

**Guitarist of the People, Guitarist of the Elite:  
Towards a Biography of Dilermando Reis**

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## **Guitarist of the people, guitarist of the elite;**

### **Towards a Biography of Dilermando Reis**

This article summarizes the research I began with my master's thesis *Dilermando Reis and the Valorization of the Brazilian Guitar* (University of California State, Hayward, 2002) and continued in 2003 in Brazil under a Fulbright grant. Although little known outside Brazil, Dilermando Reis (1916-1977) defined what is called the “traditional” style of Brazilian guitar. His life is a portrait of the changes Brazil underwent during the twentieth century, reflected in attitudes towards him, and towards the guitar.

### **“...probably the most famous Brazilian popular guitarist...”**

My exposure to the music of Dilermando Reis began with the collection of *valsas* and *choros* published by Guitar Solo Publications and edited by a Brazilian, Ivan Paschoito<sup>1</sup>. The collection interested me for a number of reasons; for Reis' unique voice as a composer, for Paschoito's painstaking work in communicating the subtleties of interpretation that made the music come alive in Dilermando's hands, and for the brief biographical profile of the composer.

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<sup>1</sup> Ivan Paschoito, ed. *The Great Guitarists of Brazil: Dilermando Reis*, 2 vols., San Francisco: Guitar Solo Publications, 1990 and 1994.

The notes that precede the music were seemingly the only paragraph published about Dilermando in English<sup>2</sup>. Articles published about the Brazilian guitar up to that time either failed to mention Dilermando or simply included his name with little comment. Brazilian literature about popular music during his life either leaves him out, or mentions him in passing as a name the reader is expected to recognize, a man who needs no introduction.<sup>3</sup> A few of his compositions are frequently re-recorded by Brazilian guitarists, but his original recordings are mostly unavailable; the LPs are occasionally found in Brazilian second hand shops, and although a few have been reissued as CDs in Brazil, even there these are not easy to find.<sup>4</sup>

Paschoito's introduction counts among Dilermando's recordings 23 LPs including over 100 original compositions, and refers to him as "...probably the most famous Brazilian popular guitarist..." I found this to be a provocative statement; how could a man, seemingly little known, be the most famous guitarist from a country full of guitarists, many internationally recognized? Was this just a case of a "scholar/ fan" playing fast and loose with superlatives? The answers to these questions turn out to be complex and revealing, requiring an understanding of the context of Dilermando's life; his country and his times.

Dilermando presented a unique package, amalgamating elements of popular, folkloric and classical traditions. His technique mixed first hand experience with an older generation of players who represented pre-industrial Brazil with a study of the available

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<sup>2</sup> The online magazine "Just Jazz Guitar" published a series of articles about the Brazilian guitar in 1999, and an article in this series did include a brief discussion of his style.

<sup>3</sup> A brief biography (in Portuguese) and a fairly complete discography may be found in the *Encyclopedia Cravo Albin*, available online through the Brazilian Biblioteca Nacional site, [www.bn.br](http://www.bn.br).

<sup>4</sup> CD releases include: Dilermando Toca Pixinguinha, O Violão Brasileiro de Dilermando Reis, Abismo de Rosas,

classical schools of guitar; his distinctive and highly expressive sound resulted from the application of his understanding of the classical (Tarrega school) right hand to the steel strings of the popular guitar, a sound further polished by the magic mirror of radio and recordings; his personality juxtaposed the simplicity of a “*caipira*” (country boy) with the sophistication of a man who represented systematic study and associated with the most powerful men in his country. He is remembered with a double layer of *saudade* (longing or nostalgia), first in that his playing, even when he was a young man, was tied to a romanticized image of the past, second in that the high point of his career coincided with a period of optimism, progress, and national pride.

The trajectory of his career took him from Guaratinguetá, a city whose traditional society had its roots in the plantation economy which had dominated Brazil’s past, to Rio de Janeiro, where music and politics intersected in the medium of radio, and then to Brasilia, the visionary creation of politicians, social planners and architects, which represented a future Brazil is still grappling with.

### **Guaratinguetá**

Dilermando dos Santos Reis was born in 1916 in Guaratinguetá, São Paulo. Guaratinguetá was founded around 1650 as a supply point between the gold mines of Minas Gerais and the port city of Paratí. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it became a center for the production of coffee, the crop that powered the national economy, and a stop on the rail line that linked São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. The presence of a teachers’ college and a number of other schools gave it the name “the Athens of the Valley Paraíba”. Its

illustrious sons include a number of writers and musicians, the first Brazilian to be recognized by the Vatican as a saint (Frei Galvão), and a president of the Republic. Rodrigues Alves' presidency (1902-1906) brought progress to his native city; public works, piped water, sanitary sewers, and the first electricity in the north of São Paulo.

Dilermando came from a large family; his parents had eighteen children, ten of whom survived to adulthood. Although large families and high infant mortality are stereotypical features of Brazilian life at that time, this was an extraordinary number<sup>5</sup>. Both sides of his family went back at least five generations in Guaratinguetá, and birth certificates, certificates of marriage, wills and inventories provide a chain of clues that allow the history of the city to be read from the point of view of one family. On his mother's side all of the men were officers in the *Guarda Nacional*, small and large plantation owners whose fortunes rose and declined with the coffee economy. On his father's side, three generations of single mothers, an unknown grandfather, and great and great-great grandfathers who were both priests<sup>6</sup>.

Dilermando's father, Francisco or "Chico" Reis, was a fascinating figure. Dilermando referred to him always as a minor functionary in the municipality, an often repeated image in the Brazil of Dilermando's youth, one of modest education and routine duty. The older people in Guaratinguetá say he was a *coveiro*, a grave digger, and documents show that he was the overseer in the municipal cemetery in Pedrogulho. Pedrogulho was a new and still sparsely populated neighborhood across the river from

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<sup>5</sup> less than 1% of families in Guara at that time were so large. Teresinha Paiva de Faria et al., *Decadência do Café numa comunidade Vale Paraibiana*, Guaratinguetá: Estado de São Paulo, 1973, p273.

<sup>6</sup> Parts of both sides of the family appear as collateral families in the genealogy of Frei Galvão, Carlos Eugênio Marcondes de Moura, *Os Galvão de França*, 3rd ed., São Paulo; EDUSP, 1993. I am indebted to two genealogists in Guaratinguetá, Dr. Helvessio Castro Coelho of the Museu Frei Galvão, and Joaquim Fagundes of the Museu Conselheiro Rodrigues Alves.

the old city center, and there the majority of burials were indigents. The cemetery became so identified with him that in the old days, when someone died, people would say that he “went to the *chácara* (small farm) of Chico Reis”. One legend has young Dilermando spending the night in that cemetery, leaving his guitar at the cross, a rite performed traditionally on Good Friday, when “God is dead and the devil is loose<sup>7</sup>.” At day break, according to the story, he began playing “divinely.”

In intimate contact with suffering and grief, and inspired by the writings of French spiritualist Alan Kardec, Chico began to have mediumistic experiences and founded a spiritualist center in the family home. Beyond lectures and healings, the center arranged medical care and distributed food and clothing and to the needy. This good work did not go unnoticed, and the house was frequently stoned by intolerant neighbors. The practice of the religion was specifically prohibited by law during the first decades of the twentieth century, like many elements of popular culture, slowly gaining respectability and acceptance. Dilermando, like many of his colleagues, considered himself an “*espírita*”, a designation which included a gamut of activities, from the “white table” of the Kardecists to afro-brazilian Candomblé or Umbanda.

Dilermando recounted that Chico was responsible for the entry of the guitar into his life<sup>8</sup>. He and his father were sitting in the house one Sunday afternoon when a man passed in the street singing and strumming a guitar, which Chico offered to buy. A price was agreed upon and Dilermando asked his father why he had bought the guitar. Chico said that he played a bit and his son asked for a demonstration. Chico sat and strummed, and began to sing, and soon Benedicta, Dilermando’s mother, joined him, singing the

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<sup>7</sup> Folklore courtesy two klocal historians, Antonio Figueredo and Tom Maia.

<sup>8</sup> Rio de Janeiro Museum of Images and Sound interview, 1972.

*modinhas* of Catullo de Paixão Cearense. Dilermando was dazzled by this and when his father asked him if he wanted to learn to play, the boy jumped at the opportunity. Chico told him that it would be an honor, that his dream had always been to be a great guitarist, but that he had always been heavy handed.

In a few weeks, according to Dilermando, he had learned all his father had to teach. Chico sought better teachers for his son, and stimulated him by playing recordings and encouraging him to learn the solos by ear. Among these early solos were those of Americo Jacomino (1889-1928), also known as Canhoto (Lefty). An autodidact who played left handed, but without inverting the strings, he was one of the earliest guitarists to record in Brazil, and one of the most difficult to imitate. Canhoto had a penetrating tone, fluid, expressive phrasing, and an intense vibrato which, so the story goes, unleashed the heart attack which killed him<sup>9</sup>. These three characteristics became even more pronounced in Dilermando's playing, and Canhoto's *valsa* "Abismo de Rosas" later reached a large audience through Dilermando and became so identified with him that it was frequently attributed to him<sup>10</sup>.

Guaratinguetá had wind bands and orchestras that played in the theaters and cinemas, and some of the musicians from these groups figured among the boy's early influences, notably Benedito Cipoli (1901-1957) and Bomfiglio de Oliveira (1894-1940). Cipoli was a man of many talents, remembered as a flautist and composer. He gave instruction to Dilermando and his brother Erasto, who was also learning to play guitar. Bomfiglio, trumpet player, composer and conductor, had an international career but

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<sup>9</sup> Ronoel Simões, "Américo Jacomino, <<Canhoto>>" in *Américo Jacomino; Abismo de Rosas e grandes obras*, São Paulo: Fermata do Brasil.

<sup>10</sup> Many of his obituaries called him the author of "Abismo" and João Pernambuco's "Sons de Carilhões."

returned to Guaratinguetá for the city's yearly festivals. The city's wind bands are recalled in the *dobrados* that Dilermando played, often with effects of snare drums and bugle calls.

Lauro dos Santos was another figure in the boy's life. Dilermando called him the best guitar teacher in Guara. One old resident remembered him as a "happy mulato..who didn't do anything. He drank, played, stayed out all night... He was not well looked upon<sup>11</sup>." He lead the guitarists in the carnival *bloco* that Dilermando performed with, and exposed him to at least a little classical music: a review of a fund raising concert in the local Cine Central before Carnaval of 1933 includes on the program Dilermando playing "Lagrimas" (either Tarrega's miniature or Sagreras' tremolo study) and Lauro playing "Miserere" from Verdi's "Il Trovatore."<sup>12</sup>

Cabarets and bordellos featured ensembles including many of Dilermando's friends. Music making was also the center of many family circles. The city had several cinemas, showing the latest North American films, and in those days orchestras still accompanied silent films. As a teenager he began staying out all night, participating in serenades, *serestas* or *serenatas*.

### **The serenade and the guitar as "forbidden" instrument**

The serenade is now much romanticized, part of a culture of nostalgia, but in the early twentieth century it was apparently not looked upon kindly, being seen as a ritual of seduction and a vehicle for the corruption of morals. On the one hand Chico was proud to

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<sup>11</sup> Rinaldo Luiz Pannunzio, interview with author, 2003.

<sup>12</sup> "Festival do Tesouras", *Correio Popular*, fev. 19, 1933, Guaratinguetá São Paulo.

be the father of the boy known as the best guitarist in Guaratinguetá, on the other hand he and Dilermando's mother were preoccupied with the future, and saw that Dilermando already belonged to the local "bohemia" inhabited by artists and musicians (referred to collectively as "vagabonds"), women of doubtful reputation, and high society men looking for a good time away from the constraints of home and family. Dilermando's school work began to suffer and he dropped out of school at 15, leaving the program that would have led to a teacher's credential.

At that time, again following Dilermando's statements and the literature about the period, the guitar was used, in Brazil, as an instrument almost exclusively for accompaniment. Although a few players had recorded solos, the "Tarrega school" had little dissemination in Brazil, much less in the interior of the country. Almost everyone played by ear, and although music printing began in Brazil in 1808, little was published there for the guitar until the 1930s. The guitar was spoken of as the instrument of the lower classes, marginals, vagabonds, *malandros*. As Dilermando put it, "In those days, the guitar was not well liked. In the manner that people would say, 'He even drinks and plays guitar'. Which is to say, 'In addition to drinking he even plays the guitar'." <sup>13</sup>

This type of discourse about the guitar as a forbidden instrument is a set piece in Brazilian popular music history. The actual situation was nuanced. During the time in which Dilermando said the guitar was "not well liked", the young ladies of good society in Guaratinguetá (and elsewhere) were including it in their soirées and recitals, mixing songs accompanied by guitars with piano solos and poetry. Dilermando and his teacher Lauro, taking part in the concert with their carnival *bloco*, were the only ones playing classical pieces.

Many writers have referred to the guitar, during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Brazil, as a prohibited instrument, mentioning stories of guitarists arrested for no other reason than the marks on their fingers. We are invited to imagine the spectacle of police officers breaking up an ensemble and sending the flautist or the *cavaquinho* player on his way, apprehending only the guitarist. It would be more accurate to speak of a broad repression of popular culture, often symbolized by the guitar. The police took a lively interest in the manifestations of African religious rites and the “alternative medicine” of the Spiritualists; the festivities in the open air of those who had no ball rooms; the drinking and gambling of those who did not have private clubs for these activities; and the serenaders who roamed the moonlit streets. This was beginning to change in the 1920s and 30s, as part of profound changes in Brazilian society often summarized as the rise of an urban middle class. Intellectuals and bureaucrats within the government began to valorize local culture. With the introduction of recording and radio, popular music became a valuable commodity, and as politicians began to appeal more to the masses the media, and popular culture, became important to them. These changes were slow and complex, and although playing guitar in a soirée was something respectable young ladies did in the 1930s, singing in a cabaret or on the radio was not.

### **Rio de Janeiro**

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<sup>13</sup> Museum of Images and Sound interview

In late August of 1933<sup>14</sup>, the guitarist Levino Albano Conceição (1895-1955) came to Guaratinguetá. Mulato and blind from the age of seven, Levino traveled throughout the country with the support of the Benjamin Constant Institute for the blind, giving concerts and raising money to create local schools for the blind<sup>15</sup>. An otherworldly figure, called by one poet (Catullo de Paixão Cearense) “the illuminated blind man”, he received the support and veneration of “good society” wherever he went<sup>16</sup>. Levino played a typical light classical repertoire of the early twentieth century, not unlike Augustin Barrios, with whom he was acquainted. In Rio de Janeiro he had studied with Quincas Larenjeiras, a man often pointed to as one of the earliest Brazilian teachers of the “school of Tarrega.”

Levino’s programs were divided between composers like Tarrega, Verdi and Schumann, and his own compositions and arrangements of popular music. These included descriptive pieces full of sound effects to simulate battles, and his gift for narration enthralled his audiences.

Levino gave a concert in Guaratinguetá and Dilermando was smitten. This was the kind of guitar he wanted to play. After a concert the local guitarists played for the visitor and he picked Dilermando out of the line up. Levino liked what he heard and invited the boy to travel with him. With his parent’s permission Dilermando left with

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<sup>14</sup> “Recital de Violão”, *Correio Popular*, sept. 3, 1933, Guaratinguetá, São Paulo. Thanks to Guaratinguetá’s Antonio Figueiredo Jr. for sharing the newspaper item that established the correct date for Dilermando’s departure from Guará.

<sup>15</sup> Sources about Levino include Graça Alan, *Violão Carioca*, masters thesis, Univ. Federal do Rio de Janeiro, and Genesio Nogueira’s *Dilermando Reis, Sua Majestade o Violão*, Rio de Janeiro: private edition, 2000. Genesio has the family archives of Levino but seems to have desisted from the idea of writing a biography. Guitarist Leandro Carvalho has recorded a CD dedicated to Levino’s works in arrangements for guitar and chamber ensembles titled *Cromo*. [www.leandrocarvalho.com.br](http://www.leandrocarvalho.com.br)

<sup>16</sup> Catullo’s pieces inspired by Levino can be found in: Catullo de Paixão Cearense, *Modinhas*, ed. Guimarães Martins, S.P.; Editora Fermata do Brasil, 1972, 57 and 58.

Levino and the two traveled together. After a brief period of study Levino began to present Dilermando as his student, and the two divided the program. Eventually they arrived in Rio de Janeiro, then the capital of the country.

Again following Dilermando's narrative, their first task in Rio was to find Levino's old friend, João Teixeira Guimarães, aka João Pernambuco (1883-1947). Without an exact address, the two asked after him, finding his address in a bar. They found him living in a rooming house in Lapa, the region of Rio most linked to the bohemianism of the epoch, a zone of bars, night clubs and dance halls, of bordellos and cheap living quarters. João put Dilermando and Levino up for the night, and when Levino went on his way Dilermando turned to João for support. João's "Sons de Carrilhões" is another piece that, although first recorded by the composer, would only reach a mass audience in Dilermando's recording, and would be attributed to him frequently.

Dilermando's first work in Rio was as a guitar teacher. For some time he lived hand to mouth. The guitar, he said, was not very popular among the so called "fine people", and so his students did not at first come from the most reliable sectors of society. He also occasionally played on radio programs. Radio had been a mostly amateur medium in Brazil until 1932, when the government first authorized paid advertising on it, opening the way for the growth of a class of professional entertainers<sup>17</sup>. The first programs that Dilermando played on were sporadic, with the musicians being selected from among the line up in the corridor. These programs featured amateurs who sang or played with the accompaniment of the studio ensemble, without the benefit of rehearsal, work which required a quick ear and a repertoire of the most requested tunes. Among the

artists he met at this time were Jacob do Bandolim (Jacob Pick Bittencourt, 1918-1969) and singer Elizeth Cardoso.

### **Radio and Politics**

In 1936 Dilermando was spotted by Renato Murce, a pioneer in the professionalization of Brazilian radio entertainment, and was offered a contract on Rádio Transmissora. There he joined the ensemble of the most noted *choro* composer, Pixinguinha, (Alfredo da Rocha Viana 1898-1973.) He accompanied the great singers of the period, names like Carmen Miranda, Francisco Alves, and Silvio Caldas. This intimacy with singers likely helped form the lyrical quality of Dilermando's compositions, and the vocal phrasing of his interpretation.

He also participated in programs like “*Alma do Sertão*” (Soul of the Backlands), a comedy variety show which featured characters who lampooned the manners of newly arrived immigrants to the big city, and music which recalled the rural roots of so many of the listeners. He would be a guest on “*Alma do Sertão*” for more than twenty years<sup>18</sup>.

Producers knew of his facility as a soloist and would call on him to fill dead air time, when, for example, a singer was late or, like the samba composer Noel Rosa, arrived too inebriated to sing. In a later interview, Dilermando was asked if he played by

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<sup>17</sup> For the most thorough analysis of this generation of artists as they were affected by the new cultural industry see Wander Nunes Frota, *Auxílio Luxoso; samba símbolo nacional, geração Noel Rosa e indústria cultural*” São Paulo: Annablume, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> The Radio Nacional Archives had a recording of him on the show in 1957. No recordings of his other shows have surfaced. The history of Radio Nacional's lost discs is touched on in: Luiz Carlos Saroldi and Sonia Virginia Moreira, *Radio Nacional: O Brasil em Sintonia*. Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 1984.

ear or by music. “I play by necessity,” he quipped<sup>19</sup>. His repertoire was slight and he found himself obliged to compose. From these experiences followed programs dedicated to guitar solos. This was a novelty at the time. Although a few pioneers had experimented with this format, Dilermando’s programs became a fixture on Brazilian radio.

In 1938 Dilermando left Transmissora and appeared briefly on Radio Nacional, and then joined the cast of Radio Club. There he met Dino Sete Cordas (Horondino José da Silva, 1918- ) and Meira (Jaime Florence, 1909-1982), the most enduring guitar “duplo” of choro. Both would accompany him on his recordings. His first 78, the valsa “Noite de Lua” backed with the choro “Magoado”, was recorded with Meira and released in 1941. It became his most successful single, selling over a million copies by the 1970’s.<sup>20</sup>

Radio Club shut down in 1953 and reopened as Radio Mundial in 1954. Finally Dilermando was contracted by Radio Nacional, the most important transmitter in the southern hemisphere, from 1956 to 1969. This list of radio stations is by itself unexpressive. But a closer examination of this chronology of Dilermando’s activity in the Rio radio scene reveals another facet of the media, the effect of politics in the professional lives of musicians during the period.

Radio Transmissora, for example, became the tool of the Integralists, a group that modeled themselves on contemporary European Fascists, and Renato Murce tells that he

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<sup>19</sup> Ronoel Simões, Interview in *A Gazeta*, “O Violão,” Jan. 9, 1957.

<sup>20</sup> According to Dilermando. Warner Brasil has so far declined to furnish sales data, and sales figures are generally not available for the period.

left the station for this reason<sup>21</sup>. In 1938 this group failed in an attempt to seize power from then dictator Getulio Vargas, and weeks later we find Dilermando and the other members of Renato Murce's cast on Radio Nacional. At the end of a six month contract Dilermando and other cast members followed Murce to Radio Club, where he remained 14 years.

Vargas was deposed at the end of WWII, but was returned to office by popular vote in 1950. He encouraged journalist Samuel Wainer to start a newspaper and buy a radio station to support him, and Wainer bought Radio Club. Wainer was persecuted by the most vocal of Vargas' enemies, journalist Carlos Lacerda, and lost the license for Radio Club in 1953, leaving the artists and technicians unemployed. Dilermando took advantage of the hiatus to travel to New York, apparently with the support of the government. There he became friends with Vicente Gomez and played recitals at the Brazilian consulate, even winning a contract with NBC television<sup>22</sup>. He was unable to fulfill this contract because of the requirements of the American musicians' union. He was traveling on a tourist visa and could not accept paid work.

Dilermando returned to Rio, and when Radio Club re-opened as Radio Mundial, he went back to work. President Vargas, increasingly isolated politically and once again deposed, committed suicide in August of 1954. Newspapers and radio stations that had attacked Vargas were the targets of angry mobs. In the confusion that followed, several stations, including Mundial, had their crystals stolen by armed and masked men, interrupting transmissions.

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<sup>21</sup> Renato Murce, *Bastidores do Rádio*, Rio de Janeiro: Imago, 1976, p 52. Murce explains that he left Transmissora as a response to the activity of the Integralists, but his dates are incorrect.

<sup>22</sup> According to his interviews. Any information about this stay in New York, from December 1953 until February of 1954 would be most welcome.

1955 was an election year, and Juscelino Kubitschek de Oliveira, the governor of Minas Gerais, emerged as a strong candidate. Dilermando was recruited by the campaign, possibly soon enough to play a serenade for Vargas on his last official trip, less than two weeks before his suicide<sup>23</sup>. In Minas Gerais, Kubitschek used the most popular musicians of Rádio Inconfidência to help with his campaign, and in Rio he also sought out musicians like Dilermando and his colleague, pianist Bené Nunes (1920-1997). Kubitschek won the election, and in June of 1956 Dilermando moved to Radio Nacional, the station owned by the federal government, where he was awarded a highly favorable contract. There he earned twice the salary of instrumentalists like Jacob do Bandolim and was only required to perform twice weekly, while others signed in six times a week<sup>24</sup>.

### **Presidente Bossa Nova**

Kubitschek had campaigned for the presidency as a modernizer, and his most audacious project was the construction, in less than four years, of a new capital for the country, Brasilia. Although a popular song referred to him as “Presidente Bossa Nova”<sup>25</sup>, and this music is generally treated as the soundtrack for the period, remembered as golden years of democracy, progress and optimism, the music that Kubitschek chose to associate with himself had folkloric roots, including the serenade. Kubitschek had, like Vargas before him, but more intensely, campaigned in the interior of the country, and the movement of the country’s capital from the coastal city of Rio de Janeiro to the interior

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<sup>23</sup> Claudio Bojunges, *JK: O Artista do Impossível*, Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 2001, p. 248.

<sup>24</sup> Information gathered from professional dossiers in the archives of Radio Nacional.

was intended to connect the distant corners of the country and accelerate Brazil's industrialization' while at the same time turning its gaze inwards.

Bossa Nova was associated with Rio de Janeiro, and more specifically the affluent "*Zona Sul*" (South Zone) of the city, and was a cosmopolitan style, borrowing much of its harmony and attitude from North American cool jazz. Dilermando, on the other hand, was always identified as a man of the interior, and pieces based on folk genres make up a sizeable, and neglected, part of his repertoire. His audience, stereotypically, was not only older, but made up of recent immigrants and inhabitants of the suburbs, the *zona norte*<sup>26</sup>. One of the most common criticisms of Dilermando's style is that his sense of harmony is simple to the point of banality. Although he often expressed his admiration for the advanced harmonies of composers like Garoto (Anibal Augusto Sardinha, 1915-1955), and occasionally employed Bossa Nova "clichés," he used them as passing references and not as an underlying language.

In 1956, Kubitschek's first year as president, Dilermando's began to release LPs. Two of these discs, "Volto ao Mundo" (1958) and "Melodias da Alvorado" (1960), contain in their packaging explicit references to the Kubitschek years. "Volto ao Mundo" (Around the World) with its selection of miniatures from exotic locations and its cover art showing Dilermando entering a passenger jet, guitar in hand, invites the listener on an imaginary journey, a journey few Brazilians could afford, but which would remind them of their president, who joked that his official residence was in the skies of Brazil. "Melodias da Alvorado" (Melodies of the Dawn), recorded with the Orchestra of

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<sup>25</sup>Comic singer/songwriter Juca Chaves (not to be confused with engineer Juca Chaves) included a line about "*tomando com Dilermando umas aulinhas de violão*", (taking a few lessons with Dilermando) something journalists always asked about and Dilermando denied.

Radamés Gnattali (1906-1988), is an explicit homage to Brasilia, the *Palácio da Alvorado* being the new presidential residence. The cover of the disc is a photograph of the palace, architect Oscar Niemeyer's trademark arches an emblem of modernity, and the final track is Dilermando's "Exaltação a Brasilia", the "first" samba celebrating the new capital.

### **Presidente Piexe Vivo**

Kubitschek handed the presidential sash over to his elected successor in January of 1961, but in 1964 Brazil suffered a military coup which would suspend democratic processes for the next twenty years. Kubitschek lost his political rights and his mandate as senator and went into exile. He had been the strongest candidate for the presidential elections scheduled for 1965, and a logical rallying point for the democratic opposition to the military regime. Kubitschek returned to Brazil in 1967. Although he himself was prohibited from talking about politics, in Lisbon he had signed on to the "*Frente Ampla*". The creation of his former enemy Carlos Lacerda, the *Frente* was an attempt to unite supporters of Kubitschek, Lacerda, and João Goulart, the president deposed in the coup. Lacerda, as a journalist and later governor of Guanabara, was one of the architects of the coup, but he too had lost his political rights in the aftermath.

Kubitschek was not at liberty to make public statements, but he participated in an interesting manifestation in August of 1967. With an entourage including Dilermando he returned to his home town, the tiny city of Diamantina in the mountains of Minas Gerais. Anticipating his visit, thousands of supporters gathered in the streets for a serenade that

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<sup>26</sup> For an explanation of the suburban radio audience and its socio-cultural milieu see Bryann McAnn, *Hello, Hello Brazil*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2004.

received national press coverage. The serenade, usually thought of as a ritual of courtship or seduction, here reveals a second face, as a ritual of social integration in which the “popular” classes pay homage to an “elite”.<sup>27</sup> Kubitschek was carried through the streets on the shoulders of the crowd and together with them sang the songs of his youth.

Kubitschek’s popular appeal, his “body to body” style of campaigning, found an echo in the words of the folk song “*Peixe Vivo*” (Live Fish) in which the singer compares himself to a fish that cannot live outside the “water” of his beloved’s company.

This kind of activity was closely monitored by the security apparatus, and in the last days of 1968 a “coup within the coup” hardened the line of the generals that governed and further chilled the political atmosphere. After this, the serenades moved indoors. A few weeks later Dilermando lost his radio program, and his colleagues from Radio Nacional say that this was likely not a coincidence. On the other hand, all the stars of radio were losing their audiences, and live radio was dying out as television took its place as the medium of consecration for popular artists.

Fortunately for Dilermando, he had other employment. Kubitschek had arranged for him to be nominated “Delegado Fiscal”, a tax agent, for the state of Guanabara. This was a secure position which insured him a certain standard of living and independence. This need for outside employment is a recurring theme among Brazilian musicians; of those here mentioned, Jacomino was also a tax assessor, Jacob was a justice department clerk, Pixinguinha received a “sinecure” as a health inspector, Quincas Larenjeiras was a public functionary, and João Pernambuco worked as a black smith and was later hired by Villa Lobos as a janitor.

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<sup>27</sup> For this analysis I thank Dr Samuel Araujo of the University Federal do Rio de Janeiro escola de musica.

The last eight years of Dilermando's life seem to have been divided between his work as a delegado, recordings, and a deepening friendship with ex-president Kubitschek. His recordings from this period include Radamés Gnattali's ambitious Concertino #1 for guitar and orchestra, and three discs with Dino Sete Cordas.

Dilermando and Kubitschek were linked even in their deaths. Kubitschek died in August of 1976, in an automobile accident which has been the subject of speculation and debate. Many cannot, given the political climate in Brazil and Latin America in general at that time, accept the idea that a man like Kubitschek could have died a common death. The many assassinations of the time and the circumstances of the crash invite conspiracy theories. There is also a family legend that Dilermando was with the ex-president on that fateful day, and that Kubitschek offered him a ride, an offer he declined. In any case Dilermando was deeply shocked by the loss of his friend and suffered a heart attack a few days later. He improved enough to return to work, but was never the same, and died a few months later, on January second, 1977.

### **Steel strings and the "School of Tarrega"**

All the early Latin American guitarists here mentioned played on steel strings, Garoto playing both steel and nylon. Dilermando himself was slow to accept nylon, recording a few records in the late sixties and early seventies on the new strings, but then returning to steel. This is a subject worthy of a more thorough investigation. The problems with the old gut strings have been mentioned: they were expensive, unreliable, and difficult to find. There are stories of Segovia's friends hoarding the strings for their

master, and of all three trebles breaking simultaneously under hot lights. Tropical humidity was perhaps detrimental to the organic strings. The steel strings are louder, and their bright tone, rich in upper partials, cuts through an ensemble. They are capable of more extreme vibrato. On the other hand gut was easier on the fingers and provided a warmer and more subtle tone palette. Although the Spanish guitar tradition was one of gut strings, the new world players divided into two groups. The wealthier, more cosmopolitan players, more or less closely linked to students of Tarrega, played solely gut, and the more “popular” players played steel. It seems that quite a bit of the prejudice against Augustín Barrios stemmed from his use of steel strings. It became a question not just of esthetics, but also of class, steel strings for the “street”, gut for the concert hall.

Brazil is a culture apart from the rest of Latin America because of its Portuguese heritage. As the history of the guitar is written there, it required foreigners, Barrios and the Spanish Josefina Robledo, to awaken the Brazilian concert public to the possibilities of the guitar as a solo instrument. Americo Jacomino is also credited with having made strides in this direction; newspapers before his concerts refer to the guitar as a vulgar instrument, without value, and afterwards lament that it was merely misunderstood, poorly served by players that rarely rose to the level of artists<sup>28</sup>. Dilermando’s formative experiences, like that of most of his countrymen, were with steel strings: the serenader’s guitar, and with the recordings of Jacomino. Unlike most of his contemporaries, however, he continued playing on steel until the end of his life. The first nylon strings he saw were locally produced and he was not satisfied, especially with the third strings. Hearing Segovia play in person encouraged him to try the imported strings, and it is

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<sup>28</sup> Paulo Castagna and Gilson Antunes “1916: O Violão Brasileiro Já É Uma Arte”, *Cultura Vozes*, São Paulo, vol. 88, n. 1, jan-feb. 1994. Available at <http://victorian.fortunecity.com/brutalist/112/musica03.htm>

interesting that although he liked them enough to record several LPs, he returned to steel.<sup>29</sup>

Dilermando credited Levino with introducing him to what he understood to be the “School of Tarrega”. This meant to him a repertoire and a set of technical ideas. Tarrega’s transcription of Chopin’s Nocturne, op.9 no. 2, was a staple of his “classical” repertoire, and the little mazurka “Adelita” was the prefix of his radio programs. The technical ideas included an artistry with left hand fingering (the “horizontal” approach which figures in Barrios’ work), a right hand which was not anchored to the top of the guitar, and the rest stroke. In interviews Dilermando demonstrated the difference between the weak sound of a plucked string and the rich sonority of a “pushed” string, the latter imparting the maximum energy to the guitar’s top without causing the strings to rattle against the fingerboard. As he explained it “...the artist has to draw the sound from the wood. This is where the artistic value of the guitarist comes from, that he knows how to draw the sound from the guitar.”<sup>30</sup>

The beauty of his sound gave Dilermando a hold over his audience, the combination of the volume and clarity of steel with the warm full bodied tone of Tarrega’s right hand. This required unusual strength. Dilermando was a short, stout man with powerful hands that seemed small but were capable of normal extension. Dilermando also tuned his guitar as much as a half step sharp, lending an edgy brilliance to his tone. Photographs of his hands reveal that he had nails that protruded over the edges of the finger flesh and that his thumb nail was exceptionally long<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with former student, “Sandra.”

<sup>30</sup> MIS interview

<sup>31</sup> João Martins, “Mãos que valem vinte milhões”, in *O Cruzeiro*, Rio de Janeiro, Jan. 31, 1959.

Although other artists on the radio had programs dedicated to solo guitar music, Dilermando's was the longest lasting. His repertoire was more accessible than that of Garoto, and this made it easier for generations of amateur guitarists to identify with him. This in turn created a market for lessons, and the "classical" style experienced a wave of popularity. Dilermando became a spokesman for the guitar as an instrument to be studied, to be learned not just by ear, but through printed music. When Dilermando first came to Rio de Janeiro, he had to search for Argentine editions of guitar music. He recounted that when he first published a *chôro* in 1936 it took eight years to sell one thousand copies. By 1952 he was able to sell six thousand pieces in three months<sup>32</sup>. Not only was Dilermando's popularity growing, but guitarists were learning to read, or amateurs with the resources to study formally had begun to pick up the guitar in numbers.

In interviews Dilermando stressed the importance of learning from written music and the kind of formal study of which he himself had little. Although musically literate and capable of reading solfeggio, he preferred to have friends write his music out for him for publication. These editions do little to capture the subtleties of his interpretation, and are unreliable as to details. It was only with the Guitar Solo editions that a set of reliable transcriptions became available.

### **Transcriptions and polemics; rubato and the brazilian "swing"**

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<sup>32</sup> "Dilermando: 'Violão não é instrumento ingrato.'" *Violão e Mestres*, São Paulo, v. 1 no. 4, p.16.

Ivan Paschoito's transcriptions, published by GSP, carefully preserve the details of Dilermando's performance, especially his characteristic phrasing. Some university educated Brazilian players take issue with this, saying that these are "inspirations", "swing", personal eccentricities that do not belong in a transcription, although many of these caprices survive in recordings separated by decades<sup>33</sup>. This is a fascinating and delicate question; how much of a player/composer's interpretation should be included in a transcription? Are we writing the transcription for those already acquainted with the style, or for "strangers"? Dilermando was a "popular" guitarist, more concerned with recordings than with manuscripts. Should a transcription exclude the ornaments that make his performances interesting?

One of the most noteworthy aspects of Dilermando's interpretation was his use of rubato. This takes two forms, a "robbing" of time in which the overall meter is distorted, and a "borrowing" in which the time is rushed in one part of a two part texture without affecting the over all tempo. This is a characteristically Brazilian practice, a technique which has enchanted generations of listeners. The French composer Darius Milhaud wrote about this type of practice as employed by the pianist and composer Ernesto Nazareth (1863-1943):

I was fascinated by the rhythms of this popular music. There was an imperceptible pause in the syncopation, a careless catch in the breath, a slight hiatus that I found very difficult to grasp. So I bought a lot of maxixes and tangos and tried to play them with their syncopated rhythms, which run from one hand to the other. At last my efforts were rewarded and I could play and analyze this typically Brazilian subtlety. One of the best players of this type of music, Ernesto Nazareth, used to play the piano at the door of a cinema in the Avenida

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<sup>33</sup> His radio interviews from the 1970s, provided by Ronoel Simões, included partial and full performances of many pieces.

Rio Branco. His elusive, mournful, liquid way of playing also gave me insight into the Brazilian soul.<sup>34</sup>

Dilermando recorded an entire album of Nazareth's work, reinforcing the association of the two men's performance practices. By the 1970s, when Dilermando recorded his tribute to Nazareth and another album dedicated to Pixinguinha, (both with Dino Sete Cordas) he was positioning himself as a conservative, self consciously preserving what he thought most characteristic in Brazilian popular music.

As an example of this type of rubato I have chosen an extract from Dilermando's *valsa* Terno Olhar (Tender Look). First we have a "straight" version. This kind of transcription requires the editor to use his imagination, to decide what the player "should" have played or "meant" to play, what the underlying idea was, and is thus a "prescriptive" approach<sup>35</sup>. The passage is the cadence of the first section of a *valsa* in ABA form

ex. 1 Terno Olhar, bars 27-32. Transcribed from the continental LP "O Violão Brasileiro"

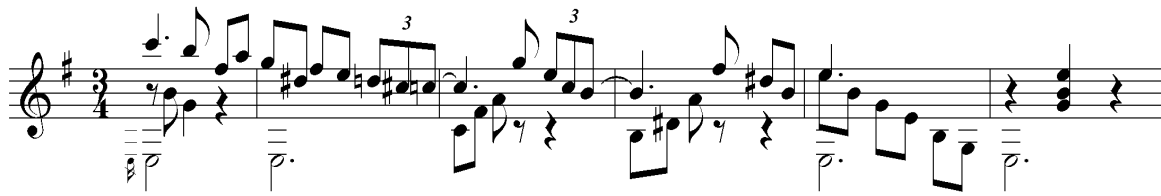


For comparison, here is a more "descriptive" transcription of the same passage, following Paschoito's method<sup>36</sup>:

ex. 2

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<sup>34</sup> Darius Milhaud, *Notes Without Music: An Autobiography*, trans. Donald Evans (NY: Da Capo, 1970), p.75.



This is the most typical rhythmic device Dilermando used, a hallmark of his interpretation. Two eighth notes leading up to a down beat have been transformed into a triplet, the stressed “destination” note occurring now before the bar line. It sometimes comes closer to two sixteenths and an eighth note tied across the bar line. It is simply a slight momentary rushing of the melodic voice without altering the underlying pulse. It is an easy figure to appropriate and use or misuse in similar contexts. Played as written above it sounds like the recordings, but it would perhaps be more correct to represent it using a grace note, as it is best thought of as an ornament:

ex. 3



Dilermando used this device much more often than a perusal of Paschoito’s transcriptions would lead one to believe. It creates interest among repeated rhythmic figures, implying the freedom of a vocalist’s phrasing against the steady pulse of an

<sup>35</sup> The importance of the distinction between prescriptive and descriptive approaches is hinted at in Luciano Pires Masters Thesis, *Dilermando Reis: O Violinista Brasileiro e suas obras*, UFRJ, 1995.

<sup>36</sup> All the *valsas* in the second volume of the GSP collection contain this figure.

accompanist, and creates waves of tension and relaxation. As a technical device, by separating the melody from the bass it makes it easier to play the melody with rest strokes. This combination of the aesthetic and the utilitarian resembles the baroque lutenists' delight in arpeggiating multi-voice passages, facilitating a clear audition and creating a playful, evasive atmosphere. It is also something distinctly "Brazilian" in Dilermando's hands, a mannerism associated with a style, a period, a set of attitudes, a kind of self expression far from the motor rhythms of contemporary pop music.

### **Fame, style and changing attitudes**

One guitarist, often referred to as one of Dilermando's students, and who enjoyed an international career, summed up the changing attitudes towards Dilermando's music. Attending Dilermando's group classes as a boy, Dilermando had seemed "a god." As a young man in his twenties he was attracted to the new sounds of bossa nova, the complex harmonies he heard on discs by Carlos Lyra and João Gilberto. At this time in his life, Dilermando seemed "square" (*quadrado*), "obsolete" (*ultrapassado*), his harmonies "banal", his interpretations "repetitive." And now at a remove of 40 years, Dilermando represents for him an essential part of the repertoire and style of the Brazilian guitar, a part he can only look upon with the greatest tenderness. These are all words I have heard over and over in Brazil, in print and in interviews with the men who lived through these changes.

Just as the full voiced singers of the golden years of radio gave way to a younger crowd with a more intimate delivery, Dilermando, with his vibrant and expressive style,

was replaced by players with new aesthetics. On the one hand, players appeared in the classical field with technique and repertoire that showed an evolution that Dilermando could only admire at a distance. On the other hand, the popular guitarists were adopting the improvisation and sophisticated harmonies of jazz, or the electric guitar of rock music. Although players in both camps had often had their first experience of a well played guitar listening to Dilermando, few sought him out, and he became a forgotten man. He lamented, in the last years of his life, that in his neighborhood only the baker, the man at the newspaper stand, and the post man knew who he was, and the latter only because he saw the name on his mail<sup>37</sup>.

Players never stopped recording his music, but the vast majority of recordings treat a handful of pieces to exhaustion. It is evidently out of a felt need for a reappraisal of Dilermando's work that Rapahel Rabello titled his CD dedicated to Reis' work "*Relendo Dilermando*", "Rereading Dilermando". Marco Pereira, one of the best players on the contemporary scene, is recording a disc of his own arrangements of Dilermando.

Guaratinguetá hosts, each September, a national guitar festival in Dilermando's memory featuring a week of concerts by Brazil's best popular and classical guitarists, and attracting aspiring young artists with its competition<sup>38</sup>. Previous years have featured Paulinho Nogueira, Paulo Martelli, Fabio Zanon, Mario Ulloa, and Paulo Bellinati. 2003 was the eighth year of the festival, and artists on the program included Paulo Pedrosoli, Nicloas de Souza Barros, Guinga, Paulo Porto Alegre, Marcus Tardelli, and Francisco

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with Luiz Maria de Jesus, aka "Luizão," a Rio amateur that studied informally with Reis during the last years of his life.

<sup>38</sup> More information can be found at [www.cultura-guaratingueta.blogger.com.br](http://www.cultura-guaratingueta.blogger.com.br), e-mail (in Portuguese) to [cultura@iconet.com.br](mailto:cultura@iconet.com.br)

Petrônio, the “velvet voiced” tenor that recorded seven LPs of serenades with Dilermando in the 1960s and 70s.

### **Terno Olhar**

I have included, with the permission of Dilermando’s family, a transcription of *Terno Olhar* (Tender Look). One of his most haunting and dramatic minor mode *valsas*, it is the first track on the last LP he recorded, *Violão Brasileiro*, now available on CD.<sup>39</sup> Like most of his compositions the music has not been published. I am editing a volume of these pieces that will be available in early 2005.

The original tempo was around 120 for the quarter note, which is to say 40 for the bar. Dilermando played with a great deal of elasticity within the bar, and also held certain notes, distorting the bars. The first notes of bars 1 and 2 Dilermando held and played with strong vibrato. Don’t lose the pulse, don’t get lost in detail, keep the bars mostly steady, arresting the forward motion only in these “landmark” notes. Think of these rubatos as “strategic” and not “tactical”, as molding the motion within a section and marking the return, and not simply belaboring a pretty note.

Although the harmonic language is simple, there are a few progressions which are special and typical of Dilermando’s style. One is the use of  $V_6/V$  as a passing chord, the bass leading down to iv (bars 11-13). Another hallmark is the plagal cadence to iv in the B section, d minor to a minor (bars 40-41.) The first ending of the B section shows

Dilermando's creativity with cadences; the  $V_4^6/V$  resolves to V through an ambiguous intermediary harmony. The second ending of this section is also typical, diminished triads on i and vii preceding the tonic. Play the melody throughout, when possible, with rest strokes, and make the wood sing.