

Bossa nova

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.03663>**Published in print:** 20 January 2001**Published online:** 2001

In Brazilian popular music, a movement that originated about 1958–9 and effected radical stylistic changes in the classical urban Samba. The word ‘bossa’, from Rio de Janeiro slang, means loosely ‘special ability’, ‘shrewdness’, ‘astuteness’ and the like. The term ‘bossa-nova’ first appeared in Antônio Carlos Jobim’s song *Desafinado* (1959) whose melody with complex intervals (diminished 4ths, minor 6ths) and a rather tortuous shape was intended to suggest the idea of a singer with a certain vocal insecurity. Its melodic and harmonic complexity was justified by the song text as ‘bossa nova’. The originators of the new style included Jobim himself as a composer and João Gilberto primarily as a singer and guitarist. Their first important recording was *Chega de Saudade* (March 1959). Although the samba figured prominently in their repertoire it was not their exclusive genre.

One of the features of the new style, affecting popular music in general, and the samba in particular, was a deliberate avoidance of the predominance of any single musical parameter. Before bossa nova the melody was generally strongly emphasized, to satisfy the basic requirement of an easily singable tune; bossa nova, however, integrates melody, harmony and rhythm. The performer has a vital role in this integration, but heavy emphasis on the singer’s personality is altogether avoided. Strongly contrasting effects, loudness of voice, fermatas or scream-like high pitches are generally excluded from a proper bossa nova singing style; the singing should flow in a subdued tone almost like the normal spoken language. The characteristic nasal vocal production of bossa nova is a peculiar trait of the *cabaclo* folk tradition of north-eastern Brazil, but was rare in earlier urban music. As a soloist the interpreter no longer opposes the accompanying ensemble: they are reconciled. The guitar as an accompanying instrument is emphasized and, whether as a solo or accompanying instrument, may present a harmonic structure with two functions: one of traditional harmonic support, and the other a percussive function, stressing the rhythmic strokes chordally. Both functions are frequently integrated in the same chord entity, as shown in many performances of Baden Powell, Brazil’s foremost guitarist in the 1960s. Certain harmonic formulae have almost become clichés since the advent of bossa nova, such as the shifting of major and minor modes in a tonic–dominant relationship (e.g. A♭ minor to D♭ major). The pattern of modulations is the opposite of those in jazz, which usually follow an ascending order in the circle of 5ths and have greater harmonic tension. Except for certain processes of chord formation (particularly altered chords) there is less jazz influence than some early critics believed. A trait traceable to jazz and perhaps related to bebop is the highly improvised style on an implied theme of some bossa nova instrumental pieces. The most remarkable innovation of bossa nova music is in its rhythmic structure, which affects the very foundation on which the samba was built. The rhythmic structure of the bossa nova samba possibly had its origin in both the folk and the classical samba formulae (ex.1). João Gilberto was mainly responsible for extracting and isolating those elements that constitute his famous guitar stroke, called in Portuguese ‘violão gago’ (‘stammering guitar’; ex.2). Many variants of that basic rendering have developed, their common trait being the predominance of ternary divisions against the binary one which occurs only once (exx.3a, b and d) or not at all (ex.3c). These

variants have been the point of departure for many ingenious drummers and guitarists towards a previously unknown rhythmic versatility. Bossa nova song texts are also innovatory, and are valued not only for their expressive content but also for the sonorous individuality of their words. Some affinity has been noticed between bossa nova texts and Brazilian concrete poetry. In several examples the lyrics seem to have been conceived together with the music, so close are the verbal rhythm and the melodic (cf Jobim's *Samba de uma nota só*, *Desafinado* and *A garota de Ipanema*).

Ex.1 Classical samba rhythms



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Ex.2 João Gilberto's characteristic bossa nova rendition of the samba rhythm.



Ex.2 João Gilberto's characteristic bossa nova rendition of the samba rhythm

Ex.3 Bossa nova rhythmic formulae



Ex.3 Bossa nova rhythmic formulae

During the early to mid-1960s bossa nova became linked with a social protest movement. Musically the introduction of international pop styles, especially rock music from England and the USA, gave rise to a dynamic hybrid style which reached its peak with the group Tropicália.

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See also

Brazil, §III, 3: Popular music, Bossa nova.

Gilberto, João

Jobim, Antônio Carlos

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