

# The Americas

## Maria Bethânia Amor Festa Devoção

Biscoito Fino

Budget Price (2 CDs, 86 mins)

★★★★

**Great performance, uneven album**



Maria Bethânia is most famous outside Brazil as Caetano Veloso's sister. But within Brazil she is as big a star in her own right. Like her brother, she emerged onto the musical scene as one of the *novos baianos*, who made music together in Salvador in the mid-60s, and who included in their number Tom Zé, Gilberto Gil and Gal Costa. Those three discovered drugs and electric guitars and invented the Brazilian art-rock psychedelia that became known as *tropicalia*. Bethânia followed a more traditional path – as a song interpreter. And from the earliest days she was admired for her deeply resonant voice, filled with power and emotion.

Bethânia's albums – especially those of the 70s and 80s – are often polluted with overly lush strings, which are far too syrupy for many non-Brazilian ears. This live show, recorded in March 2010 in Rio captures her without an orchestra, fronting a choice band of old session musicians. By and large it serves as a delightful introduction to her work. Her voice remains superb and the vast and varied selection of songs include Bahian standards such as Dori Caymmi's 'É O Amor Outra Vez' and Caetano's 'Não Identificado', classics like Chico Buarque's 'Rosa Dos Ventos', sambas ('Feita Na Bahia') and *bossas* (Vinícius de Moraes' 'Serenata Do Adeus'). However, in parts the CD is poorly engineered – especially on the first CD, with tracks cross-faded and cut in mid-flow at whim, and loud cheering is inserted seemingly at random for microseconds – jarring on the ear and breaking the intimacy of the live recording.

Alex Robinson

## Diego El Cigala Cigala & Tango

Edge Music/Universal

Full Price (46 mins)

★★

**Uneasy bedfellows**



Tango and flamenco have elemental, thematic, tonal and rhythmic differences due to their entirely separate, and exceptional, cultural histories. On the evidence of this live album by flamenco singer, Diego El Cigala, marrying them is not a straightforward process. Where his version of Cacho Castaña's 'Garganta con Arena' is rebellious and his take on the Cobián-Cadámico classic 'Nostalgias'

interestingly reckless, his attempt to deconstruct Gardél's 'El Día que me Quieras' is a failure. The transmutation works with the first because it's not a tango at all, but a pop ballad (about the iconic tango singer Roberto Goyeneche), made popular 15 years ago by Adriana Varela. The second sounds like El Cigala means it, at least, and may have had a few tango-style bad nights. The third is a cheesy blob of a song; the Muppets couldn't craft a more daft tango hybrid. Stylish support from tango guitarist Juanjo Domínguez, *bandoneón* legend Néstor Marconi and well-travelled violinist Pablo Agri can't rescue the songs, and the cameo from Argentinian pop singer Andrés Calamaro doesn't help. When El Cigala goes on to have a crack at a Kurt Weill number, 'Youkali' (with the strings ripped off from 'Libertango'), and then wraps up the album with a busy, botched version of the Mercedes Sosa standard 'Alfonsina y el Mar', you can't help feeling the whole experience is, like that Cardiff classic of Half and Half (chips and an Indian curry), a fusion too far.

Chris Moss

## Ahmed Dickinson & The Santiago Quartet Latin Perspective

Cubafilin Records

Full Price (50 mins)

★★★★

**Beatle beats, Afro-Cuban style. And a whole lot more**



A government-owned bar named Yellow Submarine has recently opened in Havana. Its Beatles-themed interior – porthole windows, blue-and-yellow interior, Beatles lyrics on the walls – is the latest addition to the self-consciously progressive 21st century Cuba. In one of life's more serendipitous twists, this new collaborative album, *Latin Perspective*, features a re-working of 'Beatlerianas' – songs by Lennon and McCartney arranged by Leo Brouwer, currently CEO of the Cuban National Philharmonic Institute, and a Fab Four fan if ever there was one. Here, seven tracks ranging from

'Yesterday' to 'Penny Lane' are transformed by London-based Santiago String Quartet and the Cuban guitar virtuoso Ahmed Dickinson Cárdenas into lush homages to the likes of Bartók and Stravinsky.

Indeed, it was these last two maestros who inspired Brouwer's 1957 work 'Quintet for Guitar and String Quartet', which is also here – its Afro Cuban rhythms and melodies framed by the classical *sonata* form and freshened and brightened by the young artists involved. Grammy-nominated Uruguayan composer Miguel del Aguila is represented by the quirky, playful 'Presto II', a Latin dance piece flecked with elements of 20s jazz and boasting the sort of irregular time signatures and unusual playing techniques that would floor lesser musicians than the five talents involved here. There's also the pretty, fragmented 'Metro Chabacanco' by legendary Mexican composer Javier Álvarez. All the pieces on *Latin Perspective* require both stellar ability and the sort of musical intuition that makes a good ensemble great. The Santiago Quartet is on a mission to celebrate Latin America's rich concert repertoire. With Dickinson at their side they sound positively joyous.

Jane Cornwell

## Fania All-Stars Our Latin Thing

Strut/Fania

Budget Price (2 CDs, 100 mins)

★★★★★

**Possibly the best salsa gig ever**



This special edition package celebrates the 40th anniversary of a very special night. On Thursday August 26 1971, the stellar musicians and vocalists of the Fania stable crowded onto the stage of Spanish Harlem's Cheetah club to regale a teeming, delirious audience with some of the most exciting music ever captured live. Volumes 1 and 2 of the legendary *Live at the Cheetah* set have now been augmented by a few bonus tracks – including Ray Barretto's sinuous 'Cocinando', which accompanies the opening titles of the film

– and the documentary film that lends this package its title. Director Leon Gast went on to make *When We Were Kings*, the acclaimed account of Mohammed Ali's 'Rumble in the Jungle' with George Foreman. This film, built around the hullabaloo at the Cheetah and intercut with scenes of daily life in El Barrio, is surely its equal and worth the cover charge alone.

Anyone who has ever heard the All-Stars' much-anthologised 'Quitate Tú', one of the four long jams that comprise Volume 1, will appreciate how the vociferous audience helped to cook things up to boiling point. 'Ponte Duro' on Volume 2 goes right off the scale. Once you've witnessed on film the human cauldron that night, the experience of listening to the soundtrack becomes more intimate and still more intense. The various components of *Our Latin Thing* should make this an essential treat for anyone who loves New York, documentary film or peerless live music.

Mark Sampson

## James Hill Man with a Love Song

Borealis Records

Full Price (56 mins)

★★★★★

**Little instrument. Big ideas**



Sophisticated and playful, the songs and tunes on this new album from Canadian ukulele sensation James Hill sound at times as if Oregon's cosmopolitan big band Pink Martini have moved north of the border. The consummate ease with which he wields his uke is matched by a deep-rooted confidence in his songwriting ability. These qualities were honed from a young age, as Hill is a product of a concerted effort to open the eyes of Canadian schoolchildren to the delights of Hawaii's pint-sized guitar. He has gone on to be a leading uke player and teacher, and on his 2009 collaboration with cellist Anne Davison, *True Love Don't Weep*, he revealed a talent as a singer too. Davison joins Hill again on this album, and Hill swaps uke for banjo and piano at times to great effect.

This collection just breezes by – a mix of bluegrass, jazz, junkyard skiffle and brooding singer-songwriter rock-pop – with beautifully observed lyrics flitting between moody contemplation and wry humour. The backing vocals are delightful, the arrangements unexpectedly refreshing. Listening to 'Soap and Water' or the two-part closer 'Voodoo Forever, Aloha', reminds the listener of how fantastic dramatically creative music can be.

What Hill has achieved here is to take the uke beyond its usual territory, where it is either being frantically strummed in a self-consciously comic manner, or plucked with unnecessary gravitas in an effort to



Fania Allstar's Johnny Pacheco with local children from the Spanish Harlem (El Barrio) in New York