

Bossa Nova

Bossa nova is a sophisticated variation of Brazilian samba that crystallized during the late 1950s in Rio de Janeiro. It featured a new guitar beat combined with an intimate style of singing, sophisticated harmony and melody, and breezy lyrics. In the 1960s bossa nova became an international sensation and was adopted into the vocabulary of jazz.

João Gilberto (1931 -) launched the bossa nova movement in Brazil with a new gentle style of guitar playing and singing. His distillation of the essence of syncopated samba rhythms in a form suitable for the guitar became known as the bossa nova beat:



A typical bossa nova rhythm pattern

Gilberto turned the acoustic nylon-stringed guitar into a popular instrument for the middle class, using it to accompany his intimate and vibrato-free singing style, replacing the crooning style popular at the time in Brazil. His recordings of the first bossa novas in 1958, including “Chega de Saudade” and “Desafinado” deeply affected musicians in Brazil. In 1962 he moved to the United States, where

he lived until 1980, in between tours of Europe and Japan. His performance with saxophonist Stan Getz on the record *Getz/Gilberto* was released in 1964, won several Grammys, and set sales records for a jazz album. It featured compositions by Antônio Carlos (“Tom”) Jobim, including “The Girl From Ipanema,” which became one of the most performed and recorded songs of all time. Bossa nova became an international sensation in an era otherwise dominated by the popularity of the Beatles.

Jobim, one of the greatest popular music composers of the twentieth century, is best known as the composer of the most famous bossas, though ninety percent of his compositions were in other styles. His main instrument was the piano, on which he can be heard on recordings playing sparse fills, counterlines, and occasional chords to support the groove, which is otherwise held down by the guitar, acoustic bass, and light drum set. This orchestration, which was at times augmented with flute, saxophones, trombone, and strings became another signature of the bossa nova style.

A number of the composers from the early days of bossa nova came from the middle class and had formal music instruction. Jobim, for example, studied piano and admired European classical music composers, as well as American jazz writers and bands. Whereas samba is built on simple chord progressions using

mostly triads and minor or dominant seventh chords, bossa nova had a more sophisticated harmony, both in terms of chord progressions and the extended chords which added sevenths, ninths, elevenths, and thirteenth to the voicings.

Vinícius de Moraes (1913-80) was a diplomat and poet, and began a fruitful songwriting partnership with Jobim beginning with songs for the stage version of “Black Orpheus.” Moraes’ lyrics reflected the enjoyment of love, sun, surf, sand, and smiles, and the life of the rising middle class, a refreshing change from themes of tragic relationships often put to music in the samba canção tunes of the 1950s. Foreign audiences miss the beauty in the linguistic dimension, of the poetry and cultural associations in the Portuguese text. Jobim spent years in the U.S. attempting to protect the integrity of the English versions of his songs, and as his command of the language grew later wrote lyrics for some of the songs himself.

Bossa Nova is played gently and usually at a lower volume level than samba. Samba is packed with syncopation, is written in cut or 2/4 time, and emphasizes the second beat in the measure. Bossa nova should also emphasize the second beat in a bar, but there is less syncopation, and the accents are not as strong. This makes it easier to play for musicians in other countries who have not grown up hearing samba. Bossa nova was born in the beach communities of Copacabana

and Ipanema in Rio de Janeiro, predominately by a group of young university-educated middle class musicians who had little social contact with the musicians on the samba scene. It soon moved from their gatherings at the beach and in apartments to nightclubs, and then was taken up in larger venues and television programs in São Paulo, Brazil's business capital. It became the soundtrack to accompany the modernization of Brazil underway on a national scale.

As with all styles of popular music, fashions change. Bossa nova's demise in Brazil was hastened by the military coup there in 1964. Lyrics were censored by the government, and many musicians left the country to work abroad, dissolving the scene at home. Some listeners criticized bossa nova as having become too "Americanized" musically, and for its lyrics not reflecting the new political reality. After being abandoned by the Brazilian public in the 1970s it enjoyed a revival after the country returned to democracy in 1985 and DJs began remixing classic tunes with contemporary beats.

RELATED ARTICLES

Bossa Nova; Gilberto, João; Gillespie, Dizzy; Influence, Brazil; Jobim, Antônio Carlos; Samba

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