

Difference Between Samba and Bossa Nova

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From the Masses to the Classes

(written by Michel Nirenberg)

Despite the term's previous existence in Brazilians' informal lexicon, the word "Samba" was officially used for the first time in 1917, in a 78rpm recording called "Pelo Telephone" (By the Telephone) by composer Donga.

Samba

Samba was born in Salvador, capital of Bahia, and later developed in Rio de Janeiro.

The music style's origin comes from a mix of African culture, brought to the country by slaves when Brazil was still a Portuguese colony, and as such influenced by European musicality.

What resulted was an instrumentation infused with many forms of percussion – like the surdo, chocalho, repique, tamborim, pandeiro among others – as well as the guitar and the cavaquinho (a small type of guitar with 4 strings).



Samba Jam on the Street

Samba and Bossa Nova history

Samba Classifications

Early samba composers were mainly from the lower classes, and a great part of them had African heritage. Their lyrics focused on the daily lives of people living in the cities, generally on those from the more popular classes. Throughout time many different types of samba styles developed. Below we can identify some of the most common:

- Samba de Terreiro – one of the oldest types of samba, it is related to the context in which it was being played, the terreiros –communities where people

would sing and dance in rodas (circles) – remembering their ancestry as well as daily lives.

- Samba de Partido Alto – also one of the original types of samba, it talks about the daily life of the “morros” (hills in Rio de Janeiro that later in the 20th century became shantytowns). With a repeated refrain, the subsequent verses follow the established theme proposed. This subgenre is often characterized by improvised lyrics.
- Samba-Canção – Born in the 1920s, it consists of slow rhythms and romantic/sentimental lyrics.
- Samba-Enredo – It started around the 1930s and is related to the Carnival parade in Rio de Janeiro made by the samba schools, played with a full percussion accompaniment. The whole choreography and scenography is based on the theme presented as the official storyline/subject matter for that year's parade.
- Samba-Exaltação – a samba with patriotic lyrics, extolling the natural beauty of Brazil. Many times with a full orchestra accompaniment.
- Samba Carnavalesco – small samba marches played in the carnival ballroom so that people can sing and dance along to the music. A small “jazz orchestra” usually plays it with singers.
- Samba de Gafieira – A little more modern and usually faster type of samba, it is played by small orchestras in dance clubs; it can also be played as instrumental samba.
- Pagode – Born in Rio de Janeiro in the 1970s, this form quickly became very popular mainly because of its simple and romantic lyrics, accompanied by a repetitive percussion groove, oftentimes including modern instruments and electronic effects.



Getting Ready to Samba in Brazil

Despite this being a simplified approach towards defining Samba, these styles create a portrait of the genre through some of the samba types that we can still actively find nowadays. One of the most famous samba musicians of all times, who helped spread and popularize the style, both in the S and in Brazil, was Carmen Miranda. In the late 1930s Hollywood hired Miranda, a great Portuguese singer that grew up in Rio de Janeiro to represent Brazil's national style abroad. Despite her enormous success, she faced many critics who accused her of selling herself to America, and not actually representing the real samba. However, today she is considered one of the most important samba icons.

The Birth of the Bossa Nova



Bossa Nova and the Guitar

For most critics, Bossa Nova's official debut year was 1959 with the release of the LP *Chega de Saudade*, by João Gilberto. Differently from Samba this musical style came from the elites. Following the "Golden Years" of the fifties post World War Two, young upper middle class musicians started to gather in the neighborhoods of Copacabana and Ipanema in Rio de Janeiro seeking something new. They believed that Brazil could influence the world with its culture and sought to internationalize Brazilian music.

Bossa Nova Characteristics

- The development of spoken song – many songs had romantic lyrics, and used very light singing instead of the "big voice" from samba.
- The glorification of natural landscapes and elaborated lyrics – the movement started in Rio de Janeiro, a city where there are so many wonderful natural monuments that it's hard to count. With elaborated lyrics, composers declared their love for the city (as well as for the carioca women).
- The richness of its instrumentation – many groups used instruments like the cello and the flute in their official ensemble, as well as piano, acoustic guitar and bass, and sometimes backing choirs.
- The use of very light percussion – Contrary to techniques used in Samba, percussion features as a light musical accessory, instead of the main groove instrument.
- The strong influence of American Jazz – many partnerships were made by Brazilian and American composers. The most famous and probably most successful was between João Gilberto and the saxophonist Stan Getz. However, some of Bossa Nova's creators criticized this influence, arguing that the impact should exist only as a detail, instead of a mainstream approach.

Politics, Discrimination and Carnegie Hall

In the year of 1962, Bossa Nova was internationally consecrated, thanks to the historical concert in Carnegie Hall – New York, where many important Bossa Nova musicians like Tom Jobim, João Gilberto, Luiz Bonfá among others performed. The music later saw a sudden change of direction and thematic evolution, in 1964, with the military coup in Brazil. Bossa Nova songs started to bring social themes into its lyrics, transforming what started as a politically disengaged art form, into what would later become the Tropicália movement and modern MPB (Brazilian Popular Music) – both strongly characterized as politically engaged musical styles. Some say that Bossa Nova ended in 1966, but its chronological demise didn't represent its extinction – as we can see from its continued popularity, up until this day, both in Brazil and abroad.



Samba Dancer at a Street Party

Unfortunately, during the greater portion of the 20th century in Brazil, Samba was not considered a real and serious musical manifestation that deserved to be regarded as a cultural patrimonial. Only recently, has it begun to receive the same importance that Bossa Nova has so long been bestowed. Many factors contributed to this phenomenon. For instance, while Bossa Nova was created by the Brazilian upper white middle class, and almost immediately accepted and consumed not only by national, but international audiences alike – throughout the US and Europe – Samba developed as a cultural manifestation of lower, black, African descendants classes, and faced discrimination until it was recognized as the art form it is currently considered.

Both musical styles are, and have always been, a great representation of Brazilian culture. As an avid fan, and dedicated musician myself, I hope this short article has, besides helped illustrate the styles' differences, created a thirst in you, dear reader, to listen to the music and discover for yourself how wonderful these two cultural manifestations truly are.

Glossary:

Carnaval – a folk party with a yearly parade both in the streets with informal bands playing the little carnival samba marches, as well as the official parade made by the samba schools.

Carioca – someone born in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

Gafieira – this term is usually used to represent the samba ballroom dance between a man and a woman, as well as the musical specifications stated in the article.

Terreiro – places associated with African descendants, where they would perform religious rituals as well as musical/cultural meetings.

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