Once Upon A Time In São Paulo

"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 tropicáliast 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

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.
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 melody.”

It was the input of a recording and mix engineer that gave the project a new life, bringing it closer to the blueprint of Barnabé’s then-unknown musical dreams. “I came up with a very specific idea, the idea of creating a musical composition that would be performed live, not in a recording studio, but in a live setting,” Barnabé explained. “It was a way to really express myself and my ideas.”

The music was recorded with a combination of traditional instruments and electronic elements, creating a fusion of old and new that was both unique and cohesive. The result was a powerful statement that showcased Barnabé’s skills as a musician and composer, and it firmly established him as a leader in the Brazilian music scene.

Once Upon A Time In São Paulo | The Wire | 37
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 Crocoddio.

The songs of Beleléu, Leleu, Ew 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 Policia (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 ‘intentional’ 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, Béro, 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 original) 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 “oh!”, “nossa!” “é isso??” and “hein?” 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

38 | The Wire | Once Upon A Time In São Paulo
(later known as simply Premê) and Lingua De Trapo, who both used parodies of Brazilian society. In Lingua De Trapo's "Xote Bandeirao", a migrant factory worker in São Paulo fondly remembers his days working on a farm in northeast Brazil. In the process Lingua 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, Gida Moreira, Eliete Negrinho, Tioa Ararique 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 tropicalia as a vanguard movement, and the aspiration of many of the musicians was to follow in those footsteps.

The relative success of Clara Crocodilo, Belaéu, Lelêu, 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 Dilemptânta (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 having an early home for acts such as Patife Band (Paulo Barnabé’s group), Tiitãs, Ultraje A Rigor and Iral, but then 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 Tait eventually switched from being a player and composer to a lecturer and writer in pop music and linguistics. Hamar 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 Orquideas 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 Orquideas 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 of 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 Na Ozzati recently collaborated with Passo Torto (featuring members of Metá-Métá 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-Métá 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.