

# Reflections on Bossa Nova, An Ageless Musical Style

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## Abstract

Brazil has had a distinctive history of miscegenation, which has led the Brazilian people on an unceasing journey in search of a common cultural and musical identity. This is a process where cultural experiences and social assimilation thrive, reinforcing the notion that through regional diversity music and people come together in an effective intersection of musical practices and ideologies. *Bossa nova* in the mid-late 1950s and early 1960s came to express and answer some of these new ideological questions, by breaking away from previous musical modules, and formulating new aesthetics. This research paper presents the musical characteristics that give *bossa nova* its sophisticated and distinct musical style. It further explores new aesthetics in Brazil and how the voice and the guitar formulated a new guitar groove or “batida diferente” (different beat) that would transform Brazilian music and pave the way for positioning *bossa nova* in the global musical community. As Irna Priore has discussed in her article “Authenticity and Performance Practice: Bossa nova and João Gilberto” of 2008 “music cannot be studied in a vacuum and it is a cultural and human product.”. Within this context, *bossa nova* is a crucial marker and a new melodic symbol for the middle class, embracing a historical momentum of modernization and vision for the future, a transformation of a cosmopolitan perspective into conceptual applications and usage of new aesthetics in Brazilian music.

## Introduction

It has been a little over fifty years since “*Bossa Nova*” was noticed and recognized as Brazilian music. While, there are many discussions of how Brazil appropriated this musical style, everyone agrees it has made a great impact in the global community. No longer viewed as a strictly local musical style, *bossa*

*nova* revealed a musical language flavored by elements of North American jazz with a touch of the conceptual takes of *samba*, making it part of a much larger music scenario.

As stated in Nina Priore's article *Authenticity and Performance Practice: Bossa nova and João Gilberto* of 2008, "*bossa nova* was considered elitist (produced by the upper middle class)." Indeed, this new musical trajectory unfolded in the *zona sul* (southern district) of Rio de Janeiro, in contrast to the existing *samba* music that was being created in the *favelas*, or slums districts of the city. Most importantly, the new music was also responding to Brazil's needs for modernization, a creative process already in progress. But *bossa nova* did not come into being without criticism. The style was labeled "a false musical phenomenon" by the renowned mandolinist and composer Jacob do Bandolim and the "velha guarda" (old guard), for changing the existing aesthetics of the time, and displacing and questioning the national musical representation already established by *samba* and *choro* music. The new aesthetic was a "revira-volta" or turnaround, a sophisticated musical product of an urban environment.

In a dialogue chronologically distant from the beginning of the movement, singer, -songwriter Carlos Lyra, a co-founder of the *bossa nova* movement, stated:

*Bossa nova* was fated to have a short life. It was simply a new musical form to repeat the same romantic and inconsequential words already been said for some quite time. It did not alter the content of its lyrics. The only pathway is nationalism. Nationalism in music is not bairrismo (neighborhood – meaning the local)  
(Castro 1989:344) – My translation –

Under the presidency of Juscelino Kubitscheck, Brazil in 1955 experienced rapid economic growth and a change in the class relationships of the previous decades. His government culminated an exciting time in Brazilian history by moving ahead with its ideals of modernity, including the building of Brazil's new capital Brasília and its modern architectural design. Compelled by new principles, a multi-faceted society began to emerge, breaking away from the

self-conscious individualism, inspired by Europe's avant-garde movement. During Kubitscheck's government, job opportunities increased considerably, and citizens migrated from Brazil's rural areas to the larger urban centers. In music, composers and musicians alike, were experimenting, questioning, and transforming the way harmony would be used, looking for ways to adapt to the sounds of cool jazz, as well as combining it with new musical expressions and variations of *samba* music.

## **THE CONCEPT**

In the early stages of development, *bossa nova* practitioners were still connected to their recent past. By progressively performing this new music, they were able to construct a musical formula based on the adaptation and re-contextualization of these new social and musical values. *Bossa nova* was not just a concept based on the reinterpretation of the melancholic *samba-canção*, (a slow and romantic *samba* song), but an innovative breakthrough and a new aesthetic recipe.

Albrecht Moreno in his article of 1982 "The Significance of Bossa Nova as a Brazilian Popular Music" of 1982 states:

"Its innovative harmonic structure included dissonant tones and frequent key changes; its melodies and bass lines were enriched with chromatic notes; its rhythms were complicated, unexpected and yet typically Brazilian; the interpretations were soft and intimate, definitely in an antimacho style; the orchestras were small, frequently just a guitar, constituting a "less is more" or "small is beautiful" simplicity; and the lyrics attempted a directness and a sincerity that, despite their inherent sentimentality, escaped the mawkishness that so frequently characterized the popular music of Latin America."

Unlike jazz, with its essentially harmonic style, *bossa nova* was provocative and emphasized melody. As result, rhythm and harmonic accompaniment had to accommodate the voice and produce an intimate sound, intended to display a perfect and effortless organization of spontaneous singing.

Singers no longer needed a loud voice to perform the lyrics of *bossa nova*. A quieter, softer voice was needed to bring out the words and poetry. The term *bossa nova* first emerged in the lyrics of the song “Desafinado” (Off Key) by Antonio Carlos Jobim, also known as Tom Jobim, and Newton Mendonça’s first recording of 1958 by João Gilberto’s Odeon label. That came to be recognized as the “new way” or “new knack” that revolutionized Brazilian music at the time (Moreno 1982:130).

Furthermore, *bossa nova* altered several stylistic parameters with its dynamic integration of melody, harmony, and rhythm while de-emphasizing the vocalist as the center of attention. Instead of using the traditional binary samba tempo, a diversified and creative syncopation was placed along with the smooth singing and a preference for the sweetness of the *violão de pinho* (spruce guitar). The bass line accompaniment served to connect or to move the harmony chromatically in a way that one could not notice, or to resolve musical cadences in the traditional way, giving an impression that the melody was always in search of an alternative ending or a surprising cadence. The standard drum set was used for accompaniment, though leaving out the bass drum and using a brush on the snare and rim and playing a pattern, similar to the clave pattern found throughout Latin America. For listeners, more accustomed to the rhythmic drive of urban samba, or the emotional tone of the earlier *samba-canção*, *bossa nova* definitely provided a new aesthetic framework. In a way, *bossa nova* was a kind of indirect protest and a sign of opposition to the more aggressive recordings that dominated the hit parades and radio stations of the time.

## **OTHER CHARACTERISTICS**

Singers from the previous decades that were considered “good singers” had to project their voice and use methods similar to those of “Bel canto” with a flawless technique, purity of vowels, and wide vocal range. These singers approached the melodies with a very sustained tone and vibrato commonly found in classical musical forms. The “*Cantar de peito*” (singing from your chest) or full-throated singing was a concept applied to singers from the previous radio period

or “A Era do Rádio”. From the 1930’s through the 1950’s, radio stations covered large geographical areas and were the only source of information about the government’s political and cultural agenda. Composers at that time include: Carlos Braga (João de Barros), Lamartine Babo, Noel Rosa, Lupicínio Rodrigues, as well as singers: Araci de Almeida, Linda Batista, Ângela Maria, Carmem Costa, Emilinha Borba, Carmem Miranda, Aurora Miranda, Heleninha Costa, Carmélia Alves, Ademilde Fonseca, Zezé Gonzaga, Dolores Duran, Lenita Bruno, Jorge Fernandes, Orlando Silva, Francisco Alves, Silvio Caldas, Ataulfo Alves, Nelson Gonçalves, and others (McCann 2004).

The “Enciclopédia da Música Brasileira” (Brazilian Music Encyclopedia) of 1998 defines *bossa nova* “as a (musical) expression that generically designs a new way of doing something something” (my translation). It also lists Carlos Lira, Roberto Menescal, Silvia Teles, Alaíde Costa, Baden Powel, Ronaldo Boscoli, Nara Leão, Luis Eça, and the Castro Neves brothers as the creators of this music. Some of these musicians were curious to know what North American jazz musicians sounded like, and learned by listening to the guitar of Barney Kessel, or the trumpet and jazz arrangements of Shorty Rogers. Much conjecture surrounds the significance of Johnny Alf as one of the originators of the style. Indeed, due to his purported shyness Alf spent much more of his time listening to records (the music of the Nat “King” Cole Trio and of the strongly classically influenced English pianist George Shearing) and practicing new technical skills on his piano. However, some of his early recordings such as “Rapaz de Bem” already mix traditional Brazilian music and was heavily influenced by American jazz styles and improvisations of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Furthermore, guitarist Charlie Byrd toured in Brazil in 1961 and convinced Stan Getz to record “Desafinado” the following year, thus introducing the “new phase” of Brazilian music to the United States. Indeed, for the most part, international artists were unfamiliar with Brazil’s music and culture, but were fascinated by this new way of making music. Note that U.S. musicians and composers were not even playing the Brazilian versions of the songs. Instead, they were transforming them into a new style of bossa-jazz, which blended the

elements they observed in *bossa nova* and placing them in cool jazz. As this hybrid form was developing in the United States, three individuals in Brazil are credited with being the leaders of the style: Antônio Carlos “Brasileiro” Jobim or just Tom Jobim, Vinícius de Moraes and João Gilberto. Although these artists did not overtly protest the previous music standards, João Gilberto is identified as the key person who actually created and distinguished *bossa nova*, indirectly moving away from the previous norms. Irna Priore’s article: “*Authenticity and Performance Practice: Bossa nova and João Gilberto*”, also further analyzes some of the early *bossa nova* recordings and explores how Gilberto delayed his guitar rhythms and metric dissonance by displacing the singing in the agogic sense and his usage of the melody and lyrics, an accommodation that allowed him to perform an elastic-metric version of this delicate musical texture.

### **João Gilberto’s Guitar and Voice**

Perhaps João Gilberto's major musical contribution to the style was the rhythmic and the melodic sound he created, intertwined with his soft, almost whispering voice, creating a unique texture with his guitar accompaniment. His interpretations were never clichés, always combining and exchanging different rhythmic structures. He would simultaneously sing the melodic phrase based on a different contour or rhythmic figure of the vocal line, while also using a syncopated guitar. This practice was later referred to as “*violão gago*” (stuttering guitar) that became standard in the way he accompanied himself, a style other musicians attempted to copy. Gilberto’s guitar technique intended to place the chord accompaniment between the syncopations of the melody, without ever repeating the same accompaniment, a new idea that would alter the traditional, steady samba pattern. The guitar’s right hand accompaniment is primarily imitating or “re-thinking” the samba percussion instruments, such as the *tamborim* (small frame drum with no jingles) or the implicit *surdo* (bass drum) on an imaginary, constant timeline. His voice takes a light and smoother approach, with an almost instrument-like texture of cool jazz. In a way, the melody was

using the percussive accompaniment of the guitar to suggest a more delicate *samba*.

Furthermore, *bossa nova* in jazz created a permanent subgenre. Paul Winter, a young saxophonist of the era, said that unlike the heavy sound of bebop, *bossa nova* offered something refreshing: a soft voice, gentle sound, and beautiful harmony. But also important, Winter added, "The guitar was not something that was part of our universe, and here was someone doing all this magic in the classical guitar. João Gilberto was a kind of prophet" (McGowan, Chris and Pessanha 2009:69). Thus, perhaps the strongest influence of *bossa nova* in jazz would be the use of the guitar, which was also used by Winter and Luis Fonfá, the acclaimed Brazilian guitarist in the United States. The addition of the guitar to these new repertoires was innovative everywhere. During that time, it was viewed as an instrument of the streets and was not always accepted as a "legit" musical instrument. Besides, the guitar in the United States simply did not have a part in jazz groups and it would be unthinkable to include it the way João Gilberto did. Again, it is apparent that Gilberto was really revolutionary in fostering this new development with the guitar.

### **Bossa Nova Characteristics**

In reference to Priore's article and the contextualization of "*bossa nova* and João Gilberto" and her argument that singers prior to *bossa nova* were mostly concerned with heavy articulations and rubato phrasing, the author suggests that singing *bossa nova* also required a new frame of mind, related to the improvisatory and free aspects of jazz. Some of the musical practices linked to *bossa nova* were about new aesthetics and the handling of musical concepts and theory. In certain jazz circles, composing a jazz tune meant to create a harmonic structure capable of infinite melodic variations, which is not viewed in the same way in *bossa nova*.

"Desafinado", a Portuguese word (usually rendered into English as "Out of Tune", or as "Off Key"), is the title of a *bossa nova* song composed by Antonio Carlos Jobim with lyrics (in Portuguese) by Newton Mendonça. This song and

title for the album won the Grammy for Best Jazz Performance of 1963. The melody is static and the harmony serves to enrich that experience. It also uses an alternate “blue note” in its melody line to create an Augmented 4th (tritone). The original harmony by Tom Jobim is closer to jazz in its morphology, but not in its harmonic function.

Jazz musicians often find it to be very challenging to improvise in *bossa nova*; the melody is self-contained, complex, and does not need any additional melodic material. Also, to re-harmonize or re-arrange it could be redundant. We cannot say that João Gilberto’s voice is being supported by the harmony in the accompaniment. Quite often, it is the contrary, the accompaniment following the voice’s message expressing these melodies without a vocal vibrato or extreme detail on what has been said or the message of the song. It is customary to hear the voice delaying its melodic entrance and the guitar anticipating the harmony to suggest and create syncopation, thus producing a phrase or musical feel that could be called disjunctive.

*Bossa nova* also uses the “spoken Portuguese” language in the text as it is used in Brazilian sensual conversations and declarations of love “soft and smoothly”. The relationship between the flow of text, melody, harmony, and rhythm are created to concomitantly explore and provoke a rich rhythmic groove. In creating new repertoires, composers also pay attention to certain tonalities and the usage of melody combined with harmonic accompaniment to create a “desired” dissonance. As we earlier examined, the guitar often borrows its accompaniment from the samba rhythmic section. The thumb on the right hand is used as the time line and to insinuate the “surdo drum” (bass drum) with the other fingers reproducing the rhythmic drive of the percussion *samba* instruments (Moreno 1982:134) .

In order to achieve the appropriate accompaniment both hands produce the concept of “*violão gago*” or guitar stuttering, which is João Gilberto’s trademark.



Also, bossa nova music has a natural preference for lower key tonality, soft voice and no vibrato, emphasizing different notes and alternated harmony played on the guitar, such as augmented ninths, flat 13<sup>th</sup>, half diminished, and altered bass. The idea of temporal suspension is also present as melodic phrases move forward.

In “*Garota de Ipanema*” Jobim’s ever-popular “*The Girl From Ipanema*,” in which Stan Getz solos behind the whispery vocals of Astrud Gilberto, who was not a professional singer at the time and had to be coaxed into performing the song in English, the melody is the essence of the spoken word and follows its significance and meaning. The song lyrics start by talking about a beautiful girl who walks to the beach every day (Olha que coisa mais linda...) . At the B section (Ah porque estou tão sózinho ...) the melody changes its emotions by switching from happiness and wonder to sadness and longing. Each of the three verses on the bridge modulates to add even more longing to the song. When returning to the A session the theme changes one more time and goes back to its original intent. These types of modulations are distinctive and demonstrate how Tom Jobim handled modulations chromatically, which distinguished his compositions from other types of modulations found in North American jazz (Murphy 2006: 36-46).

## **Conclusion**

These characteristics in *bossa nova* amazed and intrigued Brazilian and world audiences by rupturing former practices as well as introducing and promoting new social experiences on the national and international music scene. *Bossa nova* brought out the sophistication of a carefree and privileged class in Rio de Janeiro who dreamed about (o amor, o sorriso, e a flor) "love, smiles and flowers," the title of the second album of João Gilberto in 1960. While *bossa nova* did change the world perception of music, it did not reflect or change Brazil’s reality, which included other musical traditions from regional subcultures, as well

as the struggle of the lower social classes living in the slum areas next to the neighborhoods of Copacabana and Ipanema where *bossa nova* emerged.

The special relationship *bossa nova* has had with North American jazz led to the creation of a musical style that is neither an imitation of jazz nor a transformation of *samba*, but an interaction of both on a different level that mutually benefits the sum. At the end of the day, *bossa nova* has immensely contributed to the development of a sui generis Brazilian identity, suggesting a closer link to love and beauty in an almost utopic way. *Bossa nova* was instrumental in rebuilding the Brazilian identity not only within Brazil's borders but also in terms of the overall perception of Brazil elsewhere. The style has influenced artists in Brazil who later became leaders of the following MPB and other Brazilian musical styles.

After the great popularity of bossa-jazz in the sixties, the music was cannibalized and reinterpreted by many artists such as Ella Fitzgerald, Elvis Presley, Coleman Hawkins, Curtis Fuller and Ray Charles. Interestingly, the Big Band Bossa Nova album by Quincy Jones produced a song "Soul Bossa Nova" which would later reappear as the theme song of Mike Myers' popular *Austin Powers* comedy movies. The true integration of *bossa nova* with American popular culture not only transformed the musical elements discussed in this paper, but also culturally absorbed the same sophistication that was initiated in Brazil. *Bossa nova* continues to reverberate in the minds of its listeners as an objective response to former practices, a true and revolutionary musical style.

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