

Bossa Nova pioneer, songwriter and musician João Gilberto dead at 88

By Hiram Lee
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Bossa Nova legend João Gilberto died at his home in Rio de Janeiro on July 6 at the age of 88. Together with composer Antônio Carlos Jobim, Gilberto pioneered a “new wave” in Brazilian popular music during the mid-to-late 1950s. Combining samba rhythms with jazz harmonies, the music he created was remarkable and widely beloved for the quiet intimacy and cool sophistication it projected. When he began collaborating with saxophonist Stan Getz in the early 1960s, Gilberto helped launch a Bossa Nova “craze” in the United States.

Even more than Jobim’s beautiful melodies, the sound of Bossa Nova is in the voice and guitar of João Gilberto. The delicate quality of Gilberto’s singing is spellbinding. His voice was sometimes whisper-soft, and each lyric was tucked inside the melody as carefully as someone carrying a sleeping child to bed while trying not to wake him or her.

Gilberto accompanied himself on guitar, plucking away at his nylon strings with the relaxed, more flexible syncopated rhythms he adapted from samba, especially those typically associated with the small *tamborim* drum. His sound is perhaps best summed up by the English lyrics to “Corcovado,” one of the songs he often sang: “Quiet nights of quiet stars / Quiet chords from my guitar / Floating on the silence that surrounds us ...”

“The Girl from Ipanema,” “Chega de Saudade,” “Desafinado,” “Wave” and “Corcovado” are just a few of the songs he popularized during his career, all composed by Jobim. They have all become standards by now, with countless artists recording their own versions.

To hear the longing in Gilberto’s voice in these and other songs, whispered directly into the listener’s ear, is to suddenly appreciate the extent to which a filter

had been put in place in so many of the love songs of the time, even the best of them. Bossa Nova was more sensual, less rigid. The very sway of the Bossa Nova beat had this element to it. Gilberto was said to have written one of the earliest Bossa Nova songs, “Bim Bom,” while watching laundresses walking in their own rhythmic way to and from the São Francisco River, with baskets of laundry piled on top of their heads.

It is no wonder the music caught on in the United States in that strange period following the decline of early rock ‘n’ roll at the end of the 1950s and just prior to the British Invasion of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. It injected new life into popular music. If you were in the music industry in the early 1960s, it was all but mandatory that you record a Bossa Nova song or album. Gilberto and Jobim, of course, cannot be blamed that Bossa Nova soon drifted from the capable hands of jazz musicians like Stan Getz and Charlie Byrd to the performers of vaguely “Latin” novelty songs and the kinds of recordings that would eventually be piped into elevators. Unquestionably, the Brazilian sound introduced something new to American popular music, an informality and quiet beauty.

In “Bossa Nova: Novo Brasil The Significance of Bossa Nova as a Brazilian Popular Music (1982)” Albrecht Moreno offered this assessment: “The final refinement and successful amalgamation of American jazz and Brazilian samba resulted in bossa nova and is generally attributed to Antônio Carlos Jobim and João Gilberto in the mid-to-late 1950s. Jobim’s compositions preserved and expanded the chromaticism and modern chording that had been evolving in post-World War II Brazilian popular music while adding a delicate and melancholic melody. The melody of ‘Desafinado’ [Out-of-Tune], for example,

makes ample use of slightly dissonant harmonies and chromatic notes at important junctures to express this lament of one who has trouble singing his love song on key. Other Jobim compositions include: ‘Corcovado,’ ‘Garota de Ipanema,’ ‘Água de Beber,’ and ‘Insensatez.’

“Joao Gilberto’s contribution was primarily in the areas of interpretation and rhythmic structure. His delicate voice expressed the intimacy and melancholy of Jobim’s compositions while his rhythm arrangements, a complicated reworking of the samba, gave the music a certain bounce that retained the Brazilian-ness of the form. In the measures below, we can see that Joao Gilberto utilized the basic 2/4 syncopated rhythm of samba but modified it so that the accentuated beats are more varied and less expected.”

Bossa Nova was, in essence, a romantic movement. It emerged from the middle-class youth of post-World War II Brazil. Born in the city of Juazeiro in 1932, João Gilberto himself came of age during Brazil’s transition from the fascistic government of Getúlio Vargas to the Liberal Republic period established by the new constitution of 1946. This would be a period of rapid industrialization, modernization and relatively greater democratization, though it came from the top down and would not last long. The administration of President Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-1961) promised 50 years’ progress in five years’ time.

Like all romantic movements, Bossa Nova had a dual character. The musicians were spurred on by the possibilities of a society that, for some at least, seemed to be opening up to new things, but they worried over the loss of earlier traditions and simpler ways they tended to sentimentalize. Nature was continually celebrated as if an antidote to the hustle and restrictive conformity of big business in big cities. The poet Vinicius de Moraes supplied the lyrics to many of the Jobim compositions Gilberto would record. They tended to be preoccupied with coastal beach life, sunshine and pining after girls or boys. Warmth is the only word to describe almost every aspect of the Bossa Nova sound.

For his part, Gilberto was not interested in the aspirations his wealthy businessman father had for him, and he developed a single-minded devotion to his music. He was the classic artistic personality—a perfectionist when it came to his art and indifferent to

more practical concerns. His family thought he was mad and sent him to be examined by psychiatrists. In his book *Bossa Nova: The Story of the Brazilian Music that Seduced the World*, Ruy Castro recounts one often-told story about Gilberto’s interactions with his doctors. “Look at the wind tearing out the trees’ hair,” he said to one of them, looking out a window. The doctor replied, “But trees don’t have hair, João.” “And some people have no poetry in their souls,” he answered.

Their patient become an international star by the time the *Getz/Gilberto* album (with Astrud Gilberto, João Gilberto’s then-wife, singing distinctively in English on several of the tracks) was released in 1964. It was a smashing success, winning Album of the Year at the Grammys, the first time a jazz recording had done so, and certainly the first for Bossa Nova.

1964 was also the year of the US-backed military coup in Brazil, which would establish a dictatorship that prevailed for two decades. The more confident and hopeful social moods that fed into Bossa Nova would now have the foundations knocked out from under them. New sounds would emerge, performed by more politically minded, oppositional performers for whom romance would not be enough. Their music would be based on the innovations of João Gilberto and the unique “feel” he gave to Brazilian popular music in the 1950s and 1960s.

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