GETTING TO KNOW A COUNTRY IS NOT THAT DIFFERENT FROM courting a member of the opposite sex. First impressions often count far too much. And, like so many North American men, my interest in Brazil began with a woman. No package tours ever tempted more tourists to book their vacations in Brazil than that unattainable beach bunny who was “tall and tan and young and lovely”—a twangy rendition of the Portuguese epithet cheia de graça, “full of grace.” The difference is that I met her when I was just a boy. Which is all right, because she was only a girl.

Back in 1964, when I had reached that crucial threshold of thirteen, “The Girl From Ipanema” took the United States by storm—peddling the hot romance of cool samba to the tune of two million albums. My initial association with the bulk of South America was gawking at my customarily brainy parents, stripped down to beach towels on the deck of our vacation house, swaying along with this “new beat.” They had no more idea of the proper dance steps than they did why this bossa happened to be nova. Or that these lightly plucked sambas were middle-class versions of the clattering, shattering originals by Brazil’s poor blacks. North Americans caught up in the craze knew only that this sound con-

jured up a nation at once savage and knowing, whose seat of government had to be on the beach. Before my generation was wooed away by rock rebellion, Sergio Mendes and Lalo Schifrin, Stan Getz and Charlie Byrd whisked me off to a land I rarely heard about in junior high. Record-liner notes, not history books, first informed me and many others that there was such a place as Brazil.

Looking back, it is clear that far more was being reflected by this cross-equatorial invasion than a mere sharing of international bonhomie. In each American colossus, the early sixties provided a shining moment when it looked like democratic values might win out over barbarism. A generational change in political leadership led to a burst of sophistication in high places, symbolized by two dynamic presidents with the same initials: J.K. for John Kennedy, “Jota Ka,” as it’s pronounced in Portuguese, for Juscelino Kubitschek, still widely honored as the only honest civilian leader between two grueling stretches of dictatorship. There was idealism in the streets: the ferment of the civil rights movement in the United States, and the resurgence of industrial unions and peasant organizing in Brazil. There was a revitalized national purpose and confidence, symbolized by Kennedy’s pledge to land a man on the moon and by Kubitschek’s earthbound miracle, the long-dreamed-of construction of a futuristic new “capital of hope” in Brazil’s lunar interior. It was no accident that the man asked to compose an orchestral work for the inauguration of Brasília was Antonio Carlos Jobim, the composer of “The Girl From Ipanema.”

Soon enough, the dual Camelots would be snuffed out: in one case, through an assassination and the Vietnam War, in the other, through the 1964 CIA-sponsored military putsch that deposed left-leaning João Goulart and ushered in nearly two decades of the ditadura, military dictatorship. The period’s musical movement, aimed at self-consciously paring down and melding the best of both America’s traditions, continues to echo in our ears to this day. Brazil’s “Americanized” bossa nova would come to embody a greater truth—that no two nations on the planet could be more alike than the continent size, frontier-driven, slavery-haunted, im-
migrant catchalls known as the United States of America and Os Estados Unidos do Brasil.

The tunes that briefly united two hemispheres could only encourage my long-distance flirtation. Never mind that I was baffled that there could be a Brazilian with the Nordic name Astrud, the wife of singer João Gilberto, who won notoriety through her single English chorus of “Girl.” Astrud Gilberto’s voice certainly handed me my earliest definition of the adjective “sexy.” Turned to song titles, places like Corcovado and Ipanema became idealized teenage images of problemless playgrounds. The very word Rio took on an erogenous resonance. Poor Rio! The most common forms of deception on the planet are travel posters and girlie pictures—to which might be added album covers. And since the city’s image has been formed by all three, it cannot help but be thrice disappointing.

Am I let down because I’ve been led on for 25 years by a musical pinup, a bikini-clad tease I can never meet? Of course, I head straight for Ipanema Beach—at least the place really exists. After a few hours of sodden jet-lag sleep, I’m thrilled to get the perfect Brazilian greeting. Above an air-conditioner’s creaking last gasp, through the drapes which work fine against a full-bore tropical morn, my modest hotel room is invaded by music. In floods an onslaught of timpani, the binary clatter of bells, snares and shakers. A wake-up call for the universe! But when I open the window to chart the progress of this renegade marching band, I see nothing but a storefront directly across the street featuring Discos em Promoção. Recorded sambas for sale! A loudspeaker is giving the neighborhood a free sample: the authentic sounds I crave turn out to be canned. In the ethnographically quantified tourist zone where I’ve landed, the same rule applies to the authentic life of the city as it does to the newest generation of Ipanema girls in their skinny swimwear. Look but don’t touch.

In a ritual reenacted by many a gringo, I stagger out onto Rio’s hedonistic sands. As I’ve been warned, I carry nothing that can be stripped from me but my swim trunks and my solitude. A pale cartoon ghoul, I feel utterly out of sync with the zillion frisky

Cariocas in the midst of another weekend’s orgy of bodily display, beach volleyball, and beer. Along the promenade, numbered posts divide the sands into the varied subgroupings of Brazilian society. On one hot slice, the poets; on another, the high priests; at a third, the near-naked bureaucrats, the former political prisoners tanning at their customary waterfront turf. Brazil’s Times Square-by-the-sea comes at me in all its predictable elements: the local beauties in their razor-thin loincloth tangas righteously nicknamed “dental floss,” the equally undulating calçadas, black-and-white waves of sidewalk mosaic transplanted by the seafaring Portuguese; the incessant hawkers offering oversized towels and souvenir soccer shirts; the distant humps of coastal jungle sloping seaward, sole hints of an end to the mighty boomerang arc of bathers, this two-mile curve offering a whole city cooling consolation.

But what really makes this beach blanket Babylon different from all the others? As soon as my virgin feet begin to burn, I make for the shady oasis of a makeshift seaside tent, or pagode (from the Chinese pagoda, pronounced “pa-go-jee”)—the name given to a stripped-down style of samba that has reappeared in recent years as a response to the overpromoted and overelectrified Carnaval themes. A back-to-the-basics jam is already in session, grouped around enough empty bottles of Antarctica lager to make a bonfire in brown glass. The refreshment I’m offered is all musical.

In the cool center of the shade, a half-dozen boys are fiendishly extracting all they can from the percussive building blocks of Brazilian music: perky, insistent agogó double-bell; squeaky, optimistic cavaquinho, a Portuguese mandolin we’ve come to know as the ukulele; impudent caixa snare drum and pompous surdo bass; moaning orgasmic cuica, or African tension drum, as academics are wont to call this skin with a talking umbilical; attacking atabaques, tom-tom; versatile pandeiro, our tambourine, preferably tapped with an elbow, a hip, the tip of the nose; their tamborim, a miniature struck with machine-gun force; reco-reco scratcher and xique-xique shaker, sometimes just dry beans inside a soda can, always sounding just like their names. The overlays of staccato rhythm get everyone moving, a forced march deliciously stalled. A circle of
middle-aged mamas, shaking it in their G-strings, never runs out of traditional melodies to accompany the drumming din. Where few people carry beachside reading, every sun worshiper shows high literacy in the oral tradition, a photographic memory for the lyrical. From the start, I hear ample evidence of the average Brazilian’s encyclopedic capacity for song.

To begin my investigations into the music, I must find the creator of the lifelong infatuation that has led me here. In a nation where flowery four-part Portuguese surnames are always reduced to familiar diminutives, Antonio Carlos Jobim is known to all Brazilians by the boyish “Tom”—though the grand old man of bossa nova is now in his mid-60s. Five of the ten most-recorded Brazilian songs of all time bear his credit line—and how about most hummed?—including “One-Note Samba” and “A Felicidade.” But Jobim is more than a prolific tunesmith, a Latin Cole Porter. Nearly every aspiring Rio musician I meet, at whatever level of seriousness along the pop spectrum, credits him with being the most innovative and imitated. Moacyr Luz, a singer of *musica popular Brasileira* (MPB), the term used to group everything in the wake of bossa nova, echoes the popular sentiment: “Jobim is our great genius because he dared to be simple.”

Daring to phone him at home, I’m astonished to reach the composer after less than a dozen busy signals. “I’m sure you’ve noticed that our telephones are very whimsical,” Jobim greets me with the whimsy found in his finest lyrics. Amazingly, I haven’t had to fight my way past the jealous guard of some *empregada* (maid), a law unto themselves in a country where even the maids have maids. (One tells me her musician boss can’t come to the phone because he is resting in anticipation of Carnaval. Later, others will tell me their employers are resting in Carnaval’s aftermath.) Knowing that he splits his residence between Rio and New York,

The Guy from Ipanema

I’m not expecting Tom Jobim to have time for me. “My friend,” he declaims, “we’ll invent time!”

It must have taken a genius to have invented so luscious a tribute to a locale as grubby as Ipanema. Strolling this narrow neighborhood squeezed between an inland lagoon and one of Rio’s outer beaches, I find the air hazy, the condos heavily guarded, the avenues full of cut-rate juice joints and underpatronized malls. A block inland, we could be a million miles from the sea—except that Ipanema’s bag ladies also tote folding beach chairs. But when Antonio Carlos Jobim’s family transported him here, the trolley lines had just been extended from downtown. From the stretch of white sand praised by Isadora Duncan, branded by developers as the Praia Maravilhosa (Wondrous Beach), you could spy whales and great herons.

According to Jobim, real estate speculation ruined the whole town. Yet this nostalgic son of the neighborhood has said that real social justice will only come to Brazil once everyone can live in Ipanema. One afternoon, I follow the crowd to the very spot from which this locale became forever popularized. A block from the beach, a swarm of perfectly tanned types are striking tambourines and blasting trumpets in an attempt to squeeze every ounce of pleasure out of the waning day. The point of this promenade seems mainly to keep hopping about in Spandex fig leaves for as long as possible. T-shirts proclaim this group as Fúria—a pun formed by the root of furious spelling Rio. They have paused to serenade beer swillers on the packed covered porch of a cramped corner bar whose sign reads Garota de Ipanema. Garota means girl, of course, but a very special sort of girl. At a table here, Vinicius de Moraes, the populist poet who lent respectability to Brazilian pop music by becoming bossa nova’s prime lyricist, was moved to scribble down his tribute to one Heloisa Pinheiro, the lithesome, long-haired daughter of a Brazilian general. Riding her fame as the original “Girl from Ipanema,” Pinheiro has gone on to become a roving gossipmonger during the television broadcast of Carnaval balls. She also posed nude alongside her daughter in the Brazilian *Playboy*. If you can elbow your way inside, the original draft of
lyrics and music are enshrined in a frame over the bar—formerly called the Veloso. But I don’t find Tom Jobim there. He has boycotted the place ever since it cashed in on his song’s notoriety.

Waiting to catch up with him, I find nothing but an energetic facsimile of North American jazz fusion at People, Jazzmania, and the other fashionable boites. In similar elite enclaves, the bossa nova was born through the fusion of the ’50s North American import—the “cool” sound pioneered by Miles Davis and Chet Baker—with native Afro-Brazilian rhythms. But the greater influence these days is rock, which Brazilians pronounce just like the sport hockey. MTV-style videos are used to teach English to teenagers on a popular nationwide show. The tabloids are full of Brazilian rock stars like the maniacal Lobão (Big Wolf) and the irreverent Paralamas do Sucesso (the Fenders of Success). At most public Rio events, rock, not samba, blares from civic loudspeakers. The Eagles and U-2 drown out the chants of Umbanda priestesses during New Year’s celebrations on Copacabana Beach.

Fortunately, I’m tipped off that many veterans of bossa nova, Tom Jobim among them, are gathering for a rare reunion to benefit a terminally ill musician. Unfortunately, the show is being staged amid chandeliers and white linen at a ritzy nightclub usually reserved for mulata showgirls to shake their sculptural boom-booms at Argentine tour groups. The setting, and concert, point up how much the “new beat” has aged. At this benefit, both audience and performers have lost much hair and zeal. Johnny Alf, an ebullient black scat singer, reminds me of Johnny Mathis. Os Cariocas, once a breathtaking harmonizing quartet, sounds just like the Kingston Trio. I’m at a high school reunion of finger-snapping, jive-talking “hep cats.” The classiest class of ’59.

I’m hoping to find João Gilberto, more than the first interpreter of “The Girl From Ipanema,” the pure quavering soul of bossa nova. As hard to track as his singing-by-speaking Zen vocals and his teasingly off-tempo guitar style, Gilberto has become that oddest of anomalies: the antisocial Brazilian. One of the many apocryphal tales surrounding this legendary recluse describes how the singer Elba Ramalho purposely moved into Gilberto’s apartment building to befriend him. When shy João called her to borrow a pack of playing cards, he made her shove them under the door, one at a time. Gilberto has been the object of lawsuits for canceling shows at the last minute—and tonight he’s a no-show.

“The artist struggles all his life to become known and accepted,” is how Antonio Carlos Jobim will explain his former partner’s predicament. “Then when it happens, all he wants to do is crawl inside a cave.”

The groundbreaking songs that Gilberto and Jobim helped establish in the ’60s are today’s standards, the stylin’ of elevator music. At the time of my arrival, a gossipy new book about the formative moment of bossa nova tops Brazil’s best-seller list. Not only does interest in the music remain high but the passage of time has hardly alleviated the noisy controversy engendered by such softly flowing music. It’s hard to believe that academics and columnists once hurled every epithet at this gentle sound’s pioneers: reactionary, escapist, sanitized, above all, Americanized. But I have only to look briefly around the invaded Brazilian social landscape to see why such a howl went up among the self-appointed protectors of cultural purity when Jobim’s stream-of-consciousness classic “Waters of March” turned up as the basis for a Coca-Cola jingle. Now I know why envious critics still snipe at this leading ambassador of Brazil for acknowledging that one of his major inspirations has been George Gershwin.

That there should be such hypersensitivity to the question of “foreign influences” in Brazilian culture is, of course, a backhanded admission of susceptibility. Over and again, I will hear musicians boast of their ability to “metabolize” North American and European sounds into something distinctively their own. Brazilian music, like Brazilian art, poetry, or religion, grows through synthesis. Brazilian musicians are plagued by their tolerance, a fresh-careed approach to every incoming sound from hip-hop to the honking of cars.

I’m hoping to plumb Jobim’s secrets on a lazy afternoon in some tropical backyard gazebo. Instead, I get a frantic lunch in a setting at least as characteristically Carioca: an old-fashioned
boiler-plate churrascaria (barbecue house) called Plataforma. Doting old waiters replenish heaps of fresh-sliced steak and sausage, silver platters of onion rings and petit pois, the best French fries outside France along with obligatory beans and rice and farofa, the manioc flour that’s a gustatory sawdust Brazilians sprinkle over everything.

“I’m composing every morning these days. I’m working much better than I deserve. The way I’ve been living, all I deserve is to sit on the beach and watch the pretty girls go by.”

Jobim’s evident cheer, his nonstop quips, are fueled with beer, Brahma or any other brand, and frequent chasers of the firewater distilled from sugarcane that is to Brazil as vodka is to Russia.

“Have a cachaca with me, won’t you?” The word, like so many in Brazilian Portuguese, is of African origin—Mozambique’s kachasu. Though this son of Ipanema is not what’s known quaintly as a Carioca da gema—“of the yolk,” meaning born in the more authentic centro—he seems the very embodiment of the stereotypical Rio man: always testing out an angle, trying gambits in a world that’s both evil and delectable.

“Yes, I’m a Carioca. How can you tell? I’m a son of the Atlantic forest. I love all her animals. I listen to the birds. When I was growing up, Rio was still 90 percent forest. The water of the lagoon here was crystal clear and we had all kinds of conches and mullets. No air pollution, no real estate speculation. Brazil was so bucolic. We had only 30 million people then. Teddy Roosevelt used to hunt jaguar in the Mato Grosso.”

Compared to most of the world’s major metropolises, Rio really is a frisky little girl. The sources of Rio’s self-made myths are all quite recent: Copa’s setting for seaside strolls, the Avenida Atlântica, wasn’t laid until 1904; mass outbreaks of yellow fever came as late as 1906, the same year streetlights came to town; the first university didn’t open until 1920, the same year as the city’s mascot outspread Christ statue, erected from donations taken at Rio’s churches.

In his music, and in his persona, Jobim revels in being a throwback to an earlier civility. He is the model of naiveté and the proof that tropical man can attain erudition. He delights in living with one foot in the jungle and one eye on the roulette wheel.

“In today’s music, the chest vibrates with the electric bass. One is transported to paradise. In rock ‘n’ roll, there is strong reverence to the country of the downbeat. One-two, one-two, I know, I can count to a thousand! I don’t come out of the fox-trot, the lambada, the lambooda, or the lambooge! I come from the boogie-woogie, from the polyrhythmic and the unequal! I have this Jewish doctor in New York who said to me, ‘Mister Jobim, I have a wife who works like a clock.’ I never understood what he meant, but I like that! If something swings, everyone feels compelled to call it jazz. Jazz is the name for anything that swings, and because of the African element, there are three places in the world that swing: the States, Cuba, and Brazil. Rodgers and Hart, Duke Ellington, Jimmy Dorsey, Glenn Miller. I was exposed to all of them growing up, through the movies. And, of course, I love classical music, too.

“For the purists, even Pixinguinha”—the prolific king of the chórinho, Brazil’s lilting instrumental music derived from the Portuguese court—“is not pure enough. But the pure samba doesn’t exist anymore. With big stadiums and electronic instruments, it had to change. They even say that my nickname ‘Tom’ is American. But my darling sister named me that. It was from Antonio, because in Portuguese the ‘m’ is pronounced like an ‘n.’ She was trying to call me a ‘Ton-Ton.’ Like those murdering fellows in Haiti! Yet everyone thinks it’s American! Once, a gentleman in a bar accosted me, suggesting that my music was too American. As they say, ‘I sold my soul to the company store!’ I love Tennessee Ernie Ford! And country music, of course. My father came from the south of Brazil, from the land of the gauchos. So I told that gentleman, ‘Yes, I’m an American! A South American!’”

Jobim’s swagger rings as hollow as his defensiveness. He clings to the pose of the offended party in order to have some way to participate in the native dialogue, to break out of his isolation. For no matter how many drinking buddies you gather at your table, it really is lonely at the top—especially in Brazil, where the top is such a minuscule point of such a wide pyramid. Doing something
as well as Jobim has done leaves him imitated, exulted, excoriated—but never with the proper company.

“Even here they discriminate against me!” Jobim roars, entirely aware of the irony, since the waiters keep heaping his plate with steak and batatas fritas, keep refilling both his glasses. “But my music is so Brazilian! Can’t you feel it?” Jobim asks everybody and nobody at his long table. “If you listen to the music of Antonio Carlos Jobim, you will be saved! My music says, ‘Live and let live.’ Let the birds live, save the forest. I’m the original ecologist.” Years ago, his sarcastic advice to the Indians was to get a striped shirt and a job in São Paulo. “My music isn’t profane, it’s profound.”

Tom Jobim is one Brazilian whose garrulousness has gotten the best of him. He plays the court jester before crowds he knows perfectly well are not worth pleasing.

“Come on, my friend! Don’t you want another cachaca?” I leave the greatest living Brazilian composer with a drink in each hand. “Just keep this in mind when you do your research! People think they are very intelligent when they can name things. Villa-Lobos used to say, ‘I’m a neoprimitive concrete abstractionist.’ Because all the labels are meaningless. When he was dying, you know, he was the one who told the press, ‘I’m not composing, I’m decomposing!’ He also told me, when he was working on scores for movies, ‘The outside ear has nothing to do with the inside ear.’ In other words, the way you dress the music isn’t what makes it erudite or not. If you use orchestra, flute, or guitar. Villa-Lobos and Gershwin, what’s the difference what you call it so long as it swings? You can say the same thing about the woman you love.”

Is Jobim finally getting around to the Girl from Ipanema? Or is he referring to Rio, his lifelong passion? Or is he cautioning me before I plunge further into the music?

“You call the woman you love Maria, so you can go around thinking that you know Maria. But remember, my friend! That woman remains a mystery. Maria is only a name.”

—Moritz Thomsen, The Saddest Pleasure: A Journey on Two Rivers