

Article

## Joao Gilberto, the beating heart of Bossa Nova

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**Abstract.** Joao Gilberto died about one year ago in July 2019. To pay tribute to the musician's unique talent, the article explores Gilberto's role and contribution in bossa nova, temporary as a cultural movement, but eternal as a music style. Born in Juazeiro, a town in the North East State of Bahia, where lived until he was 16, he always referred to the big Afro-Brazilian community, as the major influence in the development of his guitar playing. The background of his early years, becoming the inspiration of this innovative rhythmic pulse, were samba and Baião (that means "from Bahia"), and other popular folk-dance music rooted in African traditions. In 1958, "Chega de saudade" historically marked the official beginning of the new sound, the song that launched the bossa nova movement, and João Gilberto's career as well. The article considers then the influence of Tom Jobim (who with the poet Vinicius De Moraes, worked for the theatrical opera "Orfeu de Conceição", better known as "Black Orpheus"). Jobim's music, his intriguing melody, and harmony, plus the poetic Vinicius's lyrics, were the fruitful soil for Gilberto's soothing, melancholic vocal interpretation, and his signature guitar style. The term "bossa nova" means exactly this: "new wave", "new thing", and we could define it, as Afro-European music, born in Brazil. At the end of the fifties, the bossa nova music idiom started to spread out since many US artists toured Brazil in those years. The early sixties were the golden years of the Bossa Nova, with the creation of The girl from Ipanema, a worldwide hit, still one of the most played and recorded songs ever. In 1964, the political crisis, the national economic troubles, and the dawn of a military dictatorship that lasted for more than two decades, were some of the external causes, that affected, besides other fields, the whole music environment. The few years of relative democracy ended violently in April 1964. The following campaign against left-wing dissident, with the CIA direct involvement, created a state of terror, that couldn't be for sure positive for any cultural movement, included music. Followed the long exile of Joao Gilberto that lasted until 1980.

**Keywords:** Afro-Brazilian community, bossa nova, Joao Gilberto.

**Resumen.** Joao Gilberto murió hacia un año, en el mes de julio de 2019. Para rendir homenaje a este músico de enorme talento, el artículo explora el papel de Gilberto y su contribución en la bossa nova, un movimiento cultural temporáneo, pero eterno como estilo de música. Nacido en Juazeiro, una ciudad en el estado noreste de Bahia, en donde él vivió hasta los 16 años, siempre se ha referido a la comunidad afro-brasileña, como mayor influencia en el desarrollo del sonido de su guitarra. El trasfondo de sus primeros años, se ha vuelto la inspiración de este nuevo ritmo, en donde samba y Baião (que significa desde Bahia), y otras músicas folk-dance popular enraizadas en las tradiciones africanas. En 1958, "Chega de saudade" marcó históricamente el comienzo oficial del nuevo sonido. El artículo considera la influencia de Tom Jobim,

la cual música, con las letras poéticas de Vinicius De Moraes, eran la base de la interpretación melancólica vocal de Gilberto. El término “bossa nova” significa: “nueva oleada”, “nueva cosa”, y podemos definirla como música afro-brasileña nacida en Brasil. Al final de los Cincuenta, el idioma de la música bossa nova se desarrolla afuera, puesto que varios artistas estadounidenses hacen el tour de Brasil durante esos años. Al comienzo de los años Sesenta empiezan los años dorados de la bossa nova, con la creación de la canción *La garota de Ipanema*, un hit mundial y todavía una de las canciones más difundida y enregistrada desde siempre. En 1964, la crisis política, los problemas económicos nacionales y el comienzo de una dictadura militar la cual duró más de dos decenios, constituían algunas de las causas exteriores que afectaron junto con otras, todo el ambiente musical. Los pocos años de relativa democracia se acabaron con violencia en el mes de abril de 1964. La siguiente campaña contra los opositores de izquierda, con la participación directa de la CIA, creó un estado de terror que no podía ser positivo para todo movimiento cultural, incluso el ámbito musical. Siguiendo el largo exilio de Joao Gilberto que duró hasta el año 1980.

**Keywords:** bossa nova, comunidad afro-brasileña, Joao Gilberto.

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## 1. Foreword

Nowadays Rio de Janeiro lifestyle and music scene, are very different from what they were when Bossa Nova emerged, with that fresh elegance, laid back good lifestyle, that a visionary middle-class had created. It was “a place where you could leave your bicycle unlocked in a beachside rack, come back at the end of the day, and find it still there” (from “Getz/Gilberto” by Brian McCann, page 115, Bloomsbury Academic 2019). Difficult to imagine something like that in the current reality, facing a 24/7 high level of crime, with violent gangs, riding the city at the loud sound of rap music inside their cars... By the time that bossa became acknowledged and rewarded worldwide, and “The Girl from Ipanema” an international pop success, the ascending parabola had already began to fade, and the magic moment inside its native country, never repeated again.

## 2. Introduction

It’s controversial to define exactly Joao Gilberto’s role and contribution in bossa nova, temporary as a cultural movement, but eternal as a music style, besides the recognition of his unique talent. In a certain way, the more I’ve learnt about him, the more it becomes difficult to give an opinion, due to lack the of direct information, because of his remote attitude, and difficult character, not helpful to understand the man behind the hermetic artist. We don’t have a lot from his own words, but mainly through testimonies of people in contact with him for a while. The resulting portrait talks about a difficult man indeed. After his return to Brazil in 1980 from US he spent almost the last forty years of his life in a form of self-exile confined in a quiet residence in Leblon, a Rio South district, where he passed away in July 2019. He performed live rarely (his last concert dated 2008), usually when he was strapped for cash, in the perpetual debts, and housing issues, that followed him all lifelong. A sort of “Hellhound on my trail” as the lyrics of Robert Johnson, the legend of delta blues:

quite similar in some way to his character, both pushed somewhere else by a constant need to change location, an endless research of a place to stay, that could have been called “home”. Both lives of these iconic musicians, were surrounded by mysteries and legends. Carlos Lyra is one of the few still alive first generation bossa nova composers. Talking about Joao Gilberto, he declared in a recent interview: “I called him Dracula, because he was a vampire. He never came out in the light” (Jazz Times Magazine, Sept 2019, p. 20). Maybe his fame was related to an agreement with the devil, like the bluesman of Mississippi did at the crossroad? We never know, but among a tendency to depression, and a misanthropy that followed him all life long, there were also evidences of a kind of hypochondriac obsession on several occasions. Like when he left US, after three years of permanence, to come back to Brazil for meeting the speech pathologist Pedro Bloch. He was in a pivotal moment of his career, but he believed that he was loosing his voice...quite a strange thing for his style of singing! The doctor anyway, didn’t find anything wrong with it, but he decided, to stop talking (that was not his special also before that!), answering at the phone knocking on the receiver, in a sort of Morse code. Another example of a possible imaginary disease happened still in a very successful period of his life, after the recordings of the “Getz/Gilberto” album.

He was performing every night at the Bussola in Viareggio (Tuscany), possibly the reference venue of the finest musicians during those Italian economic-boom years. His band was probably the best pure Brazilian bossa nova combo ever seen, with Joao Donato on piano, Milton Banana on drums, and Tião Neto on double bass, besides him on guitar and vocals. All of a sudden he quitted, leaving everything behind, to move to Paris, looking for the acupuncturist, Doctor Zappalla, because of a sprain on his right arm, and once again, the doctor was unable to solve his problem. Maybe it was only that constant desire of quitting, and move somewhere else, that pushed him away. He always refused to learn English, although he lived for so long time in US, and this made the communications with the journalists, or people in the music business, more difficult than they already were. This behaviour, perfectly matched with the fact, that he didn’t seem to care very much about his career, but to keep on working just to stay in funds for the next few months. So, giving for granted that he was not an easy guy to deal with, and despite of all these considerations, how could he have become the most iconic bossa nova musician? How could he rose to be its symbol par excellence, the star? His original songs represent a minimum part of this repertoire, mostly basically forgotten, and confined to the chronological and historical value only. Carlos “Tom” Jobim, the indisputable Brazilian great composer, that wrote the signature world famous masterpieces of the genre, was a pianist... but bossa nova has never been associated to the piano, as its reference instrument. I don’t like very much stereotypes, but there are trade-marks characteristics that identify every music style: above all the others, bossa nova is the whispering, soft, fascinating Portuguese vocals, and the nylon strings guitar arpeggios, with that steady rhythm, similar to samba, but different...and nobody else like Joao Gilberto represent all this.

### 3. The Boy from Juazeiro

Rio de Janeiro stood in a leading position, like the gigantic statue of Christ The Redeemer in the words of “Corcovado”: “Da janela, ve-se o Corcovado, O Redentor, que lindo” ( “From the window, you can see Corcovado, The Redeemer, how beautiful”). It

was the de facto capital of the whole country, not being challenged by the inauguration of the new administrative capital, Brasilia, a sort of utopia, a “cathedral in the desert” (... in the jungle in this case!), a project with no history behind it, to support its supposed central role. Rio was the heart of all the changes, the cultural centre of Brazil, and also the motherland where samba had its origins, mainly from habanera, polca and traditional dance music. Its rhythm was complex, with steady beats, and simultaneously syncopated rhythms played by different percussions: this massive amount of poly-sounds couldn't be related to one instrument only, but Joao Gilberto found the way to summarise them on his guitar. The “clave”, that means the “rhythmic cell” played all the way through the song, needed to be simplified, creating a two bars pattern that could fit the style, soon assumed as the new cliché, basically a minimalistic samba. He developed the technique through his original right-hand arpeggio: he played an alternated bass, two notes every measure, with the thumb (root and 5th, generally), sometimes adding a crotchet passing note to the reach chromatically the first bass on the next measure. The harmony was completed by the picking of index, middle and ring fingers, that played the remaining three notes of the chord simultaneously, in counter-rhythm to the thumb. Basically, he put together the beat of the “surdo” (the drum with the lowest tone in a samba ensemble), and the “tambo-rim” (a small drum played with a stick, producing a dry, high sound). It must be considered that the samba guitarists usually strummed the chords with a pick, while Gilberto's new approach always fingerpicked the strings for his “signature guitar style”, that would become a fundamental ingredient of bossa nova, known as the “batida de violão”. Juazeiro, the town in the North East State of Bahia where he was born and lived until he was 16, had a big Afro-Brazilian community, that he always referred as the major influence in the development of his guitar playing.

Besides samba, it was Baião (that means “from Bahia”), and other popular folk-dance music rooted in African traditions, the background of his early years, becoming the inspiration of this innovative rhythmic pulse. But, according to his own words, it was during a particularly troubled period of his life, that his trade-mark sound took shape. Between 1955/56 Gilberto spent 8 months in Diamantina, a small city in southeast Brazil, where Dadainha, his older sister, was living. It was in that house where he found the perfect spot to relieve his depression, and enjoy the artistic isolation he was looking for. There he discovered that the bathroom was a kind of reflecting echo chamber, perfect for listening as his voice, as the guitar, both at a very low volume. In this sort of protective cocoon, he could sing more softly, with no vibrato, moving the accents up and down the beat, anticipating or delaying the attack of the lyrics. He took away the dynamics, mastering the tempo and the pitch, over the steady rhythmic support of his instrument, using the nose more than the mouth, as he was in no need to have a big projection. He could go into a personal “space”, an unexplored area of expression, a place inside where perfection can exist. He modelled his voice, making it close to his own personality, giving a general impression of detachment, of no expectations, but a fluid stream of notes that seemed to flow around in a circular mood. “Chega de saudade” historically marked the official beginning of the new sound, the song that launched the bossa nova movement, and João Gilberto's career as well. He was not the first one to record that tune, previously included in Elizeth Cardoso's album “Conção de amor de mais”, in which Joao accompanied her with the guitar, in two of the tracks. Three months later he recorded his own version of

the song, with Odeon label, having “Bim-bom” an original composition he had written a couple of years before, on the B side of the single. The troubled recordings ended in June 1958, and the difficult launching on the market, were overcome, and between August and December, more than fifteen thousand copies were sold, with a growing interest from the general audience, and from the critics as well. The coincidence of the Brazil team victory in the soccer World Cup in Sweden, that monopolised the people’s attention, plus the difficulties of classifying the product, made the things not easy in the beginning. The producer didn’t understand the potential of that music. It was something different, but was classified as “samba-cancão”, an old fashion samba style, whose main features were a strong romantic voice, steady rhythm, and over-whelming percussions. But bossa nova was nothing like that in reality.

#### 4. “Tom” Jobim & Vinicius De Moraes

In order to understand the real innovation of this song, it’s necessary to analyse its music. Carlos “Tom” Jobim wrote something totally different from what usually done in popular Brazilian music. He was not only a highly educated pianist and composer, with a background from Debussy to the jazz avant-garde, but a sophisticated and experienced arranger too. He gave many signs of his expertise, like when he wrote the melody of “Insensatez” (How Insensitive) over the harmony of the Prelude n.5 of Frederic Chopin, that he was able to handle for his purpose of a lyrical syncopated ballad. For “Chega de saudade”, he doubled the usual length of 32 bars of an AABA standards structure tune, starting in D minor, and moving half of the song to the parallel D major: these two distinct sections brought the complete work to a ABCD structure, in which the 3rd block, could be considered a sort of interlude before the last one. This kind of modulation, minor that goes to major, was not unusual in classical music, but analysing the sequences and the relation of the chords progression, the innovations became more evident, mostly considering that the ultimate target was to write a “pop” song, not a jazz tune. For example, in the first minor section, he started with a downbeat consonant note, but then the melody stays on the upbeat till bar 9, and contains two altered notes (B natural, and C sharp) that belong to D major. Short minor lines in major keys are quite usual in blues or jazz, but not the opposite. Also the role of the lyrics can’t be underestimated to value the revolutionary impact of this song, that became the template, the basic skeleton of the following bossa nova compositions: defining not only the stylistic approach, but also the mood and feeling that they would have brought to the listeners.

We can say without any doubt, that it was the meeting of Tom Jobim with the poet Vinicius De Moraes, marked one of the most successful combinations in the history of music. They started working together in 1956 for the theatrical opera “Orfeu de Conceição”, better known as “Black Orpheus”, and from that point on, the lyricist developed a kind of gracious jealousy for the pianist’s talent, a desire of being his exclusive musical partner. It didn’t happen exactly as he liked, as Jobim also shared composing with Chico Buarque, and Newton Mendonça between others, but considering what they achieved together, it was for sure the right choice for them both. The text of “Chega de saudade” was visionary and fresh, like the whole song, and didn’t have much in common with the soap opera romantic attitude, of “samba-cancão”. That feeling of “saudade”, was basically,

a sort of blues born and grown up in Brazil, with that melancholy that can sound sweet when embraced by the performer... and Joao Gilberto knew how to do the job in the best way. He brought the song to another level of expression, matching perfectly with his interpretation, the mood and groove of the new style he was contributing to create. Here's a translation in English of the original lyrics:

Go, my sadness, and tell her that without her it can't be  
 Tell her in a prayer To come back, because  
 I can't suffer anymore Enough missing her  
 The reality is that without her there's no peace, there's  
 no beauty It's only sadness and melancholy  
 That won't leave me, won't leave me, won't leave...  
 But if she comes back, if she comes back  
 What a beautiful thing, what a crazy thing  
 For there are less fish swimming in the sea  
 Than the kisses I'll give you in your mouth  
 Inside my arms, the hugs shall be  
 millions of hugs Tight like this, united like this, silent like this  
 Infinite hugs and kisses and caresses  
 To end this "living-without-me" business  
 Don't want this "far-away" business  
 Let's end this "living-away-from-me" business

## 5. Bossa Nova

It's quite clear that Jobim's music, his intriguing melody, and harmony, plus the poetic Vinicius's lyrics, were the fruitful soil for what Gilberto had so long searched in vain: his soothing, melancholic vocal interpretation, and his signature guitar style, seemed to have finally found the perfect place. The result was the cool, innovative song, that seduced thousands of fans in a very short time. It was a guitar based arrangement, and this is also remarkable: all of a sudden the accordion, probably the most popular instrument at that time in Brazil, became obsolete, old fashion. The term "bossa nova" means exactly this: "new wave", "new thing", and we could define it, as Afro-European music, born in Brazil.

Musicians that played it, loved to say: "the only thing outside of jazz that swing"... maybe was the African roots they have in common... The complex harmonic structure, with jazz chords, sounded fresh and simple through the gentle interplay of Gilberto's guitar and voice. The rhythmic support was similar to samba, but different, familiar and innovative at the same time. For a new generation of a middle-class youngsters, grown up in the relatively economic prosperity of the 50s, it was something else, cool and trendy. The song became quickly a cult, and Gilberto's "batida de violão", the picking pattern to imitate, soon renamed "that beat" by these ardent players: followers sprang out wherever a guitar was. The expression "bossa nova" was not a new term by itself, it had been used by musicians to call something or someone that sound different, but It hadn't been associated to a defined movement yet. Still in 1959, during the "First Samba Session Festival", an event organised by the university students, and Odeon recording company, it was labelled as "Samba moderno" (modern samba). When Tom Jobim and Newton Mendonça composed "Desafinado", translated in English as "Out of tune", it included in the lyrics the terms "bossa nova" for the first time, and it had in its title and in the melody lines, the complete manifesto of itself. The apparent dissonance of bossa nova was evident since the beginning of the tune, as a proud evidence of being different, with a pinch of snob attitude from the authors, conscious of representing an intellectual elite. I think it's also quite explicit a social belonging declaration, connected to the famous phrase of the German cameras factory: "Fotografei você na minha Rolleiflex". We need to consider that it was one of the best (or probably the best) and most expensive brand in those days, besides the fact

that high technological items from Europe were rare, and precious anyway. It becomes interesting to have a look to the complete 64 bars lyrics (English translation):

If you tell me that I'm out of tune, darling  
 You should know that it causes me great pain  
 Only privileged people have hearing like yours  
 And I have only the one God gave me  
 If you insist on labelling  
 My performance as unmusical  
 Even if I lied I should argue that: This is Bossa Nova,  
 This is very natural  
 What you don't know, nor can you foresee  
 Is that those who sing out of tune do also have a heart

I photographed you with my Rolleiflex  
 It exposed your great ingratitude  
 You just can't talk this way  
 about my love  
 It is the greatest that you can find  
 You, with you music, forgot the essential:  
 In the chest of those who sing out of tune  
 Deep inside, it softly beats  
 In the chest of those who sing out of tune  
 A heart is beating as well

The original phrase: “Que isto é bossa-nova, isto é muito natural” was a sort of affirmation of the self, a declaration of deserving a place in music history, with the confidence of whom that know to get it.

The score was the same thing, showing “its program” in the opening bars: in that Db note on a Gm chord (when played in the usual Key of F major) and repeated in the following ones. That dissonance had been already used before (everything was already experimented in classical music in the XX century), and the flat fifth was part of the famous “blue notes” in black music, but these were completely different music environments. Desafinado 64 bars would had been an hard challenge for most of the singers, but not for Joao Gilberto. This was the field of expertise he knew better, where he felt comfortable, that he had contributed to create, and of which he was a structural part of. His perfect pitch, his ability of modulating between the keys, without changing the expression or the dynamic, allowed him to flow among the melody lines effortless. He doubled and increased the already high performance of the “Chega de saudade” recording, bringing the benchmark of the genre to the next level. The popularity of this new music grew quickly, with a great support of the media, mostly the magazines (O Cruzeiro in particular), and radio stations. It became the trendy music of middle and upper social classes, seduced by its elegant sophistication, in addition to the young generation, that looked at it as the living dream of a new original musical identity. Besides Desafinado, there were other two hits that Jobim and Mendonça wrote together in this period: “Meditação” (Meditation), and “Samba de una nota só” (One note samba), The latter, also recorded by Joao Gilberto the following year, was basically, another “manifesto” song, included in his second album “O Amor, o Sorriso e a Flor” released in 1960, and containing another Jobim’s pearl: “Corcovado” (Quite night and quiet stars). “Samba de una nota só” was a self-explained song in the title concept, putting the accent on the syncopation, just like the other tunes, but using one note only to do that, and stretching it for eight consecutive bars, pushing the original idea to the limit. I believe it was another kind of explanation for the listeners about what’s going on, the innovations brought to the music. Something similar happens when I perform live a tune with a dissonance ending: I try my best to show confidence and satisfaction from my face expressions, just to avoid someone thinking it’s a mistake, instead of a deliberate choice... The composing partnership between Carlos Jobim, living a very fertile and intense period indeed, and Newton Mendonça was not related to problems with Vinicius De Moraes, but simply by the fact of the poet’s absence from the

Rio music scene. The diplomatic commitments had brought him in Montevideo, where he remained for almost a year.

## 6. A rising fame

After the first bossa nova festival, an event created and organised by Rolando Boscoli (a producer and journalist, besides being a musician himself), the interest and enthusiasm around this “new thing” grew among American singers like Lena Horne, Sarah Vaughan, and Nat King Cole. The jazz musicians, always curious of possible new contaminations, were the first to feel a magnetic attraction, also because of sharing familiar harmonic structures as part of their own culture and knowledge. Brazilian exotic visual imagine, a relaxed and iconic picture of love, sun, beaches, and the sea, so fashionable in those years, probably pushed the promotion of bossa nova, like the music score of that picture postcard. The fact that the country had become trendy, could be considered another reason of its global artistic and cultural recognition. Something similar was happening to Italy at the same time: during the economy-boom years, between 1958 and 1964, everything in relation with, was internationally requested and appreciated. From cinema, to music, from fashion to cars and scooters: a winning marketing imagine, a magic wand that turned to gold whatever it touched. Brazil and Italy had two different appeals, related to their own original and peculiar fields of expertise, but with similar results. Roberto Menescal, the author of “O Barquinho” (“Little Boat”), deserve a place (or I like to say “a little place”...), for his contribution in this sense. The tune was inserted in Joao’s third album, a bigger budget production from the label, due to the selling of his previous ones: more than thirty-five thousands copies for “Chega de saudade”, and almost the same amount for “O amor, o sorriso, e a flor”. The bossa nova music idiom had started to spread out since many US artists toured Brazil in 1959, like the already mentioned Lena Horn and Sarah Vaughan, soon followed by Billy Eckstine, Sammy Davis Jr. and Charlie Byrd.

On a contrary motion moving, pianist Joe Donato, one of the most appreciated musicians in Rio, moved to California, joining the local, vivid and open mind scene, and bringing his sound as his main baggage... Mongo Santamaria, Tito Puente, Herbie Mann and Eddie Palmieri were the leading figures of the Latin movement, mostly Cuban and Caribbean oriented before his arrive. Year 1962 was probably the magic one for bossa nova, at least on its native land: in September the dream team took place in Rio, putting together on stage for the first and last time, Carlos “Tom” Jobim, Vinicius de Moraes, and Joao Gilberto, plus a rhythmic section directed by Aloysio de Oliveira, for a show planned to run for a month, that instead lasted for other two, always fully booked. Coincidentally, but maybe not, it was the first time that “Garota de Ipanema” (The Girl from Ipanema) was performed, and it was also the last song that Vinicius and Jobim wrote together. After that event, the poet went to Paris due to his diplomatic service, the pianist moved to New York for what would have become the official coronation of the genre: the concert at the Carnegie Hall on November 21, 1962. In the audience, between others, Tony Bennett, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Gerry Mulligan, Erroll Garner, and Herbie Man... Host of the show, and master of ceremonies, Leonard Feather, that, besides being a pianist and a composer, was one of the most influential and valued music journalist and critics of that



time. Advertised as “New Brazilian Jazz” the concert saw on the stage the cream of the crop, partially already seen in Rio few months before: so the amazing list included Tom Jobim, Luiz Bonfá, Carlinhos Lyra, Sergio Mendes, Oscar Castro-Neves... Last act was Gilberto’s one, and got the longest and louder applause from the public, it was probably the apex of his career. The bossa nova gang doubled the show few days later at the George Washington Auditorium, and the following party was held at The White House, special guests of the First lady, Jacqueline Kennedy.

## 7. Beyond the borders

The diaspora of the bossa nova leading figures was a natural consequence of its increasing popularity and success, as well as the linkage with jazz musicians. They opened their arms to embrace it, adding this style and its original compositions to the mainstream melting pot. In a certain way, the world had discovered bossa nova because of jazz artists had recorded it, so it became quite natural to be absorbed: this thing makes difficult to distinguish where one ends and the other begins, as was already happened before to other music styles. Anyway, I’ve always believed that boundaries in music are simply a shortcut to put in order a records collection, dividing the vinyls inside the boxes, more than a real necessity. Bossa nova ultimate artistic connection to jazz, reached the peak in the 1964 recording sessions, for what would have become its absolute milestone, the “Getz/Gilberto” album. Both the artists were notoriously quite difficult characters to handle, so making them work together was a puzzle, but they did it, and the eight tracks were recorded only in a couple of days. The world popularity of the genre was already well established, as the fame of the two artists, at the top of their careers in those years. The American alto saxophonist had sold one million copies for the single *Desafinado*, from the album “Jazz Samba”, recorded with the guitarist Charlie Bird, consolidating his role of bossa reference player among the US instrumentalists. Creed Taylor, producer of the “Getz/Gilberto” album, insisted to have Astrud, Gilberto’s wife, as vocalist with the English lyrics, in a couple of tunes: “Corcovado” (Quite nights and quite stars) and “Garota de Ipanema”, adding her interpretation to the Portuguese lyrics sang by Joao. Astrud was the daughter of a Rio resident German professor of English language, and amateur singer, with multilingual skills, and lack of accents. She was perfect to create a contrasting effect between the two singing styles: the male perfectly controlled and pitched voice on one side, the female, apparently absent-minded and superficial, on the other. The effect was flashing, and it’s one of the key of the song success: it added a pinch of lightness, that “sandy beach feeling” that was moreover part of the song, and of that Brazilian holiday image I’ve talked about before. The song has been so much overplayed along the years, that it’s difficult to analyse it with “fresh ears”, but if you can do, it’s easy to remain seduced by its beautiful melody and harmony: a big part of this glamor is due to Astrud’s cool approach and simplicity. Although in the beginning she was not planned to be part of the recording sessions, it is beyond any doubt, that Taylor’s intuition turned out to be the ice on the cake of the whole project. It was issued as a single too, making a shorter version that could better suited the pop market and radio stations, becoming soon the international hit that everybody knows. The whole album was a collection of jewels, recognised like an absolute masterpiece as by the critics, as by the fans. After the recordings, Joao hit the road again,

and moved from New York to Europe. Bossa nova was everywhere now: in the supermarkets, or in the elevators, as a simple background, but also in the movie soundtracks and theatres shows, as synonymous of elegance and refined taste.

## 8. A personal consideration

In my opinion, it's remarkable to notice the popularity quickly reached by Desafinado, or Samba de uma nota só, as, after all, by the whole genre, despite the complex and dense harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic structures. I believe that the general audience level of sophistication, and open-mindedness to new "difficult" listenings, have decreased constantly in the last years. The curiosity of something unusual, and the pleasure of discovering unfamiliar sounds, involve an effort for understanding, not welcome by a generation grown up with the instant reward attitude of the smart phones apps. Besides bossa nova, or everything else associated to jazz, I don't think that youngsters fed on flashing tattooed rappers, or "gangnam-style", could have been close to the sensibility and educated ear necessary to evaluate and appreciate high quality music like that. It's not their fault, of course, they have been simply so much exposed to low level commercial music, and not trained to stay focused on a concept for a long, mostly when not easy. As I've said, I'm not talking about bossa nova in the specific: this simple observation could be widely extended. It's enough to think about Mitch Mitchell, drummer of "The Jimi Hendrix Experience": his way of comping was closer to Elvin Jones (John Coltrane quartet), more than to the steady pattern of a hip-hop drum machine. Or thinking about the albums of of "progressive rock" bands, where one track of Pink Floyd, Genesis, or Yes, could last the entire side of their LPs. Emerson Lake & Palmer, sold millions of copies, starting from classical music templates and masterpieces ("Pictures at an Exhibition" was based on Mussorgsky). Today the average listening of a pop hit before skipping to something else, is around 20 seconds. Talking about the lyrics, the gap becomes more dramatic, considering for instance the poetry of Bob Dylan (Literature Nobel prize in 2017), or Leonard Cohen... the confrontation to a rap tune text, is not even possible. I could keep on doing samples like these for ages, but I don't want to start an argument associated to "we were better", or a sterile discussion related to "the old good times". I'm not a nostalgic person at all, and I live the current era, with all its good and bad features and characteristics, always present in every other historical period as well. Woody Allen's "Midnight in Paris" is a great movie about this syndrome of a perpetual nostalgia, that doesn't allow to enjoy the reality we live, a feeling that can't pass an external, not emotional, analysis. I'm only saying that it would have been very difficult nowadays for bossa nova to explode as a global trend, to become such a popular music, as instead happened in its own time. I'm not talking about a niche of passionate listeners, a cultural elite, everywhere always represented, of course. In its golden years, bossa nova was appreciated by a general audience, by average educated people, and its iconic tune, "The girl from Ipanema" was a worldwide hit, besides being one of the most played and recorded songs ever. Of course, it would be a mistake to generalise these considerations, as there are several exceptions to be valued. But... as we use to say, they confirm the rule...

## 9. Brazil Twilight

By the time Joao had made the 1964 worldwide big bang with the iconic album “Getz/Gilberto”, the temporary movement that created Bossa Nova, was already in rapid decline, despite the eternity of the music.

The bright light that illuminated the international music scene, starting from Joao’s version of Jobim’s “Chega de Saudade” in 1958, was growing dim. During these magic years, Brazil lived a period of economic development, social mobilisation and political debate related to race, gender inequality, and wealth distribution: the perfect “soil” for the growth of new ideas. But nothing lasts forever. Brazilian “Primavera”, that means “Spring”, as the title of one of Carlos Lyra’s more famous compositions, had begun to fade, together with its innovative sound. The political crisis, the national economic troubles, and the dawn of a military dictatorship that lasted for more than two decades, were some of the external causes, that affected, besides other fields, the whole music environment. The few years of relative democracy ended violently in April 1964. The reforms that had started under the presidency of Joao Goulart, slightly removing the obsolete large estate rural economy, and promoting the nationalisation of some enterprises of general interest, couldn’t be accepted by the dominant classes for a long. The involvement of US was obvious since the beginning of the “coup d’état”, with the immediate recognition of the new military government, in what seemed to be the never-ending Cold War. The following campaign against left-wing dissident, with the CIA direct involvement, created a state of terror, that couldn’t be for sure positive for any cultural movement, included music, of course. The military dictatorship was the end of the dream, adding other artists to the diaspora followed to the show at Carnegie Hall in November 1962.

## 10. Like Don Abbondio...

Alessandro Manzoni, in his famous novel *I Promessi Sposi*, described the fragility of one of the main characters, the priest Don Abbondio, in these terms: “like a terracotta vase forced to travel near many steel vases”. The place of bossa nova in the music market during the 60s, soon became, like that... The British invasion, and in particular the amazing innovations brought in pop music by The Beatles, in contemporary with rock, and folk explosion, put a new young generation at the centre of the stage, culturally and economically, for the first time in history. That decade saw one of the highest concentration of memorable events in the past century: from the Civil Rights movements, to the Viet-Nam war, from the Space exploration to the Moon landing, from Mohamed Ali to the Beatles, Dylan, Hendrix, the hippy counterculture, and beyond. Joao’s gentle fingertips touch on his nylon string guitar, his whispering voice, his visual image closer to a bank clerk more than to a pop star, couldn’t match with those turbulent changes. In the movie “Forrest Gump”, through the dramatic odyssey of the two main characters, there’s a partial, simplified description of that era: a period of culture revolutions, deep contrasts, political passions, bringing upfront problems and ideals that were quite distant from the peaceful highly educated middle-class that was the most receptive audience of bossa nova. In a very short period, the music that few years before was fresh and innovative, became quickly obsolete, out of the market. Gilberto’s low volume singing, the “tranquil attitude”,

as written in the English lyrics of “Triste”, belonged all of a sudden, to the past era, that couldn’t stand the rock screaming tube amplifiers: a generation gap, not possible to be filled at that time. In the same years, the Jazz avant-garde was going into a more sophisticated and complex direction, that would definitively have dismissed it from popularity. Antony Braxton, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler..., and John Coltrane were pushing to the limits their personal path of sound research, far from the crowd, but supported by critics and intellectuals. It was only through Miles Davis “electric revolution” at the end of the 60s, that jazz recovered from that “ivory tower syndrome” that had isolated it, restoring a relatively good popularity, through the “marriage” with the rock sound and instrumentations. The following so called “Jazz Fusion”, largely born through the diaspora of Miles bandmates, became popular to young audiences, already accustomed to a similar sound, but not so much among the traditionalists, still attached to more acoustic tones. Bossa nova had the venture of being that terracotta vase, smashed between the new pop and rock popular music, and the free-jazz movement, plus the electric jazz course.

## 11. Conclusions

The revolutions described above put several styles and music genres in difficult waters, pushing artists, previously at the top in the charts, to search for new solutions. Bossa nova had changed the landscape of music in such a deep way, that one of the most influential figure in the business ever, Frank Sinatra, invited Jobim to work together in a common project. He was still the most popular singer in the world in 1967, but no more followed by a large amount of fans as before. It was not a fate, or a stylistic choice, but a way to stay on the market with something different from the “Great American Songbook” that nobody seemed to enjoy anymore. In the following album, Sinatra sang in the style of Gilberto, and asked Jobim, to play the guitar in the recordings, not the piano. The trade mark features of bossa nova: the whispered flat and vibrato-free vocals, and the nylon strings guitar patter known as *batida de violão*. Joao Gilberto had won, and put the signature at a such high level, despite of not being part of the recordings. The album “Francis Albert Sinatra & Antônio Carlos Jobim” was nominated as “Album of the Year” at the 10th Grammy Award 1968. Only The Beatles were able to beat it, winning the category with their absolute masterpiece “Sgt Pepper Lonely Hearts Club Band”, the first concept album in history. Gilberto’s beautiful singing, so cool and emotionally rich at the same time, with his sweet floating Portuguese lyrics, deserve a place in whoever have an ear for listening, and a heart for deep understanding. His trade mark steady guitar comping, with his simple but so effective rhythmic structure, remains the benchmark, the starting point for players in searching of the bossa nova sound. His careful choice of chord voicing, sequential step movements in the harmonic progressions, favourite extensions (mostly 9ths) and alterations (usually augmented, Dominant 5b, diminished), are part of the daily practise for every serious jazz guitar player. Thousands of students all around the globe, in academies and universities, learned his style as a must of their artistry, adding to their repertoire the tunes he made famous. These melodies and counterpoint lines, deep into the harmony for their identity, still stand in their beauty. Joao Gilberto stopped to be simply a great artist, becoming a “category”, and reaching an untouchable place in music, no more depending on commercial success, or fashion changes. Despite of his reclusive life since

he returned to Brazil in 1980, where he disappeared much before he really passed away, he remains present, and he will always be, as the reference icon for the music he so much contributed to create.

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