

Book Review

Barbara Browning. 2017. *A Foreign Sound*. New York: Bloomsbury. 173pp. ISBN 978-1-50131-923-5 (pbk).

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Caetano Veloso's 2004 album, *A Foreign Sound*, is a love letter to North American music and a self-reflexive meditation on what Barbara Browning calls the "blender of US/Brazilian musical relations" (136). Browning's book on Veloso's album, published in Bloomsbury's new 33 Brazil series, extends this meditation to a meta-foreign level by positioning the author herself as an "estranged but curious" foreign listener (160). That is, she explores the album's foreignness to understand not only Veloso's creative renderings, but also her own relationship, as an American scholar, to Brazil and the foreign sounds caught between the two countries. She invites readers to rethink their personal relationships to music and its capacity to destabilize national boundaries.

The album is part of Veloso's long engagement with foreign sounds, especially those from the Anglo-American world. Catapulting to fame as a leader of Brazil's *tropicália* movement in the late 1960s, Veloso shocked Brazilian leftists invested in nationalist musical repertoires that rejected "imperialist" American musical influences. Invoking the Brazilian modernist theory of cannibalism, he claimed that Brazilian artistry was enriched by voracious devouring of any potential influence, drawing on Anglo-American psychedelic rock, avant-garde music, and many other styles. *A Foreign Sound* is the artist's mature reflection on his life-long engagements with American music. He reprises songs by Irving Berlin, Rodgers and Hart, Stevie Wonder, Bob Dylan, David Byrne, and Nirvana among others. Veloso's versions are not attempts at "authentic renderings". Rather, he transforms the songs with new arrangements, instrumentation, and rhythmic feels, reinterpreted through his Brazilian-Portuguese, British-English accent. The album's name is taken from 'It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)' by Bob Dylan, an artist with whom Veloso is frequently compared. Dylan admonishes us, and Veloso reminds us in covering the American songwriter: "Don't fear if you hear / A foreign sound to your ear".

Browning notes that the album's apparent disorder—moving from Tin Pan Alley to calypso and No Wave rock—sounds like a postmodern “shuffle” of American popular music. The book introduces and organizes the album for the listener, demonstrating some of Veloso's aesthetic strategies. In her introductory section, she introduces Veloso and his album through several lenses, asking first the implicit questions of the album: What is a foreign sound? To whom? Browning notes the “shamelessness” of the artist who frequently lauded Carmen Miranda's global exhibitions of Brazilian culture as a precursor to *tropicália*. Veloso is similarly unembarrassed in the opening track, ‘The Carioca’, written for the exoticizing American film *Flying Down to Rio* (1933). He asks the listener if they've “seen the ‘Carioca’”, a short-lived dance fad, “accurately” singing a butchered American-style “CARE-ee-oh-ka” rather than the standard Portuguese pronunciation. Indeed, Browning notes the versatility of Veloso's voice in this “meta-singerly album” as it “chews on” foreign sounds (17). She views the album as a genealogy of Veloso's own vocal influences: the crooners, the whisper of João Gilberto, the grunts of rockers. For her, this cannibalist album is an expression of “reverse musical imperialism” that throws remixed American songs back at the global market.

The body of the book comments on each song, sometimes in pairs, in an order of her choosing loosely based on chronology and divided into two sections: “Standards” and “Rock and Pop”. One could ask whether her ordering does violence to Veloso's intentional mixing of two supposedly distinct musical traditions: the “Great American Songbook” tradition supposedly killed off by rock and pop. Browning's organization does allow her to present an accessible narrative that considers the album's diverse musical resources. Drawing on scholarship, reviews, and many other songs, her knowledge of American and Brazilian popular music, especially Veloso's, is impressive. For her, the songs broach larger subjects: meditations on joy, break-up, gender ambivalence, and complicated ethnic histories. ‘Summertime’ is a window to explore how Black oppression is distinctly, and similarly, treated in Brazilian and American culture and music. She notes that the particular songs Veloso selected often tell stories of his own personal relationships. His rendering of David Byrne's [‘Nothing but’] Flowers’ allows her to explain Bryne's role in popularizing *tropicália* in the United States. She considers what is missing in this Brazilian-American conversation, suggesting that the obvious choice of ‘The Girl from Ipanema’ might be too shameless even for Veloso.

Like earlier work, Browning's reflections are unabashedly personal and, at times, seemingly unacademic. Though she imposes some order on the album, her method can likewise seem, as she says, “postmodern.” Her considerations of songs read less as definitive arguments than open meditations that raise more questions than they answer. They lead to personal anecdotes that might

seem irrelevant, or even “too much information”. She makes clear in the afterword that the book is addressed to Veloso, whom she has known personally since the mid-2000s. Considering that her project might be understood as modelling self-exploration in order to encourage us to reflect on our own relations to foreign sounds, such reflections bothered me less than her dependence on endnotes. Her explanation of the book’s organization is buried in the endnotes; they comprise almost a third of the introduction alone.

Those criticisms aside, Browning’s thoughtful meditations on the album helped me listen to it better. I will admit that even to me, an ethnomusicologist of Brazilian music, the strangeness of Veloso’s voice in English and his shameless kitsch were at first alienating. In this sense, Browning’s book is successful in illuminating Veloso’s strategies. It and the larger 33 series provide accessible “close listenings” of “art objects” too often cast aside in the “race for theory”.

One review of Veloso’s 2004 album notes that it was released at a height of worldwide anti-Americanism during the cavalier invasion of Iraq. Now, as we watch even further rightwing presidents in the United States and Brazil violently draw boundaries around what can constitute their respective national cultures, Veloso’s project sounds as important as ever. Browning too, writing just before Trump’s election, notes the strangeness of contemporary efforts at blocking out the foreign. She encourages us to hear the resonant foreignness that constitutes us all.