

TRACINGS by Mike Tracy

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I truly enjoy new challenges and experiences. I have been afforded amazing opportunities in my professional life, traveling the world meeting and working with musicians and people from all walks of life. While I must admit that I am not what one might call a "World Music" fan, I am curious about how the music of other cultures has affected the music that I like to listen to. I have always felt at home listening to Brazilian music. I guess it started with Stan Getz and Astrud Gilberto's rendition of The Girl From Ipanema (Garota de Ipanema) and Sergio Mentez's group Brazil 66. I can't really explain but I was drawn to the sound and 'feel' of their music. Ironically, the first jazz selection I ever played by myself in public was The Girl From Ipanema. It was for my 9th grade science class at Seneca High School. We were studying sound and about 150 people heard me probably stumble through the tune. No music, I had learned it from Getz's recording.

Many years later a saxophone student from Brazil, Vadim Arsky, visited the School of Music looking for a place to work on a graduate degree. That was in 1986 and Vadim and I have been friends ever since. Vadim developed into a very accomplished saxophonist and returned to Brazil. He performed and taught throughout Brazil and South America, eventually returning to his home in Brasilia to take a position at Universidade de Brasilia. He became the head of their School of Music in the late 90's and offered me a two week residency during the fall of 1998. I gladly accepted.

It was quite an experience. The people were just like their music - lively, sophisticated, friendly and open. I quickly discovered that the music was everywhere; everyone played or sang the music of Brazil. The airport in Rio de Janeiro is not named after a politician but after a musician - Antonio Carlos (Tom) Jobim. I also learned that the country, which is easily as diverse as the United States and about as large in land mass as the continental US, had many related but different styles of native music. Influences were absorbed from everywhere, creating an amazing array of possibilities. The musicians I met were highly accomplished and eager to play and interact. They were open to new ideas and challenges. While I spoke no Portuguese and few of them spoke English, we all got along and immediately became friends. Music is truly an international language.

During this visit I met pianist Renato Vasconcellos. Performing with Renato was like playing with a musical brother. We had similar interests and life experiences which showed in the music we created. Ironically, Renato was, like Vadim, interested in going to school in the States for a graduate degree. We agreed to work that goal.

During the fall of 1999, I was asked by the American Embassy and Casa Thomas Jefferson, an organization of private schools who focus on offering English and other classes, to tour Brazil with a jazz quartet. Phil DeGreg, Eric Sayer and Steve Barnes traveled with me to Rio de Janeiro, Belem, Porto Alegre, Goiania and Brasilia. It was a great trip which just reinforced my love of Brazil, its people and music. I also got to experience first hand more of the diverse music and culture contained within the country.

The friends I had made during my first visit all came to support our efforts. It was great seeing everyone, especially Vadim and Renato. I was able to tell Renato that we had just put the finishing touches on a Master's Degree in Jazz at the SofM. He explained that he had just completed his undergraduate degree and was ready to make a move. It was a perfect fit for Renato. He enrolled spring 1999 and was the first to graduate with the Jazz Master's Degree in 2001.

Renato had a great influence on everyone he touched. His spirit, love of music, willingness to help others and exceptional musicianship are still having an impact at the School of Music. Renato also lived with my family during his two year stay. He and his wife Isabelle are like an uncle and aunt to my children. During this time, Renato and I would often play together, trying out different things and working through his compositions. We enjoyed playing together so much that I thought it would be great to record our efforts. I began assembling tunes and organizing musicians with that goal in mind. The material came easily. August 5th (the birthday of Renato's brother - who is an outstanding classical

bassist) and September 15th (the date of pianist Bill Evan's passing) are examples of Renato's original works. Renato also arranged the other selections which are by famous Brazilian musicians - Antonio Carlos Jobim's Once I Loved and Favela, Vera Cruz by Milton Nascimento, Hermento Pascoal's Balaio and Melancia by Rique Pantoja. By January of 2001 we were close to begin recording.

About this time, I began working toward a tour of Brazil with the UofL Jazz Ensemble, faculty and friends. Through the efforts of Walter Abbamonte (former student of Vadim's who came to UofL, graduated with a bachelor's in music and is currently enrolled in the MBA program in the Business School. Walter, his wife and young daughter now live in Louisville) and Renato the two week trip for forty-five musicians became a reality. The group toured and performed in Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, Santos, Osasco, Cubatao and Brasilia. What an experience, again reinforcing the Brazilian connection.

Three individuals who would play important roles on the recording participated in this trip - percussionist Terry O'Mahoney (a native Louisvillian and SofM alum), pianist Steve Allee and Brazilian drummer Erivelton Silva (highly respected and one of the most recorded drummers in the Brazil). Steve (who was on our jazz faculty and Renato's teacher) and Terry (who would join our faculty after the trip as a visiting professor) were bitten by the music as well. I asked Steve, an outstanding composer in addition to being an incredible pianist, to write a tune for the recording. He came up with the title selection Tracing. We were now set to begin.

What transpired was combining local musicians Tyrone Wheeler (bass), Pat Lentz (guitar), Greg Byrne (percussion) Kathy Jordan (vocal) with pianists Renato and Steve Allee, and percussionists Terry O'Mahoney and Erivelton Silva. The music came together during a number of sessions. It was fortunate that Erivelton was in town with Renato for Jazz Week 2002 and we could find a time to enlist his services.

What resulted from our time together was a combination of music which reflected respect and friendship among musicians from diverse cultures and the influence of our Brazilian experiences along with Brazilian musicians experiencing jazz and America. I know I had a great time working with these outstanding musicians and can't wait to return to Brazil to continue the musical journey.

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