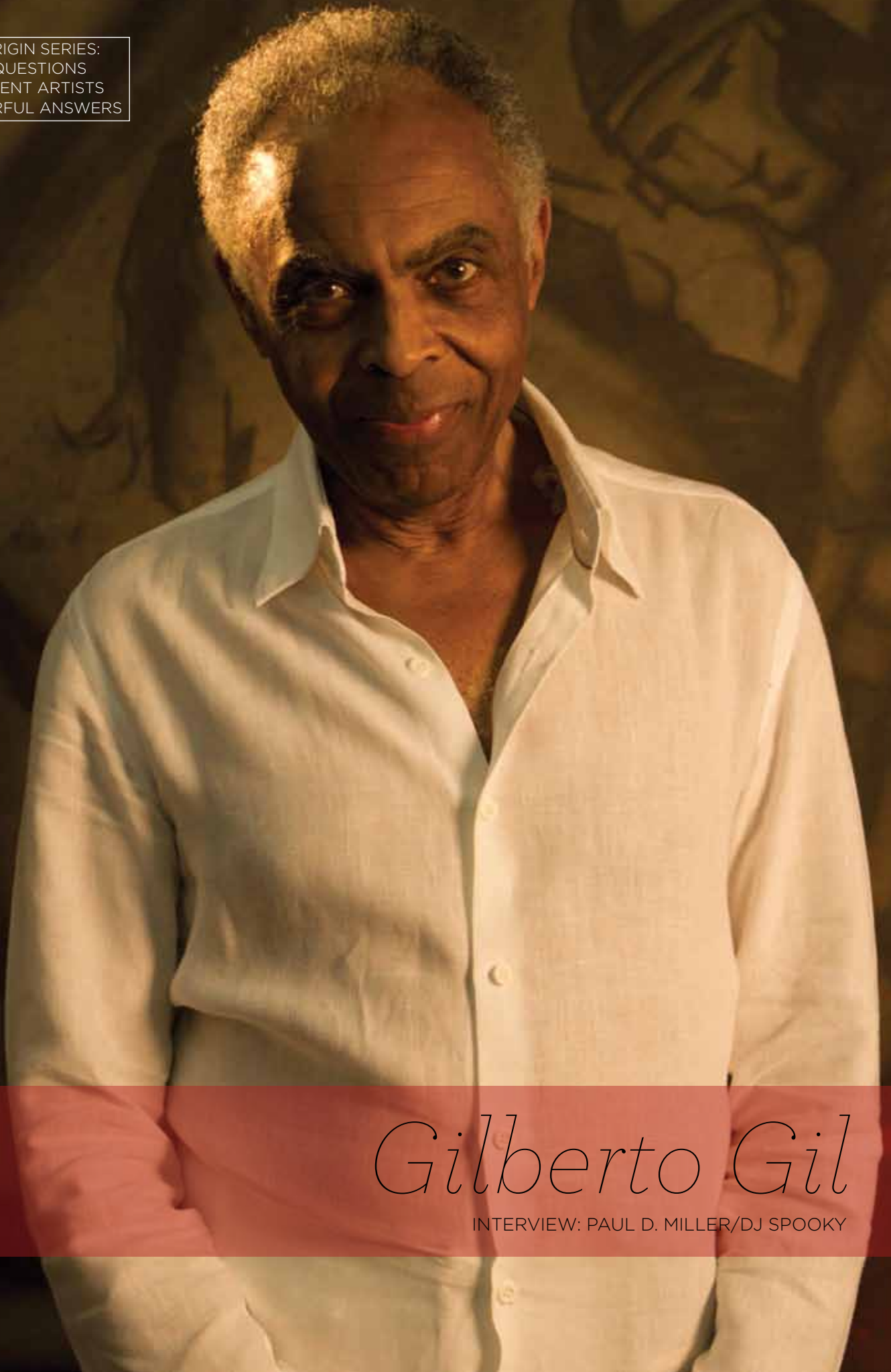


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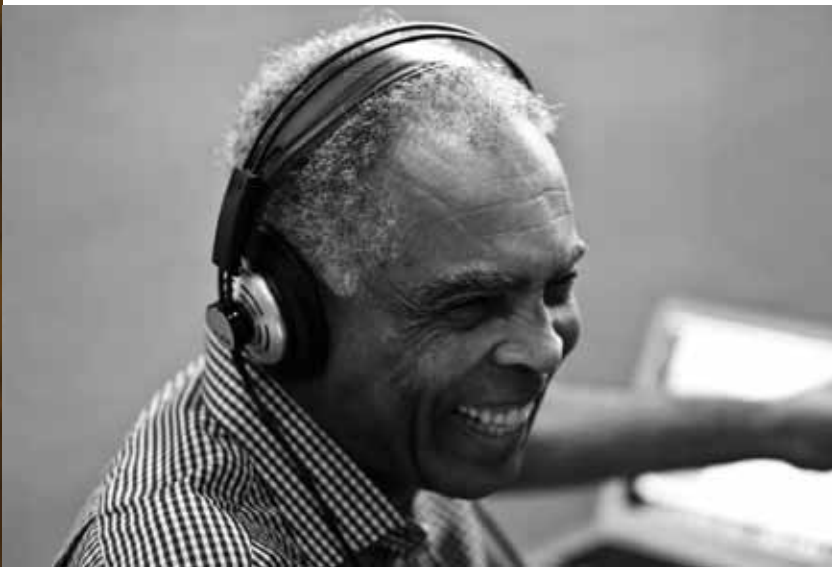


THE ORIGIN SERIES:  
SAME QUESTIONS  
DIFFERENT ARTISTS  
POWERFUL ANSWERS



# *Gilberto Gil*

INTERVIEW: PAUL D. MILLER/DJ SPOOKY



*“We are sufficiently conscious of this dimension or quality of Brazil as a melting pot, as a culture and a nation that is being subjected to an amalgamating process. More than just a mixing process, it is an amalgamation where the fragments, the parts in collision, really interact profoundly.”*

It's not every day that you get a chance to catch up with one of your all-time favorite artists, but on one sunny and beautiful day in Bahia, I paid a visit to Gilberto Gil to catch up with him on his many projects coming up. I was in Brazil for the Digitalia Brasil Festival, and Gilberto Gil was one of the other participants. We met through Lawrence Lessig a while ago, and stayed in touch.

One of my favorite Brazilian playwrights, Augusto Boal, wrote a great book way back in 1992 called *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* where he described his new idea about how people could respond to the changing dynamics of culture in Brazil with new voices, new roles, and new visions of what was possible in the rapidly changing landscape of post-everything. He liked to call it the “Theatre of the Oppressed,” from Paulo Freire’s coining; it was theatre in its most archaic application of the word. In this usage, all human beings are Actors (they act) and Spectators (they observe).

I like to think that the span of change and transformation that has swept Brazil in the last several decades, and that has taken the country from dictatorship to modern economic superpower, has been mirrored by its highly influential Tropicália artists like Caetano Veloso, Torquato Neto, Os Mutantes, and Tom Ze, who combined African and Brazilian rhythms with rock and roll, and ended up creating a fusion of art, theater, poetry, and music that set the tone for so many other cultural advances around the world in progressive arts movements. What they once called “antropofagia,” or “eating all cultures,” we now just call “sampling.”

We're at the Goethe-Institute in Salvador de Bahia. I'm sitting here with an incredible hero of mine, Gilberto Gil. Do you prefer Gilberto or Gil?

It doesn't matter. I've been referred to as both.

You've seen an evolution of culture over the last fifty years, from being in prison to being the minister of culture at the top of society. With people like Pelé and films like Marcel Camus' *Black Orpheus*, we've seen a Brazil that has been hyper-accelerated. I know that you're very interested in these semiotics of poetry and their relationship to composition. Brazil seems like a hyper-mix, a hyper-collage. How does your music reflect some of those issues?

We are sufficiently conscious of this dimension or quality of Brazil as a melting pot, as a culture and a nation that is being subjected to an amalgamating process. More than just a mixing process, it is an amalgamation where the fragments, the parts in collision, really interact profoundly. They become another thing after the contact. They produce another substance, so to speak. The Brazilian substance for us is very notable, very receivable. My whole work with music has reflected this consciousness and has been absorbing this kind of spirit.

Under the dictatorship, many musicians went to England. I've always felt that your exile in England was an influence because you got to use some English soul music from that time and the English were listening to Jamaican style because of the rock scene and the Jamaican and Nigerian immigration. So there was another kind of melting pot going on. What do you think of that time? In the sixties, seventies, what was some of the music you were listening to?

That process had already started under the Tropicália movement. The Tropicália had in mind the opening of the barriers and frontiers so that we could freely and openly work with different ingredients. We had already been submitted to a very strong influence of American culture. The movies, the music, and the whole technological apparatus: everything had a lot to do with the Americanization of our lives. Tropicália dealt specifically with that. The American influences, the European, more classical influences, the diaspora that came from Cuba and Jamaica and other places: that was already the element at work for the Tropicália. Going to London and being exposed to a more specific Jamaican culture, Indian culture, Africans from Nigeria and Ghana, the niches of those cultures that were found in London and other places in England, this also had a kind of influence in giving me a broader scope or sense of what Tropicália had to deal with.

**A lot of your music was from a live, almost poetry scene. Brian Eno likes to say that the studio became an instrument. In the sixties, a lot of rock bands were doing tape collage and editing. Steve Reich was doing his minimal and classical music, and even Jimi Hendrix was doing Electric Ladyland. In some of your recordings from that time period, there was a lot of experimentation. Do you feel that recording changed your whole process?**

Not just those procedures, but even the timbre, the sound, the synthesizers and pedals, all the things we were able to use to process sound and music. MIDI gave the instruments the possibility of being digital, becoming digitalized. Beginning



PHOTOS L-R:  
BY MARCOS HERMES, BY JORGE  
BISPO, BY JORGE BISPO, BY BETI  
NIEMEYER



*“We should also start taking care of the future, not just the heritage. What’s the horizon that is opening to us? What is in front of us? Where do we have to go towards?”*

in the sixties, but getting strong during the seventies and eighties, everybody was sort of Miles Davis and Chick Corea and the jazz guys on the West coast and East coast in America, and then in Switzerland and lots of groups in England and elsewhere, like here in Brazil. We were all under a heavy influence of technological gadgets and changes that we used as elements to produce and create music.

**But a lot of that took a different route in Brazil. I find that Brazil would re-purpose and transform some of the music of all these different cultures. A lot of the Japanese instruments, the expensive Yamaha keyboards, are in there. When I hear your music from then, it’s definitely experimenting with those keyboard sounds, with less guitar. A lot of people were listening to you. Miles Davis, Ryuichi Sakamoto, they would always talk about your work. I wonder how the evolution of the technology of recording and then of editing transformed your language. When I saw you yesterday, you were very much in a magical moment with the audience. There’s always the relationship of the singer, the poet, but I always think of you as a techno-futurist, someone who is very interested in technology.**

As paradoxical as it may seem, I’m a very enthusiastic defender and advertiser of those changes and advocating those technologies, but I’m not necessarily a profound user of them. If you listen to my work in different periods, you can note the influences. When some new thing came on, you can hear that this element is brought into the music of the

moment, in every period. The whole attitude and interest started already during the Tropicália thing.

**When you say Tropicália, people were doing installation, graphic design...**

...movies...

**Do you have any favorites from that time that stay in your memory?**

Many. Hélio Oiticica, who died some time ago. Antonio Días, still alive and in Rio, with interesting passages in Milan and New York. Movie makers like Glauber Rocha or theatre directors like José Celso, Martinez Corrêa or Augusto Boal. In a sense, Augusto was pre-Tropicália. He was one of the theatre guys that had received many different actors coming from different places in Brazil. He was receiving them in Rio and São Paulo. His group was very active in those cities. But when the Tropicália started, he left Brazil. He was in Europe and North America for a long period. What he did before Tropicália had a lot to do already with the transformation of the languages, poetry, literature, movies and so on.

**You had such an incredible career span, from being minister of culture to being dissident. Was there any inspiration from a Russian point, like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn or Václav Havel in the Eastern European freedom movements? The Cold War between the US**



**Brazil is considered a bootleg culture. A lot of stuff is about copying. I first met you through Lawrence Lessig in San Francisco.**

At the fifth anniversary of the Creative Commons project.

**You championed a lot of open source initiatives for Brazil. As far as I read, as a minister of culture, it was very important to get people to change their ideas about open source.**

When I was given the position as minister, I thought that I should take care of the classical ways of considering cultural goods, the heritage and the whole thing. But we should also start taking care of the future, not just the heritage. What's the horizon that is opening to us? What is in front of us? Where do we have to go towards? And then the digital culture, the new forms of communication that were possible with electronic and new media and new forms of interaction. All of that was interesting to have inside the government as elements for designing public policy, and I took care of that. We interacted with other offices in the government that had to do with that: the science and technology ministry, the communication ministry, the cultural ministry, and the ministry of planning. It should be a whole government approach. We tried that and we had the support of President Lula at the time. During eight years, six years of which I was in office, and then João Luiz da Silva Ferreira, who was my secretary before and then took the position of minister, we were able to establish a new outlook or outline for this drawing or designing of public policies concerning cyberspace, internet, open access, and all that.

**What's beautiful about it is that, I think, you inspired a lot of young people to get into digital literacy very early. In fact, Brazil, in the last ten years or so, has become a place for a lot of digital code. A lot of people are very literate with computers. They've grown up with those policies.**

I would say that they would be somehow attracted to those things through the natural flow of technology, the natural application of those technological elements in their lives, in our lives. But what distinguishes, in a sense, our work in the ministry was the fact that we vindicated also the role to really design public policies, to bring those issues into the government agenda. That was a contribution in increasing the element of attraction for the young generation concerning those things.

**That has never been done in other Western countries, except maybe with Václav Havel becoming president because he was an arrested dissident. In the US, it's very interesting because we are at a crossroads with the Republicans.**

It's very relevant now. Obama came to power with this element of raising many new hopes and expectations but he's been fought back by the system, becoming almost paralyzed in a way. Why? He wants to stand for a peaceful, generous, encompassing approach that would bring all Americans, but not just Americans, the whole of international society, together to advance civilization towards what we all understand is necessary to advance. Because of that he's being subjected to very serious rejections from the reactionary portion of the system, which, unfortunately, is the dominant portion.

**It's weird because when I see what happened with Brazil, with the very dynamic policies you all were initiating, you had a lot of support and were able to push them through, whereas Obama is trying to push, but the Republicans, the whole society, is paralyzed.**

The United States is very important, too important in the civilizational process of the world. It's difficult to move, to make a difference in establishments like the one the US represents.

**Did you and Obama ever meet?**

No, never. I had left Lula's government already when he met Obama at the inauguration. I had something to do in Washington, a different

**and Russia played out with the dictatorship here in Brazil, which was supported by the US. I always wondered if there was a hidden connection between some of the Non-Aligned Movement. A lot of Indian filmmakers didn't want to go west or east, so they ended up making Bollywood. In Brazil, the Tropicália was independent from both.**

As far as I can recall, our forms of doing and acting and processing were not connected to foreign groups in terms of really being in contact and exchanging information. Through the natural information processing, through the news and magazines, the cultural things we were able to have in our hands, we knew what was going on in Italy with the Modern movements of cinema, the Nouvelle Vague in France, the new movements concerning visual arts in England and in the States, the politically related movements on the campuses, the Black Panthers, and all of that. Even though we were not intimately attached or related to them, in the overall picture, we were very much informed about their existence and what they were doing, their purposes and the similarities between what they were doing and what we were intending to do. In a sense, we were influenced a lot by them.

**To me, that transformed some of your early initiatives with Lawrence Lessig and the Creative Commons because of this idea of open source culture and political activism, the control mechanisms of how people think about copyright law and its enforcement.**

“Black culture is global, but people sometimes think it needs protection, or that it has a pure aspect. To protect it in which sense?”

thing. I went with Lula, and I tried to be received by Obama, but I couldn't. Those official things, you know. I still want very much to meet him and have a chat, tell him that he should try to have a ministry of culture in the US.

**The US is the only country in the developed world that has no minister of culture. But we have one for IT policy.**

Which we can understand as far as the past of the American way of dealing with culture is concerned. Sponsors, corporate endowments, and the heritage of the big fortunes would take care of financing cultural projects when American society was homogeneous. Now it's too complex, it's a mix. Different cultures in collision. I think it starts to be necessary to have a government institution to deal with cultural affairs.

**I wanted to ask you about art and architecture because I know you're very interested in the arts. You mentioned Hélio Oiticica, Augusto Boal, I'm sure you've probably met Vik Muniz. What about Oscar Niemayer?**

While you were mentioning those names, I was thinking about Niemayer. Besides being modern in terms of drawing, of using the aesthetics for his architectural spirit, he was an activist. Very political, very active. He was a leftist. He was part of a great democratic and social-democratic resistance in Brazil. He is referential, not just in terms of architectural design, but even as a political activist, as a thinker and interpreter of different ideological elements coming from the old European left. From the intellectual and artistic universe in Europe and in America, he was responsible for helping to design some important buildings in the world, like the UN, Brasilia, in France, in Italy, in Spain, in Africa. He is one of our outstanding personalities in the field of architecture and design.

**Yesterday, you mentioned Candomblé and the idea of the nation, the idea of the mix. It was very interesting. We were talking about carnival and you were saying that maybe Candomblé is a kind of operating system for thinking about Brazil. What do you think about public policy's relationship to helping new forms of art? In the US they always want to keep it separated. We have the National Endowment for the Arts, which is very conservative. What I heard yesterday was a lyrical sense of a possibility you have in Brazil and especially Bahía as a kind of black culture.**

First of all, not just the African heritage we have in Brazil—black culture is global, but people sometimes think it needs protection, or that it has a pure aspect. To protect it in which sense? Even that we have, in a way, welcomed those elements and embraced them and let them be part of our transforming cultural process. With black religions, for instance. Now they're national. They've gone even international. They've gone to Uruguay, to Argentina, to other countries of South America: the deities, the music, the philosophy and everything. At the same time, some parts of the reactionary system have historically been against them and fought against this natural absorption by the society of African elements, trying to reject them, trying to impose a European kind of vision of what our

culture should be. Protecting this African heritage is the first thing we should do, both by constant social mobilization in favor of those things and by governmental policies. This is something that has been going on in Brazil for at least thirty years now. Many governments in Bahía, in Pernambuco, in Rio, everywhere, have been mobilized to protect that ancient heritage we have, and then, of course, opened possibilities for them to mix, to mingle with new dynamics, new cultural forms, with the cyber culture, the modern culture, so that they can progress and continue to give a great contribution to our life and our culture.

**For me as an artist, I have been very respectful of the way you have been able to balance between history and an idea of the future.**

Sometimes, from outside, and from America especially, where the racial tension is so intense, you tend to understand Brazil as a kind of ideal situation, but it's not. There are a lot of problems. Historically, we have been in struggle, in real struggle to protect and defend the natural leaning towards absorbing the African and the Indian heritage that our society has.

**In terms of film, I'm sure you have seen *Cidade de Deus (City of God)*. From that film to Marcel Camus' film *Black Orpheus* to a couple of other films, *Quilombo*, *Pixote*, these are all films that deal with class and race. What is your opinion for the near future, from globalist to localist, from local—Brazil—to global?**

I think that the global consciousness concerning all those elements that produce tension, fractions of societies, is changing in the sense that we all tend to understand a little more the needs for harmonizing the process and integrating races and cultures and producing multiculturalism and different melting-pot situations. That affects global things, tolerating the Arab, the African, the Eastern civilizations, getting rid of this hegemonic dominance by the West. That's all comprehensive now in terms both of understanding and approaching the whole planet. That affects Brazil also, because Brazil originally has been a culture like that, mixing culture open-source. I see the future of Brazil as the future of the planet. We are definitely and finally engaged in the same destiny.

**My last question, for practical purposes: are you working on any new albums, productions, film, or music?**

I'm going to record a live project that I've been working on. It initially started with me and my son Bem and then we had Jaques Morelenbaum, a great cello player, joining, and then we had a percussionist, Gustavo di Dalva, from the black culture in Bahía, and a violinist from Russian-French origin. We are also going to have a big symphonic orchestra, so we're going to record that and that is going to be the next album. But then I'm already working on another project for next year that deals with Samba, a specific form of reading Samba, not a classical one.