Soulful Samba Transcendence: Brazilian Star in the US

SOURCE: [**CHRIS M. SLAWECKI**](https://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/profile.php?id=146)
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If Pedro Moraes had a muse, she'd shake up sweaty samba bars, hips swaying, and turn heads dancing in the street, snaking her way from Rio's bohemian quarter to Bahia and Recife (and on to Mexico City and Liverpool). She'd boogie between the earthy and the erudite, with heady tropicalismo and brainy modernism.

She'd embody the smart samba, lusophone lyricism, and folk funk captured on Moraes's lush album *Claroescuro* (Independant) and now in full force for the singer songwriter's first U.S. tour in September, backed by a coterie of premier musicians who have performed with everyone from [Amy Winehouse](https://www.google.com/search?as_q=Amy+Winehouse" \t "_blank) and Angelique Kidjo (bassist Patrice Blanchard) to Hiromi, Esperanza Spalding and Toninho Horta (drummer Mauricio Zottarelli). With samba and other Brazilian and Latin American sounds as inspiration, Moraes is bringing back the brilliance of Brazil 's 1970s pop heyday, with his literary bents and a passion for traditional beats.

When Moraes was growing up, samba was distinctly uncool. But it had already started to shape his life: His part Eastern European Jewish father met his Afro-Brazilian mother at a samba gathering in Bahia. “She was singing traditional sambas there and saw this handsome gringo, my father. He seduced her playing percussion," Moraes recounts with a smile.

With the advent of forró, a northeastern Brazilian dance style that became big all over southeastern Brazil's big cities in the 1990s, samba also found a new audience, with college kids and young musicians embracing and rethinking songs that stretched back decades. Moraes, found in this scenario his gateway to his musical roots, playing at bars and watching women like the larger-than-life babe of the salsa-samba anthem “Marcela" heat up the room.

“You don't have a set list before the concert. You just sing and play whatever comes to your mind, whatever has to do with the mood and the couples on the dance floor," Moraes explains. “Every once in a while, a guest singer comes up and starts singing a song you've never heard before, and you have to guess the chords and follow along. It was a real musical education for me!"

This education was about more than musical chops, however; samba was a new way to discover old roots. “Listening and dancing to samba," recalls Moraes, “we all felt a sense of belonging that reached far back into our African and Portuguese forefathers." A sense of timing, and what Moraes calls “a peculiar shade of sadness and heartache" that he invokes on “Canção da despedida," based on the sensual yet sorrowful “slow sambas" of Rio.

This longing can spring from the literary, and Moraes draws inspiration from great Portuguese and Spanish poets, to Catalan fishing shanties. It can also jump out of street parties and carnival incantations, like the Ash Wednesday prayers for Carnival to go on forever that Moraes channels on “Samba da Quarta-Feira." Where carnival and samba meet the poetic and spiritual is where Moraes thrives, and he evokes that intersection, imagined as the overlapping of two great cities, on “Coroa e Cara."

“The juxtaposition of Rio Capibaribe, the river that crosses Recife, which is often called the Brazilian Venice, and so-called Rio da Guanabara. The city of Rio got its name from Portuguese explorers who mistook the Guanabara Bay's entrance to the mouth of a gigantic river," Moraes recounts. “It felt like an homage I really needed to pay to Recife , the city that, years earlier, had taught me the deeper meaning of Carnival."

Moraes comes honestly by his love of transcendent images and lusty poetry nestled into popular and folk music. Brazilian songwriters—from Milton Nascimento and Jobim ("Samblefe") to [Carmen Miranda](https://www.google.com/search?as_q=Carmen+Miranda" \t "_blank)'s favorite songwriter [Dorival Caymmi](https://www.google.com/search?as_q=Dorival+Caymmi" \t "_blank) ("Dora")—have long perfected the art of crafting simple songs that pack a powerful literary punch while keeping dance floors hopping.

This approach—tied to a long history of intellectual movements and pop evolution—has sadly fallen by the wayside recently, for both commercial and cultural reasons. “Over the last thirty years, this possibility for negotiating links between different places in our culture has shrunk," opines Moraes. “I'm not a complex composer. I like fun and I like pop, but I don't think it's divorced from subtlety and richness."

Moraes adds another layer of richness by incorporating other Latin dance genres like salsa and tango, another neglected trick of the tropicalist trade. “Playing with salsa is like opening a gift box and trying to learn how to play with a new toy," Moraes smiles. “You don't do exactly what is supposed to be done with it, but rather create your own new games." Such as playing around with the Beatles classic “With a Little Help From My Friends," by setting it to an Afro-Brazilian ijexá rhythm.

This simple playfulness had big goals, however: “I want to be natural and simple, and at the same time, I want to open new windows to the soul," Moraes reflects. “It's about finding a place of transcendence."

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09/25/2010, Sat: New York, NY: SOB's: 200 Varick Street, Basement: Show: 10 pm: PH: 212.243.4940

09/25/2010, Sat: Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Film and Music Festival: Girard Ave Outdoor Stage @ Girard Ave & 2nd St: Show: 1 pm

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10/01/2010, Fri: Austin, TX: KUT FM 90.5: Horizontes Radio Show: Show: 1 pm: PH: 512-471-1631

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