



# THE TRUE BOSSA-NOVA

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRAZILIAN KEYBOARDIST MARCOS SILVA

Marcos Silva's music is melodic Jazz-Fusion, infused with the rhythms and harmonies of Brazil. A native of Rio de Janeiro, his music study began at the age of eight, and he has toured since most of Latin America and the United States. We interviewed Mr. Silva in Berkeley California:

**How did you begin in music?** A: The first thing was that I saw this classical guitar sitting on top of the wardrobe, and I wanted to try it. "Oh, you want to try that?" my father said. "I know these three chords," he said, and he showed me.

But then, I had learned my three chords but I couldn't move them around the fretboard. It was a challenge. I knew three chords but couldn't play a song. And it wasn't rhythmic.

So while I then studied classical guitar, I found myself listening to something different: The Bossa Nova era was just coming in, it was around 1963. Those songs had chords that weren't just triads. When I heard those Bossa Nova chords, I had to play it.

**Your rock band?** A: Yes, with some friends. We played in clubs. Led Zeplin, Steppenwolf. We had a singer who could speak English to sing the lyrics.

**What was your family like?** A: My father worked for some factories that made fabrics. He

took care of the finances. We lived with uncles and aunts and lots of cousins in a big house. Nobody in my family was a musician.

I'm a lot like my father, in that I'm stubborn. It's a good thing. To persist in music, you have to be stubborn. Not like stupid, but you have to keep on and on.

**How did you learn Bossa?** A: In Brazil, you must back up singers. You have no chance of starting out on your own. At sixteen I was playing professionally. I had got a chance to sub in a nightclub, and that led to other jobs. We don't have jazz or popular music schools in Brazil. The learning process in Brazil is that you have to play in nightclubs, with no charts. You learn from recordings, and you play the gig from 11 until 5 in the

morning.

It's tough. One day you've learned all the songs for the male singer, in his key, and the next day it's a female singer, and everything has to be in a different key. The harmony is very complicated, so playing different keys is not so easy.

But I had to do that. I loved playing the piano. Sometimes we'd go to the singer's house and rehearse a little bit, you know. But then you're on your own; you really have to practice.

**Did the other musicians make it difficult?**

A: No, it's more like 'let's try to play without screwing him up.' It's supportive.

**During that time was there one singer who particularly carried you along your way?**

A: Leny Andrade. One of the best singers that Brazil every had. She sang only great music; in fact, at '67 she still does.

**Why was she so valuable to you?** A: Because she also knew how to play the piano. So if I played a different note, she'd say 'Oh, you played something else there ...' And the groove that she had while singing was unbelievable; it carried you along. So exciting. Can you believe how it was growing up, and playing with all these people? These were the best singers in Brazil. It was like electricity. I felt so lucky, and still do.

**What taught you the most?** A: First of all, life. Because when you have to do things that you can't do, you do it. Like what if someone gives me a chart that I can't do technically. I have to find a way to do it.

**What's the most exciting thing you've ever done?** A: Aierto Moreira had written a spiritual mass, and he asked Gil Evans to do the orchestration and arrangement for him. Gil didn't have time and offered it to me. It was a 63 piece orchestra where I wrote every single note, and conducted it. I was 28. I had to do it in two weeks. It really made me stretch out.

**What did you learn from your early years?**

A: You have to work hard, harder than you think, to get what you want. We all say you have to work hard, yeah. But that word 'hard' is not enough.



**American Jazz  
Players could not  
play the real  
Bossa Nova  
rhythm, so they  
did this 'Latin'  
thing with the  
three-two clave  
rhythm behind it.  
That's all wrong!**

**What's the silliest thing you've seen in your gigs?** A: I was doing a show in Panama. The piano leg slid off the edge of the stage, and the piano fell on my lap, and I was having to hold it up. The guy who was supposed to fix stuff on the stage, I'm trying to get his attention, and there was a percussion thing, and he couldn't hear me and I just had to hold up the piano while we were playing.

**What is your style?** A: Simple. I'm a guy that plays what's inside of me and what I learned. I play Brazilian music. I like funk, and Brazilian music, they go together very well. The funk and the Brazilian music are both very rhythmic, and that means you can't be shy. But I don't embellish the peacock. I don't do unnecessary things. If the music is good, you present it simply. If the music is not good, you can call the best musicians in the world to play, and it's going to sound like what it is.

**How did Bossa Nova evolve?** A: The story I heard from Airtio was that people used to play outside the clubs, in the streets, on guitar and they'd sing, and on flute. So maybe 2 am on the sidewalk, and you can't wake up the neighbors, so they had to swing softly.

And they wrote so many songs, sometimes ten songs a day, there was competition going on. Some guy would say "Today I got this chord, see what you think ..." The composition is not necessarily diatonic, or in modes, it's just what sounds good. A lot is composed on guitar.

Before bossa, there was rock and roll, and a simple kind of music ... I was seven years old and my Grandfather listening to the radio, listening to old-style Brazilian classical music, it was quite different.

**If a trio was playing in a Brazilian club from that period, what are the instruments?**

A: You're going to hear guitar, bass, and drums, or piano, bass, and drums. Maybe a singer, maybe not. One chordal instrument, one percus-

sion instrument, and bass.

**The bass player has got it easy!** A: Yes, no problems. Oh bass players complain, "Oh I don't add anything to Brazilian music just by going root and fifth," but they do. Without that bass, Brazilian music is dead.

**What is the authentic Bossa rhythm?** A: Aha! I grew up in Brazil, and spent half my life there, and I never heard a Brazilian drummer play bossa nova the way Americans usually hear it played.

Let me write it down. Here's two measures of 'WRONG', and then there is a correct example. ['RIGHT.']

**Why is this one right and that one wrong?**

A: First, the Bossa Nova is not really a rhythm. The Bossa Nova is a period of time. The true Bossa Nova is music from that period. It's not just the rhythm.

In my opinion, the American guys went to Brazil, and they brought it here -- Stan Getz and Charlie Byrd -- To play that true rhythm on the drums is very hard. So these musicians went out and they played some 'Latin stuff.' And the combination wasn't a happy one, you know what I'm saying? (laughs)

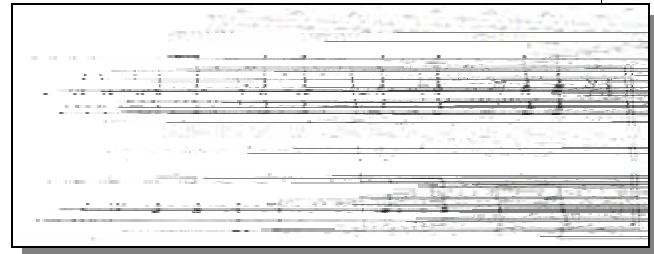
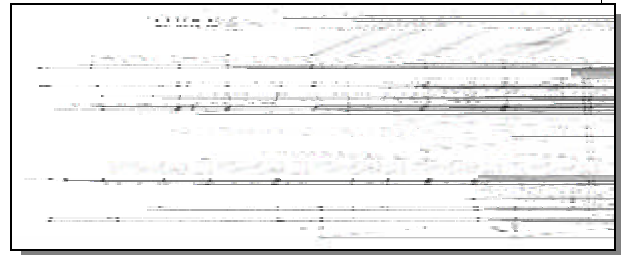
They were playing root-root five-five, like in 'Ricky don't lose that number'.

And I don't know anybody in Brazil who plays the bossa nova with the clave rhythm.

In other words, this whole simplification that says you take the samba clave rhythm and you move the last beat one click later, and now you got your bossa nova, it's just not true.

The clave — we don't have that instrument in

(Continued on page 6)

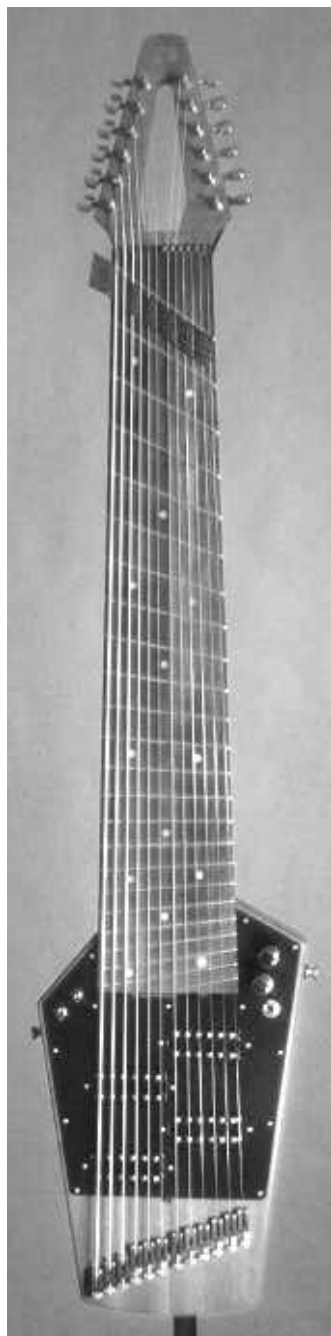


*Note: See October 2001 email issue for complete lesson on how to play RIGHT and WRONG bossa, with sound-clips and chord charts.*



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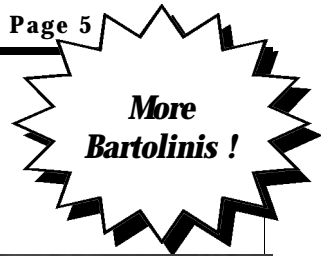
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## TRUE BOSSA: INTERVIEW WITH MARCOS SILVA ...

(Continued from page 3)

Brazil. So the thing about the clave and Brazilian music, I don't know where it comes from. These claves, bongos, and so on, if you hear them in Brazilian music they are just enhancement. They are not part of the music. In Brazilian music, the harmony and melody dictate where the music is going.

**Oh bass players complain, "Oh I don't add anything to Brazilian music just by going root and fifth," but they do. Without that bass, Brazilian music is dead.**

**Why couldn't American musicians like Stan Getz get it right?**

A: Because they were doing something new, and nobody cared. That's the only reason. And also, realize that to interpret Brazilian music in the right way is not easy. It's very exact.

In jazz, you've got a piece of paper (a chart) and it becomes a rough guide. But in Brazilian music, you have to play what is written, you can't change it.

If I'm talking about a C seven flat nine sharp eleven on top of the fifteenth, you've got to play that. In jazz, you can play a C seven anything. In Brazil, the composer wants it just the way he wrote it.

**So we're talking about a layer of subtlety, that's not really part of the jazz tradition?**

A: That's it.

**So we can play *Lester Leaps In* just any old way, but if we play *My Neighbor's Blue Canary* ...**

A: That's right, we have to play just those chords as written.

Also there's a difference in that jazz is often written in four/four time, but Brazilian music is usually in two/four time, and this makes a difference in the lyrics and in the feel. It eliminates swing. You can relax more in four/four, but in Brazilian music the sixteenths are precisely exact with no swing.

**What does it matter what pattern we play?**

A: Well it matters because it goes against the melody. In the song *Corcovado* the way you hear it in the US has different lyrics, and in fact anything you play behind it will sound fine. But the original lyrics have a different feel to them. In fact none of the lyrics in these songs are the same as the original. You've been robbed!

**What is your suggestion for learning this kind of music well and musically?**

A: Simple. Go to the source. Get someone who has a background and study with him. If you live in Idaho and don't have access to somebody local, call me. If you want to learn this music, you must find somebody who knows.

**Do you play other types of music?** A: I don't know how to play be-bop. I can play a bayon, that's Brazilian. I can play fusion.

**How does a person get to be a working professional?**

A: You play a lot, and wait for the luck to happen. Some people never become pro, but it's not really their fault. The musician is totally helpless, being controlled by somebody else. I was lucky. I came here playing with famous Brazilian artists. The gigs came to me. That's just luck.



**I know you play bass, rather well. Do you have any suggestions for bass players?**

A: It's funny. The bass is not a very technical instrument. You don't play around the chord. Brazilians who play the bass, it's a precision that makes everything happen, holding the groove. You don't play the altered chord tones, if you do, you might as well play guitar. We need you here to do this simple thing. You're not going to go all over the fretboard. My technique suggestion would be you have to have heart, a bigger heart than anybody in the band, because you are dictating what's happening. It's not a technique thing. It's mental.

**Advice for beginners?**

A: Speak out. Whatever you hear, ask why is that. Be nosy. Don't be shy. You'll never know if you don't ask. If you go for it, you won't have regrets.

**What do you think about this new touch-style method of play?**

A: If it's going to add to the music, it's great to use two hands, three hands. But if it's going to make the music sound different, that's not so great. In terms of Brazilian music, you're playing two instruments. If it's going to add and add some embellishments that's fine. But it must continue to show accuracy toward the forms we already have.

I love the idea of how the fingers move in the same direction. That's even better than piano, because it's such a natural movement for your two hands.

I know I gave up on guitar because I couldn't play the bass notes like on a piano. I couldn't do the bass and the harmony at the same time. Being able to do this simply is powerful.

Your tapping instrument, it's not exactly a replacement piano, but I can see an advantage. When a guitar and bass play together, sometimes there's something missing. Sometimes the harmony is going to be there; sometimes not. The same goes for the rhythm. But with your instrument, like a piano player, the two parts are one guy, and they should fit together well.



Note: See October 2001 email issue for complete lesson on how to play RIGHT and WRONG bossa, with sound-clips and chord charts.



## ANNOUNCEMENTS

**Newsletter Expands:**

*It seems we have more to give you than will fit in our printed newsletter. So we're expanding with more email issues. The postal and email versions will now bring you different articles and lessons. This means more tapping info, articles, sound-clips, & photos for you. Sign up now to receive BOTH postal and email issues.*

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