



Choro, a history

The coming of the Portuguese royal family to Rio, in 1808, gave birth to a rich and unique cultural effervescence that took over the city. In a way never contemplated in the European mainland, the refined aristocratic culture was slowly but surely infected by the populace biting wit. Unquestionably a result from this mix-up, a new musical style, combining chords and rhythm, aroused and soon became a cultural phenomenon. It was called the *choro*.

All at once, the city faced some infrastructural development as well, including the setting up of essential public conveniences such as mail post offices and harbor operations, which paved the way for the growth of a still undersized middle class. This new born layer of population consisted mostly of afro-Brazilian citizens, which made up the social tissue that gave support to the diffusion of new musical styles, such as the *choro*.

tication, which placed his compositions in the borderline dividing pop and erudite music. The songwriter himself declared his Brazilian tangos (like "Digo") to be a "piano stylization of *polkas-lundu*".

João Teixeira Guimarães (Pernambuco, 1883/1947), aka João Pernambuco, though having some experience as a backing musician for several groups, it was as a guitar solo composer ("Interrogando") that Pernambuco gained recognition, and the admiration of some very important fans like maestro Heitor Villa-Lobos.

Many other pioneering *choro* artists – musicians and songwriters – gave rather important contributions to the development of the style. Such is the case of Patápio Silva (Rio de Janeiro 1881/1907), a flute virtuoso and first soloist to play on record, in 1904. Amongst the musicians that hung around Anacleto, it is worth mentioning the names of trumpet player Albertino Pimentel ("Fantasia ao Luar"), his successor in the conduction of the Fire Corps Orchestra; flute player Felisberto Marques ("Isso não é vida") and multi-instruments' player (trombone, euphonium, ophicleide – instrument that features a vertical pipe like the fagot, sax keys and trombone mouthpiece) Irineu de Almeida ("Qualquer coisa"). Irineu Batina, as he was called, became a famous songwriter and played an important role on the growth of *counterpoint* in *choro* tunes.

These ground-breaking artists' musical production thrived in such a gigantic way, mainly due to the high quality and range of their work. *Polka*, *schottische*, *mazurka*, *valse*, *tango*, *square dance* and *maxixe* set the tone for all social occasions. The high excellence artistic level observed during the boom of the "chorões" music, demanded every musical production that came afterwards to match the same standards. To this date, it is a common saying that "a bad *choro* is only played once."

Like all royalty entourages, the Portuguese brought – along with crowned heads, aristocracy members, workforce and maids – some of their prime musicians, to keep up the spirits on the new (and rather warm) noble ballrooms.

The two main musical genres of Brazil back then, *modinha* (with the tune "Casinha Pequena") and *lundu* ("Loirinha") were already familiar amongst the Lisbon aristocracy, and were brought back with some fancy innovations. The royal family brought the first pianos to arrive in Brazil, and soon the instrument became a hit all over town, with many enthusiastic apprentices displaying a natural talent, granting Rio recognition as a musical gifted city. In 1856 author Araújo Porto Alegre dubbed it "the City of the Pianos", and the large number of instruments all around helped in making some European musical styles rather popular, specially the *polka*, deemed as the one of the "parents" of *choro*.

First recordings, first groups

The first known *choro* recordings date back to the "unplugged" era, when all musical performances were delivered without the aid of electricity. The first recording sessions are claimed by the Fire Corps Band, conducted by Anacleto de Medeiros. Put together thanks to Anacleto's scouting excursions throughout *choro* joints and gigs, the Fire Corps Band outstood the many *choro* bands from their time due to the finer vocal tunings and arrangement of the songs.

The first solo recordings came about in 1907. There were usually three instruments, with a soloist accompanied by acoustic guitar and *cavaquinho* (4 strings soprano guitar) players. The trumpet, flute and clarinet were the most commonly used instrument by soloists, while flute players like Patápio Silva opted for recording with the backing of a piano, evidencing his concert hall pretensions ("Zinha"). Another flautist, songwriter, with an impressive discography was Antônio Maria dos Passos ("Ela dorme"), soloist from the Chiquinha Gonzaga Group and from Group Passos no *choro*.

It is clearly observed in that time a gradual development of guitar *counterpoints*, in duo performances with the soloists, the so-called *baixarias*. It is interesting to notice that *choro* recordings up until that period did not encompass any percussion instrument, which would only be in fact incorporated from the 20s onwards, featuring *pandeiro* (a kind of tambourine) player João da Bahiana (João Machado Guedes, Rio de Janeiro 1887/1974) as the top pioneering percussionist.

Jazz-influenced choro

In spite of being totally different music genres, *choro* was indeed influenced by jazz, especially by the amazing success of Bennie Goodman in the 30s. From the top crop of our string musicians back then, the one that drank more from the jazz fountain, with no room for doubts, was the gifted guitar player Garoto (born Anibal Augusto Sardinha, São Paulo 1915/1955), who displayed obvious and strong influence from the "swing fever" ("Benny Goodman no *choro*"), easily noticeable when he played tenor guitar.

Radamés Gnattali (Porto Alegre 1906/1988) was the great modernizer of the *choro* style in the 40s and 50s. An expert arranger and talented songwriter, he helped expand the style's horizons by incorporating harmonic patterns from the jazz ("Remexendo") as well as from the so-called concert hall music style.

Going Down and Coming Around

The second half of the 60s and the early 70s are considered the worst moment in all of *choro*'s history. Radio was no longer the frontrunner media vehicle, long surpassed by the wonders of television broadcasting, and *choro* was not a TV style music genre. The record industry was no longer hiring instrumental musicians, and the horo market releases were mainly all catalogue recordings. The deaths of the styles biggest names, Jacob do Bandolim in 1969, followed by Pixinguinha in 1973, also worked as huge downers on the *choro* scene.

When all forecasts indicated decline and ruin, a revival movement started to surface. A brand new offspring of instrumental musicians started to build up, in the 80s, a new age for *choro*.

When the anxiously awaited *polka* dance was first performed on stage in Rio, in 1845, it represented the answer to a longtime yearning for a more liberal behavior in the town's social life. It was the due and necessary transition from group dances like square dance to couple's dancing, which was already happening with the *valse* (introduced by the royals), but took far more sensual contours with the *polka*.

As *polka* songbooks became easily available to piano players that performed on middle class social events, common musicians started copying what they heard, adding to the excessively sentimental accent of the Portuguese music the spicy rhythmic influence left on Brazilian music by the African slaves. This is how the *choro* was born, at first as a way of adapting Brazilian verses to the variety of newly introduced foreign styles like: *polka* (mainly), *valse*, *habanera*, *schottische* and *mazurka*.

As I see it, the name "choro" (which means "cry") comes from the almost "weeping" way local musicians used to play in order to soften the European polkas. Thus, they were called "chorões" (cry babies) and their music, *choro*. The word also functioned as a designation of the style's groups, like "choro Carioca", or of the events related to the kind of music: "today is *choro* night at Cidade Nova".

The pioneers

A decisive factor for the quality and longevity of *choro* was the high artistic level of its front line performers.

Joaquim Antônio da Silva Callado (Rio 1848/1880) is considered the first "chorão" (choro artist). His father was a bandleader, which drove him to start playing the flute at eight years old, and writing his first songs at fifteen. His most memorable *polka* is "Flor Amorosa.

Pixinguinha, a choro genius

When Alfredo da Rocha Viana Filho (years later known only as Pixinguinha) first saw the light in April 23rd 1897, *choro* was living its golden years. From a young child Pixinguinha's home life brought him together with the musical style, having an extraordinary talent, formerly mentioned here, for a private music tutor: Irineu de Almeida. Pixinguinha developed his very unique style of playing the flute, with an essentially rhythmic quality ("Os Oito Batutas"), and we can infer from hearing the first recording sessions on which he played the mature and gifted musician he already was, at age fourteen.

During his youth, Pixinguinha attended ritual ceremonies at *candomblé* sites in Praça Onze, downtown Rio de Janeiro, where afro-Brazilian religious traditions were cultivated, and where *samba* was later born as one of the most representatives musical styles of Brazil. This afro approach is perceived all through his work (in pieces like "Conversa de Crioulo").

Before turning fifteen, Pixinguinha began playing professionally in bars and as a member of stage orchestras, and the later formed his own band "Os Oito Batutas" ("Eight Smart Pants" in a free translation exercise).

During the late 20s, Pixinguinha focused on songwriting for Variety Theater plays, turning the job into his very own working laboratory for experimenting with the creation of a Brazilian approach to orchestra conduction. The results of such experimentations started to appear in his work in 1928, with the release of his epic masterpiece "Lamentos".

Using as a sandstone the music of the chorões (*polkas*, *schottische*, *valse*s, etc), and mixing it up with elements from the African Brazilian tradition, from

Callado was also a key player on the surfacing of the first *choro* groups.

His music tutor, Henrique Alves de Mesquita (Rio, 1830/1906), also played an important role in the process of establishing the style. He was a student at the Paris Music Conservatory, and it was from the French capital that he brought the *habanera* ("Ali Babá"), a French-tailored Cuban rhythm that worked as a launch pad for the first Brazilian tangos.

Chiquinha Gonzaga (Francisca Edwiges Neves) was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1847. Was the creator of the "*marcha de carnaval*" – upbeat, rhythmic and melodic tunes, with easy sing-along verses, that became must-play hits at ballrooms and street festivities during the Carnaval period. She also became one of the biggest names in Variety Theater playwriting (with "Sultana"), the greatest artistic expression of the masses back in those times.

Besides Callado, another African Brazilian artist to stand out at the time was Anacleto Augusto de Medeiros, born in the beautiful Paquetá Island, right in the heart of the Guanabara Bay, in 1866. Having spent his life working with music as organizer, producer, orchestra conductor, he was a gifted songwriter ("Terna Saudade"), as well as the man behind the incorporation of a Brazilian accent in the *schottische* ("Santinha"), a European dance style a bit slower than the *polka*, brought to Brazil in 1851.

Amongst the groundbreaking *choro* artists, Ernesto Nazareth (Rio 1863/1934) was, undoubtedly, the biggest name. Son of a humble, low income family, he managed to learn to play the piano at an early age and trailed a rather intriguing path, in comparison to his peers. While the first "chorões" fashioned their performance style based on the *polkas* they heard played on the piano, Nazareth "shaped" the *choro* for the piano, granting the genre an unexpected touch of sophis-

country music and from his vast and assorted experience as a professional musician, Pixinguinha blended concepts and gave to *choro* – up till then rather mutable style – a definite musical form.

Another Pixinguinha peer, the gifted trumpeter and songwriter ("Flamengo") Bomfiglio de Oliveira (São Paulo 1894/1940) also shone in the sky of *choro* stars back in the 20s, 30s. As did many other musicians, drawn by the ever-growing job opportunities in the Rio – São Paulo area, like saxophonist Severino Rangel (1896/1972), aka Ratinho ("Brincando"), and mandolin player ("Picadinho à Baiana") Luperce Miranda (1904/1977), who brought from the Northeast of Brazil an extra drop of talent to the steaming melting pot of the Brazilian *choro*.

The radio role and the establishment of the regional group format

The 30s saw an unquestionable quality and quantity growth spurt in Brazilian pop music. A whole new generation of high excellence songwriters, musicians and singers gained room with the radio as their main diffusion tool.

For a radio station back then it was mandatory the *in-loco* aid of a *regional* band, as were called the musical groups comprised of base instruments such as guitars, *cavaquinho* and *pandeiro* and a soloist (flute, mandolin, etc). This type of group had no need for written material and had to show incredible agility and improvisation skills to fill in during any on air blanks, broadcasting mishaps, as well as to jump in any time for backing up singers when needed. All in all, it proved to be a self-paying investment.

The first of these *regional* groups to achieve a higher level of organization was Gente do Morro, featuring as leader flute player Benedito Lacerda (Rio

In every province of Brazil there are assemblies of "chorões", and, in some of them the Clubes do *choro* (*choro* Clubs) help bring audiences together. More and more musicians from all over the world are coming to Brazil to take *choro* lessons and learn its language.

What fascinates and impresses *choro* scholars and enthusiasts everywhere is the fact that a kind of music for the masses could be at the same time sophisticated, unrestrained and resilient. *choro* keeps on living, always refreshing itself and conquering new generations of fans.

This album is all about illustrating the rich diversity of *choro*, with 28 different instrumental sets, and combining musicians from varied generations. Precious moments have been revitalized, like the ebony flute played by Leonardo Miranda, the same brand and type as the one used by Callado on the early days of *choro*; and the dynamic tenor guitar, a special instrument custom-built by Garoto.

Henrique Cazes

de Janeiro 1903/1958), who would later found the Regional Group Benedito Lacerda ("Dinorah"), introducing the perfect base musicians trio formation from 1937 onwards: Dino – Horondino José da Silva (Rio de Janeiro 1918/2006) and Meira – Jayme T. Florence (Pernambuco 1909/1982) on the strings, and Canhoto - Waldiro Frederico Tramontano (Rio de Janeiro 1908/1987) on the *cavaquinho*. The Lacerda group worked as a role model for many other groups that came afterwards and provided a basis for Pixinguinha & Lacerda's historical recordings ("Descendo a Serra") between 1946 and 1951.

With the radio and recording success of Conjunto Regional de Benedito Lacerda, soon enough the *choro* groups abandoned the format diversity that had distinguished the style so far, and adopted the Regional Group conformation. While in the 10s and 20s *choro* songs were recorded by bands, trios, quartets with no base instruments (such as clarinet, trumpet, euphonium and tuba), soloists with piano accompaniment, and other conformations; little by little the 30's *choro* starts being recorded mostly by regional format groups, a standard that will remain unchained for practically four decades.

The big development trigger for the style during this period was the rising of an offspring of great soloists: Luis Americano (Sergipe 1900/Rio 1960), Jacob do Bandolim ("Biruta", "Doce de Coco", "Noites Cariocas") (born Jacob Pick Bittencourt, Rio 1918/1969), *cavaquinho* player Waldir Azevedo ("Delicado", "Pedacinhos do Céu", "Brasileirinho") (Rio 1923/1980), clarinet player Abel Ferreira ("Chorando Baixinho") (Minas Gerais 1915/ Rio 1980), among several others.

During the 40s and 50s, the so-called "choro de gafieira" (a *samba*-influenced variation of the style) blossomed, bringing recognition to artists like trombone players Raul de Barros and Astor Silva ("Chorinho na Gafieira").

Concerned with the organization and dissemination of the styles amazing musical theory, these new era musicians started developing their own learning methods; and what was long ago passed on from generation to generation only by means of ear and practice was now available information to a much bigger number of gifted and interested artists. Added to all of this was the increase of independent record label options, which highly amplified recording opportunities, and motivated a growth in the number of amateur and professional "chorões" nationwide, now better educated, theory and technically more prepared, and in less time.

As a result to all of these innovations, *choro* is undergoing a moment of sizzling interest in this dawning of the XXI century. Each of its ever-growing variations sees a constant blooming of talented new musicians and bolder and brighter groups, bringing a dazzling and fresh new breath of life to this timeless music style.



Radamés Gnattali with Henrique Cazes at his ultimate "Roda de *choro*" in 1986.

Radamés Gnattali, ao lado Henrique Cazes, em sua última Roda de *choro* em 1986.