



Caetano

by
Robert
Myers

PHOTO BY CLAUDIA THOMPSON

Towering above the crowd as though suspended in air at the precipice overlooking Brazil's Bahia de Todos os Santos, his right arm stretched upward, hand tensed with passion, Castro Alves stands frozen in the act of oration. The square in which this statue resides, named after the 19th century poet and abolitionist, is the center of Salvador da Bahia. The city itself, sprawling up and down a series of escarpments and around the enormous half-moon bay from which it takes its name, really has no geographic center.

The Bahian singer-songwriter Caetano Veloso is among the crowd gathered at the base of the statue this second night of Carnival to watch the *trios-eletrico*—bands playing amplified music on huge mobile lorries—performing in the center of the square. It is no coincidence that he chooses this place to celebrate. The songs he has created over the last twenty-five years contain such distinctive and seemingly effortless lyrical beauty that it is tempting to believe music and poetry have always been a single art form in Brazil. Perhaps they have been, and no one realized it until Caetano, as he is known to everyone in Brazil, created such songs as "Lingua," "Uns," "O Leozinho," and "Ca Ja."

Caetano has always written music (forged entirely new musical forms, in fact) by combining elements of many artistic genres. He credits Antonio Carlos Jobim and Joao Gilberto for providing him

with a model of artistic hybridization in *bossa nova*—a musical form which combined elements of *samba*, *baiao* (a Brazilian northeastern folk music), Caribbean rhythms, avant-garde poetry, and American jazz. Caetano and his contemporaries from Bahia—Gilberto Gil, Maria Bethania, and Gal Costa—"worshipped Joao Gilberto and Antonio Carlos Jobim," says Caetano. "We always sang their songs for each other. We were interested in rock-and-roll, as well, but *bossa nova* was very jazz influenced."

By combining *bossa nova* with rock and roll—especially the music of The Beatles—Caetano and the young Bahians created a new musical form called *tropicalia*. They used Bahian Carnival and the *trios-eletrico* as vehicles to test and refine their new musical style, infusing the lyrics of their songs with references to modern Brazilian culture and oblique jabs at the military government. Caetano's song "Tropicalia" served both as a cultural and musical manifesto, and, like so many of his later songs, may be read as a poetic text.

Drawing from the Brazilian modernist poets of the 1920s, Caetano described *tropicalia's* project of artistic assimilation as anthropophagy. "The trio has the piquant taste of cannibalism," he said, "carnavalizing everything it finds in front of it, the most popular classics and the most classic popular songs." Caetano celebrated this frenetic, communal, creative energy in his 1968

Veloso

The Chameleon Poet Of Bahia

frevo (a polka-like rhythm from the Brazilian state of Pernambuco) "Atras do Trio Eletrico," when he sang, "Behind the *trio-eletrico* only the dead don't dance."

Yet the style of the *tropicalistas* alienated almost everyone. "The leftist students thought we were selling out to imperialism, and the government thought we were subversive," Caetano says. Both Caetano and Gil were jailed for two months and finally forced into exile in England.

When they returned, many of their detractors had reconsidered the merits of the short-lived movement, and *tropicalia* is now widely credited with laying the groundwork for the present renaissance of Brazilian popular music. Caetano attributes the inventiveness of the new generation of Brazilian musicians to the deep relationship which exists between pop music and the Brazilian people. "New Brazilian music, no matter how imitative it may be initially," he says, "tends to become more original, and more Brazilian."

The same could be said of Caetano's music. He has refused to settle comfortably in one musical tradition. In the 1970s, he began to sing occasionally in English, not to reach an American audience, but to incorporate various English and American singing styles into his repertoire. He eventually recorded a *bossa nova* version of Cole Porter's "Get Out of Town," as well as a version of Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean"—featuring a coda from The Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby"—in a down-tempo vocal style reminiscent of Billie Holiday's Verve recordings of the 1950s. He performed *fados*—lyrical ballads from Portugal—by the Portuguese singer-composer Amalia Rodrigues, and also recorded a melodic interpretation of the pulsating anthem "Depois Que Ile Passar," by the Afro-Bahian Carnival group, or *bloco-afro*, Ile Aiye.

On the 1986 live album *Totalmente Demais*, he seamlessly intersperses his own compositions with the rock title song and interpretations of classic *bossa novas*, *baias*, and a *samba* by Noel Rosa, the renowned composer of the 1930s. On his most recent album, *Caetano*, he performs everything from a Tito Puente-style *salsa* to a song combining country-rock and *baiao*. There is even a funk song called "Eu Sou Neguinha" ("I'm a Young Black Girl"), which is a mocking tribute to his favorite contemporary North American singer, Prince.

On *Caetano Veloso*, his only album produced in the United States, he again sings in varying styles, accompanied only by his acoustic guitar. His voice is so self-assured that each composition sounds and reads like a poem crafted by a master at the peak of his powers. He sings about his hometown of Santa Amaro, his father's death, his artistic relationship with Gilberto Gil and Joao Gilberto, and the planet Earth in a song that is both ballad and hymn, called "Terra."

Caetano, when he is not touring, splits his time between an apartment in Leblon in Rio and a modest home near Ondina Beach in Salvador. During Carnival his house in Salvador seems as important a location for experiencing the celebration as the Praca Castro Alves—the square in which Alves' statue stands. Milton Nascimento and Moraes Moreira stop by for long conversations on the back porch. The music on the record player alternates between American rap and the album *Egito Madagascar*, by Olodum—the most popular *bloco-afro* at this year's Carnival—while Luiz Caldas' *trio-eletrico* rehearses on the streets in front of the house. On the table in the living room are books by Goethe, Rimbaud, Wallace Stevens, and Joao Cabral de Melo Neto.

One night Caetano and his friends and relatives gather in front of the television set to watch the Carnival parade in Rio, critiquing the various *escolas-de-samba*, or samba schools. The next night he stands in the garden in the backyard reading a poem by the 17th century Bahian poet Gregorio de Mattos for a film documentary about Carnival. Caetano does the reading perfectly on the first take. He knows the poem and the poet well.

Gregorio de Mattos was an intensely religious man who wrote classical sonnets, improvised verse sung to the accompaniment of the viola, and wrote scathing satires of the Bahian authorities, who eventually forced him into exile. Since he wrote in so many styles and his poetry was not collected until after his death, the authorship of many of his works is in doubt.

One cannot help but wonder if some archivist two centuries from now, compiling the works of singer-composer Caetano Veloso, will not experience similar confusion or astonishment at the breadth and beauty of Caetano's artistic achievements.