

## Brazil's Crowd Crooner

Contributed by Daniella Thompson  
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Orlando Silva (1915–1978) was Brazil's greatest male singer during the radio era (and in the opinion of many, the greatest of all time). His crystalline tenor, natural emission, and impeccable sense of timing combined with an unerring taste to produce a long string of popular classics.

By the age of 21, he was the biggest singing star Brazil had ever known, equally at home while interpreting samba, waltz, foxtrot, choro, or Carnaval marchinhas.

At a time when radio and phonographic discs were in their infancy as mass entertainment media, with no organized publicity machine to propel his career, Orlando was known and beloved throughout Brazil. He was the first Brazilian singer to be mobbed wherever he went. Fans tore his clothes for souvenirs. Women attempted suicide on his account.

Image courtesy of Ricardo Paoletti

Getúlio Vargas once told him, "I would like to have your popularity, Orlando." The singer modestly replied, "Nobody is as popular as you, Mr. President." Retorted Vargas, "But nobody has your popularity and no enemies."

There are experts (including Ruy Castro) who opine that during his peak years, Orlando Silva was the best popular singer in the world.

The peak years were short; they lasted from 1935 to 1942, while Orlando was under contract to RCA. By the mid-1940s his voice had lost its brilliance in the wake of an alcohol and drug addiction.

In the '50s, the singer managed to rehabilitate himself and reconstruct his career, although never at the dizzying heights of his youth. Still, as he once said to his biographer Jonas Vieira, "I'm already in the history of Brazilian popular music, and nobody can take this place away from me."

Orlando's consecrated place consists of immortal recordings such as Pixinguinha's "Carinhoso" and "Rosa" (flip sides of the same 1937 disc); Cândido da Neves' "Lágrimas" and "Última Estrofe"; "Dama do Cabaré" (Noel Rosa); "Lábios que Beijei" and "Juramento Falso" (J. Cascata/Leonel Azevedo); "Chora, Cavaquinho" (Dunga); "Abre a Janela" (Arlindo Marques Jr./Roberto Roberti); "A Jardineira" (Benedito Lacerda/Humberto Porto); "Meu Consolo É Você" (Antônio Nássara/Roberto Martins); "Nada Além" (Custodio Mesquita/Mário Lago); "A Primeira Vez" (Bide/Marçal); "Naná" (Custódio Mesquita/Geysa Bôscoli); "Aos Pés da Cruz" (Marino Pinto/José Gonçalves); "Quero Dizer-te Adeus" (Ary Barroso); "Errei... Erramos" (Ataulfo Alves) and "Atire a Primeira Pedra" (Ataulfo Alves/Mário Lago); "Curare" (Bororó); and "Preconceito" (Wilson Batista/Marino Pinto), among many others.

Several of the above ("A Primeira Vez"; "Aos Pés da Cruz"; "Curare"; and "Preconceito") are known to present generations in the voice of Orlando's fan João Gilberto, who began his own solo recording career in 1952 with "Quando Ela Sai" (Alberto Jesus/Roberto Penteadó), in which his interpretation was clearly inspired by his favorite singer.

The singer's statue in Praça Orlando Silva,  
São Paulo (photo courtesy of sampa.art.br)

Orlando's life was a turbulent one, marked by extreme highs and lows, early poverty, illness and pain. His father, José Celestino da Silva, a railway worker, was a well-known choro guitarist who played with Pixinguinha in an early formation of the Oito Batutas and hosted choro parties at the family home.

These sometimes lasted as long as a week. José Celestino died in the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918, when Orlando was only three years old, but the choro heard in his infancy no doubt molded the singer's style for the rest of his life.

This life is well told in Jonas Vieira's book *Orlando Silva, o Cantor das Multidões* (Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1985), which has just been published in a revised and expanded third edition.

Vieira is the most authoritative source on the artist, having been his personal friend. In addition to interviews with Orlando, Vieira questioned the singer's family, acquaintances, and colleagues in the musical and radio spheres.

Being himself a veteran of these very circles, Vieira brings to his account the credibility of an insider.

The book served as the source for the new musical play *Orlando Silva, o Cantor das Multidões* by Antonio de Bonis and Fátima Valência.

Where can one obtain Vieira's biography? I wish I could tell you. There used to be a Loja Funarte online, where it was possible to order books and have them shipped from Brazil for a very reasonable cost. That site is no more. The best strategy is to ask your favorite vendor to order it.

On a related note, the 3-CD long box *Orlando Silva, o Cantor das Multidões* (RCA/BMG 7432123238-2), containing 66 recordings spanning the years 1935–1942, is still available.

However, it doesn't contain everything Orlando recorded in those years. Jonas Vieira informs me that a new, complete box set is about to be released.

See photos of Orlando Silva and listen to him singing some of his hits on this page by Fabio Lanari. You can read more about Brazilian music and culture at Daniella Thompson on Brazil here: <http://daniv.blogspot.com/>