



Sue Steward looks at the long and varied career of one of Brazil's most loved singers

CAETANO VELOSO

The Caetano Veloso story begins in Bahia, the most African state in Brazil, and weaves through São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, pauses in London, moves around the Americas and the rest of the world. After four decades, Veloso is one of the best-known, best-loved Brazilian singers, a Grammy-winner celebrated for his poetry, songs and voice – and always, his musical surprises.

Many people beyond the world/Latin scene first heard Veloso's gentle crooning and celestial falsetto when Pedro Almodóvar used 'Cucurucucú Paloma' in *Talk To Her* (and gave him a cameo role). He also sang – alongside Lila Downs – in *Frida*, the story of the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo. Otherwise, most people knew him from a long list of albums and his sensational, intimate concerts.

A good place to join the Veloso trail is not with a record, but through his marvellously detailed and honest autobiography *Tropical Truth: A Story of Music and Revolution in Brazil* (Bloomsbury). Although only a partial story

(it closes in the late 80s), it is a fascinating account of his personal and musical development within the dramatic changes in Brazil's recent history.

It's hard to say that there is a 'Caetano Veloso sound', but the key to his music is a restless imagination and curiosity. His lyrical guitar style (hand-picked, delicate and rhythmic) reveals lasting influences from the discordant *bossa nova* stylists. His music draws on the ancient African rhythms of *candomblé*, on samba and bossa nova and upbeat *forró* from the north-east, as well as jazz, rock, 60s pop, and modern European composed music. The slight, androgynously beautiful man possesses a similarly ambiguous but always distinctive voice which exploits the sensual rhythms of Brazilian Portuguese and swings between masculine ruggedness and high falsetto, with a tender croon in between.

Since childhood Veloso was a rule breaker. Teenaged passions for Miles Davis and bossa nova pioneer João Gilberto propelled him onto the explosive arts scene at Salvador University in the early 60s. He joined film-makers, playwrights, and artists,

his future soulmate Gilberto Gil, and singers Gal Costa and Tom Zé (his sister, Maria Bethânia was already established in Rio), who became the core of the musical/performance art movement known as *tropicalismo*. Their hippy costumes and pop-influenced music, surreal and psychedelic lyrics containing poetically disguised digs at the military dictatorship, led to the imprisonment and exile of Gil and Veloso in 1969. The re-issued import album *Caetano Veloso* (Philips, 1990) which includes key *tropicalismo* anthems like 'Tropicália' and 'Soy Loco Por Ti, América', preserves the fateful 1968 album with its psychedelic cover, Beatles harmonies and bossa chords which put Veloso on the wanted list of the military dictatorship.

Relocated in exile to London, Gil and Veloso were face-to-face with musicians like Hendrix and The Beatles who had inspired their revolution. The swirling Hammond organ, searing electric guitar and tambourines on Veloso's London album *Caetano Veloso* (Polygram, 1971) reflect Swinging London, but the lyrics reveal a profound homesickness.

Back in Bahia in 1972, Veloso and Gil were heroes in the dawn of the new democracy and they led the youth in anthems like 'Alegria, Alegria' (Happiness) and 'Tropicália', which are still hugely popular today.

Eighties influences included reggae (Gil had already fallen for Bob Marley), but most importantly, the impact of Veloso's new partnership with cellist Jacques Morelenbaum which revolutionised his sound, brought new dimension to the songs, and altogether elevated the beauty and maturity of his work. Also, his friendship with David Byrne, who discovered Brazilian music during a visit to Salvador and triggered the interestingly eclectic, experimental album *Estrangeiro* (Foreigner), produced in 1989 by Arto Lindsay and Peter Scherer.

The 90s saw a spate of long-life records with different, new themes. *Circuladô Vivo* (a live version of *Circuladô*) and after that English language adventure, *Fina Estampa ao Vivo*, (the live version is superlative) is a gorgeous, mostly Spanish collection of Latin America classics.

Veloso launched the new century with an emphasis on Brazil's African past. His album *Noites do Norte* (Nights in the North) is a moody, reflective tribute – in songs about slavery, race and national identity – to the African traditions still dominating his homeland in Bahia. The stark minimalist percussion which drives the song 'Zera a Reza', was provided by a

member of Afro-Reggae, the network of percussion troupes which Veloso established in the favelas of Rio. That album contains Veloso's interesting collaborations with his son Moreno, a talented multi-instrumentalist and fine guitarist who provides delicate Congolese melodies.

As Veloso's reputation continues to spread beyond Brazil, he joins that itinerant network of international singers who often make unexpected collaborations. He sang a version of his pan-Latin anthem, 'Soy Loco Por Ti, América', with the late Celia Cruz on her *Duetos* album, and recently recited the lyrics from his 70s bolero 'Coração Vagabundo' on the record *Lágrimas Negras* with veteran Cuban pianist Bebo Valdés and flamenco singer Cigala. Last year, he joined fellow Bahian, Virginia Rodrigues, on *Mares Profundos*.

2003 was a milestone year for Veloso; he won a Grammy, featured in a *South Bank Show* documentary and released the English language album *A Foreign Sound*. Veloso explained the logic of the album: "Ever since I lived in London, I used to sit around playing guitar with friends, singing in English the songs of Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, etc. and people would ask, why don't I record in English?" He has transformed songs so familiar they seem impossible to improve – sacred classics like 'Body and Soul', 'Cry Me a River', and a re-make of Nirvana's 'Come As You Are'. "I am a foreigner," he says, "And sometimes somebody from outside can bring a new light to a song." Like Sinatra, Veloso alters the emphasis and inflection of familiar words and phrases and, in the process, creates new emotional meanings.

So, whereas his soulmate Gil is now minister of culture and rarely plays gigs, Veloso still fills concert halls with adoring fans, makes new connections, and draws new audiences who are discovering Brazil's open secret. After more than 40 years, he is still at the forefront of Brazilian popular music, creating classics of the future.

BEST ALBUMS

Circuladô Vivo (Polygram, 1992)



A milestone and a masterpiece. Live versions of songs from *Circuladô*, plus covers of Bob Dylan, Michael Jackson and Carlos Gardél sit beside classics by Veloso and other Brazilians.

Sophisticated, eclectic music, wide-ranging themes, and a tribute to co-producer and cellist Jacques Morelenbaum.

Universal Music do Brasil



Fina Estampa ao Vivo (Polygram, 1994)



Fabulous award-winning album, sung in Spanish and Portuguese, uniting Latin Americans in new versions of their own hits. Spanish film-maker Pedro Almodóvar was intoxicated by 'Cucurrucucú Paloma', which he used in *Talk To Her*. A showcase for Veloso's extraordinary vocal versatility and sublime falsetto.



Noites do Norte (Universal, 2000)



Veloso's tribute to the African culture in Brazil is an amazing album, radically different from others. His employment of young musicians from the generation influenced by ragga, Brazilian drum'n'bass and African music, creates a truly international soundscape, rooted in centuries-old traditions.



BEST COMPILATION

Caetano Veloso: The Definitive Collection

(Wrasse, 2003)



Eighteen songs representing a career spanning half a century – from revolutionary 'Tropicália', through homesick exile in 'London, London', and the contrastingly upbeat variety of 'Fina Estampa' and the Afro-Brazilian 'Zumbi', which reflects his partnership with cellist Jacques Morelenbaum.



BEST AVOIDED

Circuladô (Polygram, 1991)



Produced by Arto Lindsay, and involving tropicalismo soulmates, Gilberto Gil and Gal Costa, this possibly shows its age (any choice will raise howls). As interestingly avant garde as Frank Zappa, but maybe lacking the cohesion of Veloso's best albums.



A Foreign Sound is reviewed in the Latin America section

LIKE CAETANO? THEN TRY...

✦ **Moreno Veloso: Musical Typewriter** (Hannibal, 2001)

Son of Caetano, the young multi-instrumentalist similarly revels in eclecticism. At times, his voice is uncannily similar. An excellent debut, and striking extension of Caetano's legacy.



✦ **Maria Bethânia: Brasileirinho** (Biscoito Fino, 2004)

Caetano's sister is almost deified in Brazil. These exhilarating devotional songs (including several by her brother) include Afro-Brazilian *candombles* and tributes to Brazil's natural beauty. Bethânia's profound and deeply androgynous voice is at its peak. A marvellous, impassioned collection.

