

## Egberto Gismonti: Biography

Egberto Gismonti is world-renowned as a multi-instrumentalist and composer. He was profoundly influenced by Brazilian master Heitor Villa-Lobos, his works reflecting the musical diversity of Brazil. From the Amazon Indians' *batuque* to the Carioca samba and choro, through the Northeastern *frevo*, *baião*, and *farró*, Gismonti captures the true essence of the Brazilian soul in a way that is primitive, yet sophisticated, and reflects it through his personal vision, elaborated by years of classic training and literacy in a wealth of musical languages in which jazz plays a significant role.

From a musical family, in which his grandfather and his uncle Edgar were bandleaders, he started to take piano and theory classes at five. At that time, he also started to learn the flute and the clarinet, eventually taking the violão (acoustic guitar) in his teens. Following the piano classical tradition because of his father, he embraced the guitar to please his Italian mother, who was very fond of *serenatas*. Trying to transpose the piano's polyphonic quality for the guitar, he spent several years developing three custom-made instruments (ten-, 12-, and 14-stringed) and developed his own two-hand technique. At eight, he started to study piano with Brazilian masters Jacques Klein and Aurélio Silveira, with whom he would remain for 15 years. He subsequently moved to Nova Friburgo, a small town near Rio, for one year and four months and attended the Nova Friburgo Music Conservatory. At age 20, he refused a classical music scholarship in Vienna to delve deeper into popular music. In October 1968, Os Três Morais performed his composition "O Sonho," arranged for a 100-piece orchestra, at the third International Song Festival (FIC), which was aired by TV Globo in Rio.

This song, with its uncanny orchestration, provoked enthusiasm around and was recorded 18 different times by several international artists. Soon after, he left Brazil for France, where he became the conductor and orchestrator for the French singer Marie Laforêt in an association that lasted for nearly two years. It was instrumental for him to meet and become a pupil of the great masters Jean Barraqué (1928-1973), a disciple of Anton Webern, and Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979), a former consultant to Igor Stravinsky. The importance of these two icons was to not only underscore the unique richness of his country's background, but also to urge him to pursue a singular expression rooted in the *cabocla* and *mestiça* traditions.

His first LP, *Egberto Gismonti* (Elenco) was released in 1969 and featured his vocals on original compositions and those of bossa nova composer Paulo Sérgio Vale. That same year, he performed at the San Remo Festival in Italy. In 1970, he toured through Europe, recording two singles in France, one LP in Italy, one in Brazil (*Sonho 70*), and one LP in Germany (*Orfeu Novo*). His song "Mercador de Serpentes" was presented at the fifth FIC. Returning to Brazil in 1971, he settled in Teresópolis, another small town close to Rio. That year he played in several venues in Brazil, and his music was incorporated into the soundtracks of the movies *A Penúltima Donzela* (Fernando Amaral, 1969), *Confissões de Frei Abóbora* (Brás Chediak, 1971), and *Em Família* (Paulo Porto, 1971).

In 1972, he recorded *Água e Vinho*, in partnership with poet Geraldo Carneiro, and in 1973, *Egberto Gismonti* and *Academia de Danças* (EMI/Odeon), the latter of which was the turning point when he began to stress his instrumental work. After recording, the producer said it made no sense at all. He received a note from EMI/Odeon saying that, due to Brazil's economic difficulties, that would be the last album of Gismonti's career: it was an album outside of any category, with 25-minute tracks, expensively produced with synths and orchestra. This album was awarded with the Golden Record in Brazil.

From 1972 to 1991, Gismonti recorded 19 albums for EMI/Odeon. In 1974, he accepted an invitation to play at a festival in Berlin, Germany, and asked Hermeto Pascoal and Naná Vasconcelos to join him. He then met ECM's CEO, Manfred Eicher. Returning to Brazil, he received a letter from ECM inviting him to record with them. Not knowing what would be the importance of that label, he postponed the response until the end of 1976. Then he accepted the invitation, imagining he'd record with the all-star Brazilian group he was performing with by then: drummer/percussionist Robertinho Silva, bassist Luis Alves, and saxophonist/flutist Nivaldo Ornelas, but the Brazilian military government had imposed a high fee for all leaving Brazilians at about 7,000 dollars, so he decided to record solo. Fearing that challenge, he was wandering through Norway when he encountered a friend, a Brazilian actor, who invited him to his home, where he met Brazilian percussionist Naná Vasconcelos. With the three-day time constraint, he decided to involve Vasconcelos and, when asked to describe the album's concept, he explained that both performers had a common history: two boys wandering through a dense, humid forest, full of insects and animals,

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keeping a 180-foot distance from each other. He knew Vasconcelos would accept without hesitation. His LP *Dança das Cabeças* with Vasconcelos received several contradictory international awards reflecting Brazilian cultural richness: in England, it was awarded as a pop record; in the U.S., as folk music; in Germany, as classical music. Either way, it changed both artists' lives: Vasconcelos immediately became an international artist, touring worldwide; Gismonti returned to Brazil and decided to research Amazon folklore. In the heart of the Amazon forest, Alto Xingu, he tried to make contact with the Yawaiapiti tribe, playing his flute for two weeks until head chief Sapaim invited him to his home. They shared no common language other than music, and Gismonti spent about a month living and learning with them, upon the condition of spreading the forest people's values. Two years later, with saxophonist Jan Garbarek, percussionist Colin Walcott, and guitarist Ralph Towner, he recorded *Sol do Meio-Dia*. His LP *Solo*, released that next year, sold 100,000 copies in the U.S. In 1981, with Garbarek and bassist Charlie Haden, he recorded the LP *Magico*. The same year, the trio toured Europe, including a concert at the Berlin Jazz Festival, and recorded a second *Magico* album, entitled *Folksongs*. In 1981, Gismonti toured again with Haden and Garbarek, performing throughout Europe. Also in that year, he recorded the double album *Sanfona* with his all-star group Academia de Danças (drummer Nenê, saxophonist/flutist Mauro Senise, and bassist Zeca Assunção). With Vasconcelos, he recorded *Duas Vozes* in 1985. In 1989, he recorded *Dança dos Escravos* and in 1990, following the release of *Dança das Cabeças*, Gismonti toured the United States with his group, which included cellist Jaquinho Morelembaum, flutist/saxophonist Nivaldo Ornellas, and keyboardist Edu Mello E Souza.

Also in 1990, he recorded *Infância*, accompanied by Nando Carneiro (guitar/keyboards), Zeca Assunção (bass), and cellist Jaquinho Morelembaum. With the same group, he recorded *Música de Sobrevivência* in 1993, an album inspired by the writings of the Brazilian poet Manoel de Barros, who reflects in his work the Brazilian duality of the cultivated Portuguese tradition and the massive illiteracy disseminated in that country, which, notwithstanding, deeply influences the official language. In 1995, he recorded *Meeting Point* with the State Symphonic Orchestra of Lithuania. In 1996, Gismonti recorded *Zig Zag* with Nando Carneiro and Zeca Assunção. He also owns the successful label Carmo, which has several joint ventures with ECM. He recently performed an almost impossible task: He bought the rights for all of his scores through EMI/Odeon for worldwide publishing, with the exception of Brazil. However, music continues to be his main focus. In 2009, Gismonti released the two-disc *Saudacoes*, which featured one disc of his seven-part composition, "Sertões Veredas — Tributo à Miscigenação," and a second disc of guitar duets with his son Alexandre Gismonti.