Conversation

THE TROPICALISTA REBELLION

A conversation with Caetano Veloso

Christopher Dunn

Interview translated by Andrea Kouklanakis

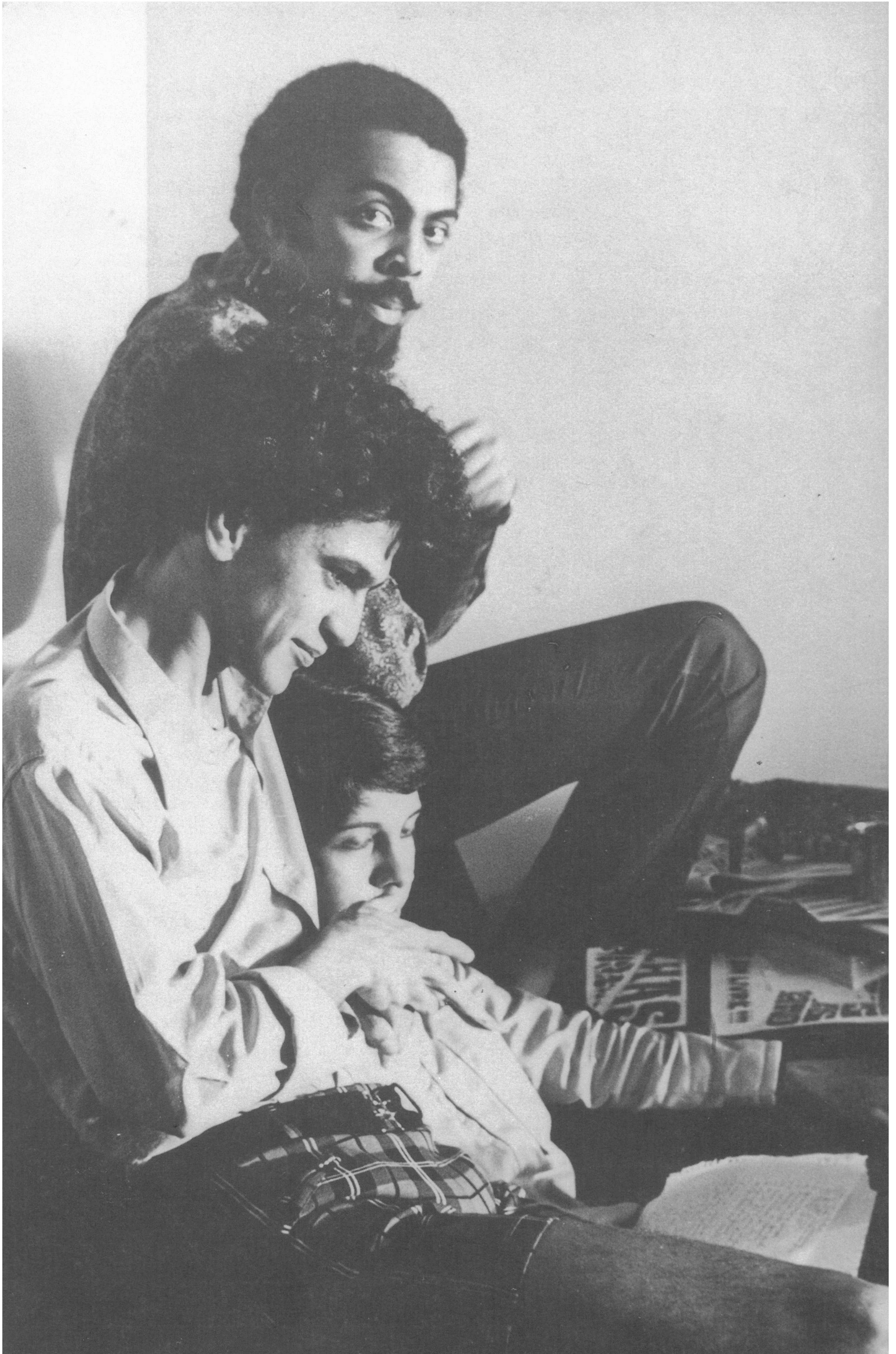
"I cannot negate where I live, nor can I forget what I've read," said Brazilian composer-performer Caetano Veloso in 1968. Veloso was living under a repressive military regime in an unevenly developed, largely impoverished nation; he was "reading" the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan, and James Brown, as well as Sartre, Godard, the concrete poets of São Paulo, and the literary provocateur of Brazilian modernism, Oswald de Andrade. His declaration sounds almost unremarkable today, in an era when cosmopolitan intellectuals and immigrant workers alike regularly negotiate myriad "border crossings," both figurative and literal. Yet in the Brazil of the 1960s, Veloso's attitude seemed irreverent, if not treacherous, to proponents of cultural nationalism, who saw in the influx of imported symbolic goods, particularly from the United States, the insidious machinations of imperial minds.

In 1965, Caetano Veloso had relocated from Salvador, Bahia—the center of Afro-Brazilian culture—to Rio de Janeiro, and then on to Brazil's industrial capital, São Paulo. Friends and collaborators from the vibrant musical scene connected to the Universidade Federal da Bahia—Gilberto Gil, Tom Zé, and Gal Costa—as well as the poets Torquato Neto and José Carlos Capinam, soon followed. In São Paulo, they hooked up (via concrete poet Augusto de Campos) with erudite composer-arranger Rogério Duprat and the experimental rock group Os Mutantes ("The Mutants"). The convergence of Bahia's vital expressive culture with the avant-gardist energies of São Paulo produced Brazil's most aesthetically innovative experiment in popular music to date.

Like other Brazilian musicians of this generation, the Bahian group came to national attention by way of televised music festivals in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, which had turned into contests for mass popularity. Veloso and Gil introduced their new "universal sound" in 1967 at the third Festival de Música Popular da TV Record. By the end of that

Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, and Gal Costa, Rio, 1968

Paulo Salomão. Abril Imagens, São Paulo, Brazil



year, their musical approach, which combined rock instrumentation with Brazilian melodies and rhythms, had been dubbed *tropicalismo* in the local press.

Tropicalismo is not a musical style like bossa nova, rumba, tango, or rock. It connotes, above all, a certain strategy toward cultural production which "cannibalizes" both local and foreign styles and technologies in a process of ironic appropriation and recycling. Indeed, one of the key literary texts for the tropicalistas was Oswald de Andrade's "Manifesto Antropófago" ("Cannibalist Manifesto," 1928), a sort of blueprint for Brazilian cultural production in which European high culture, especially the avant-garde, would be critically "devoured" without effacing local specificity. The manifesto is dated "year 374 since the deglutition of Bishop Sardinha." For Oswald de Andrade, the violent demise of this unfortunate Portuguese prelate at the hands of Brazilian indigenes was the first act of anticolonial struggle. The tropicalistas, for their part, digested large helpings of the North American counterculture of the 1960s, from the hippie movement and acid rock to black power and soul music. With this in mind, we might better understand Veloso's remark that tropicalismo proposed an "aggressive nationalism" against the "defensive nationalism" of his critics.

The tropicalistas shared close affinities with Brazilian artists working in other fields such as film, theater, visual arts, and experimental fiction. Glauber Rocha's classic film of Cinema Novo, *Terra em transe* ("Land in Anguish," 1967), and Oswald de Andrade's play, *O rei da vela* ("The Candle King," 1933), which was staged in 1967 by the Teatro Oficina, are often cited by Veloso as key influences on his compositions during that period. In that same year, the conceptual artist Hélio Oiticica exhibited his cryptic installation, *Tropicália*, which provided the namesake for Veloso's song-manifesto. Many tropicalista songs also converged with the work of North American pop artists and their Brazilian counterparts such as Rubens Gerchman and Antônio Dias. Veloso's ironic yet affectionate wink to the camp icon Carmen Miranda at the end of "Tropicália" is just one of many parodic references to vulgarized or stereotyped emblems of Brazilian culture which the arbiters of "good taste" would have preferred to forget. These ironic dislocations, akin to the iconoclastic gestures of Dada, did not seek to annihilate the parodied object, but rather to question its social place and cultural meaning. Where is Carmen Miranda "located" in Brazilian culture or in the pantheon of Hollywood stars? What does she say about the flow of cultural products from Brazil to the United States, and back again?

Despite their differences with left-wing nationalists, the tropicalistas ultimately provoked the ire of the authoritarian regime. Many of their songs, like Veloso's "Tropicália," created fragmentary, allegorical montages of Brazil's historical contradictions. While the regime constructed a unitary, conflict-free vision of Brazilian society, the tropicalistas conducted an archaeological dig into the "ruins of history," as Benjamin would have it. Increasingly, their songs explored the quotidian violence of urban life under the regime and represented marginal subjectivities not readily subsumed by social class.

from "Tropicália" (1968)

Caetano Veloso

Eu organizo o movimento
Eu oriento o carnaval
Eu inauguro o monumento
No Planalto Central do país

Viva bossa - sa - sa
Viva a palhoça - ça - ça - ça - ça

O monumento é de papel crepom e prata
Os olhos verdes da mulata
A cabaleira esconde atrás da verde mata
O luar do sertão
O monumento não tem porta
A entrada de uma rua antiga estreita e torta
E no joelho uma criança sorridente feia e morta
Estende a mão

Viva mata - ta - ta
Viva a mulata - ta - ta - ta

O monumento é bom moderno
Não disse nada do modelo do meu terno
Que tudo mais vá pro inferno
Meu bem

Viva banda - da - da
Carmem Miranda - da - da - da - da

translation "Tropicália"

I organize the movement
I direct the carnival
I inaugurate the monument
on the central high plains
of the country

Long live the bossa
Long live the straw hut

The monument of *papier-maché* and silver
The green eyes of the *mulata*
Her long hair hides behind the green forest
The moonlight over the plains
The monument has no door
The entrance is an old street, narrow and winding
On his knees a smiling, ugly dead child
Extends his hand

Long live the forest
Long live the *mulata*

The monument is quite modern
You said nothing of my fashionable suit
To hell with everything else
My love

Long live the band
Long live Carmen Miranda

Veloso and Gil were particularly savvy in their use of mass media. Toward the end of 1968, the tropicalistas even hosted a television program called "Divino Maravilhoso" on the now-defunct TV Tupí in São Paulo. The program was largely without structure: they usually staged impromptu "happenings" involving invited guests. On one show in late December 1968, they parodied the national anthem (six months before Jimi Hendrix's famous rendition of "The Star-spangled Banner" at Woodstock), a move which irritated the increasingly vigilant censors. Their irreverence seemed subversive to the defenders of social order and propriety.

By that time, "hard-line" forces with-

Caetano Veloso and Gal Costa, Rio, 1968

From Caetano Veloso Songbook I, *Rio de Janeiro: Lumiar Editora*

in the regime had prevailed: there would be no devolution of power to civilian authorities in the foreseeable future. In response to the escalation of labor activism, the intensification of civilian protest, and, finally, the emergence of an armed resistance movement, the government of Artur de Costa e Silva promulgated the draconian Fifth Institutional Act on December 13, 1968. This law suspended habeas corpus, instituted blanket censorship, and proscribed the political rights of opposition leaders. Within a couple of weeks, Veloso and Gil were arrested; they were exiled to London for two and a half years.

Caetano Veloso has produced roughly one new album each year since he began recording in 1967; three years ago he and Gil released *Tropicália 2*, commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of their original project. He remains at the forefront of Brazilian music, combining pop sensibility with a penchant for experimentalism and innovation. He refers to himself as "just a radio singer," but regularly finds himself at the center of national polemics and intellectual debates about culture, politics, sexuality, and race in Brazil. And he continues to call himself a tropicalista.

CHRISTOPHER DUNN: How did your musical career start?

CAETANO VELOSO: I've liked singing since I was a child, but I really wanted to draw, to be a painter and a film director—I wanted to make movies. Music was always something that I loved, but I thought it would be a hobby, not a profession. I thought of myself as a music lover. But somehow destiny hooked me to popular music. I think that the situation in Brazil lends itself to it; popular music is such a strong presence here.

When I was a child I used to play the piano at home in Santo Amaro. When I was eight, I would stay home listening to easy songs in order to learn them by ear and then play them. I also knew how to sing some old Brazilian songs, which I learned from my mother—she sings very well, and knows songs from different periods. But I didn't really develop an ear for harmony. In 1960, when I was seventeen or eighteen, we moved to Salvador and the piano had to be sold, so I asked my mother to buy me an acoustic guitar. I found it very different, and I thought I might never be able to learn how to play it. Then one day I met Gilberto Gil, and I learned a little bit from him. The little I do know about playing guitar comes from those days. I don't know how to read music, I didn't study with any teacher.

CD: School was listening to João Gilberto . . .

CV: Oh yes, João Gilberto was a mentor for me. I was listening to bossa nova in 1959, and I was crazy about it.

CD: I once saw João Gilberto play in the amphitheater in Salvador. I arrived late and sat on the ground in front of the stage, and soon afterwards you and Gil came and sat right next to me. But it was the most interesting thing, because you looked like his students—singing along with him.

CV: It's true, we really are. I remember that day very well.

CD: It's now almost thirty years since the tropicalist movement first appeared, and I wanted to start with the most general question. What was tropicalismo?

CV: It was a total confusion. . . . [Laughs.] It was, in a nutshell, a reaction against what was happening to bossa nova in its second phase. We were all disciples of bossa nova. Bossa nova had considerable artistic, musical, and social value. But by the late 1960s there was a certain code of "good musical behavior." The new artists had added political slogans to what was more or less a diluted version of what bossa nova had achieved in harmony and rhythm. We believed that bossa nova represented a much more powerful and profound force in the history of Brazilian popular music. We wanted to be better disciples than those who were merely imitating it or perpetuating it.

We ended up causing a great scandal, because we showed interest in what I call British neo-rock 'n' roll, what was happening in the sixties—the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Who, etc. Rock 'n' roll was an American thing from the 1950s, and what happened in England was a revisitation of that music by groups who were more or less conscious of what they were doing. I like to call what was done in England "neo" rock 'n' roll because it was a *commentary*, not as fierce as what we did in Brazil, but nevertheless a commentary on the original rock 'n' roll. We were interested in that phenomenon. We were also interested in the kind of Brazilian popular music that most people considered to be of lesser quality—in the Argentine tango, in Cuban music and Mexican *boleros*. We did something similar to what the pop artists in the U.S.A. were doing in the visual arts: we took what was kitsch—what was considered bad taste—and we placed it in a more sophisticated repertoire. And that jolted the musical establishment.

But these more or less ironic displacements were happening all over the world; this dislocation was a vital and characteristic practice of the 1960s. And for Brazil that dislocation was full of implications. By using electric guitar in melodic compositions with elements of Argentine tango and African things from Bahia, we assumed an immediate posture of "being-in-the-world"—we rejected the role of a Third World country living in the shadow of more developed countries. Through our art we wanted to put forward a vision of the world at that time, from our own perspective as Brazilians.

This triggered a strong reaction against us in Brazil. First from leftist stu-

Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil in London, 1969

From Caetano Veloso Songbook I, *Rio de Janeiro: Lumiar Editora*

dents, and then from the left in general, which considered us antinationalist for accepting American rock 'n' roll, and anti-Marxist or antisocialist, because we had an anarchic attitude toward the world and toward society itself. We let our hair grow long, and did the sort of things people were doing in the 1960s all over the world. But tropicalismo was a very ambitious project; we took in the hippie movement, pop music, the British invasion, student movements in the U.S. and France—we had all this material to discuss and reflect upon. Although our first critics were on the left, it was the right—represented by the military dictatorship—which sent Gil and me to prison: two months in prison, then four months in confinement in Salvador until we were finally exiled and spent two and a half years as exiles in London.

CD: I want to talk about a very important moment for tropicalismo: the eliminatory rounds of the 1968 Festival Internacionale da Canção (International Festival of Song), when you sang "E proibído proibir" [It's forbidden to forbid], and the uproar it caused. Why did the public react against this song?

CV: It was not so much the song itself. People already disliked us for our musical and personal attitudes. And people took the festival very seriously. It had cultural and political value for Brazilian students—and for us—because popular music in Brazil has a very strong tradition. The students who went to these festivals favored nationalism and a kind of a socialist populism. This festival was started after the military coup in 1964, but in the beginning that government didn't prevent left-wing cultural manifestations. The students reacted against what we were doing—it wasn't how a leftist songwriter was supposed to behave.

CD: Was tropicalismo a criticism against an essentialist vision of Brazilian culture?

CV: It was a criticism of that type of nationalism, a nationalism that seemed naive and defensive. We were ambitious: we believed that, at least with popular music, we should and could be aggressive, that we could have a more engaged kind of nationalism. We took the example of "cultural anthropophagy," or cultural cannibalism, a notion put forward by the modernist movement in the 1920s, especially by the poet Oswald de Andrade. You take in anything and everything, coming from anywhere and everywhere, and then you do whatever you like with it, you digest it as you wish: you eat everything there is and then produce something new.

We thought we could have a critical attitude from a cultural perspective, an aggressive attitude, not a passive and defensive nationalism. It was very difficult at the time for the students to understand, and what we were doing shocked them. For them, letting our hair grow was already a sign that we accepted the hippie movement, that we were "Americanized." We liked Jimi Hendrix, the Beatles, James Brown, and the Rolling Stones, and this was seen as a sellout. They thought we should defend Brazilian music from all foreign influence.

We assumed an immediate posture of "being-in-the-world"—we rejected the role of a Third World country living in the shadow of more developed countries

But bossa nova, too, had affirmed Brazilian culture precisely because it had no qualms about assimilating the best of American music. Bossa nova was considered a strange phenomenon when it appeared on the music scene; João Gilberto was a cultural scandal when he appeared on the scene. People thought he was weird: they would say, "This guy has no voice, he sings out of tune." His songs had dissonant harmonies and exotic or modern melodies that departed from traditional music. A famous critic in Brazil, Jose Ramos Tinhorão, who's a nationalist and a leftist, waged a holy war against bossa nova in the press, which he continues to this day. He considers it unintelligible, and a mere imitation of American music. He thought the songs were elitist and that people would never understand them.

With tropicalismo we wanted to remind people that bossa nova had done a certain kind of cultural violence in order to revitalize popular music. But memory is short for such things, and

From "Manifesto Antropófago" [Cannibalist Manifesto, 1928]

Oswald de Andrade, translated by Leslie Bary
in Latin American Literary Review *19:38 (July–December 1991)*

Cannibalism alone unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically.

Tupi or not tupi, that is the question.

What clashed with the truth was clothing, that raincoat placed between the inner and outer worlds. The reaction against the dressed man. American movies will inform us.

Down with all the importers of canned consciousness.

We want the Carib Revolution. Greater than the French Revolution. The unification of all productive revolts for the progress of humanity. Without us, Europe wouldn't even have its meager declaration of the rights of man.

The Golden Age heralded by America. The Golden Age. And all the *girls*.

We were never catechized. What we really made was Carnival. The Indian dressed as senator of the Empire.

We already had Communism. We already had Surrealist language. The Golden Age.

But those who came here weren't crusaders. They were fugitives from a civilization we are eating, because we are strong and vindictive.

Before the Portuguese discovered Brazil, Brazil had happiness.

We are concretists. Ideas take charge, and burn people in public squares. Let's get rid of ideas and other paralyses. Believe in signs; believe in sextants and stars.

Absorption of the sacred enemy. To transform him into a totem . . .

Down with the dressed and oppressive social reality registered by Freud—reality without complexes, without madness, without prostitutions and without penitentiaries, in the matriarchy of Pindorama.

Oswald de Andrade

In Piratininga, in the 374th Year of the Swallowing of the Bishop Sardinha.

Gal Costa, Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, and Os Mutantes on the Divino *Maravilhoso* TV program, October 1968

Paulo Salomão, Abril Imagens, São Paulo, Brazil

people thought that bossa nova was very good, but whatever we were doing was the opposite of bossa nova. Even the bossa nova artists didn't like what we were doing. Only João Gilberto, who's the most radical of the bossa nova generation—the most profound, the true inventor and creator of bossa nova—understood our position. He got it.

So when I enrolled "E proibído proibir" in the festival, I knew it was going to cause a scandal. I went up on stage with a Brazilian rock band from São Paulo called Os Mutantes. Their very presence was already offensive to the audience—they started booing even before we started playing. The song opened with more than a minute of atonal music composed by Os Mutantes. This caused complete hysteria among the students. They already hated us. To tell you the truth, I deliberately provoked them. It was a happening.

CD: It was very punk.

CV: It was amazing. I wore a plastic outfit, and I had on a necklace made out of electrical cords, iron chains—it was something! The audience's reaction was brutal, they hated me. You know, there was a guy there named John, an American. He was over six feet tall, and because of some problem he had lost all his hair, even his eyebrows. He was very pale white, super tall, a little crazy, and with no hair. I signaled to the American guy to come up on stage and he started screaming, while the audience kept shouting "You are Americanized!" And in the middle of it was this guy—so weird—and yelling "AAAHH!" just like Yoko Ono. The students were infuriated and started jeering horribly.

This had been the first presentation of the song, and when I returned to sing it a week later for the second round, the audience was ready. They staged a protest: when I came on stage, they all turned their backs to me—the entire audience turned their backs. It was a cu-

Brasília, Brazil

AP/WIDE WORLD

rious thing . . . they too staged a happening, a protest—that whole theater, all with their backs to me. So I sang the song, and I was moving my hips back and forth, dressed in that shining black and green plastic outfit, with my long hair and a lot of electrical cords around my neck.

During an interlude in the song, I recited a poem by Fernando Pessoa, a Portuguese poet from the beginning of the century, who is, in my opinion, one of the greatest poets of modern times. It was a mystical poem about a king in

In cultural cannibalism, you eat everything there is and then produce something new

Portugal, Don Sebastião, who died when he was very young in a desert battle against the Arabs in Alcazarquivir. This was all still part of the show. It was a very strange mixture of rock 'n' roll and French student politics—"É proibído proibir" was a phrase that French students had written on walls around Paris. And in the middle of it all, Os Mutantes and my big hair—I looked like a mulatto, because I'm kind of mulatto—all my plastic clothing and cords and reciting: "Wait, I have fallen in the sand dunes and in such adverse times . . ."

It was crazy. So they booed me a lot. And then I started to talk, although I didn't know what I was going to say. And when I started talking they turned to face the stage—they wanted to see and hear what I was saying—but they were throwing whatever they could find at me. They were screaming and throwing things. I had Gil come up on stage and stand next to me, at which point someone threw a piece of wood, which hit Gil in the leg. And then I started yelling: "Is this the youth of Brazil, is this the youth that wants to have power and do something good for the country?" I thought they were so prejudiced and I wanted to tell them so. I was angry.

Carmen Miranda

UPI/Corbis-Bettmann

CD: Let's go back to Oswald de Andrade, to this notion of "poetry for export" he outlines in his "Manifesto da poesia pau-Brasil" [Manifesto of Brazilwood Poetry]. Did you intend to make music to be exported? What did that mean to you?

CV: The basic idea of exportation in Oswald's mind is not that you are ready to sell anywhere, but that you do something that you know is international—something that is an intervention at an international level. The Brazilian concrete poets were very interesting in this respect. In the fifties they created visual poetry, which they called "concrete" poetry—an expression that became international. Their attitude had an aesthetic boldness at an international level, and they maintain this vision today; they follow the events of the world with a cosmopolitan view. The concretes looked to tropicalismo because they found in us an identification with this Oswaldian attitude, this idea of "poetry for export," which was formally a very aggressive, worldly kind of poetry.

In truth, at that point I did not even think that the records I was making were "exportable," even though bossa nova had been recognized worldwide as a very sophisticated and high-quality music, coming from a poor country. Bossa nova had influenced good American and European musicians. So this idea of exporting Brazilian music had a precedent, but we didn't really believe that the kind of "product" we were making at that time would make it over.

"Chiclete com banana"
[Chewing gum with banana, 1958]

Gordurinha and Almira Castilho,
translated by Christopher Dunn

I'll mix bebop into my samba
When Uncle Sam picks up the hand drum
When he picks up the tambourine and the bass drum
When he finally understands that samba is not rumba
Only then I'll mix Miami with Copacabana
Chewing gum I'll mix with banana
And my samba will come out like this
I want to see the great confusion
It's the samba rock my brother
On the other hand I want to see
the boogie-woogie with tambourine and guitar
I want to see Uncle Sam beating on the frying pan
In a Brazilian jam session

Still, the spirit of it, the impulse was there. Milton Nascimento, for example, has a considerable amount of influence on some important musicians around the world. As do Djavan, Hermeto Pascoal, Egberto Gismonti, Gil, Jorge Ben, Antônio Carlos Jobim. And even today, my records come out in the U.S. and Europe, they're reviewed in newspapers and magazines abroad. And I thought that my music would not be easy to export because one would have to know Portuguese.

CD: Yes, your music is very lyric-centered. Do you think that Brazilian culture has always had the anthropophagic capacity it had in the sixties?

CV: I think so. The kinds of things Oswald was talking about in 1922 had already been explored before in popular music, because foreign influences have always resulted in something very original. American music from the 1940s—the period when American music became a massive presence in Brazil—influenced a lot of artists, ever since Jackson do Pandeiro. The American spirit in Jackson is very pronounced, but what he did to American music was new, it was uniquely Jackson do Pandeiro. It was music from the north of Brazil, and it had a special spontaneity.

CD: "Chiclete com banana" [Chewing-gum with banana, 1958] . . .

CV: "Chiclete com banana" is a manifesto of this new style. In our case, with tropicalismo, we made a sort of mixed salad, a hybrid style. It was invigorating for popular music: strange, interesting, and vital. This had consequences even for Brazilian rock bands of the 1980s and into the present day—it gave them a kind of freedom, put them at ease to enjoy the Beatles and music from Spanish America. Tropicalismo paved the road for this freedom; we didn't feel humiliated by the presence of cultural influences from richer countries. We didn't feel intellectually or artistically inferior or offended. I think that it is this sentiment that made João Gilberto an artistic genius, and the same is true for Antônio Carlos Jobim: they weren't humiliated, they were stimulated. We, too, were stimulated by all kinds of references.

We used to listen to Jimi Hendrix and be fascinated by his inventiveness, James Brown and all that wonderful energy, the Beatles and their creativity, joy, light-

ness. We were happy that all of these existed. We were alive and young, we wanted to do things—and we thought that Brazil should affirm itself in this way, that the Brazilian political system should be this way.

I still think so today. Brazil has never managed to realize its full potential, to achieve stability, wealth, some clarity in its public relations. It's a frustrated country, especially economically. We need to improve our standard of living, to have a better distribution of wealth, to prevent people from starving, to prevent kids from having to live on the streets. And we need to have originality. I think Brazil should be more independent in its political decisions and in its ideas, as it has been able to be in its music.

CD: One problem now is this trend of cultural importation, what Oswald de Andrade called the importation of "canned consciousness." American pop gets here and gets played on the radio more than music by Brazilians.

CV: Yes, that's true, but it's a little strange to see the discrepancy between the airplay and the sales. When a foreign record sells as much as Brazilians it makes news, precisely because it is not the rule. They never sell as much as the Brazilian ones. You cannot compare.

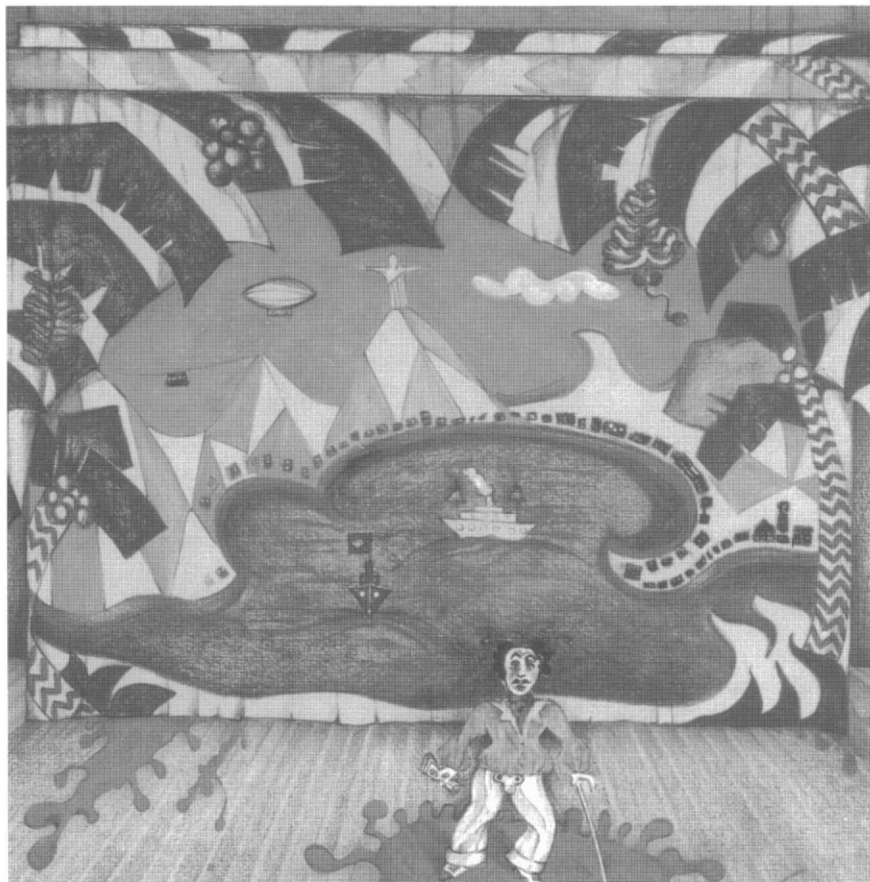
CD: So Brazilian records still sell more?

CV: But of course. It's incomparable. This is a myth which serves to corroborate an unjust kind of domination, because you turn on the radio and hear an incredible amount of American music, and these records are selling thirty, forty, maybe eighty thousand copies, while Brazilian musicians are selling a million, eight hundred thousand copies. There has never been any foreign artist who's sold half, or even a third of what Roberto Carlos sells.

The problem is, for the multinational corporations that own the record labels in Brazil, it's much more expensive to produce a Brazilian record—they would actually have to produce it here. But if a tape comes ready-made from Los Angeles, or London, they only have to copy it and to put it out to the radio stations. For them it's better to sell something all over the world, so it's much easier to have a new release from Michael Jackson or Madonna and instantly have it sold in Argentina, in Senegal, in Italy all at the same time. There's a pyramid effect. No one spends anything, they just reap the profits. So for them it's great.

But in Brazil, what sells is Brazilian music, despite everything. Do you think Madonna, Prince, or Michael Jackson sell more than Brazilian music? No way. I travel all over the world and everywhere I go I see the same thing: the music is American, or the television programs are dubbed. When I go to Italy, France, Portugal, Argentina, or Japan, I don't see a local, natural response to popular music as strong as I see it in Brazil. A resistance . . .

A natural resistance. I am only interested in the kind of resistance that's natural, not a programmed one. The defensive, nationalist kind of reaction tends to be suspicious, because it carries within it a notion of cultural isolation, which is no good. It becomes provincial and breeds a feeling of resentment; it does not have a power of its own, but it lives



Hélio Eichbauer's stage set for the Teatro Oficina's 1967 São Paolo production of *O rei da vela* ("The Candle King"), by Oswald de Andrade.

out of a negative force—the reaction against someone else's power. But the influence that Americans have in terms of international commerce is a given. You simply encounter it, it's there, it's an American conquest. And so it's up to you to conquer things in your own way, working with what you have. Brazilian popular musicians have always known how to produce attractive music, and it has dominated the market here without a period of discontinuity. Ever. This is something that the international public should know.

CD: "Tropicália," a song you wrote in 1968, became a manifesto. In it you make reference to a structure, a monument. What is this monument?

CV: I'm not sure, because in a strange way, that song is made up of images, and to a certain extent the song itself is a structure, isn't it? But you feel that there is a reference to the creation of Brasilia, and the whole irony of building a monument when there was nothing to be commemorated: a poor country, under a military dictatorship, a dark, terrible monument. It was an image of great irony, a more or less unconscious expression what it was like to be in Brazil and to be Brazilian at that time: you'd think of Brasilia, of the Planalto Cen-

tral [central high plains] and you'd expect to derive a certain feeling of pride from the architecture, and yet it was not at all like that. The feeling was more like: "What a monstrosity!" And this is because Brasilia was built and soon after the dictatorship came, and so Brasilia remained there as a center of this dictatorship. But in the song, the monument is described as a combination of diverse Brazilian cultural elements, of a culture shared by all: papier-maché and the green eyes of the mulatto woman. . . .

CD: But in the song those elements are always in opposition.

CV: And some of the oppositions are quite scary.

CD: On the one hand the song mentions "bossa," which is a symbol of sophistication.

CV: And on the other, the "palhoça" (thatched hut). The song shows how these oppositions point to enormous distances: the gap between the country's intellectual and artistic development on the one hand, and the backwardness of a great part of the population due to poverty, on the other. These contradictions could be used to shock Brazilian audiences. That song made a lot of people think: it generated articles, books, conversations, discussion. And in the end we were arrested. . . .

CD: Why were you arrested?

CV: Because what we were doing was new. Tropicalismo lasted for a year only, and the military didn't know what to make of it—they didn't know whether it was a political movement or not—but they saw it as anarchic, and they feared it. There were some intellectuals in the military, who had some understanding of what we were doing—they were the ones who recommended that we be imprisoned. They thought we represented dissension and danger. People had to take a stand, and we were raising questions, giving interviews, and saying the kinds of things I've been telling you here, these things were coming to fruition in our minds—a vision of Brazil in which there was freedom, strength. Obviously, we were enemies of the military regime, we hated it, and we thought that this regime was a source of shame for us. However, we did not take part in any political group. We were not communists, or members of any left-wing party. I had never even participated in the academic student council. I was never interested in politics proper. So there was no political affiliation, but they were suspicious and preferred to arrest us because they did not know what to do, or where the thing could end up.

CD: To return to the song "Tropicália," you mention Carmen Miranda in it. Recently you compared putting Carmen Miranda in the song to Andy Warhol painting a can of Campbell's soup. . . .

CV: That's right.

CD: What does Carmen Miranda represent to Brazil and Brazilian culture?

CV: Well, after tropicalismo Carmen Miranda came to be admired once again, and was recognized as a positive cultural

symbol. But until tropicalismo, most people considered Carmen Miranda to be a kind of grotesque representation of Brazil, something to be ashamed of. There were a lot of people who revered her, who remembered her—old people from the time when she was marvelous. But even those who loved her felt sorry for what she'd suffered in Hollywood. Those who'd been born afterwards only knew her as that woman we used to see in films, who made us slightly ashamed.

Those Hollywood films presented a distorted image of Brazil, because they mixed in whatever "Latin" references would work well for them. That meant Cuban, Mexican, Argentine elements—all of this was ascribed to Carmen Miranda, and she became a sort of . . . she was a bit like the monument in "Tropicália," she was a bit of a monster. Before tropicalismo we could only feel ashamed of her. The tropicalist attitude freed us

With tropicalismo we wanted to remind people that bossa nova had done a certain kind of cultural violence in order to revitalize popular music

from this shame, and for me to include her name . . . well, that name had a shocking effect. Her whole act had all the characteristics of the ridiculous, didn't it? And yet at the same time with the tropicalist movement we rediscovered Carmen Miranda.

When we started tropicalismo I did not know about American pop art. But then during the 1967 São Paulo Biennial, there was an exhibition of their work and someone took me there. I was impressed because it confirmed a trend we were exploring in tropicalismo: that is, to take an object—a vulgar, even a culturally repulsive object—and remove it from its context, displace it. For example, you want to bring in an object that's culturally repulsive, so you go embrace it and then you dislocate it. Then you start to realize why you chose that particular object, you begin to understand it, and you realize the beauty in the object, and the tragedy involved in its relationship with humanity—humanity's tragedy for creating that object and that kind of relationship—and finally you start to love it. And if there really is something lovable about it, you begin to respect it.

But before that, there's a moment when you arrive at that neutral point, when you become uncritical in relation to that object. This was the case with Andy Warhol, who I think stayed at that point right to the end of his life: you cannot think that he is saying: "Look how this is tacky, kitsch, horrible, we should transcend it." Not at all; he's at that neutral point when the object is just the object: Bang! It's in your face and it has nothing to say about itself. So Carmen Miranda, at the time that I wrote "Tropicália," had reached that point of neutrality for me. She was no longer a grotesque thing, unpleasant, but was something that began to fascinate me, something I wanted to play with: it had already become lovable for me in many respects. She had been recovered: a kind of salvation.

CD: Parody has something of love, parody is not mere scorn.

CV: Exactly.

CD: It's an ironic displacement, but at the same time you have a certain affinity with it . . . you have love.

CV: Love. We have to return to Oswald de Andrade, who says all this in one poem. The poem is called "Amor," and the text of the poem is simply "Humor."

CD: It's a way to recover something from the past, to recover it, assimilate it, try to understand it, not with scorn, but as something that is part of the culture.

CV: Yes.

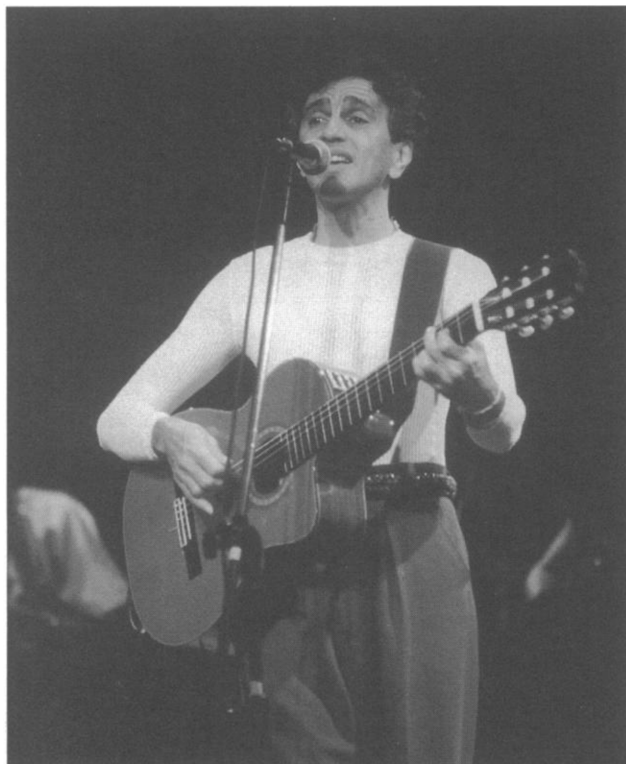
CD: It's beautiful.

CV: At that particular moment it's beautiful, at the moment of movement. The consequences are many . . . but one cannot judge art by thinking of the result. Today people's responses to art are informed by fear—"Oh, we have lost all perspective to judge what is good and what is bad"—everyone wants to return to the avant-garde movements from the beginning of the century. I think this kind of attitude is a betrayal of all great art. I'm just a radio singer, but that's my opinion.

CD: You once said that in any musician who goes and does anything in America—whether it's the Afro-Brazilian pop group Olodum singing on Paul Simon's album or you or Milton Nascimento playing a concert there—there's something of Carmen Miranda. Why?

CV: I think it's impossible for us to follow what happens to Brazilian music outside Brazil without thinking of Carmen Miranda, because Carmen Miranda was the first sign—the first Brazilian musical production outside of Brazil which had any international repercussions. There was a day—I wrote about it once for the *New York Times*—when Tom Jobim was going to play at Carnegie Hall. Sting had invited us to sing at Carnegie Hall—Tom Jobim, myself, and Elton John. Since Tom Jobim was going to sing "The Girl from Ipanema," Elton John had brought along a Carmen Miranda hat, and he had the idea to

Andy Warhol (American, 1930–1987), Campbell's Soup I: Black Bean. *1968. One from portfolio of ten screenprints on white paper, 35 x 23 in. © Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/ARS, New York*



Caetano Veloso, 1993

Lívio Campos

come dancing in with the hat when the song started. But Tom Jobim was very serious, he's an older man, and so Elton John ended up not doing it. But the simple fact that it had been suggested . . . you feel that that suggestion is always there. Bossa nova is, in its presentation, the opposite of Carmen Miranda. Bossa nova musicians are serious, they are respectable people. Tom Jobim is a great composer, he comes on stage and plays the piano beautifully . . . but suddenly you see it, Carmen Miranda is there.

"The Girl from Ipanema" was sung by João Gilberto's wife, Astrud, who at the time was not a singer, but she sang it because she knew English. In the end it was the one bossa nova record that had the most success. And so now Elton John, who's from another generation and has nothing to do with bossa nova or modern jazz—he's someone out of English rock 'n' roll—one day by chance meets Tom Jobim in Carnegie Hall and would have perhaps dared to come on stage dressed like Carmen Miranda at the moment when Tom was going to sing "The Girl from Ipanema" as his last number. . . . It's all rather suggestive. . . .

CD: Right, because the gesture is a tacit comparison, a suggestion that all Brazilian music is the same, whether it's Carmen Miranda or bossa nova. Of course this is not a very sophisticated vision, and with an American audience, perhaps Tom didn't want to . . .

CV: That's right.

CD: But in Brazil maybe it would be OK, because people understand the difference better.

CV: Yes, Brazilians would understand the difference better—and the identity. Because on the one hand Carmen Miranda and Tom Jobim are different and on the other they're really the same. Carmen Miranda *is* really an important part, an integral, and shaping part of something which is altogether good, which is Brazilian popular music. Her experience in the United States was not necessarily negative in this respect, not even from a musical point of view. It's a very complex thing, you know.

But the public must be sophisticated enough to see the value of their being one thing—Tom Jobim and Carmen Miranda. What happens is that the naive American audience still does not know the difference, the small but significant

difference between them. So obviously it is preferable, from Tom Jobim's point of view, that the differences still be highlighted for the American audience, because they are not mature enough to recognize the identity.

CD: Now I'd like to talk a little bit about your more recent work. I wanted to ask about the importance of the "concrete poets," Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari in the tropicalist movement. When, on the album *Circuladô* you recorded "Circuladô de Fulô" from Haroldo de Campos's collection *Galáxias*, were you revisiting tropicalismo?

CV: I had that precise feeling when I recorded *Estrangeiro* [Foreigner]. On the cover of that album is the scenery from *Rei da Vela* [The candle king], a play by Oswald de Andrade produced by the theater group Oficina in 1967, one of the great happenings of tropicalismo. That scenery, which we used when we toured Brazil, is like the vision of Brazil which appears at the beginning of the song "Estrangeiro"—Brazil seen from the outside. Carmen Miranda herself is just that: Brazil as viewed by foreigners.

In the opening of "Estrangeiro," there's Cole Porter, Levi-Strauss and Gauguin looking at Rio's Guanabara Bay. All those things I say in the song are true, those are the impressions they had and wrote down. Levi-Strauss found Rio very ugly. In *Tristes Tropiques* he says, "Rio is known for being beautiful, and São Paulo for being ugly, but I, to be honest, do not like Rio at all. When you arrive at Guanabara Bay it is ugly. It looks like a toothless mouth, a big mouth with just a tooth here and there."

From "O Estrangeiro" [The Foreigner, 1989]

Caetano Veloso,
translated by Arto Lindsay

The painter Paul Gaugin loved the lights of
Guanabara Bay
The songwriter Cole Porter loved the lights of her night
Guanabara Bay
The anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss detested
Guanabara Bay
It looked to him like a toothless mouth.

And I, if I knew her less, would I love her more?
I'm blind from seeing her so often, from holding her up
like a star
Oh what is a beautiful thing?

Gauguin said that it is more beautiful than Tahiti. He starts *Noa Noa* saying this about Tahiti: "It's not as beautiful as the bay in Rio de Janeiro. . . . "

Cole Porter also found it beautiful. . . . The first time I sang in New York was at the Public Theater and I sang Cole Porter's "It's Delovely." The audience thought I was kidding when I said: "I am going to sing it in bossa nova style, because Cole Porter made this song for Rio." I was speaking in English and the Americans were laughing, thinking I was joking. But I kept saying: "I'm telling you and you don't believe it?" He was sailing on a yacht with some friends, and they stopped here, they dropped anchor in Guanabara Bay. As night fell and they saw all the lights, they said those things, that list of adjectives. Someone said, "It's delightful," and someone else said, "It's delicious," and he was left with nothing to say, and so he joked: "It's delovely," he just thought it up. In a biography there's a photograph of the bay at night with all

"Circuladô de Fulô,"
from Galáxias, 1984

Haroldo de Campos,
translated by Arto Lindsay

circulator of flowers to the god to the demon be given may god guide you
because I cannot and hail those who gave themselves to me circulator
of flowers and those who did not
ringing like a shamisen put together with a wire
stretched tight, a cable and an old can at the end of a party market at the
apex of the sun at its apex but for others that music didn't exist
it could not because it could not popular be that
music if you can't sing it isn't popular it can't be tuned
it doesn't tintinabulate it doesn't tarantina but besides it's unwound from the guts of misery from the tense guts of the most shrewlike physical misery and aching aching
like a nail in the flattened out palm of the hand a rustiness blind nail
in the flattened out palm of the hand heart exposed like a nerve
tense held back a black denial blind nail abiding in the palm
pulp of the hand in the sun
the people are language inventors in the cunning of mastery in the shrewd shrubbery
of the marvelous in the sights of the unexpected groping over the crossing
courting the axis of the sun

the lights and the notes he wrote on the yacht: "the beauty of the lights in Rio . . ."

With the next record, *Circuladô*, I didn't think much about tropicalismo, but I am a tropicalist, so it just turned out that way. And the song "Circuladô de Fulô" from that album is based on a poem from the sixties by Haroldo de Campos; the poem is contemporary with tropicalismo. It's a very swiftly moving text, with a regional accent and a lot of regional idioms and on top of that written by an avant-garde poet, with no punctuation; he writes like that. Haroldo read the poem to me when I was exiled in London. I was enchanted by it. The poem interested me then because it is a reflection on Brazilian popular music: it makes reference to a man Haroldo had seen, a terribly poor man from the north, a beggar, who was making music with a *berimbau* made out of a tin can. Then he sang that refrain, "circuladô de fulô," and asked for money. Haroldo was impressed by it and wrote about it, expressing the idea that invention happens in the direst of circumstances—that the direst circumstances can create something new, something modern.

This is why Haroldo says in the poem that "the people are language inventors." Haroldo also predicts in the poem what the most reactionary populist from the left would say about the "Circuladô": if it's strange, or experimental, somehow it cannot be popular. But nevertheless this man asking for money in a street market in the north is creating experimental music: the sound was incredible and even more so the text he recited as he asked for money: "Circuladô de Fulô ao

deus ao demo-dará" [Circulator of flowers, to the god to the demon be given]. It's an odd phrase, isn't it? The guy created both a sound and a text, he was an inventor, and this is what Haroldo underlined. This is what I take as a paradigm of our attitude to popular music.

Olodum, for example, from Salvador, is not some primitive, traditional phenomenon. But it is very likely that a great part of the international audience thinks that Paul Simon, a modern American singer, invited these primitive black percussionists from Bahia—a poor state in a poor country—to play with him and then he added some modern flavor to it. No: Paul Simon, the old songwriter, who's been producing good melodies and well-written lyrics since the sixties, invited the super-new and innovative group Olodum to play with him. Olodum is a modern group; it was influenced by things that came long after Paul Simon, especially by Bob Marley. Olodum's percussion added reggae to samba and invented something that didn't exist in Brazil before, or anywhere else in the world for that matter. There is nothing "traditional" about that. That is modern pop invented in the seventies and eighties. This is all new, a lot newer and more modern than Paul Simon himself. So Olodum is a product for export. And because it appears primitive, it becomes an export in two senses, since the primitive is naturally imported by rich countries as something exotic, different, interesting, and all that.

I do think, however, that David Byrne's relationship to Brazilian music is more interesting than Paul Simon's. It amazes me that when I am interviewed in the States, and here too, people talk about both artistic relationships as if they were the same thing. I'm not denigrating Paul Simon's importance, but David Byrne's attitude is radically different. For David Byrne to have released that record by Tom Zé—*Massive Hits: The Best of Tom Zé*—in the U.S. is wonderful. It is the opposite of what Paul Simon did with Olodum, because with Paul Simon you discovered Olodum, but you didn't find out what Olodum is. He didn't inform you about their creative inventiveness. Because Olodum is the "Circuladô de Fulô," you understand? Olodum is that thing which Haroldo said about the poor man who invents something with minimum resources—he creates something modern, new, provocative, different. That's what Olodum is.

Until tropicalismo, most people considered Carmen Miranda to be a kind of grotesque representation of Brazil, something to be ashamed of. She was a bit of a monster

CD: I always wanted to know about something that I find fascinating in your compositions and in MPB (Música Popular Brasileira) in general. The artists are always complimenting each other, paying homage, as it were. You talk about Gil, Maria Bethânia. . . .

CV: Djavan talks about me. . . .

CD: Yes, Djavan talks about you, he invented the verb *caetanear* [to caetano]. It's

Caetano Veloso in banana outfit, April 1968, on Chacrinha TV program

From Jornal A Tarde

a very curious thing, something you don't see very much in the U.S. Most of the American artists have big egos.

CV: It's more competition than collaboration.

CD: I feel that MPB in the last twenty or thirty years has been something done in collaboration, as you say.

CV: Tropicalismo contributed to that, because it celebrated this idea that there is room for a lot of people doing different things. There was a period in Brazil when people were afraid that the market couldn't accommodate us all. There was always one big composer at the top. First it was Edu Lobo, then came Chico Buarque—and Edu Lobo disappeared. Then when I appeared it looked as though Chico Buarque would have to fade. Everyone thought so, as if it were a fight where one had to decide between Chico and Caetano. But from the beginning Gil and I appeared on the scene *together*, and we never supported such a notion. There was always collaboration and friendship. Maybe because the country is so poor and because it's so difficult to get things to work in Brazil, and because popular music works so well, we instinctively prefer to help each other rather than get in each other's way. I don't know, it's a mystery. But I attribute it to the fact that we actually really like each other.