
A US Jazz Cat Finds New Life and Career by the Beach, in Rio, Brazil

Contributed by Ernest Barteldes
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It is not every day that a jazz musician discovers a new instrument and then goes on to single-handedly change the way the public sees it. This is the case of New York-born Scott Feiner, who fell in love with the pandeiro (a Brazilian hand drum similar to the tambourine) during a visit to Rio de Janeiro a decade ago.

A former guitar player during the mid-90s, Scott Feiner had dropped out of the music scene after years of playing in jazz clubs around the country and also abroad. In 1999, he traveled to Brazil and heard someone playing the pandeiro on the street - an experience that would forever change his life.

Since then, Feiner has released two discs as a jazz pandeirista. On his latest entitled *Dois Mundos/Two Worlds* (Biscoito Fino, available on iTunes), he entered the studio with his Brazilian band (Jesse Sadoc - trumpet; Marcelo Martins - tenor; David Feldman - piano; Alberto Continentino - bass) and cut several original compositions alongside covers of Thelonious Monk's "Monk's Dream" and Cole Porter's "All Of You." He also took a fresh approach on "Asa Branca," a Brazilian standard that is hardly ever heard in jazz circles.

Since taking up the pandeiro, Feiner has regularly returned to the US to perform, promote his records (he was in Austin last November for a percussion-related event) and also to visit his family back home. We caught up with him over an e-mail interview, when he talked about setting his guitar aside (at least professionally - he still uses it to write tunes), the new record and his ongoing love affair with the pandeiro.

Most musicians go to New York to find work, but you have taken the reverse route - what caused you to do that?

Well, it's important to point out that I didn't leave NYC and head to Rio de Janeiro to be a professional musician. When I went to Rio in 2001 it was out of my passion for the pandeiro and Brazilian music in general, but it was mainly to submerge myself in it for pure interest/desire. Becoming a professional pandeiro player, and eventually the birth of Pandeiro Jazz, came a few years later and it all happened very organically. I still look back and ask myself, "How did this all happen"?

What made you put down your guitar and take up the pandeiro - and what instrument do you use to write your original material and arrangements?

People love this question and journalists love to say that I put down the guitar to pick up the pandeiro. But the truth is I

spent 4 years without playing music at all. During that time I took a bit of a break from listening to so much jazz and became very enthusiastic (or perhaps obsessed!) about Brazilian music. To answer your second question about composing ... either the guitar or piano.

Why did you decide to take a break from playing? I mean, four years is a long time.

It's hard to answer this question briefly. I tend to tell people it's like a relationship that just ends. At the time I was pretty young and I think that the life of a New York jazz musician just sort of got to me. Looking back I think it was a mixture of financial and creative frustration, along with lifestyle issues. Typical challenges that most musicians face. In my case I felt I needed to walk away from it for a while. If I hadn't encountered the pandeiro I think there's a very good chance I wouldn't have returned to playing music. It's funny to think that I'm playing jazz again because of the pandeiro, but in theory has nothing to do with jazz! Hard to believe such a little drum can be so powerful, isn't it?!

Your new CD Dois Mundos has more original material than the first Pandeiro Jazz CD... was that a conscious effort?

Yes, for sure. I think that as I started to perform more again after the first Pandeiro Jazz CD was released I found myself eager to write some new tunes and became less interested in playing arrangements of standards. I was also encouraged by others. I remember Joe Martin, the bassist on that first CD saying to me that what he liked best on the record were my tunes and that he thought I should write more and do less covers. After shows people tend to comment on how they like the tunes, so I guess it's working.

The first Pandeiro Jazz disc was recorded in New York with American musicians, but this time around you recorded in Rio with Brazilian cats... how different was it recording with these musicians?

Both bands are made up of wonderful musicians. As very in demand sidemen, all of them have lots of studio experience so they were very easy to work with. They're also my working band and we all really enjoy playing together. I really like the idea of creating a 'band' ... a musical family. In my case, I'm lucky as I have two musical families! If there's any differences to note, it would just be that the recordings I've made in NYC have been made faster than the one in Rio, but that might be more about the cultural differences, than musical ones. Since we're talking about recordings I should mention that the third Pandeiro Jazz CD has already been recorded (with the NY band) as is in the process of being mixed. I'd like to get it released before the end of this year if possible.

The next time you go on tour, will you be traveling with the Brazilian band?

I really don't know. It's hard to set up tours in general and bringing people from Brazil is even harder. I just was picked up by a European booking agent and this was one of the first topics of discussion - which band would I bring to Europe? Flights from Brazil are more expensive and there are other issues. It would be fun to bring the guys from Brazil for some gigs outside of Brazil at some point, but luckily I have a great band in New York to call on!

You did a version of Luis Gonzaga's "Asa Branca." His compositions are often overlooked by jazz musicians. How did you discover his work, and what motivated you to record this tune?

It happened pretty naturally. I was playing duo with the pianist from the CD, David Feldman (his name doesn't sound Brazilian, but he is indeed from Rio) at his apartment. We were just starting to play together and experiment with the idea of piano/pandeiro duo. He started to play "Asa Branca" at some point and it just worked. We play it as a duo in every concert we play in Brazil. People tend to love it and as it's such a well-known melody in Brazil it helps to offset all of the originals we play. Recently I got a great compliment from a percussionist from the Northeast of Brazil. He said that he thought that he couldn't bear to hear "Asa Branca" again as it's been so overplayed, but he loved our version and thought it brought new life to the tune.

Feiner will be on tour from May 12 to 28 appearing in New York, San Diego and also in Mexico. For more information, visit www.scottfeiner.com

Ernest Barteldes is a freelance writer based on Staten Island, New York. He can be reached at ebarteldes@yahoo.com. This article appeared originally in The Brasilians.