

---

## Book Review: *Bossa Mundo: Brazilian Music in Transnational Media Industries*

---

K. E. Goldschmitt. *Bossa Mundo: Brazilian Music in Transnational Media Industries*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 245 pages.

K. E. Goldschmitt's *Bossa Mundo: Brazilian Music in Transnational Media Industries* is a fascinating account of how Brazilian popular music has been received and made sense of among English-speaking audiences in the United States and United Kingdom since the bossa nova fad of the early 1960s. The focus is not on "what the music in question may have *represented*, but what it *did* and how" (4, emphasis in original). This stress on what this music did, or what people did with it, marks a refreshing departure from much scholarly work on transnational popular music, Brazilian and otherwise, which often seems to assume that there is a narrowly (if not singularly) correct understanding of whatever genre or practice happens to be under discussion. Samba is about racial democracy; tango is about passion; jazz is about freedom; and so on. These tropes are gross generalizations, of course, and also clearly ideological. But their narrative power is potent nevertheless, even for those working against their interpretive grain, such that any real departure from them is often construed as a misunderstanding on the part of scholars or others who just don't get it. One of the primary takeaways from this book—which is not at all invested in what Brazilian music "really" means—is that such misunderstandings do not represent points of breakdown or failure but moments of productivity and generation. They are, in other words, creative misunderstandings, and the thing they create is value.

This orientation will feel familiar to many readers, though Goldschmitt's emphasis on the diffuse (but also economically instrumentalized) attention of distracted publics navigating a media-saturated world rather than the polysemic and polyvalent properties of music as a communicative mode marks a productive new path through these issues. In that sense the book is not really about listening to Brazilian music as a discrete activity but about watching films and television, consuming advertising, reading magazines, enjoying sports, shopping at Whole Foods, learning to dance, playing videogames, surfing the internet, and otherwise living life via commercial popular culture. At the same time, the musical materials people encounter even in these diffuse, distracted contexts are not entirely open-ended, and often deliberately adhere to those vague but powerful tropes—stereotypes, really—that the sound idea "Brazil" has taken on for English-speaking publics due to the processes described throughout the book. These include

notions of racial difference, sexual sensuousness, and some hazy image of sandy beach tropicalism that English speakers have managed to hear in everything from the bossa nova crooning of Astrud Gilberto to the booming bass of funk carioca as championed by North American superstar DJ/producer Diplo.

Goldschmitt discusses this transnationally disseminated musical sense of “Brazil” in terms of brands and branding, in that “music from Brazil became the sound of the country’s international image, or national brand” (4). More than the images, terms, designs, or slogans used to differentiate one product from another, Goldschmitt’s idea of a musical/national brand suggests something wider: at once coherently meaningful yet largely open-ended, constantly changing yet curiously stable, and as ephemeral as sound waves but as material as a vinyl LP. The concept is productive in many ways, especially in how it frames the object in a much broader way than, say, the idea of genre or the notion of musical culture. That being said, the idea of brands and branding did not really gain traction for me as a reader until the later chapters, where Goldschmitt discusses the active cultivation and deliberate management of the brand “Brazil” in a more conventional sense, including logos, slogans, cross-sector marketing campaigns, and other efforts on the part of governmental managers, marketing consultants, media industry operatives, private corporations, and musical artists, among many others (all of which has become a typical part of cultural policymaking in Latin America and elsewhere since the turn of the millennium). Previous to these efforts, and as discussed in great detail in the first two thirds of the book, “the sound of the country’s international image” was more about navigating a flexible but compelling amalgamation of images, ideas, fantasies, and desires on the part of both Brazilian musical producers and English-speaking cultural consumers than deliberately cultivating a national brand as such. But whatever one ultimately takes from Goldschmitt’s use of brands and branding as an interpretive framework, the notion clearly challenges us to think critically about the scope and range of popular music. What, for example, would our scholarly debates sound like if we replaced the word “genre,” “culture,” or even “music” with the word “brand”? This book provides one compelling answer to that question, and convincingly shows that if we don’t at least include brands and branding in our conceptual lexicon we are clearly missing a huge amount of what popular music is and what it does.

The book is organized into six chapters plus an introduction and short epilogue. It begins with a discussion of bossa nova as a music and dance fad in the early 1960s. It then moves chronologically with chapters on how bossa nova became “adult contemporary” music in the later 1960s, and Brazilian musicians’ work in the U.S. jazz fusion and funk scenes of the 1970s. Subsequent chapters describe Brazilian music’s discursive reframing as “world music” in the 1980s with an extended appearance by David Byrne and a fascinating discussion of the lambada dance craze, the turn-of-the-millennium circulation of Brazilian artists in what I would call hipster circuits of media consumption and global lounge remix culture, as well as contemporary efforts to navigate the endemic precarity and corruption-driven economic crisis that has unfortunately characterized neoliberal Brazil for the past decade. These include mutually beneficial collaborations between musical artists/media industries and what were previously thought of as largely non-musical companies, such as the Brazilian cosmetics firm Natura. It would have been

interesting to include chapters on earlier historical moments as well, such as Good Neighbor policy figures like Carmen Miranda, who clearly set the stage for much of what followed in terms of creative misunderstandings regarding Brazil and Brazilian music in the U.S., though that would be an additional book. The chapters that are included here map a strikingly diverse set of case studies, though the chronological structure keeps the overall narrative clear from chapter to chapter and again represents a welcome departure from the more typical genre-centric way of telling these stories.

For all the theoretical emphasis on distraction and inattention, Goldschmitt is highly attuned to the details of musical sound and audiovisual media, drawing on richly detailed descriptions of sound recordings and, especially, films throughout the book. Goldschmitt is also very attuned to the lives and experiences of Brazilian musicians and others operating in the transnational media industries, whose artistic work and professional careers were and are both blessed and burdened by the national brand of Brazil. For example, Chapter Three examines the creative misunderstanding of Brazilian racial politics and identifications that enabled white Brazilian percussionist Airtó Moreira to sidestep the internal politics of Black Power within Miles Davis's fusion groups of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Goldschmitt mobilizes a wide array of additional evidence throughout the book, from music journalism to ethnographic interviews to firsthand accounts of working within the transnational media industries as a curator of Brazil-themed playlists for the music streaming service Beats Music. Beats Music would go on to become the foundation of the Apple Music streaming service following the tech giant's acquisition of Beats for some three billion—with a “b”—dollars in 2014. Thus for all the endemic precarity faced by musical artists, academics, and other workers today, in the U.S. as in Brazil, there is still clearly a lot of money to be made in the transnational media industries.

There were moments where I felt the author made too much of too little, as in Chapter Two's discussion of bossa nova's transformation into an easy-listening index of an emerging “jet set” lifestyle in the late 1960s, which relies primarily on close readings of two bossa nova-filled film soundtracks. I also would have loved to know how seemingly other instances of North American fascination with Brazilian music might fit Goldschmitt's narrative, such as Kurt Cobain's famous infatuation with the iconic *tropicália* band Os Mutantes and the initially underground circulation of that group's material from the 1960s among decidedly non-world music audiences in the 1990s. How might an example like that fit within the national brand of Brazilian music? Does it represent an alternative, potentially undermining the (racist, sexist, exoticizing) tropes associated with the brand? Or is it just more of the same, showing how the brand can grow to encompass new styles, histories, markets, and publics without really changing much at all? These questions should not be heard as criticisms of the book, which I consider required reading for anyone interested in these topics. The fact that Goldschmitt's provocative work brings such questions to mind ultimately speaks to the explanatory power of the national brand paradigm, not its limitations.

*Morgan James Luker*  
*Reed College*  
*Email: mluker@reed.edu*