

**MUTANT MEMORIES:
LOOKING BACK WITH
SERGIO DIAS**

If you were asked to name the most radical musicians of the 1960s, you're likely to think of Bob Dylan, John Cage, Frank Zappa, Can, or even Pink Floyd. But just how radical were these musicians? Sure they indirectly challenged "the man" and authority, but were their lives ever at risk? Were they ever forced to flee their country?

One thing is certain: the most radical musicians of the 1960s did not play the Avalon Ballroom or appear at the first Be-In. No, the *truly* radical musicians of the 60s were literally thousands of miles away, on an entirely different planet. On the Planeta dos Mutantes.

From their humble beginnings in 1967, the Mutantes were an entirely new breed of rock musicians. Like the Beatles, who they adored, the Mutantes appropriated, borrowed, and down-right stole musical ideas from a variety of idioms: classical, pop, jazz, country, blues, and psychedelia. But unlike the Beatles, they had the rhythm of Brazilian percussion in their soul – a rhythm that quite emphatically shaped their music. And somehow, their music emerged from a country where individuality was repressed and where "new ideas" were considered a threat to national security.

In 1968, the Brazilian President Artur da Costa e Silva, through the power of the armed forces, decreed "Ato Institucional 5" (AI-5). Established in response to mass demonstrations, heavy criticism

from the Brazilian Democratic Movement, and the rise of free thinkers, AI-5 suspended the National Congress in Brazil, did away with state legislative assemblies, and fully established a total dictatorship. The intelligentsia, artists, and bohemian-types were actively sought out by the armed forces and tortured, imprisoned, or even killed. By 1969, many of Brazil's most important musicians, like Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso, had fled the country.

The Mutantes remained. Amidst the horrific political situation and from within the overly repressed society, the Mutantes and their music miraculously flourished. And they did so without veiling their sound or interests! They were the truly radical musicians of the 1960s. Their freakish name, their wild music, and their unique dress characterized them as openly anti-establishment. Even under the restraining AI-5, the group managed to record their first LP, *Os Mutantes*. A small masterpiece, this record gave the world a glimpse of just how far the rock imagination could stretch. Here was music that rocked as hard as the Beatles, synthesized music idioms from all over the world, and brought popular Brazilian music one step further. The Mutantes' use of experimental distortion and effects was unlike anything else being produced in South America, and their genuine inventiveness – with effects built entirely by brother Claudio – demonstrated a resourcefulness that few bands could claim.

After Rita Lee and brother Arnaldo left the group, it was up to Sergio (the youngest brother) to continue in the

Mutantes tradition. This he did for several years, adding various members throughout the 1970s, until the group could no longer maintain momentum. The music they have left us, with its rich dynamics, Brazilian percussion, primitive distortion, and diverse assortment of styles, will never end. And thanks to the work of David Byrne, who recently compiled a Mutantes "greatest hits" for his *Luaka Bop* label, the Planeta dos Mutantes has been well charted for posterity. *(Ed: Many long-time fans considered the comp to be somewhat disappointing in terms of the material chosen, which concentrated on the ballads at the expense of the more experimental songs, but at least the collection garnered some well-deserved mainstream recognition for the band.)*

PT: I've read that you come from an extremely musical family. Did everyone play an instrument?

Sergio Dias: Yes, they did! My mom is a great concert pianist and composer. Actually she's the first woman in the world to write, perform, and orchestrate a concerto for piano and orchestra. My dad was a great opera singer, in his day, and he is also



a great poet. All of my brothers were involved in music, so I guess you could say that my family was entirely surrounded by art and music.

Did your brothers teach you to play guitar or did you learn on your own?

I'm a self taught musician mostly, though my older brother Cláudio did teach me the first two truly "hard" songs that I learned: "Driving Guitars" by the Ventures and "Guitar Twist." I started on an acoustic six-string steel guitar that actually belonged to my brother.

When did you receive your first guitar?

One day, when I was thirteen years old, I told my mom that I had decided to be a professional musician and that I was going to quit school. She told me "OK, so now that you're a professional go out there, work and earn your money." Using my brother's guitar, I started to give music lessons. And in a matter of six months, I was

making more money than she used to spend on me. So, in return for my hard work, she bought me my first guitar.

What records were around your house growing up?

We had many records in our house in those days: Nat King Cole, Everly Brothers, Duane Eddy, Cely Campelo, The Ventures, Shadows, Les Paul, Brenda Lee, Rita Pavoni, Jimmy Smith, etc. I heard the classical stuff performed live when I went to the Municipal Theater concerts with my mom and dad.

Before Mutantes, I read that your older brother Arnaldo was playing with his group The Wooden Faces. Did you ever play with that band?

Arnaldo is two and a half years older than me. When he was playing in The Wooden Faces, I was into Twist-and-Rock, instrumental music, guitars, guitars, and more guitars! Those were great times. I didn't hang out that much with The Wooden Faces because I was too busy playing in about ten different bands at the time. I

don't really remember any of the The Wooden Faces tunes, but I did sit in on a gig or two.

What were Arnaldo's other pre-Mutantes groups like? Did these outfits ever release any recordings?

Six Sided Jazz was the original band formed by half of Wooden Faces and half of Teenage Singers. When I joined this band it changed the name to Six Sided Rockers, and then Os Seis (slang for "You Guys"). We did our recording debut with Os Seis, and released a 45 single of a song entitled "O Suicida" and one other song. Really great material which I will redo someday.

What was the "scene" like in Sao Paulo circa 1967 or 1968? Comparable to California or New York?

Quite different. There were no drugs in the area at that time, and we were as clean as whistles. In Brazil during the 1960s, we were natural freaks and went out of our minds quite naturally. I guess it was in the DNA or something, because the drugs didn't come until much



along with many others. When we took the stage as the Mutantes, we were booed by the audience for playing with

Our music was never really played on the radio; we were extremely underground. Luckily, André was a very

The Planet of the Mutantes gig on Casa Grande was an incredible show – a total multimedia event (before such



electric guitars and having (in their minds) a totally "Americanized" sound. The majority of the MPB (Musica Popular Brasileira) saw us as a threat to the establishment of the left – can you imagine that? An established Left!?! So we just kicked the hell out of the stage and played. The music was so good that they had to swallow us whole! I remember they had gathered lists with signatures from all the MPB guys to ban us from the festival and from future festivals.

Did your first record get pushed heavily by the music industry guys? Were any of those early songs being played on the radio?

We didn't have any real contact with the "business guys" at that time. We pretty much dealt only with André Midani – the head of the Polygram Label.

avant-garde person and gave us a lot of support.

Did you tour anywhere at that time?

We were very busy in Brazil in those days; we played there all the time. On the whole, we had a closer relationship with France, and we travelled there and performed at the Midem and the Olympia. We also appeared on French radio and television. Around that time, we also played a large show in Portugal. Never had any gigs in the United States or England, though we did play impromptu on the London subway once!

What was so important about the legendary "Casa Grande Theater show" put on by the Mutantes?

things existed!), with film, dance, acting, and of course, music. I remember there were nets thrown on the audience, huge rolling Caterpillars (made of inflated tube tyres) thrown on the audience, and even the band was thrown on the audience – there was no real stage. We seemed to be at the height of our popularity then.

How did A-15 effect your opportunities to tour and play live shows?

We did tour in Brazil a lot, but never throughout South America – it wasn't possible. The A-15 act was responsible for the deaths and torture of so many people. Somehow, we escaped imprisonment. Our image was so young, healthy, and modern that it could have caused the government whiplash and they could have

had us arrested. We did have several threats before concerts and had to evade the police on several occasions. You can understand that we were very upset and scared when they arrested Gil and Caetano Veloso.

How did things change when Rita Lee left in 1972?

It was a difficult time for us. Of course, we all loved each other a lot. I remember when she said she was leaving, me and Liminha wanted to go with her. This was at the time when Rita and Arnaldo divorced. Music and marriage don't mix. As far as our sound goes, the instrumental part grew a lot and we were playing like mad all over the place. Great gigs....

Did you find that the Mutantes sound progressed naturally over the years, even after Rita and Arnaldo left?

It evolved in a totally natural way. We always reflected the times. Of course, there was more musical pressure on me in the 1970s, for Arnaldo and Rita are irreplaceable. But before the individuals who make up the Mutantes, there was the music and the spirit of revolution. I only closed doors with the band when I found that the people around me and the band were drifting too much from the original ideas we represented.

Please tell me about your Lotus Music company? Do you find the record business to be a better scene now than it was in the late 1960's?

Lotus Music was recently created as a label and centre for ideas and art. The first CD is

aimed more at Brazil as it's 70% in Portuguese. I am still tuning up all the business aspects and the internet site, etc. I believe the so-called "scene" is more obscure nowadays; unfortunately money and stardom come ahead of creativity. In the old days, we had more spontaneity all around us and we were investigating virgin territories.

Do you go to the United States often?

After the Mutantes broke up, I believed the next step for me was to learn more. For what else could I do in Brazil? So I went to the U.S. and played with all the cats there and that was great because I had to learn a whole different approach. Nowadays, I live in New York part of the year. In the U.S., I can relax, think, and waste more time in the studio making music.

Any final thoughts on looking back?

In the very beginning, I remember we were always together – all of the Tropicalia musicians – a tribe-like system, where ideas spontaneously grew out of our day to day life. But I guess in the social aspects of the larger picture, we all lost a bit of our naiveté around the same time, beginning with the so called "revolution in 64" and when America lost Kennedy. It was at that time, I believe, that things started to become sour and we seemed to lose the freshness of that beautiful generation.

Written, produced and directed by Marc Minsker. Interview with

Sergio Dias © Ptolemaic Terrascope, Summer 1999

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