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At 80, Bossa Nova Pioneer João Donato Not Slowing Down

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It was a steamy Saturday in the historic Brazilian town of Tiradentes, and João Donato was on a tight schedule, but taking it all in stride, smiling broadly. The 80-year-old bossa-jazz innovator had just finished an interview with a visiting American journalist at his hotel. Tonight he would headline a free outdoor concert in this preserved colonial town, backed by a band of 20-somethings.

It was one of the main attractions in the final concert series of the MIMO Festival, which took place Oct. 17–19. But first, Donato was scheduled to conduct a master class with more than 100 eager music students at the local Centro Cultural a few blocks away.

“You come with me,” he says. Donato sits up front with the driver; his wife and young record producer join us in the back seat. He lights up a sizeable joint.

“Do you enjoy this?” he asks, reaching into the back seat to offer a hit. The offer is declined, citing the need to stay sharp. “I need to stay dizzy,” he says.

Everyone laughs. He pauses a beat. “Did I tell you about how I met Dizzy in New York?”

One of bossa nova’s most prolific composers, Donato is one of the few founding fathers of the genre who is still performing. He was a contemporary of the late Antônio Carlos Jobim and the still-living but reclusive João Gilberto; he performed and co-wrote songs with both of them.

But Donato went his own way musically, pioneering a uniquely funky style of electric bossa-jazz in the '70s



João Donato plays a Fender Rhodes piano at the 2014 MIMO Festival in Tiradentes, Brazil (Photo: Tom Cabral/MIMO Festival)

and '80s. As a player, he alternated between acoustic piano and Fender Rhodes. His songs and arrangements also reveal strong Latin roots, a sign of the profound influence of bandleaders like Tito Puente and Mongo Santamaría, with whom he played in the '60s.

His best-known songs, like “A Rã (The Frog),” “Amazonas” and “Emoriô,” are often built on simple building blocks: catchy melodies and repeated, insistent grooves. But it’s the way he develops the melodies and takes them into unexpected harmonic territory that makes his style so distinctive. He was awarded the Latin Recording Academy Lifetime Achievement Award in 2010.

Lately, the restless Donato has been playing with a hot 10-piece big band of young São Paulo musicians called Bixiga 70. With its four-person horn section and three percussionists, Bixiga 70 brings a wild Afrobeat-inspired energy to the Donato repertoire.

Ronaldo Evangelista, a São Paulo journalist-turned-producer who brought them together, said, “The Tiradentes show was a test-run for some songs and arrangements we’re going to record early next year for his next album, *Electric Donato*, which I’m producing with the new band.” The album is slated to include new compositions and is partly inspired by Donato’s own great '70s electric albums like *A Bad Donato* and *Donato/Deodato*.

He’s got other new projects as well. Donato is writing a symphonic suite with jazz trio based on themes of Debussy and Ravel. He is also planning a U.S. tour with his trio in 2015 and a two-piano tour of Europe with Chucho Valdés.

Back in the car, Donato is talking about Dizzy Gillespie. His story takes place in the 1960s, early in Donato’s 12-year sojourn in the States as a pianist, arranger and bandleader, which started in 1959, before the bossa nova wave hit. “Dizzy wanted me to join his quintet,” he recalls. “[Argentine pianist] Lalo Schifrin had just left, and he said I could take his place. I said, ‘But I don’t really play your kind of jazz.’

He says, 'No problem, I'll teach you.' But I had to say no because I had my trio and we were booked."

At the hotel, Donato had reminisced about the old days, when he played with artists like Puente, Santamaría, Eddie Palmieri, Cal Tjader, Bud Shank, Sérgio Mendes and Astrud Gilberto. At the same time, his own compositions were becoming increasingly well known.

Among the more memorable musicians he encountered was the gifted but troubled Chet Baker, who had been an early hero to Donato and all the original bossa nova crowd in Rio. Donato had a six-week engagement at The Trident in Sausalito. "I worked there with my Brazilian trio two or three times a year, very successfully. The manager loved us. But then I lost my rhythm section to [guitarist] Bola Sete and had to play the gig with a pickup band who didn't really get my style. The manager said it sounded terrible. So we called Chet Baker."

He recounts the phone call. "I said to Chet, 'Would you like to play with me in Sausalito?' He said, 'Yes!' I said, 'How much?' He said, 'I'm very flexible.'" A deal was struck, and the two musicians worked together successfully for three weeks, playing a mix of their tunes. They took to each other so well that San Francisco Chronicle jazz critic Ralph J. Gleason wrote that working with Donato "was the best thing that has happened to Baker in years."

"But he came late every day," Donato recalls. "We were supposed to play at 10 o'clock, and he would come at 11. I never knew where he was. ... One of those nights he showed up bloodied, with a bloody handkerchief. He said that three guys had beaten him up. He had to go home [to Southern California]. He did many things after that, but he didn't sound quite like he used to." Donato was the last musician to play with Baker before the trumpeter lost his teeth.

Later, at the master class, Donato, seated behind his Rhodes stage piano, cracks jokes and leads a singalong of one of his biggest hits, "A Rã."

When asked about the birth of “The Girl From Ipanema,” he puts the phenomenal hit into perspective. “We were all trying to write songs like that,” he says. “So many songs at that time had a similar chord progression.” He plays the familiar sequence of I, II, IImin, V, back to the I. “I used it, Jobim used it, Jorge Ben used it. None of those other songs made it. But this one was a good marriage of melody to lyrics.”

He demonstrates how the same chord progression had been used in many hit songs, playing the changes on the Rhodes and singing, in turn, “Ipanema” “Só Danço Samba,” “Watch What Happens” and “Take The ‘A’ Train.” “Musicians should analyze what these songwriters did,” he says. “You can construct many, many melodies on such progressions.”

A student asks him to describe his creative process. “There are two kinds of music I don’t like: too simple or too complex,” he says. “The best music is the most natural, like the sounds of birds or children playing. If you don’t fuss with it too much, it comes naturally.”

To read DownBeat’s overview of the MIMO Festival, with a review of a concert by Egberto Gismonti, click [here](#).

—Allen Morrison