

“O Que é que a Bahiana tem”--Carmen Miranda (1939)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



Carmen Miranda

Roughly translated as “What Does a Bahian Girl Have?,” the song “O Que...” pays tribute to the women of Bahia, a northeast part of Brazil that borders the Atlantic Ocean. It was the first American release for the great Brazilian bombshell Carmen Miranda. It is also the song from which she acquired her legendary stage persona.

So: what does a Bahian girl have? Carmen will sing it and show you via the costume she adopted for the number. She has a silk turban, golden earrings, a starched skirt, adorned sandals, golden bracelets, a twist in her hair and a silver buckle called a *balagandas*. In short, she has the Carmen Miranda style (though the sparkles and trademark fruit on her head would come a little later).

Carmen Miranda was born Maria do Carmo Miranda Da Cunha in Lisbon, Portugal in 1909 and acquired her first name from her opera-loving father. She grew up in Rio, Brazil, where her father—not surprisingly--ran a wholesale fruit business. She was convent educated. At a very young age, Carmen went to work in local shops so that the money she earned could help pay for the care for her tuberculosis-stricken sister. While still a girl, Carmen opened and ran her own hat-making business.

Always a singer and a dancer, Carmen began auditioning for radio shows while still in her teens. In 1930, in Brazil, she released her first album. She made her film debut in the Brazilian documentary “A Voz Do Carnaval” in 1933.

Throughout the 1930s, Carmen would be her nation’s most accomplished singer, its Queen of Samba, and her fame eventually brought to her the attention of Lee Shubert of Broadway’s Shubert Organization in the USA. He imported her for a featured part in his 1939 NY stage production of “Streets of Paris.” There, she was a sensation. Brooks Atkinson wrote in his review, “South American contributes the most magnetic personality ‘The Streets of Paris’ has to offer. She hardly moves outside an area of six square feet; she sings with her eyes closed and her gestures unobtrusive. But she radiates heat that will tax the Broadhurst air-conditioning plant this summer.”

Not long after, Hollywood, never one to let a new talent slip by, also came calling. The studios at that time were anxious to court the Latin American market since so many European cinemas were closed due to the war. And what a better way to reach them than via their own Samba Queen?

Miranda made her Hollywood movie debut in 1940's Technicolor musical "Down Argentina Way," a Fox film, co-starring Don Ameche and Betty Grable. By this time, Miranda had perfected her image. In "Argentina Way" she appears bedecked in layers of golden beads and oversized pearls, platform heels (the better to bolster her small five foot frame), a long red skirt, and an outrageous headdress. Her head was fruitless for now though; only flowers and leaves spouted from her turban. In time, however, her head would become a famous cornucopia of ample citrus—grapes, mangoes, passion fruits and some very Freudian-looking bananas.

Just as individualistic as her look was Miranda's performance. Miranda did seem, truly, larger than life. Dancing on her platforms and swaying her hips generously, she also gestured widely with her hands. But, even then, her hands were no competition for her face: Miranda's eyes were always wide and rolling, her mouth always stretched out to fully pronounce her lyrics. Everything about Carmen Miranda was exaggerated. For film goers, they had not seen anything this outré since the heydays of Gloria Swanson and Nazimova. In retrospect, it's easy to see how Carmen Miranda became the source of a million parodies and the midwife to a generation of drag queens.

Still despite her extremist elements, vocally, and as an entertainer, Miranda hit the mark. She had a lovely voice and an innate showmanship, able to really sell a song.

Because she was a hit in "Down Argentina Way," Fox soon rushed Miranda into other fanciful musicals: "That Night in Rio" (1941); "Week-End in Havana" (1941); and "Springtime in the Rockies" (1942), among others. In them, she sang a variety of songs seemingly tailor-made for her style, "I Want My Mamma," "Tico-Tico" and (of course) "The Lady in the Tutti Frutti Hat."

Much like Esther Williams and Sonja Henie, in each of her films Miranda's part was pretty much preset. Usually she'd just show up in a nightclub scene, where she could sing a song or two, and then the film could quickly return to its main plot. In her tendency to be slotted in as diversion, Miranda's film career follows in much the same vein as Lena Horne during her early MGM tenure. In her films, Miranda was seldom the star, just a supporting player. But when she was given more to do, she proved herself an effective comedienne whose heavily accented and rapid-fire speech, intentionally or not, often provided the biggest laughs.

Unfortunately, Miranda's distinctive style soon got her pigeon-holed. Never able to break out of the mold she had crafted for herself, Miranda's film career seemed to wane almost as quickly as it began. In total, she was featured in only 13 films. Her last, "Scared Stiff," with Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, was released in 1953.

The song "O Que..." was written by Dorival Caymmi. Caymmi was a highly successful Brazilian singer, songwriter, actor and painter. By the late 1930s, he was already well on his way to becoming a legend and one of the recognized fathers of Brazilian music. He had already performed "O Que..." on his radio show when a friend and co-star of Carmen Miranda's brought the song to her attention. Reportedly, originally, Miranda didn't much care for it but was eventually won over when Caymmi performed it for her in person.

The song is a call-and-response between its coquettish lead singer and her backup boys. What does the Bahian girl have, they inquire, that drives men so wild? From there, the singer—Miranda—rattles off her list of her seductive tools. In some ways, "O Que..." is a "list song," on par with Cole Porter's "You're the Top."

Once recorded, Miranda's version of "O Que..." was a hit both at home and abroad. And, notably, for all her colorful plumage and on stage performance art, it was her musicianship that actually sold all that vinyl; after all, people don't buy records for the visuals. Her "O Que..." is rhythmic and catchy, bearing not only an item by item list of a maiden's allure but also a certain playful, festive Carnival spirit. And Miranda's performance of the song is top notch—she shows not only a great command of the lyrics but also an impressive vocal range.

The success of “O Que...” in the US was much of the nation’s first exposure to authentic Brazilian music. In retrospect, it makes perfect sense that it would be Carmen Miranda, South America’s most famous export, who would make this most important of introductions.

Today, sadly, Carmen Miranda’s too often thought of as a curio, almost a novelty act. She is seldom appreciated by film scholars or audiences as a true artist. In some ways she was and is a prisoner of her own successful characterization; she bears more than a passing resemblance to another energetic Latina, Charo, whose “cuchi cuchi” persona too often obscures her extraordinary talent as a flamenco guitarist. Meanwhile, in her theatrical, outrageous on stage get-ups, Carmen Miranda is the aesthetic forbearer to a generation of later female performers—Cher, Cyndi Lauper, Patti LaBelle, Bette Midler, Katy Perry and Lady Gaga. And, like those ladies, Miranda isn’t just artifice; she has the musical chops to back it up.

During her lifetime, Miranda often had a fraught relationship with her homeland. Sometimes she was viewed as a caricature of their culture rather than a quality ambassador for it. But, upon her passing in 1955, Brazil recognized her contributions and her death beget a period of national mourning. Today, in Rio, a museum devoted to her life and work welcomes thousands of visitors every year.

Miranda has also since been frequently tributed in songs by some of her symbolic offspring, notably such contemporary stars as Daniella Mercury and Ivete Sangalo. Meanwhile, the door she opened for Latin American recording artists has since been ably passed through by the likes of Celia Cruz, Tito Puente, Selena and Ricky Martin, among others.

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