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Nation Beat finds its rhythm in northeastern Brazil

BY JIM CATALANO • JOURNAL STAFF • JULY 11, 2008

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Nation Beat will be making its GrassRoots debut this year, but it's likely that the sextet's blend of volcanic Brazilian rhythms and rootsier American influences will quickly find an audience among festival-goers.

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The band is led by percussionist Scott Kettner, who founded the Nation Beat after spending time in Recife, in northeastern Brazil, in 2000-2001.

Before that, his exposure to Brazilian music was limited. "It was very much the generic 'Girl from Ipanema,' 'Blue Bossa' kind of thing — it was very shallow," said Kettner from his home in Brooklyn. "But living in New York City makes it easy to get in deeper."

He took lessons with jazz drummer Billy Hart, who told him he had to study maracatu rhythms. "Once Billy inspired me to do that, I started seeking out the Brazilian cats here in New York City. I started getting deeper into samba. Once they told me to start learning maracatu, I decided I had to go

really go learn it. I packed my bags and moved to Brazil for a year. I didn't know any Portuguese — I learned the hard way by being hungry on the street."

So what's the appeal of maracatu? "The energy and the beat," Kettner said. The first time I heard that beat, I was hooked forever. When you hear a traditional maracatu group, sometimes there are 150 drummers—you feel the rhythms in your chest when they pass by you, you feel the vibrations of those drums just cut through your body. It's addictive, man, it really is. Once you start playing with them, and you're inside that energy, it's like a freight train that going and it's never going to stop. It's intense"

Kettner assembled Nation Beat about six years ago, adding country and Klezmer elements to the Brazilian base. In fact, the Klezmatics perform on several tracks on Nation Beat's new CD.

"I'm from Florida, and I grew up listening to country, blues and bluegrass. So those combinations were really natural for me," said Kettner, who also contributed percussion to Donna the Buffalo's new CD. "The Klezmatics thing—I've been working with Frank London for a few years now on a solo project that he has. He had called me because I have a percussion group here, Maracatu New York, and he called me with an idea of mixing klezmer with northeastern Brazilian rhythms. I said, 'let's do it.' So we made a record together that was really successful in Europe, and we've played a lot of gigs together.

"It really does work, combining the klezmer music and the northeastern Brazilian rhythms," he continued. "One of the reasons they really work is that the first Jewish synagogue in the Americas was in Recife. The Jews were there for 100 years before they were expelled by the Portuguese, then they came to New York.



Nation Beat will make its GrassRoots debut with two sets: 9:30 p.m. Friday, July 18 in the Dance Tent, and at 4:30 p.m. Saturday on the Infield Stage. (Jen Mazer/Provided)

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So there's definitely some crossover there."

Nation Beat's new CD, "Legends of the Preacher," also spotlights Brazilian vocalist Liliana Araujo, who's equally at home singing "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" as funky songs such as "Nago Nago."

"We met her through a friend," Kettner says. "When we were in Brazil in 2005 recording our first record, a friend recommended to me that we get Liliana to sing background vocals. We had never met her, but we went on our friend's advice and brought her in. But when she got to the studio and got into the booth and started singing, we all sat there in awe and our jaws dropped to the floor. We realized, 'This is the singer we've been waiting for.' It took us a couple of years to get all the paperwork done, but we finally got her here and she's been here for a year now and is our permanent singer."

Nation Beat has done a lot of touring, including a 2007 visit to Brazil. "The Brazilian audience really loved what were doing," Kettner says. "For us, that was a true test, to play this music in Brazil. What we're doing is not necessarily Brazilian music, and it's not American music. It's kind of really right down the middle. So we were really curious to see what the Brazilians thought about what we were doing to their music. And they loved it—they really, really loved it. It was great to play down there."

Visit www.nationbeat.com to learn more.

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