

MUSIC

Passion and Politics in João Bosco's Brazilian Rhythms

By JAMES GAVIN APRIL 30, 2017

Two centuries of his country's rhythms flow through the fingers of João Bosco, one of Brazil's most fabled guitarists, singers and composers. Now 70, he can stir up a whirlwind of speed and agility, breezing through tricky meters, harmonies and beats from all over Brazil.

"João sounds like an orchestra," said the jazz guitarist Lee Ritenour. "He's got several things going on at the same time. He can be playing a very complex rhythm on the guitar, and at the same time he's singing something completely different."

His virtuosity has made Mr. Bosco a draw in places where Portuguese is not spoken; from Tuesday through Saturday he will display it at Birdland in a rare New York engagement. But back home, his significance is much deeper.

In the 1970s and early '80s, when Brazilians lived under a harsh military dictatorship, he and his lyricist, Aldir Blanc, empowered them with songs that conveyed intense pride and fighting spirit. The messages were often encoded to fool the censors; Mr. Bosco's lilting tunes and rhythms made every song seem to float. One of the duo's hit sambas, "Nação" ("Nation"), lives on as an anthem of Brazil's majesty; it recalls folkloric heroes, the glories of nature, the deities (orixás) who watch over things, and battles won. Beneath it all is his playing, with its rock-steady forward momentum.

Stories about Mr. Bosco's career tumbled out of him as he talked by phone recently from his home in Rio de Janeiro. For all the ease of his playing and singing, he practices relentlessly, he said. "I never studied music formally," Mr. Bosco explained. "Everything came from my intuitive perception."

During the late '60s, he was an engineering student in his home state of Minas Gerais; away from school he experimented with guitar. Mr. Bosco was entranced by Dorival Caymmi, the father of 20th-century Brazilian songwriting, who composed, played guitar and sang as though one were inseparable from the other. Meanwhile, he absorbed every rhythm he heard, from the tribal Afro-Brazilian sounds that played on the radio to the airy pulse of bossa nova. As American jazz trickled into Brazil, Mr. Bosco discovered the time-bending meters of the pianist Dave Brubeck.

In 1970, he met Mr. Blanc, a psychiatry student and sometime lyricist. They began writing together, while still pursuing their professions. After two years, Mr. Bosco heard one of their songs on the radio as sung by a ferocious young star, Elis Regina, who would become his muse. "I had always dreamed of living in Rio," he said; that moment compelled him to move there and take up music full-time.

He and Mr. Blanc joined a vanguard of young, brainy, socially committed musicians and songwriters who emerged in the heat of the dictatorship: Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, Chico Buarque and others. Whatever they wrote, the censors had to approve. "They had no criteria for censorship — just some abstract rules," Mr. Bosco said; one had to keep rewriting and resubmitting, driven by "that very strong will to put your idea into words." He added, "Sometimes it took you to an even higher level of creativity." Often, he added, "the censors lost and the song won."

Four decades after the creation of "O Bêbado e a Equilibrista" ("The Drunk and the Tightrope Walker"), Brazilian audiences still sing along with this masterwork by Mr. Blanc and Mr. Bosco. The song's beginnings can be traced to Christmas 1977, when Mr. Bosco heard that Charlie Chaplin had died and thought of writing a Carnival samba in his honor. He brought the idea to Mr. Blanc, and their imaginations flew. Recalling Chaplin's portrayal of an aging, drunken clown in the movie "Limelight," they spun that image into an allegory of the political circus Brazil had become; between the lines was a call to let those in exile come

home. Ms. Regina performed it “in a manner so soul-stirring and magisterial,” Mr. Bosco said, that audiences knew what the song meant, even if the censors didn’t.

The drive to help a troubled country has never left him. A few years ago he began writing songs with his son, Francisco Bosco, a poet, journalist and philosopher. “Malabaristas do Sinal Vermelho” (“Red-Light Jugglers”) speaks of children who descend from the hillside slums and accost drivers stopped at a red light. The youngsters juggle for tips; but under the influence of drugs, some rob or kill. The words take a compassionate view of Brazil’s social outcasts, some of whom may “claim their share” while others “pay with their lives.” Mr. Bosco deepened the pathos by inviting a choir of children from Rosinha, one of Rio’s most treacherous favelas, to sing with him on the record.

He is old enough now to be their grandfather, but his fingers still fly with the same dexterity. Recently, he said, “I went to a religious space in Salvador, Bahia, and in front of the orixás I told myself that if ever I cannot deliver the music in a way that meets my standards, I would rather become mute.”

He spoke again of his reverence for musical practice. “I study; I concentrate; I give up a lot of things to be able to present music the way it should be presented,” he said. “Music is everything to me. I am alive because I’m singing and playing.”

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