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Globalization and Brazilian Jazz Artists

by AC

1. Introduction

Brazilian music is known and has been gaining praise around the western world, especially since the second half of the last century. In the late 50's, with the huge success of *bossa nova* the music of Brazil almost became present in the main venues such as movies, music festivals and record stores worldwide. Since then, Brazilian music has been associated with jazz and tunes like *Desafinado*, *Girl from Ipanema* and *Quiet Nights (Corcovado)*, and as it is now, these songs have become part of the main core of the jazz standard repertoire. The widespread presence in the 60's and 70's of *bossa nova* created a new interest in the music of a land that even though a bit far away could offer new possibilities for the jazz audiences around the globe. In that period, when globalization was a word not present in anybody's mind and the music industry executives were still mesmerized by the power that rock and pop music could have in their sales, the main attraction that Brazilian music offered was in its musical elements such as harmony, melody, and rhythm making a immediate connection with jazz. Songs would work better in instrumental versions whereas once only someone who could understand Portuguese would understand. Artists like Egberto Gismonti, Hermeto Paschoal, and fusion group Azimuth were regular features in jazz festivals worldwide but specially in Europe. From the mid 80's on the situation changed and not only Brazilian jazz music but Brazilian music as a whole, although still associated with jazz, moved away from the Brazilian jazz

artists to focus (only), (this time) for commercial reasons, on pop artists with reasonable success in Brazil. Much has been discussed among Brazilian jazz musicians about the reasons why, instead of their music, pop music and pop artists are now presented as jazz attractions in jazz festivals, rather than Brazilian pop artists being shown in pop venues and Brazilian jazz artists appearing in jazz festivals. The actual reason is probably the most obvious, the language barrier. Because Portuguese – the language we speak and of course, the language that the local pop artists use for their singing – is not well spread or spoken fluently in many countries in Europe, it will be a bit difficult to sell Brazilian singers to European pop audiences. For a jazz audience, used to more subtle artistic messages, that barrier would not be impossible to overcome. But why forget the Brazilian jazz artists altogether? Well, that is what we will attempt to discuss here.

2. Brazilian Jazz Scene

First of all, we need to understand that the world Brazilian jazz is not used to describe the music produced in Brazil that shares roots with the jazz music worldwide. Brazilian jazz inside the country goes with the label of *música instrumental* – in English, instrumental music. The first question any foreigner will ask is: and what about vocal jazz, or when the music, although still jazz, is sung? Well, we do not have plenty of that and most of all, there are commercial reasons that will be discussed later on that can illustrate more on that specific case. But for our purpose here, Brazilian jazz is mainly instrumental music or, as the expression might imply, the music created by instrumentalists. That music is not only closely associated with jazz but also has some of the basic structures of jazz like rhythm, and improvisation. It is a musical art form, similarly to jazz itself, that except for short periods of time, when it caught major media attention for different reasons, relies on alternative means to be produced, promoted, and performed.

We can say that the local jazz scene in Brazil offered three main outlets for the production of Brazilian jazz musicians. The first is the local club scene that, although still available, it has not only declined in the last ten years or so but also provides very low income for musicians. The appeal to perform in clubs is only artistic freedom and a place for meeting and getting together with other fellow musicians. The second outlet would be the opportunity to perform in music festivals around the country. Even though there are not many festivals where the main or only focus is only jazz, we can say that most festivals will have in their roster, at least a few Brazilian jazz artists. However, these festivals rely mostly on corporate sponsorships or government support and many times the support can be withdrawn without further explanation. Festivals happen every year but most of them do not last for many editions, whatever the reasons for that may be. The third and most impressive outlet for the production of local jazz artists is in the form of an effervescent independent CD production. Here, the advent of digital media for recording and reproducing music has allowed musicians to record and sell, despite lacking efficient distribution, their music. Having a CD out is, for the Brazilian jazz musician, a chance to be heard and let his/her music go beyond borders. The CD makes their music more respectable and also create a situation so where their music will not die when the performance ends or performance opportunities shrink. It is reasonable to believe that more than 90% of the Brazilian jazz music available on CD is independent endeavors once we do not have a strong record company with its focus on jazz. Even the major jazz companies that had jazz divisions during the 60's, 70's and part of the 80's simply closed those divisions due to lack of, reasonable profits, according to their view. The actual numbers of the independent music production in Brazil is not known because research made on the subject were funded by the major labels and those companies, for obvious reasons, decided to simply ignore the subject of independent production. The last research made public credited to instrumental music less than 1% of the market for recording products.

3. Globalization and Major Record Labels in Brazil

Most of recording companies present in Brazilian marketplace are multi-nationals like EMI, PolyGram, Warner, Sony, etc. They are responsible for the core of the music recorded since the first half of last century. These companies had for many years divisions dedicated to instrumental music and such artists like, for example, Egberto Gismonti (signed for years with EMI), Hermeto Paschoal (signed with Warner) and Victor Assis Brasil (signed also with EMI) were recorded and released by the majors. It all disappeared in the late 80's when the divisions dedicated to that music were put to rest. During the period the Brazilian jazz artists had support from the majors they had good distribution and promoting. These artists had opportunities to play inside and outside the country and Brazilian jazz was perceived, around the globe, mainly as an instrumental music. Few singers like Milton Nascimento, who had a strong connection with the jazz world, would do artistic projects in the jazz style. Milton Nascimento for example, released a record with Wayne Shorter where Brazilian and American musicians shared the chairs rather evenly. Around that time, it was fairly common for Europeans promoters to organize and bring to tours in Europe artists like Pau Brasil – a jazz group from São Paulo –, Egberto Gismonti, Wagner Tiso, Hermeto Paschoal and some others. Every year a hand full of Brazilian jazz artists would come to Europe and do a series of concerts, some of them in jazz festivals.

The situation would change completely in the 90's when possibly, encouraged by the growing interest in the new trend called *world music*, the major record companies in Brazil started to promote Brazilian pop music around world in a more aggressive way. The music from Brazil is a bit too present and already fairly known to be labeled *world music*, a term applied to more exotic forms of music. Because its historic association with the jazz audience, the preferred way to promote and present Brazilian pop music around the world chosen was to labeled it as jazz and bring those artists to jazz festivals. It is important to consider that jazz festivals themselves had already become a multi-cultural events and basically anything nowadays can be presented in a jazz festival. The marketing strategy was very simple with European jazz promoters and record companies working together with Brazilian based branches of multi-national recording companies. CDs of Brazilian pop artists

are being released in Europe by their companies affiliates – most of the times as jazz – while the subsidiaries in Brazil would cover some of the traveling expenses like plane tickets and even in some cases, housing, and musician's dues making those artists very attractive in the cost-benefit column.

Gradually even promoters that used to bring Brazilian jazz artists to Europe to play in the continent started to shift and in a short period of time the interest was only on singers, blocking the way for a whole new generation of jazz artists from Brazil to play in European jazz festivals. The situation got to a point that a famous jazz drummer in Brazil who was trying to book gigs in Europe for his band when approached the local representative of one of the agents that book Brazilian acts received a reply that said "*Brazilian jazz has to have vocals.*" Strangely enough this was the same agent who brought Hermeto Paschoal and Egberto Gismonti to Europe in the seventies. Apparently, he had a change of heart.

4. The Brazilian jazz musician situation

From the view point of a Brazilian jazz musician the most frustrating aspect of this situation is to see that pop artists are perceived and labeled as jazz musicians worldwide, while inside their own country they go to incredible lengths to dissociate themselves from anything even remotely related to jazz. Sometimes even explicitly declaring in interviews their complete dislike for jazz music. So, in Brazil they are pop artists but abroad they are jazz musicians, how can that be? For a singer to be perceived as a jazz singer means less opportunity in performance venues and certainly almost no chance to land a fat recording contract. There are some singers that present themselves as jazz acts but in that case they will face the same situation as any jazz musician, meaning less opportunities and basically total independent production, promotion, and managing of their art.

For a Brazilian jazz musician, singer or instrumentalist, who finance independently his/her CD and has to be responsible for their own booking, seeing

that the same people that despise jazz in their country having a chance to perform in jazz festivals abroad and being presented as jazz musicians is a terrible fact to simply disregard, but what can they do? Basically nothing. When I sent a few friends an email asking if they want to send me a CD for me illustrate my presentation, I was surprised to be contacted by people that I had never had even met expressing sympathy and saying they wanted to be part of it. I had not called anyone, but my email spread as people forwarded it to each other traveled,. People called me on the phone and even some Brazilian jazz musicians living and working abroad wanted to pitch in. Unfortunately, I had to travel light and just chose just CDs that I could assemble in few days to bring in with me.

5. Globalization and Brazilian jazz music

At first globalization seemed to be, for a Brazilian jazz musician, a more democratic approach to promote and sell their music, but what really happened is that globalization changed the perception of the Brazilian jazz music to something not even close to jazz. If pop artists are now jazz musicians, what is, or how, an actual jazz musician will be perceived? The answer is..., well, we do not need to answer because they are not perceived at all.

There has been few Brazilian Jazz artists to manage somehow to play in few venues in Europe but in most cases, they had to cover their own expenses for traveling and touring can be a very gruesome experience due to lack of a local support.

To change that we might have to start using the globalization to do what it promised to do in the first place, create a democratic venue to let people who are not heard to develop a voice. The jazz community is by definition a minority, sharing a small percentage of the global music market. So we need to connect this scattered minority to make it a collective effort. Although jazz is also by definition an open art form, that survived and developed through the decades by accepting everyone with

his/her own style and cultural background, making that probably the reason why jazz is everywhere. By having a definition of jazz that will not create an exclusion, but will rather draw a clearer line between pop and jazz, maybe we can bring to the scene artists that are, right now, truly excluded.