

“Olha que coisa mais linda” (Look,  
what a beautiful thing):  
The exotic spectacle in covers of *The Girl from  
Ipanema*

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**Introduction: Heloisa Eneida Menezes Paes Pinto**

Heloisa Eneida Menezes Paes Pinto was a fifteen year old school girl living in an elite beachfront neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, lined with elegant new high-rise apartment buildings. Her father was a General in the army. He was a protective father, but not so overly protective that he would keep his daughter from walking alone to school, the dentist, the tailor, or to take her routine dip in the ocean. Little did she know, as she walked alone in her school uniform, that young musician Antonio Carlos Jobim, and older poet Vinicius de Moraes came to know her routine, and enjoyed watching her from a bar near the ocean.

It was the early sixties, in the heart of rapid industrialization and startlingly high rates of economic growth in Brazil. Optimistic nationalism was underscored by winning the world cup soccer tournament. The Juscelino Kubitschek administration had pledged to work towards correcting the uneven economic development between the poverty-stricken north of the country and the increasingly prosperous and modernizing south. With intentions of accomplishing this goal, Kubitschek, in a fit of utopian hubris, moved the capital of the federal government to the geographical center of Brasil. Oscar Niemeyer’s ultra-modernist building designs literally concretized this

vision, and Brasilia was built at a furious pace, providing a large number of jobs in the process. In hindsight, after thirty years of resultant inflation, twenty-five years of military dictatorship, and at least nine currency changes, this optimism was a house of cards. Yet at the time the feeling was palpable, at least in an area like Ipanema which was so clearly reaping hitherto unseen economic benefits and access to consumer goods from abroad.

It was this accelerating economic contact with the goods of the rest of the world, and especially the United States, which later led a Brazilian political scientist to name his book on the era “The Bossa Nova Republic” (Dantas Filho). The bossa nova, as developed by young upper-middle class urban musicians such as composer Antonio Carlos Jobim and performer João Gilberto, among others, combined a slow samba ballad style known as *samba-canção* with elements of the cool jazz of Miles Davis and Chet Baker, as well as classical influences, particularly Chopin. In an effort to modernize the samba without losing some sense of its core, the rhythm of the bossa nova maintains a polyrhythmic sense even at its most stripped down. Jobim describes the basic rhythmic pattern as one beat among the many that make up the carnival parade samba, the thunderous samba batucada (Salles Jr: 1993). The bossa nova, the name translated as “new school” or “new technique” contrasted past forms of the samba through its striving towards musical and lyrical understatement, harmonic sophistication and unusual chord progressions and melodic shapes. The aesthetic of the bossa nova was one of elegant simplicity and whispery, intimate integration of the vocals and the ensemble. The simple, direct lyrics contrasted the verbosity of past generations. Generational politics were definitely at play in the aesthetics of the bossa nova. Jobim and company sought to embody an optimistic generation of cool, upper-middle class youth who followed the motto “Tô na minha, tá na dele” (I do my thing, he does his).

Caetano Veloso, a current pop star who retains bossa nova influence, saw this modernizing movement as necessary in the complex Brazilian context where elements of the first and fourth worlds intermingle (1997: 36). Other Brazilian scholars, such as José Ramos Tinhorão, take another view. Tinhorão believes that the bossa

nova represents the capitulation of Brazil to the cultural imperialism of the United States. He believes that the bossa nova is fully based on models of American jazz, and finds it laughable and ironic that the bossa nova musicians then managed to sell this jazz back to an American audience as something different and exotic (Tinhorão: 1969).

Let's return to Heloisa as she passes by Tom Jobim and Vinicius de Moraes back in 1962. The two were so inspired that they collaborated on a song entitled “The Girl from Ipanema,” unaware that it would soon embark on an idiosyncratic global trajectory, becoming one of the most recorded songs on earth. Stan Getz and Frank Sinatra recorded the tune together with Jobim, João Gilberto and his wife. It became a jazz standard, a pop hit, an easy listening staple and a lounge favorite. Moog synthesizer kitsch, surf, new wave and new age versions were recorded. Film soundtracks and television commercials used the song.

In my reading, I will draw upon Argentine dance scholar Marta E. Savigliano's assertion that it actually takes three to tango (the couple to do the dance, and a spectator to watch with desire). Like the scene of the tangoing couple, the scene depicted in the song “The Girl from Ipanema” can be read as a spectacle of passion, of exoticism and of eroticism. Although the interaction between the sullen male gazer sitting in a bar and the sexy, aloof female passing by is not, in any literal sense, a dance like the tango, the dynamics are nonetheless strikingly similar. I will utilize aspects of her analysis of “Tango and the Colonizing Gaze” in my reading of “The Girl from Ipanema.”

Before my reading of certain cover versions of the song, I will summarize Savigliano's arguments regarding the tango in order to clarify their later application to the context of “The Girl from Ipanema”. In seeking to account for the enduring international appeal of the tango throughout the twentieth century, she examines the reification of the non-western Other as providing meaning that has been lost in the rush of industrial capitalist civilization. Ever since global trade networks have allowed products from the margins to be sold to the centers, images of the passionate Other reappear

again and again. These Others are represented as more corporeal than cerebral, more passionate than rational, with strange and exotic customs. Although a remarkable consistency exists in these representations, as much of the non-western world is homogenized under the category of those who are “not like us”, not all exotics are created equal.

Savigliano charts the place of the tango within what she calls the “hierarchy of exotics,” defining the sophisticated rung it held on this ladder, as “a versatile, new kind of exotic that could adopt the manners of the colonizer while retaining the passion of the colonized, both at heart and on the surface” (Savigliano, 1995: 111). She argues that “The tango was originally poor but moving upwards, urban with some traces of ruralness, white with some traces of color, colonized with some traces of a native barbarian in the process of being civilized. It was a perfect candidate for the modern capitalist condition of the exotic...in tango eroticism was controlled and suggestive...Tango’s sexual politics were centered in the process of seduction” (1995: 110). I will make the case that these themes, (ambiguous, sophisticated exoticism and the dynamics of seduction) which Savigliano outlines regarding the tango, are also very relevant regarding “The Girl from Ipanema.”

According to Savigliano, it is this dance of resistance and submission that becomes a spectacle of passion that “expresses, performs and produces Otherness erotically through exoticism.” (1995: 73). The roles in this spectacle are as follows: “a male to master the dance and confess his sorrows; a female to seduce, resist seduction and be seduced; and a gaze to watch these occurrences” (1995: 74). The colonizing spectator sees “a spectacle in miniature of his own plays with the colonized: the colonized female dancing in cooperative/resistant movements with the colonizing male.” (1995: 76) Therefore, a certain alliance exists between the male dancer and the colonizing spectator, “hiding from each other their asymmetries in power and hiding their power over her altogether” (1995: 79-80). I will argue that these roles and dynamics are present in detail in cover versions of “The Girl from Ipanema,” especially those which cross national borders.

## **Collaborations with Stan Getz and Frank Sinatra: The seminal versions of “The Girl from Ipanema” for the U.S. and world markets.**

For this paper, I will focus on two important versions of the song, which have undoubtedly influenced the vast majority of subsequent covers worldwide. Both are collaborations between Brazilian musicians and musicians from the United States: The Stan Getz/João Gilberto/Antonio Carlos Jobim/Astrud Gilberto version, released in 1963, and the Frank Sinatra/Antonio Carlos Jobim version, released in 1967. The Getz/Gilberto version of “The Girl from Ipanema” became an emblem of the bossa nova craze in the United States. The Frank Sinatra version rejuvenated his career and confirmed the song’s entrance into the canon of jazz standards. For these two versions, I will focus principally on how the dynamic of male, female and spectator plays itself out through multiple voices and languages. I will also examine the voices involved in these collaborations: their vocal tone, how they are placed in the mix and the roles they play in the narrative of the song. Finally, I will interpret subtle differences between the lyrics in Portuguese and their English translation.

The 1963 recording featured Antonio Carlos Jobim and João Gilberto, Gilberto’s wife Astrud and U.S. jazzman Stan Getz, who had spent time in Brazil in search of musical inspiration and was very interested in the bossa nova. Astrud’s participation was an afterthought, as she had never before sung professionally. She had come to New York with the others to serve as a translator, and it was her knowledge of English which eventually motivated João to push for her inclusion on the cut.

With the exception of Getz’s breathy improvisation during certain verses and instrumental breaks, the song is played in the restrained bossa nova style (by the two who largely invented it), with little improvisation beyond the variations of the stuttering guitar of João Gilberto. The tone is hushed and controlled, and the voices try

to incorporate themselves into the self-consciously cool timbre of the ensemble, as opposed to standing out in front of the mix.

Popular music scholar Simon Frith reminds us that when we hear a voice without a body, we assign a body to it, imagining its physical production. This exercise of the imagination includes “age, race, ethnicity, class—everything that is necessary to put together a person to go with a voice. Thus we can read the ways in which, within certain musical genres, voices are coded according to these various social factors” (1998: 196). This is clearly the case with the four voices which sing these two versions of *The Girl from Ipanema*. In the Getz/Gilberto version, João sings the first section in Portuguese.

His voice is quiet, breathy, intimate, and masculine yet somewhat boyish. For the non-Portuguese speaking audience, the beginning of the song establishes the tone of a young, sophisticated foreigner singing sexily. A short introduction of syncopated nonsense syllables establishes both the polyrhythms of the samba-derived bossa nova beat and their very subdued delivery. The first verse, in Portuguese, begins with the phrase “*Olha que coisa mais linda*” (Oh, look at that beautiful thing), and goes on to describe the lovesick attraction of a lonely boy who watches a beautiful, golden skinned girl pass by on her way to the beach. He is taken by the way her hips sway as she walks by. He compares her movements to the beauty of a poem. It is a personal confession, and up to the end of the first chorus, only he and the girl are mentioned. In the chorus, he is melancholy that she doesn’t notice him, and during the last line, reflects sadly on “the beauty that is not only mine”, introducing the idea that other spectators exist in this scene who share his passion for her. In the subsequent verse, João sings that when she passes “the world, smiling, is filled with delight, and becomes more beautiful because of their love for her.” Immediately following this verse, Astrud comes in, in accented English, singing not of his specific desire, but the generalized phenomenon that “when she passes, each one she passes goes ahhh...”

Astrud’s role is somewhat ambiguous in the narrative of the song. She sings in English as a mediator, not a verbatim translator.

Instead, by singing about the girl in the third person, e.g. “when she passes...” Astrud is a spectator who surveys the scene, watching him watch her go by, her voice panned completely into one ear in the mix in contrast to João’s position at the center. At the same time, the tone of her voice clearly embodies the description of the girl herself. The occasional flat pitch of her amateur voice, overdubbed and doubled in places to cover up sour notes, comes off as youthful and somewhat inexperienced. The breathy, intimate quality and serious, cool delivery indicate her sophistication and sensuality. Her Brazilian accent and subtle language mistakes such as “he watch her so sadly”, “she looks straight ahead, not at he”, “ohh, but sees her so sadly” are strong markers that she comes from another place.

The idea of accent and language mistakes as charming or even sexy has a long history in terms of Latina representation in Hollywood film, television and music. The malaprop has been milked for its comic value, from Carmen Miranda to Charo and beyond, signifying both charm and a sense that the latina is more body than mind. Yet in this case, she is not singing for laughs. The song contains many of the classic tropes of the exotic, (the sensual female; the close connection to nature, here seen as the sea; demure submission and coy resistance to seduction) yet placed in an ultra-chic cosmopolitan setting. Parallel to what Savigliano writes regarding the tango, “The Girl from Ipanema” can be seen as “a novelty into the exotic genre; it performed a ‘distinguished’ ...,urbane exoticism from the already in/dependent colonial world...an exotic suited to the complex modern imperial ordering of the world” (1995: 82).

Frank Sinatra’s 1967 version of the song featuring composer Tom Jobim juxtaposes two male voices with different results. The song begins with Sinatra singing nearly the same english translation that Astrud previously sang. Remember that this version does not begin with the personal confession of attraction to the girl, but rather the observation that “each one she passes goes ahhh...” In contrast to the Portuguese text, only after this is acknowledged does he personalize his desire for her, as one of the many who want her, stating “how I watch her so sadly.” The next line, “How can I tell her I love her?” in Sinatra’s delivery ends up connoting the possibility that the lack of

a language in common is actually what dooms them to a misencounter.

The song's production combines the spare instrumentation and subdued polyrhythms of the bossa nova with Sinatra's signature lush ballad style, orchestrated with a wash of smooth horns, flutes and strings and periodic countermelodies which fill in the gaps in the vocal melody. Sinatra himself commented that he had never sung so quietly on a recording before, as a gesture towards the subdued bossa nova aesthetic. Yet his voice, present in both speakers in the mix, the only voice you hear for the first minute and a half of the song, is robust and swaggering with the unflappable composure of his inimitable style. In contrast to the somewhat mechanical delivery of bossa nova melodies, Sinatra varies his phrasing throughout, playing with different interpretations of the lyrics.

After the first minute and a half Jobim appears, singing in Portuguese, completely panned into one speaker. Immediately, as if to stay true to the "raw material" of the bossa nova for this section which reinforces the authenticity of Sinatra's efforts through Jobim's participation, the orchestra completely cuts out and Jobim's voice is left bare with only the trio of nylon string acoustic guitar, bass and drum set. Compared to the sumptuous vocal tone of ol' blue eyes, Jobim sounds young, slightly amateurish and nasal, yet still sophisticated and recognizably influenced by the cool jazz of Chet Baker, Miles Davis and others. In a live recording at this point, Sinatra comments "It's the only way," savoring the sounds of the Portuguese language and Jobim's "authentic" phrasing.

Following Jobim's brief solo section, Sinatra returns, and the two trade lines as if they are both watching her, agreeing about the virtues of her body, and commiserating the fact that she isn't with either of them. During the turnaround, Jobim switches into english and sings in unison "But each day when she walks to the sea, she looks straight ahead not at me." In this line, only the last syllable of the phrases are in harmony, (the "me"! ) perhaps suggesting that, although they are not the same, they share this desire for her. They then trade lines until the song fades out.

Although not literally a dance, the scene depicted in different versions of the song *The Girl from Ipanema* conforms remarkably consistently to Savigliano’s interpretation of the dynamics of exotic dance. I will mention a few key details from these two versions, and consider the ways in which Savigliano’s ideas speak to the song:

Just as the male, the female and spectators worldwide play roles in the spectacle of TGFI, so “it actually takes three to tango: a male to master the dance and confess his sorrows; a female to seduce, resist seduction and be seduced; and a gaze to watch these occurrences” (1995: 74).

Just as the English verse in the Getz/Gilberto recording invites the English speaking listener to watch him watching her, so “the colonizer sees a spectacle in miniature of his own plays with the colonized: the colonized female dancing in cooperative/resistant movements with the colonizing male” (1995: 76).

Just as ambiguity exists regarding when Jobim or Sinatra is narrating their own or the Other’s desire and expressing their own or the Other’s sense of powerlessness in the situation, so “the male dancer and the colonizing spectator become allies, almost O/one in the same, hiding from each other their asymmetries in power and hiding their power over her altogether.” (1995: 79).

Just as the males bemoan the fact that “she doesn’t see me”, “although the seduction of the exotic might be unavoidable, the passion is incompatible and sooner or later unresolvable conflicts will arise. The encounter with the exotic is impossible; it will remain forever a disencounter, unless—of course—the exotic becomes tamed by Civilization” (1995: 86).

This last quote is key to understanding at least part of the appeal of this song in the United States in the early to mid 1960s. Its exotic appeal was calibrated with the times, containing the right amount of recognizable jazz influence and sophistication, spiced

with the right amount of Otherness through its African-based polyrhythms and unusual nasal sounds in the indecipherable words. The result was, to many across the world, intriguing but ultimately quite harmless; a breezy postcard image of a tropical resort city in an era of booming post-war jet set tourism.

As is common to many songs that become popular on a worldwide basis, the meaning of a local genre, in this case bossa nova, is significantly transformed and/or distorted by Getz, Sinatra and a myriad of others who subsequently appropriated it in every imaginable direction. The bossa nova sought to combine foreign musical elements with local traditions in order to modernize while retaining a sense of Brazilian-ness in the optimistic, quickly industrializing years of the administration of Juscelino Kubitschek. In the United States, the Getz and Sinatra collaborations, through their bilingual plays of perspective and musical blending, placed the musical tourist or “colonizing spectator” into the lead role of this drama, relegating the Portuguese-speaking male narrator to a supporting role.

### **“The Girl from Ipanema” as Jazz: Ella Fitzgerald and Archie Shepp**

Once Getz, Sinatra and others mediated the incorporation of bossa nova hits such as the Girl from Ipanema into the canon of American jazz standards, it became an almost obligatory part of many well-known artists’ repertoires. The song was subsequently recorded by Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Joey Baron, Archie Shepp, and many others. Jazz versions of the song varied greatly in terms of reverence to both the breezy, quiet carefree sophistication of the song and the musical conventions of the bossa nova genre. The feel of the bossa nova rhythm was difficult for jazz musicians to capture, due to its lateral sway or balanço as opposed to a driving swing like most jazz, and stronger accents on 1 and 3 as opposed to jazz’s 2 and 4. Some drummers tried to emulate the pattern, with its rim shots and straight eighths, while others took the

basic pattern and swung it. Some switched back and forth between the two, and others added cuban touches of claves and riffs imitating the cuban tres. Of the wide variety of jazz versions of the song, I have chosen to discuss the cover versions of Ella Fitzgerald and Archie Shepp.

### **Ella Fitzgerald: The Boy from Ipanema**

When women sing this song, they are faced with the choice of: 1. adapting the words to the perspective of an outside observer, as in the example of Astrud singing “She looks straight ahead not at he” 2. singing the exact same words that Jobim or Sinatra sang in the first person, subtly inflecting certain key words to suggest lesbian desire, as Gabriela Anders recently did, or 3. changing the words to “The Boy from Ipanema” as Ella Fitzgerald, and Crystal Waters did later.

This third choice has certain interesting implications, especially in the example of Ella Fitzgerald’s live version of the song recorded in 1971 in Nice, France. Ella’s version of the song can be described as thoroughly digested stylistically; she and her band perform it in her jazz style without attempting to closely emulate bossa nova. They improvise over the chord changes, the bass walks, and the rhythm section swings the bossa nova beat without completely changing its basic rhythmic structure. Ella’s virtuoso improvisation, both musically and lyrically, and the choices that she made in stringing together a medley reveal layers of meaning surrounding the song.

By changing the sex of the youth from Ipanema, it is now a boy whose walk “is like a samba that swings so cool and sways so gentle.” This young male object of female desire is described with a hip sway which in Brazil is overwhelmingly associated with females, especially mulata and black females. If he were to really sway his hips like a samba (for men in Brazil the samba is generally more about fancy footwork), he would be outside of the norm for heterosexual men. The dynamic between the gazer and the desired is further altered later in the song when Ella replaces the original “I

smile, but she doesn't see me" with:

he smiles, but he doesn't see me  
 no, he doesn't see me  
 all he digs is the mi-ni....  
 he doesn't dig me  
 all he sees is the hot pants  
 ah, señor, por favor, give me una chance.  
 I'm going out with the boy from Ipanema...

As opposed to virtually all other versions of the song, she succeeds in getting the boy from Ipanema. When she claims "he doesn't see me," he wasn't ignoring her, he was only looking at her mini-skirt, her body. Once she's got him, she goes with him, in the moment of improvisation, to a fantasy world of latin-ness, including mariachi-like yelps, fragments of the bossa nova soundtrack of "Black Orpheus," the Mexican mariachi standard "Cielito Lindo."

The free association and flexibility of the improvisatory moment reveals the collapse of such distinct places as Mexico, Spain and Brazil into a single vision of a sensual place south of the border. This fixing or reification of the Other, which is only inadvertently expressed by Ella, as a consequence of a certain absorption of the pervasive Latin lover stereotype, plays an important role in the maintenance of postcolonial imbalances of power through naturalizing supposed differences between people (e.g. those people, not like us, are very body-oriented, but not as intelligent, etc.). This monochrome representation has appeared again and again in Hollywood cinema, and especially the genre of the Latin musical, a hodge-podge of Mexican Ranchera, Argentine Tango and Brazilian Samba, among other genres.

### **Archie Shepp: "A square dance telescoped through the barrel of a machine gun."**

Archie Shepp was one of the main proponents of free jazz in the 1960s, along with other well-known musicians such as Ornette

Coleman and others. In his vision of music, ethics and aesthetics are inextricably linked, and he was an outspoken radical critic of America and specifically the country's race relations and civil rights problems. Once, during a gig in Japan, he announced that “We come here in peace; not like the Americans who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima” (Kington, 1992: 127). His work has been described as full of “aggression, ferocity and irony” (Jost, 1981: 105) and, like many jazzmen before him, including John Coltrane and others, he used commercial pop tunes and schmaltzy songs from musicals as raw materials to play with (as a cat plays with a mouse). Although he claims in the liner notes that he chose the song merely because he liked the way Jobim used minor seventh chords, his goal rather appears to confirm the omnipresent song's banality by turning it inside out, both harmonically and in terms of its light, harmless tone. This objective is articulated in his praise for Ornette Coleman's ability to sound like “A square dance telescoped through the barrel of a machine gun” (Shepp cited in Jost, 1981: 106).

If the introduction of the Shepp version reminds one of anything walking, it would be a lumbering hippopotamus, not a nubile girl. The melody is soon recognizable but parodied by dissonant, brash, mocking harmonies. The extended saxophone solo focuses on abrupt phrases, staccato bursts of sound and the full range of honking, squeaking and snarling timbres he can squeeze of his instrument. Shepp's saxophone playing is a far cry from Getz's seductive breathy tones.

This version of the “The Girl from Ipanema” suggests a variety of readings. As an avant-garde jazzman creating art, Shepp's aesthetic seeks to be as far from the harmless, disposable easy listening genre as possible, and bossa nova in the United States became subsumed under mood music, or seduction music for bachelors. Perhaps the lyrics struck Shepp as vacuous. Yet, it appears that Shepp's enemy is actually the compulsive desire to hear a cover exactly like the original. He is fighting against the pleasure of recognition, by playing just enough of the song's melody and structure to render it recognizable, and then confounding this expectation, prodding the listener away from passivity, challenging people to

listen in a different, more active, and critical way.

## **Conclusion**

I would like to return to the line “the world, smiling, is filled with delight, and becomes more beautiful because of their love for her,” placing it in the context of early-1960s, pre-coup Brazil. It was a moment in which Brazil was being placed on the map, so to speak. Extremely rapid industrialization, the construction of Brasilia and winning the world cup earned the country positive worldwide recognition. The sophistication of urban third world locations such as Ipanema led to ambiguity in terms of whether or not Brazil should be considered economically underdeveloped. Written during this historical moment, the song details a space in which first and third world coexistence is possible. Through the mediators of Getz, Sinatra and Astrud, singing in English, listeners all over the world are invited to recognize the beauty of the Brazilian girl (or perhaps Brazil itself?). This invitation minimizes the power disparity between the male gazer (such as Jobim) and the foreign spectator (such as Sinatra), as well as that between the boy and the girl. In this way, the seemingly innocuous pleasure of a catchy, carefree tune is actually enmeshed in global power relations.

Yet this historical moment does not explain the subsequent ways that musicians all over the world have engaged in a dialogue with this song. Once the Getz version became a huge hit, this ode to Heloisa Eneida Menezes Paes Pinto was placed in the intersection between easy listening, pop, jazz, lounge and mood music or exotica. It was parodied, attempted earnestly, dismantled and rewritten. It has come to signify cosmopolitan cool, background music, lounge schmaltz, and a passive female representation to be criticized. Jobim and Morães probably had no idea when that cute girl walked by that their song would become an enduring, high-class exotic that walks a tightrope between familiar and strange, us and other.

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