

"I started to play in nightclubs and in bars, *boites*, as they called them. For years, you know, I played this nightlife, very heavy, for dancing. Playing piano.

"I tried to compose. I tried to write. But I would never show anything to anyone. I had a drawer full of songs. Finally I got to the radio and record companies. I used to write down the melodies that songwriters would compose by ear. I was a copyist. I used to write down the Carnival melodies."

Carnaval, as everyone knows, is that celebration in February, just before Mardi Gras, when the streets of Rio de Janeiro go mad with costumed dancers. Rio is unique among cities in that the rich do not live on the high ground and the poor on the lowlands, as in Montreal and Hong Kong. The rich live in glorious houses and apartments at sea level; the poor live in the *favelas*, as the slums are called, that sprawl up its glorious hills. Despite all this hardship, residents of these neighborhoods will work for a year making costumes for Carnaval, often spending much of the year's income on them. Somehow they find it worth it, and when Carnaval at last comes, there is fabulous dancing to what the Brazilians call *escola de samba*, school of samba.

"Carnaval is not any more what it used to be," he said that day. "It has changed a lot. Brazil is industrial and coffee isn't the biggest earner any more. But Carnaval was a big thing. *Escola de samba*, the street samba. It was all very important.

"Also, they were making 78s, records that might have a short life — just a hit, a Carnaval hit. But some of them were good, well done. So there were the melodies and the sambas and the sambas *canção*, the slower songs. They're called *mediano*. In other words, midyear music, music that is not played during Carnaval.

"Before Carnaval, let's say from December, everybody was already composing and recording for the coming Carnaval in February. Lots of activity in January. And then in February, Carnaval would come and take over. You wouldn't listen to a midyear song any more. Radio was very important, before TV. Radio was the thing, and all the radios were playing the Carnaval songs. And I used to be a piano player for a record company.

"And later I became the air man for Odeon. By then I had a lot of

songs already. And singers started to record them. And I started to *show* them, which I didn't before. I was very timid, very shy, very scared. I had lots of sambas. I wrote some scores for movies, and finally João Gilberto came. And I arranged a record for him. I was basically, before being a songwriter, an arranger. I had the *attaché* case, going downtown every day to record, mainly with singers and some instrumentalists.

"Then an important fact in my life: I met Vinicius de Moraes. He was a poet, a composer. At the time he was a diplomat. But mainly a poet. He had had several books of poetry published, good poetry. He was a man educated at Oxford. He was with the foreign service in Paris."

"Wasn't he at UNESCO for a time?"

"UNESCO. He'd been around. He had been at Strassbourg [too].

"He had this idea of writing a play, *Orfeu do Carnaval*. Then he arrived in Brazil. He had been for a long time abroad. He had that deep nostalgia—"

"—*Saudade*," I interjected, laughing. One of the first things you learn in Brazil is that the word *saudade* (sow-DAH-djee) is ubiquitous and untranslatable. It means, roughly, longing, yearning, sadness, something akin to *homesick*.

"Yes, *saudade*. Vinicius had the script already for the theater. He was looking for a musician. Someone introduced me to him. We started to do good things. In '56, I think, we went to the Municipal Theater, and we did *Orfeu do Carnaval* for the stage. It was a big thing there. Local but big. All the society came. We did about two weeks at the Municipal. Then we went to a popular theater, and we did it for two months, with the scenery made by Oscar Niemeyer, the famous Brazilian architect.

"Later the French came and decided to produce the film, *Orfeu Negro* (Black Orpheus)".

The producer was Sacha Godine, the director Marcel Camus. Filmed on location, the picture made brilliant use of the costumes and dance of Carnaval and of the stunning scenery of Rio, even the *favelas*. The film hewed closely to the de Moraes play, in which the Greek legend of Euridyce and Orpheus is played out as the tale of a girl who falls