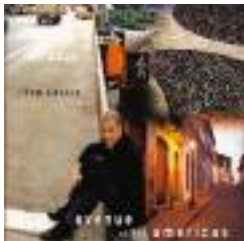


## Brazilian Music as an Antidote to Bush's Depression and 9/11

Written by Bruce Gilman

Saturday, 09 September 2006 16:06

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Even the most cursory listen to Tom Lellis will establish a few key identifying traits: a richly melodic voice, an agility and accuracy that enables him to scat with an extra degree of daring, his throwaway sense of time over a metric pulse, the company of top-drawer talent, and a way of experiencing a song and expressing to the listener what the words and melody mean to him, in the most direct and honest means possible.

An established and original stylist and bona fide musician (he is an excellent lyricist, pianist, and arranger), Lellis sings with the freedom of an instrumentalist, conjoining evocative sophistication with boyish delight in a beguiling style that sizzles with sensual as well as musical allure.

His latest release, *Avenue of the Americas*, bears out these sentiments and reveals an interpretive depth - be it pop, soul, jazz, or samba - that never falters.

Impeccable timing and imagination make his wordless improvisations exceptionally fine, and his dexterity with up-tempo numbers is matched by the beautiful poise of his ballad singing.

Incidentally, Lellis does not shy away from challenges. *Avenue of the Americas* includes works by Dorival Caymmi, Pat Metheny, Donald Brown, Keith Jarrett, and Toninho Horta, each a little minefield in its own way for which Lellis has provided lyrics and negotiates superbly.

Furthermore, Lellis works closely with his stellar backing groups making sure that their work is not merely a singer-plus-band date, but a properly collaborative effort.

Lellis's rendering of "For Better Days Ahead," his lyric version of Pat Metheny's infectious samba "Better Days Ahead" from the CD *Letter From Home*, leaves no doubt that he is a creatively spontaneous jazz singer of the highest order who also happens to

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be a keen observer of the human situation.

"Politically, it is intended as an antidote to the depression brought about by George Bush, 9/11, and the War," says Lellis. "Norwegian Wood," based on an arrangement by Sérgio Mendes, is a samba suite in 6/8 employing 16 Beatles' tunes.

"Eleanor Rigby" furnishes the prominent counter melody with others woven into a "fantasy" midsection by means of an engaging flute solo from Jeremy Steig and Lellis's overdubbed vocals.

"Baubles, Bangles and Beads," a romantic *bossa* based on themes by Alexander Borodin and adapted for *Kismet* by Wright and Forrest, was recorded by Jobim and Sinatra in 1967. When Steig takes the melody, Lellis, singing Cole Porter's "I Get A Kick Out Of You," demonstrates his knack for combining different songs as if they belonged together, after which Steig continues with a passionate and lyrical solo.

There is a fiery element of implicit dueling on the baião "Olinda Wind" as Lellis takes wordless vocal excursions over the solos by Horta - one of the gurus of Brazilian jazz guitar - and pianist Gary Fisher, who flirting with freedom, maintains a firm grasp on the sheer energy that threatens to get the best of him.

Concepts of perseverance and searching are addressed in "For Wisdom," a modal tour-de-force by Ferrante and Haslip with lyrics by Lellis that features Dave Kikoski, a first-choice pianist for virtually anybody's recording session, the propulsive Tommy Campbell on drums, and Lellis scatting effortlessly around the melody with the consummate ease of a riffing horn.

On the *bossa nova* "Pure Imagination/Waiting for Angela," there is a kind of serious fun at work with Lellis singing and playing acoustic guitar and percussion while kindred spirit Jeremy Steig, whose strength as a soloist lies in the rare combination of a faultless technique with a resourceful and often devious imagination, adds inspired and decorative twists.

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The richness of Richard Bona's full tone on fretless electric bass is never better demonstrated than on his journey through "River of Light," a philosophical ballad that spotlights Gary Fisher's tasteful and texture-conscious arrangement and piano solo.

In their unpretentious way, the lyrics here approach poetry, as does Lellis's delivery of them. Steig's flute commenting and soloing have tigerish fluency on Lellis's "A Choice of Fates," an antiwar song with a groove like Joe Zawinul's "Birdland";

Lush romanticism pervades "Isle Awhile," the lilting waltz by former Jazz Messenger pianist Donald Brown, which shows off not only the precision and lyricism of pianist Kenny Werner and the ensemble's musical empathy, but also the delicate and introspective side of Lellis's lyrics. Says Steig, "Tom Lellis deserves the notoriety lavished on Harry Connick Jr.,"

Lellis overdubbed the melodies of "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" (Ashford/Simpson) and "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" (U2), completely intertwining them lyrically and musically in an unfailingly melodic stroke of genius.

Closing the program is Keith Jarrett's "Lucky Southern" and Dorival Caymmi's "Maracangalha" brewed together samba style by Lellis who sings, whistles, and plays both guitar and percussion in an uncluttered setting that allows the lyrics to shine.

"I relate to the passion, rhythms, and romanticism in Brazilian music," says Lellis. "It's like jazz, an amalgam of influences that thrills me. But American jazz lost its romance with Trane, and '70's Miles. It became male-oriented and rough edged when I was forming as a jazz singer/musician. Brazilian music allows the romantic in me to express itself in a macho Latin way and still swing and syncopate to my heart's content."

It is hard to come up with a new or refreshing angle on music that is frequently performed as are six of the tracks that form this 11-track CD. Tom Lellis succeeds in doing so, at least in part due to the sensitivity of his accompanists, all of whom perform well, though it is invariably Lellis's voice that catches the ear, towering over the proceedings with a dazzling display of vocal expertise and good taste.

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And what a pleasure it is to hear a vocalist whose lyricism grows from his improvisational method, who sings with the instincts of an instrumentalist, and who has the capacity to add lyrics to previously instrumental works, which show intuitive musical understanding.

*Avenue of the Americas* is an excellent and sophisticated recording that draws on many contemporary strands of music-making, but with a jazz heart.

**Journalist, musician, and educator Bruce Gilman has served as music editor of *Brazzil* magazine, an international monthly publication based in Los Angeles, for close to a decade. During that time he has written scores of articles on the most influential Brazilian artists and genres, program notes for festivals in the United States and abroad, numerous CD liner notes, and an essay, "The Politics of Samba," that appeared in the *Georgetown Journal***

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**He is the recipient of three government grants that allowed him to research traditional music in China, India, and Brazil. His articles on Brazilian music have been translated and published in Dutch, German, Portuguese, Serbian, and Spanish. You can reach him through his e-mail: [cuica@interworld.net](mailto:cuica@interworld.net) .**