

Singer Clara Moreno's new album nods to the classic LP *Samba Esquema Novo*.



LAMB TAYLOR

## CLARA MORENO

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### *A Foot In Two Worlds*

For Clara Moreno, it seemed natural to become a singer. “I never chose, really,” she said via Skype from her São Paulo living room, with a friend nearby to provide occasional translation. Moreno was trying to convey just how inevitable a career in music had seemed to her when she was a little girl.

She was a child of Brazilian pop (MPB) royalty: Her mother and father, Joyce Moreno and Nelson Angelo, are two of Brazil’s most highly regarded singer-songwriters. Growing up in 1970s-era Rio de Janeiro, it was normal for musical superstars like Milton Nascimento and Egberto Gismonti to drop by the house and jam nightly. She inhaled music.

“I started singing at age 6,” she recalled. “My mom sent me to Paris when I was 18 to see if I really wanted to do this.” She stayed for six years, studying with Christiane LeGrand (composer Michel’s sister), one of France’s leading jazz vocalists and the original lead soprano of The Swingle Singers. Upon returning to Brazil at 25, she recorded her first album at the invitation of Márcio Menescal, son of bossa nova pioneer Roberto Menescal. The younger Menescal is a founding member of the Brazilian musical group Bossacucanova, leaders of the style known as “nova bossa nova,” which combines traditional bossa nova with DJs and electronic dance beats. From its beginnings in Brazilian dance clubs, the genre sparked a revival of interest in bossa nova in Europe and the States.

“At the time, I was into electronics, I was a clubber, and now I have an adolescent son,” she laughed. “I grew up, and my music grew up, too.” Moreno has a foot in both musical worlds: the bossa nova milieu of her parents’ generation, and the “nova bossa nova” movement. She eventually found her true musical identity in straight-ahead, small-group Brazilian jazz.

Hence her seventh album, *Samba Esquema Novo* (De Novo) (translation: “New Style

Samba—Again”), which has just been released on Far Out Records. It reimagines a seminal 1963 album (*Samba Esquema Novo*) by the influential singer-songwriter Jorge Ben (who later changed his surname to Benjor).

Moreno may be the perfect artist to reinterpret Benjor’s music. His original “Rhythm & Samba” style mixed traditional samba with African and North American jazz, blues and funk. Moreno’s singing is all about compelling, must-dance-this-out rhythms.

She recorded the project with her touring band—pianist João Cristal, bassist Thiago Alves, drummer Paulinho Vicente and trombonist/arranger Paulo Malheiros—after honing a modern interpretation of Benjor’s material for six months in jazz clubs. Once they were ready, they recorded the album live in the studio in one week.

Throughout the disc, Moreno employs trombonist Malheiros as a duet partner, weaving her sultry alto into and around the band’s compelling samba jazz grooves. The album also features delightful vocal duets with Brazilian singers Simoninha and Jair de Oliveira.

As a youngster, she soaked up the sounds of a jazz icon: “I very much like Bill Evans, the pianist. I know every solo he did in his life. I’m sure he never imagined this little girl in Brazil hearing his albums every night when I went to sleep, and every morning when I woke up.”

Why reinvent classic Jorge Ben? “The original *Samba Esquema Novo* album was very simple and very popular. But many people don’t realize that it is one of the first albums of Brazilian jazz music. It is very precious to me. It was the birth of a new music. I want to pay tribute to it because the young people have forgotten this music. It is the treasure of my country. We have so much trouble in Brazil. I want to focus on the best things we have.”

—Allen Morrison

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