Five Centuries of Music

Chapter One

In Brazil, the first world and the third world exist side by side. Brazil is highly industrialized in some areas and absolutely medieval in others. It is wealthy and miserable, chic Ipanema and mud-and-stick hut, high-tech engineer and Stone Age Indian, computers and bananas. As a common joke goes: if there were no Brazil, someone would have to invent one.

Another argument for Brazil's singularity is that nowhere else on earth do different races, cultures, and religions coexist as peacefully as they do there. That is partly because intermarriage has been common in Brazil for centuries, creating a truly mixed society: most everyone has ancestors from two or three continents. There is prejudice among Brazilians (more on this later), but it is rare to encounter overt racial or religious hatred of the kind that is common in many other countries. A good example of Brazilian tolerance can be seen in the commercial district in downtown Rio called Saara (Sahara). There, Brazilians of Jewish, Lebanese, and Syrian descent all go to the same botequins (bars) at the end of the workday for a beer, a chat, and, on Fridays, a little samba. Brazil has been a real melting pot for centuries, not a mixed salad like the United States. As such, a person in Brazil of Lebanese or Yoruba or Japanese ancestry usually identifies himself or herself first and foremost as Brazilian.

The First Brazilians

Brazil's national character and its rich musical tradition both derive from the profound mingling of races that has been going on since April 1500, when the Portuguese explorer Pedro Álvares Cabral stepped onto the lush tropical coast of what would later be southern Bahia.

Of course, Cabral was not the first human to arrive in Brazil, and long before his foot touched Bahian sand, a long musical tradition had been at play for thousands of years. The ancestors of today's Brazilian Indians migrated from Asia to the Western Hemisphere somewhere between twelve thousand and forty thousand years ago and eventually made their way down to South America. When Cabral first came to Brazil, the indigenous population probably exceeded two million. In their music, they sang songs solo and in chorus, accompanying themselves with flutes, whistles, and horns. They beat out rhythms with hand-clapping, foot-stamping, rattles, sticks, and drums.

Their music did not, however, play a major role in the development of Brazilian popular music. In part, this is because so many tribes were devastated by Portuguese invaders, and the Indians that survived often lost their cultural traditions when they left their native homes and went to live in cities and towns. There is Indian influence in some Brazilian popular music, as seen in songs by musicians like Egberto Gismonti and Marlui Miranda, instruments like the reco-reco scraper, and traditions such as the caboclinho Car-

A simple house in Maranguape, Ceará, in the Northeast of Brazil. ***Photo by Chris McGowan.***

naval groups. But generally one must journey to the remote homelands of the Yanomâmi, Bororo, Kayapó, and other indigenous groups to hear their music.

The Portuguese Conquest

Cabral encountered a land of great geographic diversity that is now the world's fifth largest nation in terms of land mass. Brazil is a tropical country, situated largely between the equator and the tropic of Capricorn. It possesses some forty-six hundred miles of coastline, as well as the vast Amazon River basin, home to the largest rain forest on the planet. While parts of that humid region can receive up to 150 inches of rain a year, Brazil's arid, drought-stricken Northeast has areas that may go years with no rain at all. Other regions include a savannah-covered plateau in central Brazil, grassy plains in the South, and a lush coastal belt that was once covered by Atlantic rain forest.

Cabral sailed back to Portugal and the court of King Manuel I, bearing monkeys and parrots but—to everyone's disappointment—carrying no jewels, silks, or spices. However, royal expeditions that returned to the new continent shortly thereafter discovered something quite valuable: plentiful stands of brazilwood, a tree that yielded a useful red dye and that gave the country its name. Handsome profits from the brazilwood trade soon increased the number of visiting Portuguese and French traders; naturally, the Portuguese crown decided to expand its exploitation of Brazil and get rid of the French interlopers. In 1532 the first settlement, São Vicente, was established near present-day Santos in São Paulo state. The first sugar mills were constructed there and farther north, in Pernambuco.

Some respectable Portuguese settlers came with their families to Brazil. But for the most part, writes E. Bradford Burns in *A History of Brazil*, "the Portuguese monarchs customarily sent out on their global expeditions a combination of soldiers, adventurers, and petty criminals condemned to exile. Women were excluded. The Portuguese female was noticeably rare during the first century of Brazilian history. Her scarcity conferred a sexual license on the conquerors, already well acquainted with Moorish, African, and Asian women and seemingly attracted to dark-skinned beauty." A colony of mixed races was soon in the making, quite different from the civilization that would be created in North America by English

Ângelo Agostinho's depiction of entrudo in Rio in 1880, a rude celebration that was one of the elements of nineteenth-century Carnaval in Brazil. *Courtesy of Agência JB.*

Protestants and their families, who came to settle permanently, kept more of a distance from the natives, and maintained an air of moral superiority with regard to other races.

Whether they were adventurers or settlers, the Portuguese brought their culture to this new land. In the realm of music, this included the European tonal system, as well as Moorish scales and medieval European modes. They also brought numerous festivals related to the Roman Catholic liturgical calendar and a wealth of dramatic pageants such as the *reisado* and *bumba-meu-boi* that are still seasonally performed in the streets. The reisado celebrates the Epiphany, and the processional bumba-meu-boi dance enacts the death and resurrection of a mythical bull. Both are *autos*, a dramatic genre from medieval times that includes dances, songs, and allegorical characters. Jesuit priests introduced many religious autos that eventually took on local themes and musical elements.

In addition, the Portuguese brought many musical instruments to Brazil: the flute, piano, violin, guitar, clarinet, triangle, accordion, cavaquinho, violincello, jew's harp, and tambourine. The Portuguese used a lot of syncopation and brisk, complex rhythms—traits that would help their music mesh well with the music the Africans brought to Brazil—and they had a fondness for lyric ballads, often melancholy and suffused with saudade.

Portuguese song forms included *moda*, a sentimental song that became the *modinha* in Brazil in the eighteenth century; *acalanto*, a form of lullaby; *fofa*, a dance of the eighteenth century; and (later) *fado*, a melancholy, guitar-accompanied Portuguese ballad. And along with their music, the Portuguese brought the *entrudo*, a rude celebration that was the beginning of Brazil's *Carnaval* tradition.

As they settled the new land, planted tobacco and cotton, and built sugar mills, the Portuguese looked on the native peoples as prime candidates for forced labor on the sugarcane plantations being developed in northeastern Brazil. But the Indians were unsuitable—they either escaped to the forest or died from the brutal work. So the colonizers of Brazil looked east, to Africa.

The Africans in Brazil

The first recorded importation of Africans into Brazil occurred in 1538. From that year until the slave trade ended in 1850, historians estimate that four million to five million Africans survived the crossing of the Atlantic to Brazil. (Hundreds of thousands died on route.) This was many times more than were taken to North America. The institution of slavery continued until the Brazilian abolition of 1888.

Three main ethnic and cultural groups made the journey. The *Sudanese* groups (Yoruba, Fon, Ewe, and Ashanti peoples) were brought from what are now Nigeria, the People's Republic of Benin (formerly Dahomey), and Ghana. *Bantu* groups came from Angola, Zaire (formerly the Congo), and Mozambique. And the *Moslem Guinea-Sudanese* groups (Tapas, Mandingos, Fulahs, and Hausa) were taken from Ghana, Nigeria, and neighboring areas.

The African peoples brought their music, dance, languages, and religions, much of which survived in a purer form in Brazil than in North America. In part this was due to the sheer numbers of Africans arriving in Brazil, and the large concentrations of slaves and free blacks in coastal cities such as Rio, Salvador, and Recife. It was also affected by Portuguese attitudes toward their slaves, the influence of the Catholic Church, the existence of *quilombos* (colonies formed by runaway slaves), and other factors.

The Mediterranean world had already experienced great religious and linguistic diversity by the time Cabral first came to Brazil. On the Iberian peninsula Christians and Moors had been enslaving one another for hundreds of years. African influence in Portugal, in fact, predated the settlement of Brazil by several centuries and was quite apparent long after Moorish rule ended in A.D. 1249. Thus, compared with northern Europeans, the Portuguese were relatively more tolerant of, or indifferent to, the native culture of their captives.

The formation of Catholic lay brotherhoods called *irmandades*, beginning in the seventeenth century, also helped perpetuate African traditions. These voluntary organizations functioned as social clubs and mutual aid societies and were organized along social, racial, and ethnic lines. Thus, because many slaves from particular cultural groups in Africa belonged to the same irmandades when they came to Brazil, they were able to continue their homeland traditions. In many cases, they syncretized elements of their own festivals and ceremonies with those of the Catholic Church.

Many irmandades were located in large cities, which were centers of slave importation and in general provided opportunities for enslaved and free blacks to gather together. "Until 1850," writes Diana Brown in her book *Umbanda: Religion and Politics in Urban Brazil*, "thousands of Africans per year were still arriving in Brazil, bringing with them fresh infusions of the cultures of their African homelands." "The numbers and density of Afro-Brazilian populations," she continues, "provided favorable conditions for the maintenance of their cultural traditions; in addition, these large cities offered to these groups a relatively greater degree of free time and movement than was true, for example, of rural plantation life. Not surprisingly, it was these cities in which the various regional Afro-Brazilian religions first developed."

In addition, the Portuguese intermarried extensively, partly because most of the early settlers came without wives. A racially mixed population was soon formed by the offspring of the Portuguese, Indians, and Africans, who intermingled at all levels of society. And many wealthy white officials and planters were exposed to African culture as children by playmates and nannies, and as adults by mistresses and wives.

Quilombos, colonies formed by runaway slaves in the interior of Brazil, also helped perpetuate African culture. The largest and most famous of these was Palmares, established in the rugged interior of northeastern Alagoas state in the seventeenth century. The inhabitants of Palmares made an effort to organize a society based in African traditions. It lasted for several decades and had a population in the thousands (some say as high as twenty thousand). To the Portuguese, Palmares was a threat to the established order, not to mention the institution of slavery. Numerous armed expeditions were mounted against it by the Portuguese crown, beginning in 1654. All were unsuccessful until the last major campaign, waged in 1694, which overwhelmed and destroyed Palmares. Zumbi, the quilombo's famed war commander, was captured and killed the following year. The legendary warrior is still celebrated in Brazilian music today, and his birthday (November 20) has been a national holiday since 1995.

African heritage survives in modern Brazil in a variety of manifestations. Brazilian Portuguese has incorporated many Yoruba and other African words. The cuisine in Bahia is quite similar to that of West Africa. And Brazilian music, dance, and culture in general are heavily rooted in Africa. In fact, Brazil has the largest African-descended

population outside of Africa. In 1980, Brazil's population was 44.5 percent black or mulatto, according to the government census, and it is obvious that more than half of all Brazilians have at least one ancestor from the mother continent.

Issues of Race in Brazil

Yet, despite generations of racial intermarriage in Brazil, racism persisted in an overt form for many years after the abolition, and the government persistently repressed public displays of Afro-Brazilian culture. By the late twentieth century, racial attitudes had changed for the better, yet today they remain complicated, subtle, and often invisible.

It is certainly true that Brazil is one of the most tolerant countries in the world in terms of interracial dating and marriage, which are commonplace. And it is perfectly ordinary to find people of all colors amiably interacting in the bars, beaches, and streets of cities like Rio. People of different ethnicities are at ease with one another socially, especially in the working class—where racial conflict has often been extreme in other countries. Most Brazilians believe that discrimination in their homeland today is more often tied to one's wealth and perceived social standing than it is to one's skin color.

In speaking of Brazil, it is important to remember how different it is from countries like the United States, which follows a "bipolar" model in which anyone with any degree of African ancestry is considered "black." Brazilians, on the other hand, see racial identity as a fluid continuum. They distinguish between *preto* (black) and *mulato* (mulatto) and have words for a wide variety of skin colors resulting from varying degrees of African, European, or Amerindian heritage. Another difference between the two countries is that African Americans are in the minority in the United States, while people with at least some degree of African ancestry are the majority in Brazil.

Beginning in the 1930s, influenced by the sociologist Gilberto Freyre and others, "Brazil nurtured the notions that its multiethnic heritage was a source of strength, and that any social inequality that did exist was based not on ethnicity but on class. The national identity of 'Brazilian' was promoted and ethnic identity as 'black' was discouraged," observes G. Reginald Daniel in his essay "Multiethnic Populations in the United States and Brazil."

Yet there persists in Brazil an association, sometimes openly acknowledged and other times subtly implied, of lighter skin with higher status. Magazine and television advertisements regularly feature models who mostly look as if they are from northern Europe. Black Brazilians are conspicious by their overwhelming presence in many *favelas* (slums) and in their marked absence from the elite levels of business, politics, and society. Mulattos and blacks, especially the latter, suffer disproportionately more from poverty and lack of opportunity than do lighter-skinned Brazilians. Mulattos generally have a higher social status than do blacks, but both have been subject to prejudice in the past.

Daniel and other social critics argue that Brazil's "racial democracy" is a myth, and that racism is a serious problem about which most Brazilians are in perpetual denial. Racial issues have often been addressed in popular music. Since the 1980s, Afro-Brazilian pride has been more frequently asserted—and racial injustices protested—in lyrics by artists like Gilberto Gil, Bezerra da Silva, and Batacotô, and in Carnaval songs written for Rio's *escolas de samba* and Bahia's *blocos afro*. This is a significant change from previous decades, when racial commentary in music usually consisted of jokes at the expense of blacks and mulattos. For ex-

ample, one of the most popular Carnaval songs of all time is Lamartine Babo's 1932 marcha "Teu Cabelo Não Nega" (Your Hair Doesn't Deny It), in which he sings, "Your hair doesn't deny it, mulata / Your color is mulata / But as color isn't contagious / Mulata, I want your love."

The subject of racial slurs in pop songs came to the forefront in 1996 because of lyrics considered offensive to blacks in the single "Veja os Cabelos Dela" (Look at Her Hair) by Tiririca (Francisco Everardo Oliveira), who is himself a mulatto. An activist group filed a lawsuit against the song and a judge in Rio ordered Tiririca's record removed from stores, an unprecedented move that provoked as much controversy as the tune itself. About the situation, *Veja* magazine wrote, "The principal improvement is that it is no longer possible to keep the black in his condition of invisible citizen, without rights—including that of complaining."

Whether one believes or does not believe that racial prejudice is a problem in Brazil, the debate is now fully open.

Afro-Brazilian Religion

While a combination of racism and the Roman Catholic Church resulted in a long-standing suppression of Afro-Brazilian religions, the latter nevertheless became firmly rooted in the national culture and also had a tremendous influence on the development of Brazil's popular music.

The enslaved Yoruba, Ewe, and other peoples brought their animist beliefs from Africa to the New World. These religions are probably thousands of years old, predating Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. Their belief systems were maintained for millennia, not on parchment or tablets, but as living oral traditions in ritual and music handed down from generation to generation. The Yoruba, who had the greatest influence on Afro-Brazilian religion, came primarily from what is now Nigeria.

An outdoor candomblé ceremony in Salvador. *Courtesy of Bahiatursa.*