

Once Upon A Time In São Paulo

Lira Paulistana outdoor performance, early 1980s



The collision of popular music and avant garde composition in the late 1970s birthed

vanguarda paulista, the first major independent movement in Brazilian music. **Russ Slater** discusses the new sounds of the megapolis with Arrigo Barnabé, Grupo Rumo and others

"I was thinking that perhaps the next step should be something in the root of the music itself, that we should have a revolution. So that's what I did," says Arrigo Barnabé. We're talking about his debut album. Released in 1980, it beckoned in a movement of independent musicians and labels in São Paulo known as the *vanguarda paulista*. The music scene back then was stagnant – bossa nova and *tropicália* had given way in the 70s to their conservative cousin MPB (Brazilian popular music). Those who had revolutionised Brazilian music in the 60s – Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso, Chico Buarque, Rita Lee, Jorge Ben and others – found themselves operating within this mainstream style, which relied heavily on the guitar and vocal format that bossa nova had brought to prominence. Popular among the young, educated

and predominantly white, it offered plenty of room for crafting nuanced songs but had long said goodbye to taking risks.

Barnabé, along with Itamar Assumpção, Grupo Rumo and others who congregated around a small theatre called the Lira Paulistana, wanted to return to a rupture in popular music that happened in the late 60s. When the artists of *tropicália* first came to prominence, their appearances on Brazil's hugely popular televised song contests showcased a mix that thrived on combining high and low culture, and Brazilian and foreign musical ideas. Likewise, the *vanguarda paulista* wanted to break the traditionalism of MPB. It created arguably the last great schism in popular Brazilian music.

No one was more determined than Barnabé. "You

know the *tropicálistas* – Caetano, Gil – they did a very good job," he tells me over the phone from his home in São Paulo. "Their lyrics are very high standard, and they're very good in their melodies, but they were kind of conservative with the music." For Barnabé, the *tropicália* generation had pushed Brazilian music forward with their arrangements, especially when working with classically trained composers such as Rogério Duprat and Julio Medaglia. But they were still working within the limits of pop, equivalent to what George Martin was doing with The Beatles. Barnabé wanted pop music to embrace the avant garde.

The first public airing of his ideas occurred on 21 May 1979 at the Festival Universitário Da MPB, a pop music contest broadcast on TV. The two songs he performed with his 15 strong ensemble have surfaced

Gloria Flügel

on YouTube: "Infortúnio" begins with Barnabé striking an angry flutter of notes on the piano, in what must surely be the first time that something like 12-tone serialism had been heard at a popular music festival. Barnabé is joined by vocalist Vânia Bastos, whose stilted delivery is a match for the fractured phrasing of the music. She's soon accompanied by Barnabé's growling voice, telling the tale of a woman who turned to drink and promiscuity after her husband died from thinking too much! As to the music, it veers between the thrilling and the chaotic, with the rhythm section coming to the fore following a cacophony of horns. All the while the crowd is divided, some shouting "Fora!" ("Leave!") while others opting for the more positive "Já ganhou!" ("You've already won!"). And astonishingly, Barnabé did win, with his other song "Diversões Eletrônicas" taking first place (perhaps not coincidentally, tropicália pioneer Tom Zé was on the jury.) For many in the student-heavy audience, these songs were an introductory jolt of 12-tone music; for Barnabé that was just one advanced musical technique he was prepared to utilise to turn MPB on its head.

Barnabé moved to São Paulo in 1970 to study architecture, but he regularly returned to his home town of Londrina during the holidays. There, with a close-knit group of friends, he began to mess around with new musical styles. "We began to write and experiment in a very theoretical way," he remembers. "We decided to choose the bar, going for a bar of 7/4 [time signature] and then write a bass line. We inverted it, we retrograded it [creating a mirror image of the melody], and began to write a melodic counterpart."

Energised by these experiments, music became a serious occupation for Barnabé and he went on to study classical piano – the main instrument throughout his career – and also enrol on a musical composition course at the University of São Paulo, or USP. These studies fed into the composition he began in Londrina until it evolved into "Clara Crocodilo", one of his signature songs. In its final form it opens with Barnabé imitating the type of Brazilian public radio reporter who details violent incidents and stories in a grotesquely over the top fashion. Barnabé used this persona to introduce the mysterious anti-superhero

of the title. The subject material was appropriately cartoonish, the interplay between hyperbolic narration and a high pitched female choir all adding to his modern urban fable.

The song is the title track of Barnabé's 1980 debut album, which included pieces he had been working on throughout the 70s. Some were inspired by classical music, especially the rhythmic structures of Béla Bartók. Notably, he had discovered 12-tone serialism – where all notes of the scale are intended to be used in any given passage – in a book by composer Herbert Eimert, and 12-tone elements are used on all but two tracks on the album. Other techniques first used on "Clara Crocodilo", such as creating modular passages of notes that would then be inverted with counter harmonies, also characterise the album. Lyrically, the album was also marked by its references to modern urban life – something absent from MPB, but which the rise of industrialisation, technology and global pop culture made impossible to ignore. "Clara Crocodilo" adopted the 'shock' style of news reporting, and a love of comic books is evident in the subject matter, as well as the use of expletives and short punchy statements. Its aggressive tone could be seen as a response to the military dictatorship ruling Brazil at the time. "The whole album has political meaning," asserts Barnabé. "Even if it's not that evident it's political because there's a kind of subversion in musical manners, in subverting good taste."

In that context, lighter songs such as "Infortúnio" take on new meaning – the widower in the story could be an analogy for the Brazilian public, whose intellectual revolution had been defeated by dictatorship. This was especially relevant at the time as the military had been in power since 1964 and aside from student protests in the late 60s there had been little civil unrest until 1983, which ultimately led to the end of the dictatorship in 1985.

Clara Crocodilo was one of the first albums ever to be self-released in Brazil. This was a difficult time for an artist to sign to a major – label profits had grown massively through the 1970s, and their control over the music industry with it. By the mid-70s marketing departments had a large creative input into major releases, and unsurprisingly they often favoured new records by established artists. *Clara Crocodilo* did not

make much of a profit, but such was its impact that Barnabé was described as a messiah by some parts of the media.

But Barnabé was only the beginning. A music and ex-engineering student named Wilson Souto Jr opened a venue to champion the new music and theatre being made in São Paulo. It was situated perfectly in the basement of a hardware store falling between two universities: USP and PUC (São Paulo's Catholic University). After some renovations, he opened the doors to Lira Paulistana on 25 October 1979. In its first few months it hosted theatre productions every Wednesday and Sunday, and gigs every Monday and Tuesday, offering a much needed space for new bands to perform. Over the years it expanded into a bookshop and publisher and also presented festivals and outdoor events showcasing emerging artists. Run by Souto Jr and a collective of partners, it was always eager to provide cultural production where previously there had been none, becoming a haven for arts and music students.

Itamar Assumpção was no student. He had been playing bass with Arrigo Barnabé since the early 70s, as well as working on his own material. In 1980 he appeared with a small group at another popular music contest, the Festival da Feira da Vila Madalena, and his song "Nego Dito" won third place. Soon afterwards, Lira Paulistana released Assumpção's first album *Beleléu, Leléu, Eu* (the label's first was free jazz trio Grupo's debut LP).

If *Clara Crocodilo* locates the intersection between classical and popular music, Assumpção's album was a different proposition altogether. *Beleléu, Leléu, Eu* is led by Assumpção's poetic spoken word delivery, which recalls that of Gil Scott-Heron. Telling stories from the margins of São Paulo, Assumpção's songs use notes sparsely, focusing on mellifluous melodies and the phrasing of the rhythms and vocals, by Itamar and a number of female guest singers. The bleak "Nego Dito" is about a bawling loner who takes to the street with scant regard for anyone else: "*I do not like people/Nor fucking relatives/I was born this way*", run the lyrics in English. Luiz Chagas, who played guitar with him, says, "The great discovery in [his] music was the turning of his words into a script for theatre. There are narrators,



Wilson Souto Jr outside Lira Paulistana

characters, a chorus, like in an opera. This was not usual. Music is normally me, me, me."

Arrigo Barnabé's brother Paulo lived with Arrigo and Itamar in the mid-70s and played drums on both of their debut albums. "The conception of their sounds is different," he explained to me. "Arrigo follows the line of erudite [ie academic] music and Itamar of popular music." But Itamar contributed to Arrigo's music too, adding intuitive basslines to complex compositions on *Clara Crocodilo*.

The songs of *Beleléu*, *Leléu*, *Eu* are often cited as being autobiographical, though this is something that Assumpção never divulged in interviews, and his songs are given extra ambiguity by their use of many different characters. What is certain is that Itamar's position as the only prominent nonstudent and only black member of what became the vanguarda paulista is reflected in the material, which made a striking use of informal speech, and depicted social issues and distrust of authority in overt fashion. In "Luzia", lies from the people in power are offered by way of explanation for protagonist Beleléu becoming a malandro (a bad boy or petty criminal). Luiz Chagas even proposes a connection to "the rap music that still didn't exist at that time".

Following the album, Assumpção formed a live group called *Isca De Polícia* (which translates as Police Bait), with whom he also recorded his next three albums.

With the group, Itamar moved away from the bass, taking centre-stage for what became increasingly theatrical live shows, and he also moved into playing percussion and guitar on his studio releases. Paulo Lepetit took over on bass and helped with the arrangements. He describes the unique construction of Assumpção's songs: "It is a language in constant development, always seeking to achieve a different and unique sonority... The phrase we most often hear is, 'What new sound is this?'"

If the use of speech can be seen as a trait of both Assumpção and Barnabé's work – the former with his prosaic statements, Arrigo with his cartoonish delivery – then Grupo Rumo took this even further. Like Barnabé, the members of Grupo Rumo were students at USP. They started life as a discussion group, meeting to examine Brazilian popular music, and soon developed esoteric ways at looking at musical composition. Luiz Tatit, one of the group's singers and guitarists, explains, "Initially, the group wanted to make explicit something that is present in all types of [Brazilian] song, and that is almost a secret, even for the songwriters themselves: the 'intonative' origin of their melodies. By this I mean that the melodic directions created by the composer depend much more on the intonations they practice every day in their speech than on their eventual musical preparation."

Like Barnabé, Tatit underlines the focus on European composers such as Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Webern, Bériot, Stockhausen and Boulez at USP's classical music classes. "We were influenced by the notion of novelty in the arts and we proposed changing it in this manner [of the European avant garde], [changing] the language of songs," he says.

Throughout the 70s Grupo Rumo performed semi-regularly at theatres around São Paulo, and especially at USP, as they refined their ideas, stripping down famous songs from the Brazilian music canon to their basics with a style of singing often close to conversational speech. They were also composing their own material in the same spirit, as can be heard on the two albums they self-released in 1981, *Rumo* (containing originals) and *Rumo Aos Antigos* (comprised of covers). Their music often adopted a brilliantly meta sense of self-reference, as shown on Tatit's song "Ah!". After using interjections from everyday speech such as "ah!", "nossa!", "é isso?!" and "he!" to create a discernibly popular melody, the verses themselves address the idea behind its construction with lines like, "Ah!/But that word is so good/Full of meaning with such a delicate sound/Now I'm going to have to change it?/Ah!/Kiss my ass/Ah! Does that fit?".

Humour was a big factor in the success of two other vanguarda paulista groups, Premeditando O Breque



Arrigo Barnabé, 1984



Itamar Assumpção, 1983

Jorge Rosenberg

Grupo Rumo, 1979



(later known as simply Premê) and Língua De Trapo, who both used parodies of Brazilian society. In Língua De Trapo's "Xote Bandeirado", a migrant factory worker in São Paulo fondly remembers his days working on a farm in northeast Brazil. In the process Língua De Trapo comment on the industrialised lives of many at the time. Premeditando O Breque experimented with academia-approved folk styles such as choro and marcha, but were most focused on creating a blissful irreverence with their lyrics and arrangements – their biggest success was 1983's "São Paulo São Paulo", a spoof of "New York, New York" that's still fondly regarded as an alternative anthem for São Paulo.

The work of all of these groups, as well as albums released between 1980–85 by Tetê Espíndola, Cida Moreira, Eliete Negreiros, Tiago Araripe and Patife Band, created the substantial body of work later recognised by critics as the vanguarda paulista. Concrete poets such as Augusto De Campos had previously described bossa nova and tropicália as a vanguard movement, and the aspiration of many of the musicians was to follow in those footsteps.

The relative success of *Clara Crocodilo*, *Beleléu*, *Leléu*, *Eu* and other releases, at least in the city of São Paulo, prompted the majors to take an interest, especially as MPB had started to go stale. Ariola released Barnabé's second album *Tubarões Voadores* (1984) – this swift follow-up saw him switch to synth and adopt a more pop-orientated approach, though it was conceived in the innovative format of a soundtrack to accompany the Luiz Gê comic book that was also included in the album. However, it failed to reach the same level of critical acclaim as its predecessor.

Grupo Rumo's *Dilettantismo* (1983), released by Lira Paulistana but distributed by Continental, offered the sound of the group maturing, but likewise didn't reach the kind of national successes hoped for by the majors. Though the artists of vanguarda paulista wanted to both embrace and revolutionise MPB, it seemed that their music was proving too abstruse to

be popular, and it was mainly heralded by local critics, students and fellow musicians

Indeed, the rupture in Brazilian popular music caused by vanguarda paulista turned out to be only fleeting. MPB was instead taken over by Brazilian rock as the music of choice for students. For a moment, the new rock movement and vanguarda paulista coincided, with Lira Paulistana an early home for acts such as Patife Band (Paulo Barnabé's group), Titãs, Ultraje A Rigor and Ira!, but soon new larger venues opened up and these bands left in search of this blooming audience. Struggling to find its place within the city's new music scene, Lira Paulistana finally closed its doors in 1986.

Yet many of the principles of the movement still endured. Lira Paulistana founder Wilson Souto Jr notes its political independence and praises its "ironic criticism and respecting of the tradition of MPB... We made new rules and the public understood it."

Barnabé made one final push for national recognition when his album *Suspeito* got major label support in 1987, but despite a number of TV appearances, it wasn't a success, and he went on to concentrate on classical music, soundtracks and music for theatre. But he has returned to *Clara Crocodilo* repeatedly, rerecording it in its entirety in 1999 and 2004, and in autumn 2017 his new group Claras E Crocodilos toured its songs around Europe.

Grupo Rumo continued to release music through the 80s, though Luiz Tatit eventually switched from being a player and composer to a lecturer and writer on pop music and linguistics. Itamar Assumpção mostly operated independently through small labels up to his death from cancer in 2003. After working with Isca De Policia throughout the 1980s he created a new all-women group called Orquídeas Do Brasil in 1993, and simultaneously released three swiftly recorded CDs, with guest vocalists including Tom Zé, Jards Macalé and Rita Lee. Their liberated open sound was one of many highlights in Assumpção's career – since

his death he has gained acceptance as a major thinker within Brazilian music, and a documentary, posthumously released albums and regular shows by Isca De Policia and Orquídeas Do Brasil (whom Assumpção forbade from playing without him during his lifetime) have all helped raise his profile.

Despite the movement's revolutionary rhetoric, what's notable now is how Brazilian music absorbed vanguarda paulista's advances in the decades that followed. Barnabé and Assumpção's work was so idiosyncratic it was almost unclassifiable, but Barnabé is respected for his ambitions to push Brazilian popular music to its limits, and Assumpção as a visionary documenter of the urban Afro-Brazilian experience. The work of the other bands meanwhile has been instrumental in showing that MPB need not be a static form, that it can have humour, and that it can reach out to the marginalised even when it has ambitions to be high art.

Such principles can all be seen in contemporary fringe music scenes across Brazil today, and especially in São Paulo: where Grupo Rumo's Nã Ozzetti recently collaborated with Passo Torto (featuring members of Metá-Metá and many of the musicians who performed on the last Elza Soares album), where Luiz Chagas now performs with his daughter Tulipa Ruiz and where Assumpção's two daughters continue to make MPB charged with reggae and Afro-Brazilian rhythms.

They are all tied to a highly independent music scene where the musicians own the rights to their own recordings and where they dictate their own marketing strategies. Artists like Criolo and Metá-Metá are great examples, as their recent albums were all first self-released and made available for free download before later being picked up by national and international labels for physical release.

In São Paulo this tradition is as strong as anywhere else in Brazil. It should come as no surprise then that the city was also the home to its first significant independent musical movement, the vanguarda paulista. □