



The enactment of the field of cultural and artistic production of popular music in Brazil: a case study of the ‘Noel Rosa Generation’ in the 1930s

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The electromagnetic recording system came to Brazil in 1927 – just about two years or so after its establishment in Europe and the United States. With its higher technical specificities and capabilities, the electromagnetic system provided an opportunity for high-pitch and low-voice interpreters of song to be recorded. It seems likely that these artists would not have been recorded at that time had the mechanical system still been in vogue. At least in Brazil, this was the ‘revolution’ associated with the electromagnetic recording system: a new artistic generation emerged from the poor and middle-class inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro – then Brazil’s capital city – to help produce what most prominent popular music critics and historians dub the ‘Golden Age’ in Brazilian popular music (see, for instance, Vasconcellos 1974; Tinhorão 1981; Cabral 1996). In my view, this Golden Age coincides with and is tantamount to the inception of a field of cultural and artistic production of popular music. Despite an obvious contrast in proportion and impact, there are nevertheless clear sociological similarities between this decisive moment in the history of Brazilian popular music and those moments Bourdieu (1993) describes in nineteenth-century French literature, theatre and impressionist painting.

In Latin America, Brazil was the first or second recipient of electromagnetic recording technology after it was invented in the United States. The consequent enactment of a field of cultural and artistic production of popular music in Brazil is examined here as part of a longer process of social construction that over a period of years came to transform our popular music into a series of commodities of immense popularity across the country. Significantly, the form of musical commodity at stake here was ‘made (only) in Rio de Janeiro’ – notwithstanding the size of the country as a whole. A key aspect of the process of centralisation through which that city came to predominate was the arrival of multinational record companies, and from the early 1930s the development of commercial radio stations located mainly in Rio de Janeiro (with a few also in São Paulo). ‘Instances of consecration’ such as these were

undoubtedly a significant factor in the emergence of a field of cultural and artistic production of popular music in Brazil.¹

Besides commercial radio and the record industry, there were instances of consecration of lesser importance, which had had their peak earlier, and continued to exert some influence among the semiliterate composers and musicians who predominated in the popular music scene. These instances of consecration notably included the establishment of *vaudeville* theatre and music score publishing houses. For some time before the symbiotic move of commercial radio and the record industry into the commercial exploitation of music, it was *vaudeville* theatre and the music publishing houses that governed audience access to the latest music trends in urban Brazil. During the 1930s, popular theatre and publishing houses still had a slight influence over the destiny of both songs and composers alike. But as their importance diminished, the consecrating job of both *vaudeville* theatre and publishing houses also changed within the field. More than anything, it now consisted of just re-releasing record and radio hits.

The music industry takes off

It was under the auspices of Odeon Records (a part of the International Talking Machine Co.) that Fred Figner, a Czech-born, United States entrepreneur who came to Brazil at the end of the nineteenth century, built and was responsible for the first record plant in Rio de Janeiro. This was the *Fábrica Odeon*, opened in 1912. Figner had been recording in Brazil since he first arrived, getting his cylinders and records made in Europe, and then sent back to Rio de Janeiro. In addition to selling records, Figner also sold hardware on which to play them. For twenty-five years or so after that, Figner's skills in management and his ability as a salesman and artists' agent helped him become the first and most important record industry mogul in Brazil. Significantly, though, what seemed to be his biggest achievement in the music business, the purchase of one third of the rights to a patent for double sided records, turned out to be the decisive *faux pas* in his career. The patent was hardly worth the investment Figner had made.²

If Figner was not exactly able to foretell the future of the music industry in Brazil (at least not until much later), his entrepreneurship certainly left a legacy of incomparable musical assets as well as an impression of what urban popular music might become in, and for, Brazil. Figner's *Casa Edison*, named after US inventor Thomas Alva Edison, was founded in 1900 and only started to lose its dominance in the late 1920s with the arrival in Rio de Janeiro (and São Paulo) of four multinational record companies. These were, Odeon, which had already been in Brazil as 'Odeon Records', but with Figner merely as market representative (the Parlophon label, a subsidiary of Odeon, only lasted a few years in the country); Victor (later RCA Victor); Columbia; and Brunswick. All of these employed foreign general managers, technicians (the 'gate-keepers') and maestros, along with a few local maestros (as 'artistic directors') and musicians to care of the 'local colour' of the music recorded (Franceschi 1984 and 2002).

With a 'Brazilian touch' in mind, all these maestros tried to integrate local music with the new foreign technology and as a result ended up devising a sort of local trademark orchestration for their recordings. No doubt in doing so they were trying to respond to listeners' tastes in Rio de Janeiro. It was basically under the supervision of

such maestros as Eduardo Souto (1882–1942), Pixinguinha (1897–1973) and Radamés Gnattali (1906–1988) that Brazilian orchestration was born. Yet the expertise of some foreign maestros was clearly important too – a circumstance that makes me think of Middleton’s ‘theory of articulation’ (1985). Middleton’s key point is that in analysing popular music socio-historically we ought to take into account the greatest number of social variables (such as the ones discussed above and, indeed, all those following).³

It was as a device for promoting the products of these newly arrived record companies that *Phono-Arte*, the first magazine in Brazil entirely dedicated to records, recordings and the record industry, was published in Rio de Janeiro in February 1928. This periodical clearly marks the US record industry’s market expansion into Brazil, which speeded up as a consequence of the 1929 crash and crisis of the New York stock market. For a while these record companies focused on exporting to Brazil, as well looking to subsidiaries there as a repertoire source for the larger South American market. Despite this increase in commercial music production, *Phono-Arte* ceased publication after only fifty issues in February 1931 due to its inability to review the release of a considerable amount of new records, both national and of US and European origin. Another factor was that the record companies were more reluctant than they had been, just three years before, to supply the editors with update information on new record releases.⁴ This can be explained largely by the rise of other music promoting media.

With the growing importance of commercial radio stations for promoting records and artists alike, companies like Odeon (and its Parlophon label), Victor, Columbia and Brunswick no longer needed to depend solely on printed media such as *Phono-Arte* to promote record sales. Clearly, record companies now had the most up-to-date technology at their disposal. The attraction of the new media is shown by the fact that from the early 1930s on if a magazine like *Phono-Arte* wanted to promote artists and records it had to pay for its source material. Still, during the period it operated, *Phono-Arte* presented a wealth of detailed information, leaving an indelible mark that, nowadays, helps to give us a deeper appreciation of the history of Brazilian popular music at that pivotal moment.

Phono-Arte represented not only a brand new sales and promoting format for popular music, it also enabled communication between the bosses of the record industry and commercial radio stations. Later on, *Phono-Arte*’s managers, as ‘agents of consecration’, took on the role of mediating between the two sectors. It is also important to note that these managers came from the same poor and/or middle-class background as did the members of the artistic generation referred to above.⁵

The ‘Golden Age’

The artistic generation of the early days of recording in Brazil is named after Noel Rosa (1910–1937), a white middle-class artist whose position in the canon of Brazilian popular music has been reinforced in the years following his death. From his first record and radio hit in 1931, ‘*Com que Roupa?*’, up until the year he died from tuberculosis, Rosa had more than 250 songs in his portfolio – most of them record, radio and/or *vaudeville* theatre hits. As historians and biographers have suggested, Rosa managed to work harder than any other member of his generation for the mere eight years in which he wrote music and lyrics – from 1929 to 1937. Considering he was someone who continuously damaged his health by drinking plenty of alcohol and

spending long nights in Rio de Janeiro's red light district, Rosa's song production is nothing short of phenomenal – especially by today's standards.

In fact there were other artists more popular than Rosa in the 1930s – particularly interpreter Francisco Alves (1898–1952), also known as Chico Alves and/or Chico Viola. However, there was no-one so characteristically linked to the Brazilian 'Golden Era' as Rosa. In particular, he belonged to Rio de Janeiro, and even more to *Vila Isabel*, his native 'Zona Norte' ('North Zone') neighbourhood. By the 1930s, however, being just a composer or musician was not as glamorous as being an interpreter like Chico Alves, who, from 1919 to 1952 got to record and release about a thousand songs. This may well break the all-time European record of its kind.⁶ Meanwhile, Noel Rosa managed not only to get his songs recorded by top interpreters of his time like Alves, but also worked at Rio de Janeiro radio stations (as prompter, interpreter and musician). In addition he recorded a few of his songs himself, and took part in other artists' records as guitar player and/or choir member.

Rosa's posterior fame and importance over Alves grew through a process of social construction. To make sense of this we need to understand how the category of 'taste' works in Brazilian popular music and, especially, how taste keeps on changing over the years. In particular, to measure Rosa's place in the national canon alongside other famous artists of his generation, means reflecting on his role as 'underdog', his bohemian character and enjoyment of long nights, his being a 'party animal', his reckless way of dressing, and, especially, the way he looked. Rosa had a defective cleft chin as the result of forceps childbirth. All these factors were crucial in making him an ideal subject for mythologising anecdotes. Still, we ought not to move on to these specifics too quickly. A key first step in understanding how Rosa's name has been given to his generation is to identify, and place in relation to one another, all the mechanisms of canon formation in Brazil.⁷

Canon and field in Brazil

In the early days of the Brazilian recording industry the artists we have been discussing constituted what Bourdieu (1993) refers to as a 'proletaroid intelligentsia' (originally a Max Weber expression). Under the surreptitious ordinances of the music industry, they were 'forced to experience the contradiction . . . stemming from their inferior position in the field of production' (Bourdieu 1993, p. 131). In 1930s' Rio de Janeiro, this 'inferior position' had to do with the nature of the artists' cultural capital (basically song writing, voice and ability on specific instruments) as the main source of fuel for the music industry. These skills were then transformed by the industry into 'symbolic capital', and finally sold as radio and record hits. On the other side of the field was the (transnational) economic capital of the music industry. Actually, the functions of this 'other half' were as important as the artists' tasks within the field, but this fact is nowadays either neglected or else underestimated by the historians of 'MPB', or the popular music of Brazil.⁸

Enter Bourdieu's concept of 'field'. As is well known he deploys his sociology of culture, almost exclusively, to explore 'high art' (painting, literature, sculpture, theatre and so on) – except, that is, when he is comparing 'high art' and 'middle-brow art' to show their respective complexities. It seems likely (although he barely discusses it) that Bourdieu would have placed popular music under the label of 'field of large scale production', as opposed to the 'field of restricted production' in which those 'high art' forms just referred to are located. Simply put, this shows no sign of

prejudice on his part toward popular culture, nor does it become a barrier to popular music studies on the whole. True, some adaptation of Bourdieu's concepts needs to be done when dealing with popular music in Brazil, especially the concepts of 'field' and 'instance of consecration'. Overall, though, Bourdieu's sociological theory provides a means of explaining how and why popular music became what it is today – and in a suitably redemptive way.

In the case of Brazil, Bourdieu's theory can be applied to develop a new version of the history of *MPB* as it has been written so far. Perhaps the most important notion we can take from Bourdieu is that, once a field of cultural production is created, it develops as if by itself and takes along with it all technological advances in the media as if they were its own. Crucially, for the present argument, the enactment of the field of cultural and artistic production of popular music in Brazil took place in 1930s' Rio de Janeiro, and thus it did not need to be re-enacted subsequently (as the 'history of *MPB*' seems to imply whenever it describes new music fads). The emergence of the field took place precisely at the moment when record companies and commercial radio stations also emerged as the key means of dissemination of music. As such they became the two main instances of consecration within the field. In Brazil, we might say, field autonomisation occurred when the artists of the Noel Rosa generation captured a mass local audience via specialised media. This was the moment of popular consecration, and in an important sense it persists today. Later developments in terms of music industry organisation or technological change represent shifts in a historically continuous field rather than rupture.

In fact, just like fields everywhere, the field of cultural and artistic production of popular music in Brazil constantly adjusts and readjusts its structure whenever there are technological advances, newer artistic generations breaking in or developments in the market. Historically, we can trace a series of such adjustments:

- The precipitous arrival of sound in the movie industry in the early 1930s.
- The Carmen Miranda effect – after recording and filming in Brazil in the 1930s, Miranda became a Hollywood star ('the Brazilian Bombshell') during the 1940s and early 1950s.⁹
- The emergence in the late 1940s and during the 1950s of Luiz Gonzaga from the Brazilian Northeast as national star, so turning the music industry's attention towards *Baião* and *Forró* as dance/music genres.¹⁰
- The moment when, in the late 1950s, *Bossa Nova* evolved as a 'musical revolution' of the elite *Zona Sul* in Rio de Janeiro,¹¹ almost immediately gaining US audiences and some international acclaim in the early 1960s.
- The advent of the television era and, at around the same time, the emergence of *Tropicalismo* in the Brazilian music scene of the late 1960s and early 1970s; *Tropicalismo* brought solid-body electric guitars and progressive rock influence into traditional music (demonstrating that when Bourdieu's sociology of culture is applied to popular music, the 'revolutionary' image of new types of music is often exposed as relatively minor, and that – at least in Brazil – the import of rock was more to do with 'smooth modernisation' than anything else).¹²
- The adoption of hip-hop and rap in São Paulo and funk in Rio de Janeiro during the late 1980s and early 1990s, indicating, musically speaking, how deeply penetrating (and devastating) globalisation can be in, and for, so-called 'developing countries' like Brazil.

In all these decisive moments, the structural design of the field had virtually the same characteristics as when the field was enacted, but the musical styles, the instances of consecration, the agents, and/or the generations of artists have changed considerably. That is exactly why it is important to fathom out the commercial dimension of this field historically, and so expand the horizons of what I have called here and elsewhere the 'Brazilian history of popular music', i.e. to distinguish it from the 'history of MPB', which is arguably warped and biased when it touches (if ever) the interests of the music industry and its various acolytes, both within and without the field (see Frota 2003). Of course no one would refute the general idea that the *corpus* of the 'history of MPB' has so far been an invaluable contribution to popular music studies in Brazil, but I think the time has come to put it aside for the moment – not only because a new version is out, but because I am sure that this new version *is* the right way to straighten things out a little, by way of Bourdieu's social theories and concepts. When it comes to Brazil and its always-centralised cultural life, though, it may still take some time before this new version finally catches on.

Ethnicity and wrong-turns

In point of fact, there is no way to deny that the music industry (in Brazil and elsewhere) can be characterised as a 'market of symbolic goods' – just as in the case of any cultural production, be it within a restricted or a large scale field. Every single instance in the French literary field Bourdieu describes has a similar correspondent in the field of cultural and artistic production of popular music in Brazil. Actually, this is unsurprising because Bourdieu's approach in creating his theory was to show its wide applicability everywhere in the Western half of the world, by way of offering a similar (but not equal) treatment to all cultural and artistic products (see Pinto 2000), including popular music.

For the purposes of this article, the key point is that if Brazilian popular music starts to be seen as a cultural commodity *per se*, those writing traditional MPB historiography may have to rethink the subject of 'national identity' and, especially, the way ethnic markers in our popular music genres are always linked to it. In my view, these national identity and ethnic markers have long been seen somehow as a 'necessary evil' that must always be brought up when writing on any topic of our cultural and ethnic history. In the end, this explains why in Brazil the everyday personal condition of poor blacks, as far as racial bias goes, has not greatly improved since the abolition of slavery on 13 May 1888.

Actually, there is profound contradiction here in relation to the field of popular music. On the one hand, the idea circulates that black people generated urban samba by themselves in Rio de Janeiro a hundred years ago or so. On the other hand, the social reality is that blacks in Brazil were always (and still are) unable to gain economic independence, or reap rewards comparable to those of white musicians. Reproducing what goes on worldwide, the lion's share in the Brazilian music industry has always gone toward the ultimate owners of the instances of consecration – none of them black. Crumbs, leftovers and trivial gratitude are all Brazilian blacks have got in return for the enormous cultural capital they have contributed to Brazilian music and cultural life throughout the years.¹³

But there are other advantages to be had from focusing on the urban popular culture economy: such a move also invigorates the on-going debate presented in this paper on artists' involvement with or struggle within the field (their 'position-

takings', as Bourdieu would have it). The key issue here concerns the desire to make the music scene today as glamorous as it was in the 1930s. Of course this is not just an economic matter to do with (according to viewpoint) satisfying markets or the continuous expansion of the earnings of the music industry's big bosses. My point is simply that the time has come to bring this up in Brazil, for the sake of more rigour and reliability in the history of our popular music.

Conclusion – bringing back commerce, reflecting on canon

At least as far as Brazilian popular music goes, a closer reading of Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production helps us to understand the commercial mechanisms behind the process of autonomisation in both music production and consumption. More broadly, this also implies setting the stage for an academic critique from which we might develop a set of general principles for a sociology of Brazilian popular music. Why is this necessary? Partly because to do so means referring to data that, most of the time, has inadvertently been left out. So far, 'History of *MPB*' critics have only dealt in a most superficial way with such configurations as the opposition between artists' public lives and artists' (and agents') daily-bread, family-raising activities; or the gap between the performed glamour of artists from the Noel Rosa generation and their real lives off-stage; or the way that 1930's radio and record hits came to define categories of taste, in contrast to the more conventional treatment of these songs as superficial cultural artefacts.

In the end, the message of *MPB* critics, both past and present has been that, when dealing with popular music in Brazil, a socio-historically oriented criticism is somehow of no importance, and, moreover, that what really matters is talking about songs, artists' biographical data, and the glamour related to the music scene – all with a characteristic touch of gossip. With a view to challenging the various denials at stake here, I'd like to suggest that this is the right moment to launch a new form of social criticism of Brazilian popular music. This would be more academically oriented, if only because (as the discussion above suggests) certain facts can no longer be discarded (or used inadvertently). The various show-business- and music-industry-friendly accounts that have been around for so long in chronological, anecdotal and/or social 'histories of *MPB*' give the impression that popular music is just a naïve expression of a talented few composers, musicians and interpreters whose function has been merely to entertain the public. In a sense this is all true. My point is that it's now time for the other side of the coin to be seen – actually there is space enough for the two modes of criticism to thrive together under the sun.

Endnotes

1. Unable to create a uniformly developed cultural economy, the Brazilian government played a key role in turning its former capital city (1930s' Rio de Janeiro) into Brazil's musical and artistic display window in this period, thus relegating the rest of the country to the status of 'second-hand recipients' of the music industry's products. Such a move – the location of 'consecrating machines' (political *and* musical) under the orders of centralised media – was particularly characteristic of Latin-American 'developing countries'. Notwithstanding this important political move, it does in fact appear that commercial radio stations were already operating in Rio de Janeiro months before the March 1932 national government decree which finally approved the regulations for commercial radio across the country.
2. In December 1901, Figner purchased a third of rights to patent #3465, the one for double-sided 78 r.p.m.s. He finally received this patent title in 1908, but with his rights to it geographically

- restricted to Brazilian territory in the southern half of the country. He still had to wait until 1910 to have said rights legalised by the Brazilian government. For details on Figner's unique entrepreneurship in Brazil, see Franceschi (1984) and, especially, (2002).
3. In short, the theory of articulation represents 'the most sophisticated method available of conceiving the relationship between musical forms and practices, and class interests and social structure' (Middleton 1985, p. 29). There are clearly strong parallels here with Bourdieu's field theory.
 4. See 'Discos Brasileiros Gravação Nacional (Novidades do Mez: Considerações Gerais)', *Phono-Arte*, 30 May 1930, 43/3, p. 22, and, in the same edition, the information to readers and subscribers inside the back cover.
 5. For more details on *Phono-Arte* and, especially, how it stimulated the formation of the 'field of cultural and artistic production of popular music in Brazil', see Frota (2003, pp. 91–8).
 6. For the lyrics and sheet music information of all songs recorded by Francisco Alves, see Cardoso Junior (1998). With an average of more than twenty-nine songs per year (equivalent to more than a couple of regular CDs today), and considering that he began recording in 1919 and died aged fifty-four in 1952, Alves holds the all-time Brazilian record for recording songs by a solo artist.
 7. For Rosa's most authoritative biography, see Máximo and Didier (1990). In a way, Rosa exercised the 'live fast, die young' motto to the fullest in the 1930s – thus, comparatively speaking, he was ahead of his time, and certainly ahead of some renowned dissolute jazz, rock and pop stars in the English-speaking world.
 8. The acronym 'MPB' stands for *Música Popular Brasileira* ('Brazilian popular music' in Portuguese). It surfaced in the 1960s, having been created by journalists in Rio de Janeiro. MPB critics systematised and built the major part of the national popular music canon during the second half of the twentieth century. Nowadays, most of these journalists still write books and articles on the 'history of MPB', mainly biographical accounts. The abbreviation is still in vogue – widely accepted (both by artists and the audience) as a leading genre in music stores across the country, something that includes nearly all types of music sung and recorded by Brazilian Portuguese-speaking artists.
 9. Carmen Miranda played an important role in promoting the US Department of State's 'Good-Neighbourhood' policy (see Mendonça 1999). Despite all her success abroad, there are few Carmen Miranda biographies in the Brazilian book market – the most comprehensive one, by the late Cardoso Junior (1978), is currently out of print.
 10. See Ramalho (2000) for Luiz Gonzaga's merits as a musician, interpreter and composer who envisaged, created and somehow got to 'impose' on the media the musical personality that, today, still corresponds very much to that of the region in Brazil he originally came from, the northeast back lands, the so-called 'Sertão'.
 11. Rio de Janeiro's *Zona Sul* ('South Zone' in Portuguese), which basically encompasses the beachfront neighbourhoods of *Leme*, *Copacabana*, *Arpoador*, *Ipanema* and *Leblon*, is still where most of the city's middle and upper class live in. The poor inhabit either the *Zona Norte* ('North Zone') or the *morros* ('hills and hill-sides') and *favelas* ('slums') located in the *Zona Sul* and elsewhere in the outskirts of town. Tinhorão (1998, pp. 307–20) implies that what the *Bossa Nova* young and white *Zona Sul* middle class did for Brazilian popular music was to mingle Samba with Jazz in the open, i.e. brazenly and without concealment – a musical fusion that in one way or the other had always existed in Brazil, but not so undisguised. Despite all its (dubious) 'international success', locally, for some reason, the *Bossa Nova* 'revolution' simply could not reach out to (or be reached by) the most popular and poorer segments of Rio de Janeiro and the Brazilian population (see Britto 1966; Tinhorão 1998). Even long afterwards and for very similar reasons, there is still this feeling it cannot do it. Why is that so? Any guesses?
 12. See Sanches (2000), though there is a vast bibliography on *Tropicalismo*, all very much one-sided, that is for the 'movement', written largely to praise to the skies its main stars (Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil *et al.*). Of course I do not mean to suggest that they, as poets, singers, musicians, etc., do not individually deserve such praise. It is simply, and this is Sanches' view, that the 'movement' is not the 'very serious revolution' (both musical and behavioural) which its foremost artists themselves would perhaps have liked him to invoke. In fact there were other, preceding hybrid and protest genres such as *lê-ê-ê*, later known as the *Jovem Guarda* 'movement', which, still according to Sanches (2000), was supposedly more alienated than *Tropicalismo* and took its form from 1960s British and US pop and early Beatles 'easy-listening' music. In a purportedly non-alienated, leftist/subversive style, there also was, of course, a wave of protest songs around, especially after 1968 (even under the heavy censorship imposed after the military *coup d'Etat* of 1964).
 13. Besides Tagg's essay on 'Black music' (1989), I owe the ideas in this section to the late Frank Kofsky's 1998 *Black Music, White Business*, and to *Village Voice* journalist Greg Tate's 2003 *Everything But the Burden* – not to mention Norman Mailer's 1957 classic essay *The White Negro*, and, of course, a number of titles in Portuguese on the subject of black life in Brazil both past and present.

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