

SERGIO MENDES

A RETROSPECTIVE

Sergio Mendes says he cannot recall how the idea of interweaving two female singers into a unified lead vocal came to mind back in 1965.

By 1968, however millions of music enthusiasts in the U.S. instantly recognizes that the stylish, acrylic-clear deliveries of Karen Phillip and Lani Hall - the future wife of record mogul Herb Alpert - could only belong to Sergio Mendes & Brasil '66. In that year, Brasil '66 scored three Top 20 pop hits, including two Top 10 smashes, "The Look Of Love"(no.4) and "The Fool On The Hill"(no.6), as well as "Scarborough Fair", which peaked at No. 16.

Interestingly, "Scarborough Fair" already had been a Top 20 hit for Simon & Garfunkel in early 1968. But Brasil '66 singular rendition, which sported Sergio's signature *mistura* of bossa nova/samba percussion accents and his distinctive pop instrumentation, invested in the erstwhile medieval folk ballad with a distinct sophistication and alluring sexiness that ultimately came to define Brazilian music for many music enthusiasts around the world.

Matching the success of its hit singles, Brasil '66 was rolling at retail, as well, with the 1968 releases of "Look Around" and "Fool On The Hill" striking gold. Both albums reached the Top Five of the U.S. pop chart. And though Brasil '66 previously had notched two gold records "Sergio Mendes & Brasil '66" and "Equinox", it was not until 1968 that Brasil '66 - and Brazilian music - had finally garnered the attention and admiration of an broad cross-section of audiences. Indeed, ask casual fans of contemporary pop music in the U.S. nowadays, if they have heard of Sergio and his '60s band and the answer almost always will be affirmative. ("The Look Of Love" and "The Fool On The Hill" are the favorites most often cited, but Brasil '66's Portuguese-language standard "Mas Que Nada" often will draw a suddenly informed nod.)

Undoubtedly, Sergio Mendes & Brasil '66, along with 1940s movie star and underrated singer Carmen Miranda, have been the only two Brazilian recording artists to enjoy international mainstream superstardom. And if taken from the standpoint of record sales, Sergio and Brasil '66 stand alone as the biggest international Brazilian act ever. To be sure, a distinguished pantheon of U.S. jazz artists ranging from Quincy Jones to Paul Winter to Stan Getz

deserve credit for acquainting global music aficionados with Brazilian sounds. Yet Sergio was the first to take Brazilian music to the masses. "Basically, we were putting a Brazilian spin on American pop music," admits Sergio. "But interestingly when I go on tour now, I cannot leave the stage without playing "Mas Que Nada", our most Brazilian-flavored hit."

"Mas Que Nada", as well as Brasil '66's other evergreens, is featured on "Sergio Mendes-Serie Grandes Nomes," PolyGram Brasil's extraordinary retrospective on Sergio's 30-year recording career. The six-CD set documents the many musical temperaments of Sergio that far transcend his Brasil '66 epoch. From his jazz/samba days in the early '60s as leader of the Bossa Nova Trio to his early '90s exploration of Bahian hip/hop, "Grandes Nomes" offers a definitive profile of the man who left Brazil, yet never allowed Brazil to leave him.

"I love Brazil and its music," explains Sergio, "so no matter what type of sound I would come up with, there would always be a Brazilian undercurrent in the music."

And no matter how popular Brasil '66's singles had become, Sergio would always make sure there were Portuguese-language songs on the album. Few non-Brazilians may have understood the language, but as "The Girl From Ipanema" unequivocally proved in 1964, Portuguese was a gorgeously musical idiom. Sergio was merely striving to expose this linguistic beauty throughout his career.

Born in Niteroi, near Rio de Janeiro, Sergio recounts growing up studying classical music on piano until "around 15 or so, when I was given a Dave Brubeck record and that changed my life. From then on, I started listening to Charlie Parker and Bud Powell and all of those great jazz pianists. So that was my main influence during my adolescent years".

In 1960, Sergio pondered the idea of merging jazz with samba and formed the Hot Trio, which opened the famous Rio hangout called the Bottles Bar.

"Brazilian music was harmonically sophisticated, so the jazz element was contained in the improvisation," says Sergio. "But we continued to listen to Parker, Miles Davis-just to learn the new language and incorporate it into Brazilian music."

Two years later, Sergio's Hot Trio evolved into the Sexteto Bossa Rio, which Sergio states "had a tremendous impact on the music scene in Brazil because then bossa nova was popular, yet minimalist and subdued. But I had this lively

bossa/jazz band with two trombones, tenor sax, bass and drums. It was very different.

In 1962, Sergio and his Sexteto Bossa Rio sextet appeared at Carnegie Hall as part of a multi-act from Brazil designed to publicize the increasingly popular bossa nova sound. One year later the Sexteto Bossa Rio was recording with Cannonball Adderley, Paul Winter and Herbie Mann. Sergio recorded a pair of solo jazz/samba records for Atlantic entitled "The Swinger From Rio" (with Antonio Carlos Jobim, Hubert Laws, Art Farmer and Phil Woods) and "In Person At El Matador". Neither album realized commercial success, so the always musically curious Sergio decided to embark in another direction.

By 1964, Sergio was contemplating a move to the U.S. when a telegram announcing the birth of his son Rodrigo sealed his decision. Sent to his friend, painter Wesley Duke Lee, the telegram was misconstrued by the newly installed military regime as a subversive political communique. After being placed under house arrest for two weeks, Sergio emigrated to the U.S. with his new band, Brasil '65. Among the band members were renowned singer/songwriter Jorge Ben Jor (then known as Jorge Ben) and bassist Sebastiao Neto.

Now relocated in Los Angeles, Sergio and his upstart crew were performing showcases to little avail. Ben Jor and several other band members were homesick and decided to return to Brazil. Mendes reformed his group and was later discovered at a local night club by pop producer David Cavanaugh, who helmed the ensemble's eponymous first album. The bossa-rooted record was a regional hit, but failed to spread beyond southern California.

Then Sergio came up with a concept that would solidify his place in musical history. "I ran into the idea of having two girls singing - don't ask me why - I just liked that sound," relates Sergio. "Lani Hall had come from Chicago and could not speak a word of Portuguese, so she sang phonetically, as did all of the female lead singers who fronted the band.

"Then," continues Sergio, "I decided to work with not only Brazilian songs, but well-known English language songs by composer Burt Bacharach and the Beatles. For me, the song and the melody are everything. So we started working on getting those great songs put into a Brazilian pocket. We would work all day long, break for lunch and we would go back and try an assortment of different rhythms, so it was like a workshop. It was wonderful."

Sergio also is quick to add that while he was adapting English-language songs to a Brazilian swing, there also

were prominent composers of English-language tunes such as Oscar winners Alan & Marilyn Bergman who were beginning to look for ways to season their material with rhythmic elements of Brazil.

"They were able to expertly marry American and Brazilian sounds," say Sergio, in reference to Alan and Marilyn, the latter of whom is currently president of the U.S. performing rights society ASCAP. "Two of the songs we three composed, "Look Around" and "So Many Stars", superbly exemplify the best of both of the American and Brazilian musical worlds."

But before Sergio would link up with his most famous composers, he still had to prove that his hybrid sound was going to stick. So after completing their "workshop", Sergio and his band again took to the southern California club circuit in 1965 where they were heard and signed by Alpert and Jerry Moss, the two principals of the recently-formed label A&M Records. Now called Sergio Mendes & Brasil '66, the band put out yet another self-titled premiere.

Unlike its predecessor, Brasil '66's eponymous bow caught fire, selling more than 500,000 copies and yielding "Mas Que Nada", one of the most popular Portuguese-language songs ever recorded. Ironically, "Mas Que Nada" was composed by the departed Ben Jor.

Was Sergio expecting his sound to become this big?

"Never," replies Sergio flatly. "I was totally surprised. You hope that something happens to your music, but in reality, you're just playing and recording the music because you believe in it."

Sergio & Brasil '66 quickly was lined up as an opening act for Alpert's white-hot Tijuana Brass. The two acts toured nationally and internationally whereby Sergio and his band emerged as household names in the U.S. and Europe. Sergio even opened twice for one of Brazilian music's biggest fans, Frank Sinatra and performed at the White House during the Reagan administration. Also in the late 60's and early 70's, Sergio routinely appeared on the top U.S. programs headlined by Bob Hope, Fred Astaire, Jerry Lewis and Danny Kaye, among others. "We did "The Look Of Love" with Fred Astaire dancing to the song," says Sergio.

Official proof of Brasil '66's popularity back in 1968 came in the form of industry nominations. "The Look Of Love", featured in the film "Casino Royale", was nominated for an Academy Award for best original song. Sergio and Brasil '66m then rounded out by Neto and percussionists Dom Um

Romao and Rubens Bassini also snared a Grammy nomination for best contemporary pop performance by a vocal group. But Sergio would not nab a Grammy Award until 1993 when his 1992 hybrid of Brazilian grooves and hip-hop "Brasileiro" earned him a kudo in the world music category. "Brasileiro" underlined the unassailable fact that while Sergio generally might be best known for his sophisticated '60s sound, his musical career has encompassed a wide variety of genres.

Despite his prosperity realized by his Brazilian pop bent in the late '60s, Sergio "was feeling *saudades* or "longing" for all things Brazilian. In 1972, Sergio Mendes and his latest configuration Brasil '77, cut "Primal Roots"-a fresh tribute to indigenous Brazilian music that was critically hailed but commercially ignored-in Sergio's newly-constructed studio built by an aspiring actor named Harrison Ford. "It was his first job," says Sergio with a chuckle.

Though "Primal Roots" was not a chart hit, Sergio says, "I was happy I did a Brazilian-oriented record. It was very important for me to do that album, because it really came from the heart.

"It was kind of a dress rehearsal for "Brasileiro."

"Primal Roots" was also far ahead of its time. Only in the late 1980s and early 1990s would international pop stars such as Linda Ronstadt and Gloria Estefan explore their heritage in its native tongue.

Sergio subsequently left A&M("It was an amicable parting") and after releasing several sparkling, yet underrated, pop albums, he then returned to A&M in 1982. Once again Sergio hit the pop charts in 1983 with the slick, r&b-shaded pop ballad "Never Gonna Let You Go", recorded with singers Joe Pizzulo and Leza Miller.

While recording "Never Gonna Let You Go" Sergio met top-flight engineer Bruce Swedien, whom Sergio acknowledges as his mentor in the studio.

"Sometimes I'm accused of being too polished," admits Sergio with customary candor. "But I like the sonic aspect of making records and I learned a lot from Bruce. That's why we made so many records together and that's why the production shines."

Forever mindful of his Brazilian background, Sergio cut another roots record in 1989 entitled "Arara". Four years later, he recorded "Brasileiro", a seamless pastiche of seismic Bahian tempos, deep funk and spry hip-hop.

Sergio's latest album, entitled "Oceano" is again made up of only Brazilian songs. His talented wife Gracinha

Leporace sings most of the songs, enchanting Brazilian songstress Simone contributes a track, as well as world-renowned singer/songwriters Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso, Djavan and Hermeto Pascoal. Joe Pizzulo also appears on the title track with Gracinha.

Always looking forward, Sergio is reluctant to reveal just where his legacy fits within the panorama of contemporary music. "But if you listen to recording acts like Basia or Sade," offers Sergio, "you can hear some of the same things I was doing in the 60s."

Sergio is most grateful that he always was allowed total creative freedom to wander where his muse would take him.

"I was very lucky to be able to do what I wanted," says Sergio. "If I needed a singer from India or a drummer from Mozambique, I could put them in the band, come up with a sound and I wouldn't have to worry about somebody questioning my intentions. I have always been very thankful for that."

So are Sergio's fans.

By John Lannert