**Carmen Miranda (b. 9 February 1909, Várzea da Ovelha e Aliviada, Portugal – d. 5 August, 1955, Beverly Hills, U.S.)**

**Summary**

Portuguese-born Brazilian singer, dancer and actress Carmen Miranda defied 20th century social and theatrical conventions to become a modern pop icon, an emblem of Hollywood’s Latina stereotype, and an ambassador of American intercontinental diplomacy. Inspired by the new sounds and bohemian aesthetics of Rio’s entertainment district where she was raised, Miranda embodied modern fashion and Latin femininity. After achieving musical success in Brazil, Miranda and her band brought samba rhythms to American and international audiences in the 1940s through Broadway, expanding recording technologies, and cinema. Miranda’s appearances in Fox musicals including *That Night in Rio* and *Weekend in Havana* incited criticism from Latin American audiences for homogenizing ethnic distinctions and identities. Nevertheless, Miranda rose to fame as Hollywood’s ‘Brazilian bombshell,’ becoming 1945’s highest paid woman in the U.S., as well as a de facto ambassador of Roosevelt-era cultural policybetween the Americas.

An effusive stage personality, Miranda exemplified modern artistry and women’s new social mobility with her individual flair, dance innovations, and protagonist female roles. Her bold characterizations, physicality and lead parts on Broadway and in film transformed popular and media representations of women in American history. Miranda’s signature dance style drew on polyrhythmic coordination of the torso and pelvis inspired by Latin and Brazilian social dancing milieus. Her performances marked a shift up the body from the emphasis on footwork in tap, jitterbug, and swing, which were previously featured in film, musical theatre and cabaret. The synchronized hip shaking, shoulder isolations, prominent hand gestures and animated expression of Miranda’s dance vocabulary made her movements unmistakably new, different, and modern for American audiences.

Career Trajectory

Miranda’s musical ingenuity catapulted her from Rio de Janeiro to New York City and Hollywood. She initially entered the public spotlight when her single *Tai* ([www.vagalume.com.br/carmen-miranda/pra-voce-gostar-de-mim-tai.html](http://www.vagalume.com.br/carmen-miranda/pra-voce-gostar-de-mim-tai.html)) became a Rio carnival hit in 1930. The first contract singer in Brazil’s radio history, Miranda brought attention to emerging domestic labour and civil rights struggles with her recording of *Cozinheira (Cook) Granfina* by Sá Roriz before sailing to the U.S. in 1939. The voyage of Miranda with her eight-piece band, Bando da Lua, was financed by president Getulio Vargas, who sought to strengthen Brazil’s economic and cultural ties to the U.S. Beginning with acclaimed performances in Lee Schubert’s musical *Streets of Paris*, Miranda popularized samba on American stages throughout the 40s and 50s. Miranda’s rise to celebrity status brought Latin rhythms and dances to the forefront of American mainstream culture.

Style

Based on Northeastern Brazil’s heavily accessorized and skirted Bahiana figure, Miranda’s extravagant style influenced modern twentieth-century fashion’s emphasis on excessive costume jewellery and accessories. She brought wedge heels and oversize hats into popular use, spawning a genre of modern drag performance that continues to this day. Miranda’s transformation of the Bahiana figure, modelled on traditionally-clothed African women labourers in Bahia, Brazil, is especially ironic in light of the tropes of ‘backward’ primitivism used in popular discourse and media to depict black African religions and lifestyles in contrast to Euro-American notions of forward-moving civilization and modernity. Miranda’s Bahiana image later became analogous with her Tutti Fruitti hat ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLsTUN1wVrc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlstun1wvrc)), inspired by the baskets carried by Bahianas on their heads, was further appropriated for pin-up posters and eventually became trademarked Disney cartoons. Her lead role in *Banana da terra* by Sonofilmes, where she introduced the hit tune, *O que é que a Baiana tem* (<http://www.kboing.com.br/carmen-miranda/1-1065414/>), consolidated her vogue Afro-Latina look while stirring protests of cultural exploitation among Brazilian audiences.

Criticism at Home

Following her Hollywood debut in 1940’s *Down Argentine Way,* Miranda starred in a series of Technicolor films that exoticized Central and South American cultures and settings for American markets. Despite winning over U.S. viewers during her 1941-1946 tenure with Fox Motion Pictures, South American movie-going publics criticized Miranda’s simplistic cinematic characterizations for collapsing historical and linguistic distinctions between Brazil, Mexico, Argentina and Cuba. Furthermore, some Brazilian and Argentinian critics felt that the generic Latina caricature portrayed by Miranda promoted the entertainment industry’s new interest in ‘authentic’ representations of non-western cultures for commercial gain.

Legacy

Carmen Miranda challenged many contemporary cultural norms and established a pattern of transnational collaboration that continues to this day. As a white Brazilian, her artistic cooperation with Rio’s renowned Afro-Brazilian composers contested social standards of the time in Brazil and across the Americas. She also challenged accepted gender norms by playing socially-mobile female protagonists on stage and in film. Breaking with theatrical precedents, Miranda acted as herself and created a new style that infused Latin-inspired upper body isolations and coordinations with the exaggerated facial expressions characteristic of early cinema. Choreographically, she integrated Latin steps with musical theatre and jazz footwork, as evidenced by her 1941 hit *Chica Chica Boom Chic* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHJLm6WNEv4>). In music, Miranda’s groundbreaking introduction of post-war American brass band sounds into African-inflected sambas predated Brazil’s highly political *Tropicalismo* movement, which began to mesh Brazilian percussion with foreign popular music influences in the 1960s. These fusions of Euro-American and Afro-Brazilian music and dance forms blazed the trail for countless transnational collaborations between Brazilian and American artists and producers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; notable examples include Bossa Nova classic, ‘The Girl From Ipanema’ written by Antonio Jobim and recorded in 1964 by Stan Getz alongside Astrud Gilberto (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJkxFhFRFDA>), the 2006 hit remake of Sergio Mendes’ ‘Mas Que Nada’ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tfa6fRjPlUE>) featuring Black Eyed Peas, and the FIFA 2014 anthem sung by Jennifer Lopez with percussion by samba-reggae sensation Olodum (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGtWWb9emYI>).

**Mika Lior**

List of Major Films

1933 *A Voz do Carnaval* *(The Voice of Carnaval)*

1935 *Alô Alô Carnaval*

1939 *Banana da Terra (Banana of the Earth)*

1939 *Streets of Paris* – on Broadway

1940 *Down Argentine Way*

1941 *That Night in Rio*

1941 *Weekend in Havana*

1942 *Springtime in the Rockies*

1943 *The Gang’s All Here*

*1945 Dollface*

*1947 Copabana*

Select Musical Singles

1935 Deixa Esse Povo Falar, Adeus, Batucada

1936 Alô, Alô, Carnaval, Beijo Bamba

1937 Dance Rumba, Baiana Do Tabuleiro

1938 Na Baixa do Sapateiro (recorded with Orchestra Odeon)

1939 A Preta Do Acarajé, South American Way,"Mamãe Eu Quero, Bambú, Bambú

1941 Alô Alô, Chica-Chica-Bum-Chic (recorded with Bando da Lua ), Cai, Cai, A Weekend In

Havana, When I Love I Love, Thank You, North America

1942 Chattanooga Choo Choo

1947 The Matador (recorded with The Andrews Sisters and Vic Schoen), The Wedding Samba

Paratextual References

*Beneath the Tutti Frutti Hat*. BBC Four Documentary. 2006

*Carmen Miranda: Bananas is My Business*. Documentary directed by Helena Solberg.1995.

Carmen Miranda website: <http://www.carmenmiranda.com.br/index_eng.html>

<http://annaavalanche.blogspot.ca/2009/03/sao-paulo-fashion-week-carmen-miranda.html>

Bright Lights Film Journal: http://brightlightsfilm.com/?s=carmen+miranda

**References and Further Reading**

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Guerra, Lucía. 2002*. Las Noches de Carmen Miranda, (Carmen Miranda’s Nights.* Sudamericana,

Junior, Queiroz. 1956. *Carmen Miranda - Vida, Glória, Amor e Morte, (Carmen Miranda – Life,*

*Glory, Love and Death.* Companhia Brasileira de Artes Gráficas,

Rita Mendonça, Ana.1999. *Carmen Miranda Foi à Washington, (Carmen Miranda has gone to*

*Washington).* Editora Record.