

My Brazilian Journey

Michael Tracy

As with most, my interest in Brazilian music started with Stan Getz and The Girl from Ipanema. A local radio station played his music, along with Sergio Mendes and Brazil 66, frequently during my high school years, as I was starting to take playing saxophone seriously. I was just attracted to Brazilian music. In fact, the first tune I ever played in public as a soloist was The Girl from Ipanema. Who would have known how my life would be so connected with their music, culture with long standing friendships. Then, and as now, I enjoyed the sing-able/clever melodies, interesting rhythms, similarity to jazz tunes/groups that I loved and the seemingly joyous way the music was performed – so much life and happiness even when the subject was sad. They have an untranslatable word, Saudade, which means happy sadness. I guess the closest is melancholy but it's more than that.

Life has an odd way of bringing one to what they need and mine was brought closer to Brazilian music and culture when I met Vadim Arsky, a graduate student from Brasilia. He came into my life in 1987. He introduced me to so many elements of Brazilian life and music. I probably learned more thru him than he ever received from his time in my saxophone studio. Since 1998 I have visited Brazil frequently, all of the major cities numerous times, getting to experience their culture and life firsthand. I have coordinated grants and exchanges, student and faculty visiting the States so they could experience jazz. This also included our students and faculty visiting Brazil. I even took a group of forty-one UofL students and faculty on a performance tour of Brazil in 2001. At this time the count is over two hundred folks who have visited each other's country. I have met countless people and built longstanding friendships – all leading me to their music time and time again. Nothing like playing a Bossa Nova, Baião, Partito Alto or any of their other unique rhythms with Brazilian musicians, all willing to help me to understand the rhythmic variety and subtle nuances of how they view harmony and melodic lines. Longtime friends like Renato Vasconcellos, Anderson Pessoa, Bruno Pegoraro, Thiago Wojtowicz, Thomaz Souza, Marcelo Coelho, Oswaldo Amorim, Leander Motta and many more continue to be part of my connection to Brazil.

All this is what led me to recording **Surfboard** and **Hora Certa** with all Brazilian rhythm sections, playing Brazilian standards and originals. **Hora Certa** came from my coordinating six years of student exchanges with students from Brasilia, Campinas and Louisville. Members of the rhythm section, bassist Hamilton Pinheiro and guitarist Eudes Carvalho were part of the exchange. They both contributed original material, as did another exchange student Thiago Wojtowicz, while Hamilton coordinated and edited our work. Thiago and Hamilton returned to receive Master's degrees from our jazz program at the University of Louisville. All became longtime friends and musical colleagues. Hamilton plays a major unifying role in my two most recent CDs – **Hora Certa** and **Fotografia** as a performer, contributing composer/arranger, editor and source of energy and inspiration.

Hora Certa was recorded in Brasilia during a visit coordinating an exchange – two intense days in the studio. The group Hamilton put together – Eudes Carvalho - guitar, Flavio Silva - piano, Pedro Almedia - drums with Hamilton on bass immediately clicked, making it easy for me to join them musically. When Hamilton came to UofL in 2016 to start his degree, he and I immediately understood that we would want to perform that music again and to add new material to a growing Brazilian influenced repertoire. I had already connected with Brazilian musicians through my ensembles at the School of Music, having had a Brazilian Ensemble for since the mid-2000's. Kiko Sebrin immediately came to mind. Kiko is a wonderful percussionist from Sao Paulo who would help to add to the rhythmic elements of the group. Pianist Winton Reynolds and drummer Terry O'Mahoney are longtime colleagues, having played with them for years. I knew that both were keenly interested in Brazilian music, each having traveled to Brazil thus experiencing the music and culture firsthand. We now had a US based group, naming it Hora Certa (Right Time). While performing the materials from the **Hora Certa** CD, we added Brazilian standards, originals and arrangements which has led to the current CD **Fotografia**.

The selections for **Fotografia** developed from over a year of playing new material with the US version of Hora Certa. I especially like how *Joy Spring* was adapted by Cesar Camargo Mariano and Romero Lubambo (check this duo on YouTube if you don't them), such an interesting version and so unlike Clifford Brown's original yet something I think Clifford would appreciate. Coming to their duo CD is typical for me when visiting Brazil – a friend will come to me and say 'you must check this out, it's not anything you've ever heard' – they were right. Mariano's arrangement starts in the key of D which offers a different sound and challenge for the performers. Winton felt compelled to extend Mariano's work with an interlude that gets us back to Joy Spring's typical key of F. I think Winton's extension enhances the overall presentation.

I have always enjoyed Milton Nascimento music and two of his compositions are included – *Viola Violar* and *Certas Canções*. These compositions are quite different yet demonstrate his wonderful melodic and harmonic sense, just a joy to play. Winton's original *Besos* just fit nicely into the sound of the group. It's complicated progression and form challenged us to make it seem effortless. I also think it is quite modern in sound and style.

Hopefully Duke Ellington doesn't mind our playing *In A Sentimental Mood* as we did – a Partido Alto to Samba Funk. Musicians in Brazil are just like any jazz musician and enjoy adapting established literature, so why not? Toninho Horta's *Beijo Partido* is such an unusual and beautiful composition, Hamilton plays fantastic on this.

We also included two tunes by master Brazilian composer and pianist João Donato – *Minha Saudade* and *A Rã* (the frog). Two very different tunes that are just fun to play. That also goes for the Beatles *Blackbird* and João Bosco *Coisa Feita*, indeed festive. Of course no collection of Brazilian music would be complete with a selection by Antonio Carlos (Tom) Jobim. *Fotografia*, the title track, is a fantastic example of his work – lyrical melody, harmonically interesting progression and rhythmically seductive – all are wrapped together in a characteristically simple package.

Brazilian saxophonists/instrumentalists who have influence me, in no certain order:

- Mauro Senise – alto/flute (love his duo with pianist Gilson Peranzzetta)
- Moacir Santos – baritone (more for his compositions and arrangements. He's right there with Jobim and Hermeto. I love his Ouro Negro. He's the best composer for me)
- Zé Nogueira – alto/soprano and Teco Cardoso – bari (both on Ouro Negro)
- Paulo Moura – clarinet
- Victor Assis Brasil – alto
- Carlos Malta – flute
- There are a number of young saxophonists like Ademir Junior, Marcelo Coelho, Anderson Pessoa, Bruno Pegoraro, Thiago Wojtowicz and Thomaz Souza who are excellent. (the last four are former Masters students of mine who are just outstanding human beings and wonderful musicians. I learned as much from them as they did from me).