

bret saunders

Boulder benefit to help Latin percussionist Slon

By **Bret Saunders**
Denver Post Jazz Critic

Sunday, March 31, 2002 - Denver's Claudio Slon is a unique percussion master who supplied the polyrhythmic pulse for some of the most lovely and commercially successful music to emerge from the Southern Hemisphere.

The Brazilian native arrived in the U.S. at the height of Beatlemania as the drummer for organist Walter Wanderley, who had a behemoth hit record with the transcendently kitschy instrumental called "Summer Samba" (available on the "Rain Forest" CD from Verve).

At the time, the bossa nova craze was one of the few musical contenders to challenge the British Invasion in terms of popularity, and the invigorating cultural contributions from Brazilians such as Antonio Carlos Jobim (with whom Slon also collaborated) and Joao Gilberto have provided what's turned out to be airy, timeless music.

"When I arrived in New York in 1965, it was a dream for me," said the 58-year-old Slon. "Walter was a great musician, very creative. He had a way of pressing the volume pedal. But he wasn't ready for big success."

It's true that Wanderley never racked up another smash like "Summer Samba," but his albums, especially those featuring Slon, have attained cult status, and his exotic, simple music gives off a space-age sheen almost four decades later. A fortuitous trip to a used-record store might yield a copy of Wanderley's 1966 collaboration with Brazilian chanteuse Astrud Gilberto, "A Certain Smile A Certain Sadness" (Verve, and currently available on CD if you don't want to dig for the vinyl).

And yes, that's Slon on the cover, resembling a collegiate Drew Carey in very '60s lounge attire, including a bow tie and boffo purplish jacket. The music inside is very much of its time as well: short, innocent tales of lost love rendered in Portuguese and English by Gilberto. You can't imagine anyone making music like this now, but upon hearing it you're glad that someone thought of it then.

After his stint with Wanderley, Slon spent almost a decade in the drum chair for hipster's hipster Sergio Mendez, and even recorded a Brazilian-flavored album with Frank Sinatra. Slon had some trepidation about meeting the Chairman of the Board, after hearing tales of his legendary temper.

"I expected to have to wear boxing gloves! But I was with Jobim at the time, and Frank liked his music so much, he was actually very sociable."

Slon spent the '70s through most of the '90s working with a variety of artists, including Joe Pass, Dori Caymmi, and even turned up on a forgotten album from actress Cybill Shepherd. After years in Los Angeles, circumstances brought him to Denver a few years ago, where he recorded a series of upbeat, likable albums for club owner and record-label proprietor Vartan Tonoian. Tonoian's club, Vartan's, often housed Slon and other notables, but the club recently closed and Vartan himself is apparently nowhere to be found.

Slon managed to press on, though, and work continued in the form of various gigs with local musicians appreciative of Slon's deceptively simple percussive brilliance. On the afternoon of last Jan. 31, Slon was in his car, preparing for a night out on New Year's Eve.

"I was going to pick up my wife so we could go and celebrate. I crossed an intersection, and woke up an hour later in an intensive-care unit."

Slon had been involved in a collision, and after about a week of treatment, his doctors had discovered troubling news from the X-rays.



Denver Post file photo

Denver friends of Brazilian drummer Claudio Slon are working on a fund to help cover his medical bills stemming from cancer and subsequent treatments.

"I have cancer, and what they found spread from the lungs to the liver very fast," said Slon.

His attitude is very upbeat: "I'll give it a good fight."

Slon has a lot of friends in the community, including Toni Roggio, a mortgage banker who grew up with the Sergio Mendez records featuring Slon. She's working on a fund to help cover Slon's bills, and in the meantime, is helping to put together a benefit for Slon on April 8 at Trilogy Lounge in Boulder.

"He's just a teddy-bear kind of guy. A really sweet, really nice man," she said. "And he nails everything as far as the Latin rhythms go."

Slon says he'll attend the concert if he feels up to it, which will feature Slon's friend and collaborator, guitarist Mitchell Long. Keyboardist Jeff Jenkins, bassist Eduardo Barbosa, and other locals are expected to appear.

"My body's trying to fight very hard," said Slon.

Here's hoping that he receives an infusion of the healing power his music has supplied to countless others over the past 40 years.

The Claudio Slon Benefit will be held at Trilogy Lounge, 2017 13th St., Boulder, April 8, 8 p.m.-mid- \$10 donation at the door; call (303-473-9463)

Woody's film scorer

Dick Hyman, an accomplished pianist appears in the concert hall of the King Center in Denver on Thursday, and trumpeter Terence Blanchard creates solid, intelligent jazz with his quintet at the King Center on Saturday. Call 303-556-2296 for tickets . . . Boulder Friends of Jazz hosts a Dixieland Jazz and Swing Jam Session at the Tri-City Elks Lodge in Louisville next April 7. Call 303-443-6236

Organist Scott dies

Soulful organist Shirley Scott died March 10. She was one of the most respected artists in the highly competitive (and male-dominated) field of organists. Scott often recorded in the '60s with her husband at the time, the lushly toned tenor saxophonist Stanley Turrentine. One of their sessions together was just released on the vast and exquisite "Blue Note Stanley Turrentine Quintet/Sextet Studio Sessions" box on Mosaic Records, but the budget-minded will find a lot to enjoy in the recent "Talkin' Verve: Shirley Scott" collection.

Bret Saunders' column on jazz appears every other Sunday in Arts & Entertainment, alternating with Post critic-at-large Kyle MacMillan's column. E-mail Saunders at bretsaunders@prodigy.net .

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