

Poetics of Bossa Nova

Today, I'd like to speak about the fiftieth anniversary of Bossa Nova, which already has been talked about a lot in Brazil and, I think, in many other countries of the world this year.

In 1958, on July 10th, João Gilberto, one of the founders of Bossa Nova, released his first record. It was a 78rpm record with a famous song by Tom Jobim and Vinicius de Moraes, "Chega de Saudade", which would be included in an LP album with the same title the next year, 1959.

Before his debut with this song, João participated in Elizeth Cardoso's album *Canção do Amor Demais*, released in April 1958, as a guitarist and displayed for the first time his unique style of playing guitar. In this famous style of representing the percussion of carnival samba on the guitar, he used only four fingers of his right hand.

We can say that Elizeth's album, which contained exclusively songs by Tom and Vinicius, embodies the last form of Bossa Nova before Bossa Nova itself, if we can say so. I will play the song "Chega de Saudade" by Elizeth.

I'd like you to listen to it by paying attention to the initial 'R' in the lyrics.

♪ Chega de Saudade / Elizeth Cardoso

You probably felt that this was a bit different from what is generally thought of as Bossa Nova. There are two definite differences between Elizeth and João: the vocalization and pronunciation of the 'R' in Portuguese.

Elizeth sings in a rich, sonorous voice, similar to *belcanto* in classical music terms. On the other hand, João sings as if he is talking or murmuring to somebody very intimate, similar to *parlanto*.

Please pay attention to Elizeth's pronunciation of 'R.' She pronounces it as a *retroflex approximant* (*regresse, realidade, voltar, nadar*) like 'R' in English, observed in words like Rome, Russia, or better.

On the other hand, João pronounces it as an *uvular trill*, like 'R' in French, observed in word like *Rome, Russe* or *terre*. Keep this point in mind when listening to João's version of "Chega de Saudade".

♪ Chega de Saudade / João Gilberto

I hope you have noticed the difference. This pronunciation was quite new at the time, and João was probably the first singer who used it in the history of Brazilian music.

Other two unforgettable founders of Bossa Nova are, of course, the poet Vinicius de Moraes and the composer Tom Jobim, or Antônio Carlos Jobim.

Bossa Nova became widely known to the world through the the movie *Black Orpheus* by the French director Marcel Camus. The original play *Orfeu da Conceição* on which this movie was based was written by Vinicius. And on the occasion when it was shown at the theater, Vinicius knew Tom Jobim as a newcomer composer.

In the introduction put to the play, Vinicius writes these lines.

«It was in 1942, during a dinner with my friend and American writer Waldo Frank, that what some months later would be called the seeds from which the idea of *Orfeu da Conceição* blossomed appeared. I then accompanied the author of *America Hispana* [Waldo Frank] on all the excursions around favela [slams], macumba [afro-

brazilian rituals], clubs, and ceremonies of black people in Rio de Janeiro, and I felt I was filled with the spirit of the race.

As the conversation continued, we were suddenly overcome, through a process of chaotic association, with a feeling that all those celebrations and festivities we had seen had something to do with Greece: as if the black people, those of Rio in this case, were Greeks in rags.[...]

Later, on a trip I had with the same writer to northern Brazil, the spectacles of *candomblé* [afro-brazilian rituals], *capoeira* [a kind of afro-brazilian dance/martial art], and festivities of the black people of Bahia only solidified this impression» (Moraes 1995: 47).

Vinicius called himself “the blackest white man in Brazil.” In the 60s, after Tom left Brazil for the United States, Vinicius began to work a lot with guitarist/composer Baden Powell, and one of the peaks of the duo’s works is the album *Os Afro Sambas*, which can be interpreted as “the sambas with African influence.” As this title indicates, Vinicius gradually came to find blackness in Brazilian music, especially in Samba and in Bossa Nova.

I think this fact would be disprove to the preconceived notion that Bossa Nova is music of the rich white people living in the residential areas like Ipanema and Copacabana. We may be able to go so far as saying that Bossa Nova has always been *black music* from its inception.

Before meeting Vinicius, Tom Jobim already had a 5-year-career as a composer. His works from this period have received less attention than his later works, but are fundamental to understanding the birth of Bossa Nova.

According to Tom’s biography written by his sister Helena Jobim, young Tom made money by transcribing the songs of the samba composers who didn’t know how to write nor read scores; the roots of the songs Tom wrote during this 5-year period can be clearly traced to sambas – in other words, traditional Samba-songs.

As one example, I'd like you to listen to "Outra Vez", sung by a one of the biggest samba singers of the time, Dick Farney.

♪ Outra Vez / Dick Farney

Many of Tom's songs from this period are full of inconsolable sadness, without that brightness of Ipanema's sunlight nor the ambiguous feeling of *saudade*, a mixed feeling of loss, love, and hope, which Vinicius' poetry would bring to them. Tom's songs, which were recorded by samba singers like Lúcio Alves or Angela Maria, make us think that Tom was a composer of traditional samba, rather than Bossa Nova.

Nevertheless, João Gilberto, with his magical interpretation, turned it into a Bossa Nova song. I will play his version of "Outra Vez."

♪ Outra Vez / João Gilberto

Dick Farney recorded this song in 1954, and João in 1958, so there is an interval of only 4 years between the two. Despite this, I think you felt that the two were completely different. In conclusion, I'd like you to listen to Nara Leão's version of the same song, a female singer called "the muse of Bossa Nova."

♪ Outra Vez / Nara Leão

Actually, this was recorded in 1984, 26 years after João's recording. But it is clear that these two singers are very close in their aesthetics. João's influence on Brazilian popular music was so definitive. This is why we can say that João Gilberto *created* Bossa Nova. So, there is good reason to say that Bossa Nova was born in 1958.

Thank you for your attention.

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