherently plastic and interchangeable.

Frank Coelho's liner notes speak of Mister Boombox, Monsieur Le Panache, an almost mythical figure who traverses sonic galaxies. Does this character emerge precisely from the disappearance of your voice?

I don't think so. He's referring to the character on the cover, in Willy Spiller's beautiful photograph.

Who are the main musicians on this Volume 4? What kind of guidance do you give them when they enter this universe that already seems so defined at first glance?

The core group consists of Graham Haynes on cornet, Mário Franco on bass, Ricardo Toscano on saxophone, Óscar Graça and Luís Figueiredo on keyboards, Mário Delgado on guitar, José Salgueiro on drums, and Iúri Oliveira on percussion. But I always have guest musicians for each album. In “Volume 1” it was Viva o Samba, in “Volume 2” Tó Trips, in “Volume 3” Pedro Jóia and Gaspar Varela, and in “Volume 4” Eduardo Cardinho and Miquel Bernat. And the string quartet I've used since the first album; Ana Pereira, Ana Filipa Serrão, Joana Cipriano and Ana Cláudia Serrão, who are from the Lisbon Metropolitan Orchestra. They are of extraordinary caliber, so fast that we call them "The Ninja Players". Then I give specific instructions to the musicians, whether it's visual references or creating an environment conducive to improvisation. It's the same as what I do with the actors. From what is written they find their "truth" and the soul of the piece.

In the first volumes there was a lot of the idea of memory and rediscovered material. This Volume 4 sounds less like an archive and more like invention in real time. Are you no longer revisiting the past, but building a new territory?

Yes, I think I'm more in the present. But interestingly, I have some pieces I composed in the 80 for choreographies by Francisco Camacho and Vera Mantero that I think are good and could be revisited.

The very concrete geography of ‘80s and ‘90s New York, which permeated the first albums, seems to dissolve here into a more abstract, almost cosmic space. Has the city disappeared or transformed into an inner landscape?

It's possible. I don't analyze things so objectively. It's what comes up.

Do you see clear parallels between making a film and producing these albums? At what point in the process—composition, recording, mixing—do you feel most like a "a director"?

Completely! I always feel like a director. In all phases of the process.

In film you work with a large team of collaborators. Here you have almost absolute control. Is this creative solitude liberating or uncomfortable?

It's not that different. In filmmaking, scriptwriting is like writing a musical score, but then, during recording, it's exactly like working with actors, you know the musicians. And the editing has to do with the order of the songs, where I inevitably change everything around. I would say that the solitude of writing is very comfortable for me, but I love the controlled (or sometimes uncontrolled) chaos of the studio. The rest is the listener's visual imagination.

You've always said that Cinema Imaginado wasn't intended for the stage. But this Volume 4, so focused on instrumental performance, paradoxically seems the most "playable." Do you still think this can't exist live?

I don't have a fixed band, and bringing so many musicians together is very expensive. I've had invitations to play live, but that involves a lot of rehearsals, and being a perfectionist, I would go crazy. It's better this way, making the albums—like films.

Do you feel that Cinema Imaginado is already a parallel work to your filmography—or a continuation of it by other means, perhaps more intimate and freer?

For me, it's the same. Whether it's films or music, the important thing is to create. To be alive and share what I do.

Frank Coelho ends the liner notes with "Have a good trip!". For the listener, it's a trip. For you, where is this Volume 4 a trip to?

A trip to the next trip, which will lead to another trip, and so on and so forth.

Translated from the Portuguese text:
https://www.rimasebatidas.pt/bruno-de-almeida-sinto-me-sempre-um-realizador/