

Brazil's Quarteto Brasil Turns in Crowning Performance

Contributed by Bruce Gilman
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A highly respected pool of musicians known as Quarteto Brasil has just released *Bossa Nova/Delicado*, a disc of nuance, complexity, and consequence. Beautifully crafted and expertly played, this disc demonstrates the vast imagination Quarteto Brasil possesses as well as the effortless technique at their disposal.

The interaction between the quartet members is exemplary. Indeed if Brazilian jazz is music's archetype for intimate and yet dynamically interactive conversation, the discussants - Cristóvão Bastos, piano; Zé Canuto, saxes; Bororó, bass; and Jurim Moreira, drums - provide a textbook example of interlocution elevated to the level of art.

If Quarteto Brasil and *Bossa Nova/Delicado* have a reference point in past history, the Return to Forever albums by Chick Corea on ECM, although inhabiting a different stylistic area, are perhaps the closest in approach.

Sounding like a semi-acoustic jazz suite, *Bossa Nova/Delicado* displays colorfully crafted small-group arrangements of quality material and a searching approach to improvisation that is conspicuous in its lack of flash and shallowness. These musicians express themselves with taste and clarity. Although Quarteto Brasil is notionally a cooperative, the extent to which Bastos dominates becomes fully apparent from the disc's program.

All but three of the nine tunes are Bastos originals. All are easy to enjoy, presenting an extremely varied range of moods and encouraging solo responses that complement them. All have the distinctive Bastos personality overlaying them and show how well the pianist balances his creative impetus with his impressive technical facility.

His original material, of the kind heard here, is notable for its sophisticated harmonic language and striking architectural design. Any track will demonstrate this, but Bastos's "Os Três Chorões" (Three Choro Musicians) is an especially good place to start.

A gifted player with an expressive touch and extended harmonic knowledge to call upon, Bastos opens unaccompanied, then Bororó, imparting an attractive buoyancy to the overall sound, creates a superb 3/4 feeling of momentum for soprano sax specialist Zé Canuto whose beautifully contoured solo conjures up a mesmerizing spell.

"Bossa Nova U.S.A." by Dave Brubeck reveals Bastos's lyrical phrasing and understated finesse in contrast to Canuto's exciting expressionism. Together they luxuriate in linear improvising, buoyed by Bororó's inventive foundation and Moreira's commendable restraint and taste. Bororó's playing is a model of personal projection and group awareness; Moreira's, a model of percussive discretion. He never obtrudes, but is always dependably and intelligently there, feeding the soloists and keeping the pulse alive.

There is a grace to Bastos's playing as he provides a backdrop for Canuto on Waldir Azevedo's baião "Delicado," but just beneath the surface is the strength necessary to drive the tune home. His thoroughly uncluttered thematic improvisation appears deceptively simple, but represents a postgraduate skill in spacing and selection of notes. Moreira, keeping the rhythmic substructure from sagging, provides exemplary group punctuation.

On the jaunty "Subindo a Rocinha" (Going up Rocinha), the pianist's odd metered look into one of Rio's largest favelas, Canuto's sax melds poignantly with Moreira's cuíca. While Bororó's firm musical chassis is responsible for the feel and flow, the real interest lies in the solos: Canuto's unfolding with kaleidoscopic, propulsive swirls, and Bastos's showing a clarity and corresponding angularity without sacrificing his natural warmth and expressivity.

The mood on "Elo" (Link) is generally relaxed, thanks in part to Canuto's warm-tone, which floats through the music with beautiful delicacy. Simplicity becomes its own virtue as Bastos solos imaginatively, not taking a wildly convoluted route, but using the harmonies to color and enhance.

"Estrada Real" (Royal Road) takes its name from the road that connected the gold mines in Minas Gerais state to the port of Rio. Here Bororó and Moreira are superb, the latter's brushes consistently whisking up the beat while Bastos's asymmetric chords and jagged rhythms, offset against the rock-steady bass lines, act as a voluptuous cushion for Canuto who constructs his solo judiciously and with supple shading to create the maximum effect.

Written by the genre's king, Luiz Gonzaga, the baião "Juazeiro," has a sinuous and insinuating melody. Canuto's probing, focused style is attuned to the music's intricacies; however, Bororó, being the musical glue that holds the whole thing together, makes the most telling contribution. His highly original bass playing, propelled by a strong melodic sensibility, stands out. He obviously enjoys playing in this context.

Throughout "Folia da Chapada" (High Planes Revelry), the rhythm tandem of Bororó, and Moreira whispers powerfully. Bastos adds richly to the group texture and urges Canuto on with some inspired comping. On the aptly titled "Mandacaru" (a kind of cactus), Bastos explores a variety of voicings and textures available to the quartet, his dancing lines punctuated by percussive stabs and skipping phrases.

Bororó gets a remarkably full, singing sound from his instrument as well as a flowing pulsation that sets and sustains a firm, but pliable rhythm curve. All four musicians thrive in this situation with Canuto in particular, his lines seeking out unusual harmonic nuances.

This is an absorbing and beautiful CD from four highly intelligent and talented musicians. Always suggesting new ideas to the soloist, they are among the most creatively sympathetic players in Brazilian jazz. Throughout, there are powerful ensemble and solo contributions. The basic quality that all four musicians share is a total lack of pretentiousness along with the ability to express their ideas and emotions with direct and economical clarity.

What a wonderful feeling for line these players have, what an incredible, perfectly matched and blended ensemble! Their program hangs together as a single identity, working beautifully as a complete unit.

The repertoire, with its lyric lines and provocative harmonic grids, is perfection. This is deeply thoughtful music that can be lit by flashes of lyricism or darkened by turbulent anxiety. With much to offer the careful listener, Bossa Nova/Delicado is the ideal soundtrack for a long journey.

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