Brazilian Popular Music: Caetano Veloso and the Regeneration of Tradition (review)

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Notes, Volume 63, Number 4, June 2007, pp. 870-872 (Article)

Published by Music Library Association
DOI: 10.1353/not.2007.0063

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Reflection is an action involving the efforts and desires of individuals caught equally in the fictions and histories of their respective epochs. The mindful imaginations responsible for innovative, creative culture, while existing in the socio-historical world, can seem distanced from collective tradition and the ideologies shaping “reality,” though these worlds, of artistic intentions and values, of expression via symbolic play, and of technical innovation, remain clearly linked to experience. Author Lorraine Leu foregrounds music, performance, and expression, searching for relationships among them, and meanings between them and popular Brazilian musical tradition as culture and as a set of social values. In seeking artistic meaning in popular song she has focused on the worthy and aesthetically rich profile of Brazilian cultural icon Caetano Veloso and in doing so places this prolific, often controversial singer, songwriter, and author as a recognizable player in the regeneration of tradition. Leu does an admirable job of linking Veloso’s reflections, explosive innovations, and provocations in the popular music world with the epoch that enveloped his early career, and the ocean of twentieth-century Brazilian musical tradition. The hybrid nature of Veloso’s output, though, requires one to realize that he was a primary member of bossa nova’s second generation, an exemplary composer, performer, and interpreter of the genre, while repeatedly positing himself as a sort of carnivalesque chameleon provocateur whose aim was often to confuse and stir up needed debate with his musical high jinks. Leu champions all of this throughout her search for meaning.

This approach is for the most part fair and fitting since in his immense talent and high profile, Veloso, now sixty-four, has often assumed the role of a national spokesperson of sorts while simultaneously articulating his own place in, and perspectives on, the highly touted and complex world of Brazilian popular music’s social history. Veloso, also a celebrity, is an author of several works, including 1997’s Verdade Tropical, a controversial memoir which some say recasts our hero’s role in the 1960s revolution in an amplified fashion (published in English as Tropical Truth: A Story of Music and Revolution in Brazil, translated by Isabel de Sena, edited by Barbara Einzig [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002]). This “tropical truth” also poses familiar dialogue concerning brasileidade, or “Brazilianness” and a swath of identity issues hovering about intellectuality and nationality within popular culture. Leu’s subject is also a superstar poet who cares about the meaning of being Brazilian, and fighting all of the necessary battles whether initiated in recorded song, in live performance, or on the written page. It is this side of Veloso too, as well as the sheer popularity of his recorded oeuvre, that readers should remember when Leu projects her subject onto broader plateaus and deeper contexts.

In six, quick and effective chapters and a brief conclusion, Leu’s Brazilian Popular Music: Caetano Veloso and the Regeneration of Tradition tackles a set of problematized topics including cultural and political change in the Brazilian 1960s, gender and musical style as configured in that era’s influential Tropicália movement, the meanings inherent in Veloso’s powerfully expressive vocal techniques, and the cultural values deeply located in various aspects of songwriting traditions. These are all important areas of discourse for a country of such tragic social contrasts, but one also with a grand cache of a wisdom-laden popular music heritage. Leu foregoes much emphasis on social concern other than the catastrophe that was the Brazilian military dictatorship, yet is able to conjure an adequate socio-cultural background to convey contexts for interpreting song and aspects of the Brazilian experience. Her fine work focuses mostly on recorded output dating from 1968 to 1972, a period gripped by the particularly awful political fist of a right-wing military machine of real oppression. Again, readers
must pay attention to the whole story. Veloso’s poignant career was being shaped, as the author dutifully describes, not only by Brazil’s nascent television industry, early recordings, and increasingly censored song festivals, but also during a time when citizenship had been, in effect, banned by decree, with draconian suspensions of basic rights enforced by goon soldiers and civilian suits alike. In 1969, Veloso was forced into exile along with his comrade-in-arms Gilberto Gil, a no less amazing and visionary musician.

In addition to a very well researched and carefully footnoted volume, the reader gets forty-two marvelous pages of love song analysis, a subject to which not enough musicological scholarship has been dedicated. Leu traces multifaceted themes of love from the colonial-era modinha (“little song”) through twentieth-century samba-canção, bossa nova, and Brazilian rock. The author poses a continuous line of fruitful interpretations, making relevant connections that always seem to lead back to the problem of defining the Brazilian experience, the context in which Veloso’s music and voice regenerate tradition. However the book presents a few moments of confusion and occasional downward spirals: a disappointing exegesis of Brazil’s “latent baroque quality” (p. 13); perhaps too many rehashings and interpretations of Veloso’s provocative androgyny without alluding to personal motivations (is it all an act?); and the no less problematic proposal of the “body” as being the Tropicália movement’s answer to critical concerns of the open-ended, polysemous ‘whole-less-ness’ theorized about the sub-cultural style Veloso and his cohorts engendered. While not minor points, these weaknesses will not stop most readers from enjoying the book. The same might also be said for the author’s overall reluctance to consider Veloso as anything other than a thoroughly original, almost total cultural hero.

But it is Leu’s command of her subject matter that wins the day. Chapter 3, “‘You Don’t Know Me At All’—Challenging Vocal Traditions,” and chapter 4, “Language, Meaning and Memory: The Songwriting Tradition,” for instance, both prove that the author achieves primary, multiple goals of finding meaning while foregrounding music “itself.” Irony, modernity, and the power of uncertainty as expressive devices and vehicles of meaning are outlined as crucial attributes to Veloso’s masterful and internationally admired vocal artistry. The guy is a great singer and a learned songwriter, yet that is just the beginning. Leu’s originality here requires keen wording and argument to take on vocal practice and meaning. The analysis in chapter 3 makes even more of an impact with its timely historical considerations of vocal techniques in Brazilian popular music history. So, we learn of the before-and-after paradigmatic shift of 1930s–1940s crooner Mario Reis toward colloquial vocal mannerisms, leaving behind forever the then dominant bel canto style. We are told this helped usher in the so-called Golden Age of samba-canção, an era also marked by the growing presence of radio. Indeed, taut passages bring readers through informative little histories of the linha evolutiva, the evolutionary path of Brazilian popular music development that ties together these oldies but goodies with hip, modern strains of bossa nova, and ultimately, to Veloso’s own connection to the subtitle of Leu’s treatise.

Another of Leu’s major talents lies in her Portuguese literary skills. Her interpretations and translations of, and sensitivity to, some of Brazil’s best poetry, its popular music lyrics, are highly commendable and beautiful in their own right. Leu has set a new, higher standard for English language interpretations of this magnificent cultural treasure trove. An overly slim volume, Brazilian Popular Music: Caetano Veloso and the Regeneration of Tradition could have used several more chapters highlighting this aspect of the author’s prowess, an insightful type of scholarship and care for meaning that runs throughout even what is slightly uneven in the book. For instance, of all the Veloso albums from the period studied, Joia is certainly not the most commendable. So it is almost strange to see those songs so referenced, and with such clarity, convincing analytic vision, and insight.

It is unfortunate that the Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series, a major effort to be applauded in almost every way, includes only now this overly focused work in the face of the utter vastness of an increasingly appreciated Brazilian music landscape. This fact may lean heavily on expectations surrounding Leu’s work, if not only with
the hungry readership familiar with writings on Brazilian music. For there is nothing in the book, and thus nothing in the publisher’s series, for those interested in anything Brazilian outside of the Veloso prism. Likewise, a larger volume, and one with more distance from the obviously personal subject Leu has chosen, could have mined the problematic realms of celebrity making and the very nature of popular culture using fuller considerations, and thus making better use, of borrowings from critical theories of Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdidge.

How was it that Veloso became a star, and why choose him to best illustrate the regeneration of Brazilian popular music tradition? Well, the author thought of this compound question and tries an answer in the opening paragraphs of her book. “Rejecting the idea of tradition as a static and hallowed national patrimony, Veloso’s work emphasizes the importance not only of the continuity of tradition, but also of rupture, which allows tradition to be reworked and made relevant to a contemporary context” (p. 1). In the Brazilian 1960s, rupture sold as well as anywhere else in the global youth revolution, as electric rock à la Bob Dylan at Newport, as escapist “apolitical” psychedelia, as subversive literature, and state-of-the-art, avant-garde sound art. And then there is the weight of tradition still swinging back and forth, as if like a wrecking ball, challenging innovative movements (even if only in the form of conservative audiences) only to gradually recede back into the past. Tradition’s eternal cycles of incoming inertia and receding wake, as much as all that was new to him then, seemed to have motivated Veloso to experiment with his image, sound, poetry, and body. That risk taking, in vocal technique, in politics, and in aesthetic choices, forms a basis for much of what the author describes in these pages.

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Malena Kuss, musicologist and professor emeritus of the University of North Texas, has edited an informative volume that explores the role of music and worldviews of the indigenous peoples of Latin America. The editor notes that the initial volume of the series “focuses on the inextricable relationships between worldviews and musical behavior in current and relatively recent practices of indigenous groups” (p. xix). The work marks the first installment of a four-volume study of the music of Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean, the latter being excluded from this volume.

Symptomatic of an edited work with multiple contributors, the book contains chapters that vary significantly in scope, length, and method. While the central theme of the volume is not entirely cohesive, the diversity of the authors’ approaches and backgrounds guarantees no privileging of a single perspective, and skillfully captures the complexities of the subject. Kuss argues that by “[adhering] to the principle that these [musical traditions] have to be studied at the local level,” this work “can contribute in some measure to eradication of essentialisms and to critical reassessments of the infinite ways in which cultural representations still relies on criteria and conceptual frameworks developed within the Eurocentric sphere of influence, including some models of cultural criticism stemming from vastly different historical experiences” (p. xix).

Following this approach, Carol E. Robertson composed numerous chapters of the book, also contributing a brief epilogue. In her first essay, she provides an overview of the intricate and diverse history of Latin America that complements the editor’s prologue. Robertson goes on to discuss the nguillipún, a fertility ritual practiced in southern Chile and Argentina by the Tehuelche, Pehuenche, Giniuna-Kena, Huarpe, Ranquel, Puelche, and Mapuche to heighten the fertility of livestock and crops. In later chapters, Robertson surveys broad themes in a more generalized na-