

*Interview with Airto Moreira (France) by Robert Willey, published in Percussive Arts Society's Percussive Notes, November, 2010.*

RW: Brazil is a world power in soccer and music, among other things. We understand that you have a large population, and that kids grow up playing soccer, but it's not as obvious where the music scene begins. Why is popular music so strong there?

AM: I think it has to do with the people who colonized the country, the natives that were there, and the slaves. Brazil was the only country in South America that allowed the black people to bring their instruments off the ships, which helped maintain their culture. I haven't studied it that much, but I read that they had a time once a week that they could play and dance, and do a few rituals that were important to them. The traders used to go to Africa and pick up anybody, and everybody, sometimes they would pick up royalty, the King of a huge tribe, and when they got to Brazil they were recognized and treated very specially by their own people, and the Portuguese kind of respected that. They were not as bad as some other countries. That's why we have the popular music, the people's music is so strong in Brazil. There are many rhythms that come from all over Africa and parts of Asia. The rhythm got mixed with European classical and folk music, and formed Brazilian music, making it different from other countries in Latin America.

RW: You were one of the first to play drum set and percussion together. Did that start when you were playing with Hermeto Pascoal?

AM: I first started playing percussion when I was four or five years old. I had a tamborim, some bells, and shakers. I started playing drums when I was fourteen. I went to a Carnival ball with my parents, but when we got to the door they said that because I was young I could only go in if I stayed with the musicians onstage, which is what I wanted to do anyway. The drummer was late, and one of the musicians, an old man named Pedro asked me "Do you know how to play drums? I know you play drums because on Sunday afternoons you come here and play percussion." I told him "Well, I never really played drums, but maybe I can." He said to sit down and try. I played the two main rhythms that they played at that time for Carnival—marcha and samba alegria. They said I could play until the drummer came. He never showed up, so I played from 9:30 at night until 4:30 the next morning with a couple of breaks to eat a sandwich or something. They paid me very good money for that time, and asked my father to let me play with them. Mr. Pedro was a very nice man, and so were my parents, they let me keep playing with them.

I started combining drumset with percussion later when I was playing drums with "Quarteto Novo", with Heraldo do Monte, Théo de Barros, Hermeto and an incredible singer and composer, Geraldo Vandré. He wanted a special sound, and talked to us all the time during the first month we rehearsed. Hermeto could play anything, and always wanted to complicate things in order to make things better for the musicians. Geraldo was always getting on our case, saying "Play Brazil. We are here to play Brazilian music." I would pick up shakers, triangle, and sometimes agogô while playing the kick drum and hi hat.

RW: Those instruments gave it a Brazilian sound?

AM: Yeah, very much so.

RW: When you moved to the United States you became known as a percussionist more than a drummer. Did you switch back to percussion because it easier to get gigs?

AM: There were a lot of percussionists here, but they were from mainly from Cuba and Puerto Rico. There were very few Africans. They didn't have the same instruments I had. I had an arsenal already, 60 or 70 instruments. Brazil has more percussion instruments than other Latin American countries for the reasons I explained before. I went to California in 1967 to bring back Flora [Purim] back to Brazil, where we had met. She had come to the United States a month before to give it a try, with the idea of staying for maybe three months. I was only going to stay for two weeks. My plan didn't work. I stayed in America practically the rest of my life.

RW: Why did you stay?

AM: First of all, Flora didn't want to go back. Also, I started meeting American musicians. Even though I didn't speak English I was able to communicate with them through gestures. They would invite me to sit in on their gigs. I would take a few of my percussion instruments and play with them, musicians like Lee Morgan, J. J. Johnson, Kay Winding, and many others. I liked it, I could play whatever I wanted to. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but I knew that they were happy and accepting what I was doing. I kept sitting in and playing with those guys, and then started playing gigs. I played in many combos with Cannonball Adderley, Cedar Walton, Reggie Workman, and others, and was invited one day to go on the road with Paul Winter for two months. When we got back to New York I got a call from Miles Davis' manager, and then recorded *Bitches Brew* with him. The rest is history. I didn't know it was going to be like that.

RW: By the time you were playing with Miles you must have thought things were going well and you should stay around.

AM: I started playing with Miles about two years after I arrived.

RW: You were one of the first to play avant garde free style percussion. Did that start when you were with Miles? I assume he didn't want you to play samba patterns all the time.

AM: I rarely played samba patterns with him. I played what I heard. Music is totally about communication. I listened and then I played. If you hear something you play that. Percussion is perfect for that, you get all the colors, highs and lows, you can play little flutes or things, or you can play rhythm, or hard rhythm. Miles left me pretty free. I think he liked what I played because he didn't complain. The only thing he told me was one time was "Don't bang, just play." So then I thought I was playing too loud, so I started

playing very soft. We were playing every night at the Village Gate. The next night he said “Why aren’t you playing?” and I said I *was* playing. Then he said “You listen, and you play, OK?” I didn’t speak English well yet, so I called Jack DeJohnette and told him what Miles had said. Jack said, “Well, you listen and you play, man. You play whatever you wanna play, but when you don’t feel like playing, don’t play. That’s what Miles means when he says ‘Don’t bang.’” That’s what completed my concept.

RW: For me there seem to be three types of American musicians involved with Brazilian music—those that just wanted to cash in on bossa nova’s popularity, those that enjoyed the music as vehicles to improvise over (i.e. Sonny Rollins, Herbie Hancock), and then those who some spent more time with the music and Brazilians (i.e. Clare Fischer). Which Americans do you think have gone deepest into it?

AM: Paul Winter was one of them, I don’t know if he’s still playing that kind of music.

RW: Pat Metheny?

AM: In some ways. He likes Milton Nascimento and tries to get that feeling, even though he’s a jazz player. He went to Brazil a lot. Ron Carter is one of the best Brazilian players in the world. He got it right away, he understood and loved it. Cannonball went a little deeper. He was always talking to us, he wanted to know the roots. Dizzy Gillespie, even though he played a lot of bebop and Cuban jazz, he had me and Giovanni Hidalgo playing with the big band. He wrote two or three really nice Brazilian songs—fast sambas.

RW: Do percussionists from Brazil and other Latin American countries combine well, or is it better to have one or the other?

AM: It depends on how good the players are. I can play with Giovanni Hidalgo because he will play Brazilian and also Puerto Rican and Cuban at the same time. He comes up with rhythms that allow everybody to play. It becomes almost the same thing. Giovanni is a very good example of that. There are some drummers that play well, like Mark Walker, an American who lives in New York. He is a beautiful player, plays Brazilian music, not just samba but all kinds of stuff. He plays Cuban music also. He is very smart and sensitive.

RW: How does Brazilian music contribute to an emerging world music, an intersection of music from different traditions, as heard from such artists as Antônio Carlos Jobim, Paul Winter, Paul Simon, Mickey Hart, Oregon, Ivan Lins, Pat Metheny, Astor Piazzolla, Bobby McFerrin, and others?

AM: Brazilian rhythms and music are very open. It’s almost like jazz, because it has beautiful chords that are simple enough to improvise off of very comfortably. The rhythms are not too complicated, and you can improvise almost like jazz on top of rhythms like samba or baião. That’s why jazz musicians always liked Brazilian music when they heard it for the first time, for instance the great saxophone player Stan Getz. He played beautiful stuff. I worked with him for a while. His repertoire was half

Brazilian and half jazz. He loved jazz ballads, and for faster tunes he liked Brazilian songs.

RW: Portuguese and the cultural associations in the lyrics interfere with American audience's understanding and enjoyment of Brazilian music. On the other hand, the exotic sound of the language is attractive, even when its only traces left on an English translation, as demonstrated by Astrud Gilberto's success singing "The Girl From Ipanema." I would think that Flora Purim [your wife] wouldn't have wanted to completely erase the accent from her singing. It's something distinctive, adding another dimension to the sound, like Miles' Harmon mute.

AM: Flora was Gil Evans' first singer. He liked the way she sounded singing Brazilian jazz in Portuguese. He asked her if he wrote an arrangement of a Brazilian song that he liked if she would sing with his band. and she said "Yes, of course!" He wrote a wonderful arrangement of "Naná," a composition by maestro Moacir Santos. It was a big thing, it was beautiful.

RW: Gil Evans was a master of texture and color. Do you think Flora's accent was one of the things that attracted him to her singing, in addition to her being one of the few Brazilian singers that can really swing?

AM: We were friends. We used to hang out with him. He loved Flora. Gil wanted his band to sound really open, without strict arrangements, he wanted to be more open to improvisation. I played with his band for a while, too. The original *Return to Forever* with Chick Corea opened a lot of doors for her, too.

RW: I find Brazilians to be very creative. Do you think that it's a national trait?

AM: Yeah. I think it is the Brazilian way of life. It's not like Europe and the States where you have a *job*, and then you go work at that job every day and then you go back and on the weekends have a barbeque with your kids and then you go again. Brazilians are always doing something else, it's so funny. It's not just about music, there's futebol [soccer], and dancing, and little games and things that they play. It's very creative living. Also, when you have a lot it's harder to be creative, when you have too many things, when whatever you want is there. If you don't have that much you have to compensate, and so you pick up different things, and that's the way you become more creative.

RW: So that's why you don't take every drum you own on every gig—you take just a few instruments and find ways to get the most sound out of them?

AM: Yeah, and also I don't want to have too much over weight on airplanes [laughs].

RW: Synthesizer keyboards now come with built-in samples of Brazilian instrument. What do you think about the recording of agogô, cabasa, guiro, cuíca, surdo, and other instruments, and then having someone make a rhythm track from fixed sounds?

AM: Music is pure energy. Since I was a kid I heard my elders talk about “universal energy,” which is the energy that keeps all planets in balance. We look up in the sky and see all the stars, and then there are all the galaxies. It is beyond our imagination how big it all is, but the energy is one. Positive energy is the universal energy and it is one, in everything. We are inside this energy, we exist inside it. That is where music comes from. We borrow from that as musicians in order to play. When you play live music with real instruments you get the first impact of the sound.

RW: When it is first created.

AM: Yeah. That’s number one. That’s the purest sound, and the most effective. That’s the one that has that energy with it. It comes with that energy. The people when they hear live bands say “Wow, that’s so great!” They like it so much. It’s a first generation sound. If you record that sound, and it goes through some machines and then comes out, that’s a second generation sound. Even at a live show people are listening to second generation sounds. If there’s no electronics involved then that’s first generation sound. What they do with the machines is make a copy of the sound, but it’s not real. It’s sounds very good, very clean and precise, it can be even stronger. You can create whatever you want on top of the samples, but it will never sound so warm and natural as when someone is playing.

RW: It’s always the same little scrape. You can’t have a short scrape or long scrape, it’s always the same, the copy.

AM: Sometimes it’s like a twentieth generation sound. This electronic music is maybe what’s going to be happening in the future. For me, this kind of music is not happening yet. I see and hear a lot of it, but I have never used it myself. In a recording I might enhance a sound with a little reverb or something, but when I play live I never use a machine to process it. If I want a sound with echo or some effect I’ll *play* that sound. That’s a huge difference. I feel bad for the musicians who do that kind of music, because they will never find out how beautiful it is to play an instrument together with other people, and play as part of an ensemble. That is so beautiful. It is a shame that they will never feel that.

RW: Is there anything else you’d like to say about the influence of Brazilian music in the United States?

AM: Hearing Brazilian music for the first time hits people a certain way. People feel part of it. There are artists that make me feel that way, like Salif Keita from Africa. When you hear that man singing and playing with his band it hits you like you belong to it. Brazilian music, being simple and having beautiful melodies, together with futebol [soccer] and the way of dancing and everything, it’s a whole culture that is very easy for people to like. That’s why it influences so much. There are Escolas de Samba [samba schools] all over the States, Europe, and Asia. It’s so funny. I was playing in Malaysia not too long ago and three or four guys invited me to go to a party to hear their samba school with its fourteen members. They picked me up at the hotel and took me there, and it was pretty

good. Everybody was having fun, and they were cooking Brazilian food. I couldn't believe it.

RW: You find those groups in cities across the country. It gives us a little taste of Brazilian culture. I played in one in San Diego, we wore jackets when we played for the Carnival parade, it's not same as Brazil, but the music is so fun to play.

AM: In San Diego they have a good samba school.

RW: Thank you very much for your time and the opportunity to speak with you.

AM: You're welcome.