

The Man From Ipanema

Musical tribute to Antonio Carlos Jobim

BY JEFF KALISS

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AS THE creator of that bossa nova goddess, "Garota de Ipanema" (better known as "The Girl From Ipanema"), songwriter Antonio Carlos Jobim has almost attained the status of a musical equivalent of Zeus. At age 66, he's adored not only by his fellow Brazilians but also by musicians and fans around the globe.

"I saw a concert he did recently on the beach near Ipanema," reports Celia Malheiros, a 34-year-old expatriate from Rio de Janeiro who now composes and performs in San Francisco. "It was very quiet music, on the same stage where they used to do rock and roll, but there were thousands and thousands of people there to see him. Tom [as Jobim is affectionately called] and Pele [the veteran soccer player] are the national treasures."

Singer Claudia Villela, 30, who now lives in Scotts Valley, is the daughter of a Brazilian who grew up with Jobim in Ipanema. "My mom would lullaby me with all his melodies," she said. Although Villela turned to rock and roll like most of her adolescent friends in Brazil, she found her way back to the spirit of the bossa master while studying music therapy at a rehabilitation hospital in Rio.

"There was this little girl, she couldn't hear very well," Villela recalls. "I put her on my lap and put the guitar against the two of us and started just to play ... and I sang the same phrase again and again, like a mantra. We were in this ball of sounds."

Villela and Malheiros headline three nights of this week's Brazilian Vocal and Instrumental Festival, coordinated as a tribute to Jobim by pianist Larry Vuckovich. Brazilian-influenced guitarist Joyce Cooling opens the festival, and other participants include pianist Walter Drummond, bassist Isla Eckinger, drummer Oma Clay, percussionist Louis Romero, and bossa pioneer Helcio Melito.

Speaking from his home near the Jardim Botânico, across a lagoon from the Ipanema of his childhood and youth, Jobim has no pretense to godliness. In fact, he's been having trouble remembering some of the almost 400 tunes he's

written, as he strives to assemble a set of comprehensive songbooks.

"The memory gets a little foggy," Jobim admits in a quiet, modest voice. "And also, a couple of beers make it real foggy."

Some things are clear. "I was supposed to be an architect, and I left architecture because of music," Jobim recounts. "I studied to be a classical pianist, so I used to play Villa-Lobos, as well as Europeans like Bach, Chopin and Debussy."

Among the other outside influences was the cool jazz of the early '50s, which Jobim and his compatriots in the night spots of Ipanema somehow managed to merge with the insistent rhythms of *samba cancao*.

The word "bossa," Jobim says, refers both to a bump on the head and connotes a special talent. "Stan Getz was a guy with a lot of bossa, very light," he says in reference to the American saxophonist who popularized his "Desafinado" in 1962. "And Helcio Melito was a very creative, full-of-bossa drummer in the Tamba Trio," named for the percussion instrument created by Melito.

What made bossa "nova," or new, was its rhythm (usually working five beats against four), its extended jazz harmonies (adding unorthodox sharps and flats and melodic leaps), and its infectious positive attitude.

"THERE'S a philosophical thing about bossa nova, about being happy and living a good life," says Jobim. "Brazilian music used to be very negative, saying, 'Nunca mais, I don't want your kisses,' because we come from things where the blacks have sad music, and the Portuguese, their *fados* are always like a lament."

"Suddenly, bossa nova started to say, 'Let's go to the beach. I want to see that beautiful girl. Let's accentuate the positive,' as [American songwriter] Johnny Mercer once said."

The musical genre was internationally showcased, even before its name was known, in the sound track to the 1959 film "Black Orpheus." Jobim wrote several of the film's songs, including the delicate "A Felicidade."

Three years later, surprised that Americans were interested in his "local songs," Jobim visited a chilly New York City for a Carnegie Hall performance with singer/guitarist João Gilberto, who had demonstrated unequivocally (with then-wife Astrud) that the poetic lyrics of bossa nova are best intoned without vibrato or bravura.

Kept busy with inequitable but demanding American recording



BY LIZ HAFALIA/THE CHRONICLE

Clockwise from above: Jobim, Vuckovich, Villela, Melito, Malheiros: Jobim's songs give a panoramic view of Rio

contracts, Jobim and his lyricists turned out more hit tunes, translated into English as "Wave," "How Insensitive" and "The Waters of March." The effect of the Brazilian import, displaced a few years later only by the British, was confirmed in a telegram that Mercer sent Jobim in 1965. "You influenced all the American music," it read. "Nothing will be the same after bossa nova." The melodies and beat popped up in rock, as well as in the jazz of Getz, Charlie Byrd, Coleman Hawkins, Herbie Mann and others.

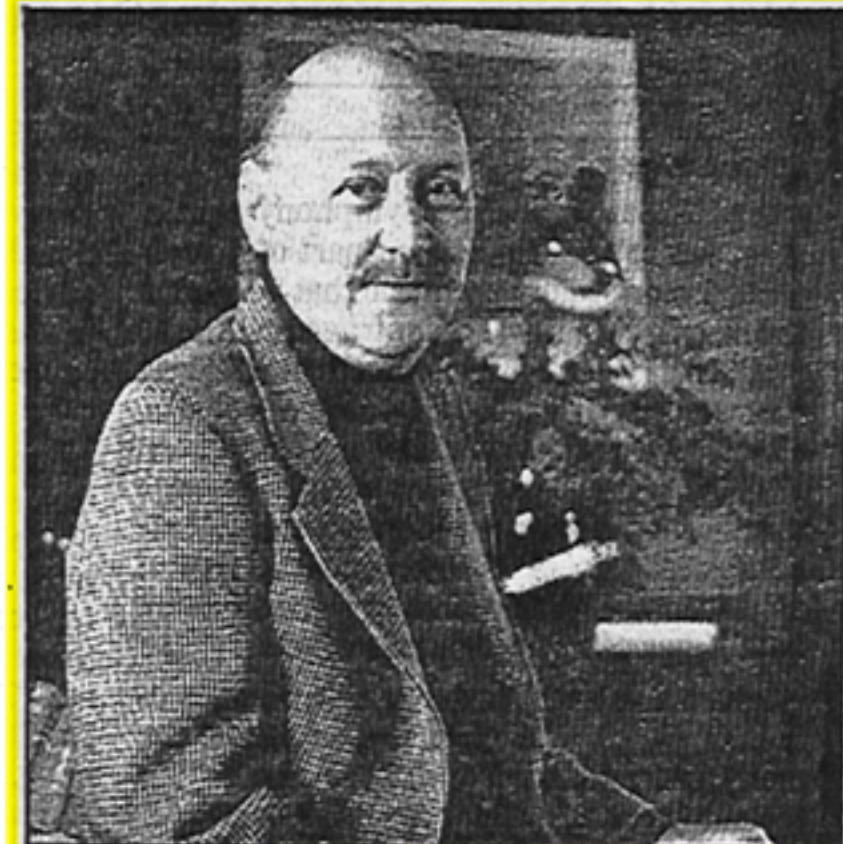
Back in Brazil, "The critics always said that we were Americanized. They were very stern about that," Jobim says. "But they were misinformed because, you see, American music itself has been influenced by everything, including Africa."

The generation of Malheiros and Villela grew up thinking of bossa nova as lounge music, not to be taken seriously. When they emigrated to the United States — Malheiros in 1980 and Villela in 1984 — they found they'd have to rethink their impression.

"If you're Brazilian, you must do Jobim," Villela was told.

"Jobim had found that it was only in the United States that he was able to play all his music, but for me it was the opposite," notes Malheiros. "In Brazil I was playing my music, but when I came here, I had to play Jobim's."

Now they're both happy to be mixing the master in with their own compositions in performance. "Being away from Brazil, it's so great that I'm going deeper and deeper" into the treasure trove of Jobim's known and unknown songs, Villela says. "He gives you the panoramic view," Malheiros



adds. "You can close your eyes, and it's almost Rio, right there ... And I guess that's why Americans like it: They like to feel that they're a part of something."

These days, Jobim says, he likes writing songs about being part of "what is happening to our beautiful little blue planet." His beloved Ipanema, once a dreamy oasis of white sands, clear waters, and the sounds and smells of abundant flora and fauna, has begun to evolve from the overcrowded, polluted tourist trap of the '70s and '80s into an ecologically conscious community.

And the composer himself has evolved to a white-haired, venerable creature of comfort. "I think

I've gotten my songbooks together just in time, because you get lazy," he muses. "And when you have to write down things that you did 30 years ago or more, you get a kind of detachment from the desires or impressions that you had when you wrote the songs."

As an afterthought, he mentions that he just encountered the real-life *garota*, the original inspiration for "The Girl From Ipanema," the day before this interview. "She has two beautiful daughters, with the green eyes and golden skin," he says. "New *garotas*. I'm getting older, they're getting younger. "I can still appreciate it, but from an official distance, with new glasses and a good cane." ■

Larry Vuckovich and his International Trio host the Brazilian Vocal and Instrumental Festival at Kimball's in San Francisco, featuring Joyce Cooling and Helcio Melito on Wednesday, Claudia Villela on Thursday, Celia Malheiros on Friday and Saturday, and Webber Drummond with Helcio Melito next Sunday.