

Caetano Veloso

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Contributor

In the history books, it was on March 31st, 1964 that a military coup ousted Brazilian President João Goulart. The U.S.-backed junta overtook all branches of government, ending nearly a century of newfound democracy for the one-time adjunct of the Portuguese empire and subjecting the country to two decades of increasingly repressive military rule. In Caetano Veloso's 2003 memoir *Tropical Truth: A Story of Music & Revolution in Brazil*, he is adamant that the date is a lie: The coup actually took place on April Fool's Day. Four years into the new regime, then-twentysomething Brazilian pop singer Veloso recorded his first solo album.

But the first voice you hear on his 1968 self-titled release isn't that of Veloso, but of Portuguese knight Pêro Vaz de Caminha, credited with discovering Brazil in the year 1500. He wrote a letter to Manuel I, King of Portugal raving about the fertile Brazilian land and how "all that is planted grows and flourishes," convincing the king that the presumed island was worthy of colonization. Carta de Pero Vaz Caminha is considered the first literary text to emanate from Brazil but it gets parodied in a high nasally voice by Veloso's drummer Dirceu. Little did the percussionist know that the tapes were running. And when the arranger of the session mimics the "exotic" sounds of the Brazilian rainforest, it points back to that time when Brazil was virgin land, before the empire arrived at her shores.

Caetano Veloso's debut album remains one of the most revolutionary albums released into the worldwide tumult of the 1960s. The opening salvo of *Tropicália*, it announced the arrival of the greatest Brazilian talent since João Gilberto and launched a fifty-year career that's not only changed Brazilian music but American music as well, from Talking Heads to Beck to No Wave legend Arto Lindsay and Animal Collective.

To non-Portuguese speakers, Caetano Veloso might not sound anywhere near as transformative as the other albums of that year: *Electric Ladyland*, *The White Album*, *White Light/White Heat*, *Anthem of the Sun*, *A Saucerful of Secrets*, to name just a few. Couched in lush orchestral strings suggestive of the generation prior instead of the psychedelic production effects of the moment, it's a sound thoughtfully strummed on an acoustic guitar. It has few of the tricks and technology of the aforementioned, but at its heart, it's a revolt, a message delivered at a purr rather than a howl, elegantly gliding past military censors.

At the time, the album struck a balance between the polemics of communism on the Left and the crushing military might on the Right, sloughing off the nationalism and patriotism on either side while embracing a love of country in the shadow of the American Empire. And at the center of it all was Veloso and his supple, silken voice, a Bing Crosby croon delivered with a glint in his eye and Che Guevara's *The Motorcycle Diaries* surreptitiously tucked into his back pocket.

The seeds of Tropicália's revolution were planted the year prior when Veloso submitted "Alegria, Alegria" ("Joy, Joy") to the TV Record Festival. Featuring a burst of fuzz guitar and electric organ it became Veloso's first anthem, his self-described "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction." It's also his Breathless, his "Chicken Noodle Soup," at once a critique and embrace of 20th-century pop culture. Veloso drinks Coca-Cola, quotes Sartre, name-drops Brigitte Bardot and Claudia Cardinale, all while slyly quoting fellow Brazilian pop star Chico Buarque's "A Banda" and shrugging his shoulders at the end with the line: "Why not?" It set the themes for the movement to come in Tropicália: courting mass media, distancing themselves from the Left and silently protesting the powers that be. As Veloso later told the New York Times: "It was against the dictatorship without saying anything about it."

The success of "Alegria, Alegria" emboldened Veloso as he worked on a new album. During lunch at a friend's house one day, he sang some of the new songs, including one that still didn't have a title. Brazilian film producer and screenwriter Luiz Carlos Barreto suggested the name of a recent piece from visual artist Hélio Oiticica, an installation that required the viewer to follow a path through sand, lined with tropical plants, until they ended at a television set. "Until I could find a better title the song would be called 'Tropicália,'" Veloso wrote. "I never did find a better one."

"Tropicália" opens with Dirceu's recitation about Brazil as a "tropical paradise," shouted amid a clatter of jungle drums, tympani, shakers, agogô bells, and the piercingly high frequency of flutes imitating bird song, before the orchestra strikes up and Veloso ambles in like a giant surveying all of Brazil:

**Over my head the airplanes

**Under my feet the trucks and trains

**And pointing out the highland plains is my nose

**I organize the movement, too

*I lead the carnival.

As expansive, outsized, and hallucinatory as Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," as insouciant and word-drunk as Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues," "Tropicália" is allegory and absorption of all the contradictions of Brazil: its baião rhythms against suave orchestral surges, its colonial opening against the overstuffed modernist lines of Veloso. In the chorus, Veloso praises the sophisticated and urbane song form of bossa nova yet rhymes it with "mud huts." Throughout the dense lines, Veloso swings from jungle to city, from swimming pools to sea, referring to fellow Música Popular Brasileira (MPB) singers like Elis Regina, Roberto Carlos, and—at the last refrain—to Buarque's "A Banda" again. Though this time, Veloso adds a twist, rhyming it with the lady in the Tutti Frutti hat, Carmen Miranda.

By that point in the '60s, Miranda was perceived as kitsch, the Brazil of old, even though early in her singing career, the “Brazilian Bombshell” was her country’s first full-fledged pop star and one of the highest paid entertainers in Hollywood. But Veloso was sincere in his embrace of Miranda, and in teasing out the last syllable of her name, he also nods to Dadaism, melding colorful camp and the avant-garde in just a handful of syllables.

“One characteristic of Tropicália... was precisely the broadening and diversification of the market, achieved through a dismantling of the order of things, with a disregard for distinctions of class or level of education.” So Veloso wrote in *Tropical Truth*, adding that one goal of their movement was “to sort out the tension between Brazil the Parallel Universe and Brazil the country peripheral to the American Empire.” It was a fine line to straddle, embracing both their own heritage and American pop culture. It meant admiring the colorful cartoonishness of the Kool-Aid Man but neither buying nor drinking the Kool-Aid, all while not falling for the consumerism being offered up religiously since the junta took power.

The American poet Elizabeth Bishop traveled to Brazil in the early '50s. A two-week voyage turned into an 18-year stay in the country, where her aristocratic spouse, Lota de Macedo Soares, fed her access to the upper echelons of Rio society. Bishop found herself with a bird’s-eye view of the coup d’etat that would soon grip the country. She marveled at its efficiency and the support it appeared to engender, writing that these displays of anti-communism were becoming “victory marches [with] more than one million people marching in the rain.” From her perspective, it was simple: “...all in about 48 hours, it was all over...The suspension of rights, dismissing lots of Congress, etc... had to be done—sinister as it may sound.” But for the Brazilians who weren’t in positions of power and prominence, those in the favelas or those in the working classes who would not stand to profit handsomely, something far more sinister loomed.

In the United States, a group of economists began to impose a debilitating economic plan around the world through means of torture and suppression. Naomi Klein’s book *The Shock Doctrine* traces this nefarious economic shock therapy from Iraq in the 2000s back to Indonesia in 1965. But its earliest iterations took place in South America. In 1962, Brazil had elected João Goulart, who Klein writes was “committed to land redistribution, higher salaries and a daring plan to force foreign multinationals to reinvest a percentage of their profits back into the Brazilian economy rather than spiriting them out of the country and distributing them to shareholders in New York and London.” It was a dynamic attempt to close the gap between the rich and poor in the country.

But less than two years later, the U.S.-backed junta ousted the president and—with an economic policy scripted in the White House—instilled a plan “not merely to reverse João Goulart’s pro-poor programs but to crack Brazil wide open to foreign investment.” In just a few short years, most of Brazil’s wealth was in the hands of a few multinational corporations and the income gap widened, never to be narrowed again. That inequality remains today, exemplified by the Olympic Games in Rio. The political corruption and

abject poverty lie just beyond the colorful walls erected to keep the favelas out of sight on our television screens.

And as the people took to the streets to protest the economic hardships befalling them, it was these same corporations behind the violent repression that soon followed. In *Brasil: Nunca Mais*, a book that detailed the dictatorship's torture record from 1964 until democracy was restored in the 1980s, the extralegal forces that brutalized unions, student groups, and other dissidents were funded "by contributions from various multinational corporations, including Ford and General Motors."

These nefarious forces at work were neither observed by the '60s counterculture in the United States (then protesting for civil rights and against the Vietnam War) nor for most of the Brazilians themselves. As Veloso noted of the time, "Almost all of us were unaware of those nuances back then, and even if we had been, it would have changed nothing; we saw the coup simply as a decision to halt the redress of the horrible social inequalities in Brazil."

But even if the young Veloso wasn't consciously aware of the corporations sucking his country dry, his lyrics suggest an awareness of something terribly amiss. It's a line that runs through the work of all who gathered under the banner of *Tropicália*: fellow Bahian Gilberto Gil; the psychedelic wunderkind trio Os Mutantes; bossa nova singers Gal Costa and Nara Leão; the wry, live wire Tom Zé; Rogério Duprat, the producer who studied with Karlheinz Stockhausen. While *Tropicália* earned the ire of the Left by not writing overtly political songs, in tapping into the collective disquiet of the time, their songs became all the more resonant.

Mocking his corporate overlords and their thirst for profit, Veloso made a tangy MPB album perfect for public consumption his first time out, his artful pop becoming Pop Art becoming agitprop. "Paisagem Útil" ("Useful Landscape") scans as a string-laced bossa nova that toys with the title of Tom Jobim's "Inútil Paisagem" ("Useless Landscape"). It's an ode to Brazil where Veloso offers up a love of Rio's city lights and speeding cars, his lovers kissing under the glow of an Esso sign, a romantic scene set in a simulacrum of nature under the auspices of that multinational oil company. The speedy "Superbacana" is a frevo as penned by Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. The titular hero "Supercool" battles Uncle Scrooge and his battalion of cowboy minions and uses advertising lingo for shiny new products like "super-peanut" and "biotonic spinach" and—amid the dizzying blur of slogans—"economic advances."

Translate the title of the jaunty "Soy Loco Por Ti, America" and it reads as "I Am Crazy for You, America." And at the time, the *Tropicálistas* were eagerly absorbing as much music as possible from their neighbors to the north. "We were 'eating' the Beatles and Jimi Hendrix," Veloso said of their influences at the time. "We wanted to participate in the worldwide language both to strengthen ourselves as a people and to affirm our originality." They fervently spun albums from the likes of Aretha Franklin, Janis Joplin, Frank Zappa, and more, but rather than simply mimic the trends to the north, they made

these influences bear out the music of their half of the hemisphere. So on “Soy Loco,” Caetano isn’t being cheeky about loving America, it’s just that he means South America. The song playfully dances between a Colombian cumbia and a Cuban mambo, sung in Portuguese and Spanish, with Veloso hoping for a united South America rather than the North American Empire. The lyrics toy with the notion of naming, be it the name of America or the girl he plans to bring to the beach (Marti), but then Veloso pivots and he sings of a nameless country.

Fun enough beach fare, until Veloso signifies a dead man whose name can’t be said. He continues to land on this figure: “The name of the dead man/Before the permanent night spreads through Latin America/The name of the man/Is the people.” Less than a year prior, on the other side of the Brazilian border in Bolivia, Che Guevara was captured and killed by CIA-assisted forces. It would be decades before Veloso would admit that Che Guevara was the dead man at the center of the song, but with his death, the prospects of a united Latin and South America were imperiled. And in the years ahead, Brazil remained under the heel of the American Empire.

As Tropicália grew in popularity around the country, Veloso began to see more attention from the authorities. A performance with Os Mutantes for Festival Internacional de Canção in September of 1968 became a riotous confrontation with the audience. Soon after, another show featuring Veloso, Gil, and Os Mutantes was staged under another piece of art from Hélio Oiticica. Only this one featured a man recently shot dead by the police with the slogan “seja marginal, seja heroi” (be a criminal, be a hero) written on it.

By the end of the year, both Veloso and Gilberto Gil were arrested by the military police and detained two months in solitary confinement without being charged with a crime. After being allowed to play a farewell concert, they were then exiled from Brazil for the next four years. Living in London and then in Bahia upon his return in 1972, Veloso continued to record albums that were by turns exquisite, experimental, and introspective.

Veloso recalled an interrogation from an army sergeant during his imprisonment: “The sergeant was revealing that we tropicalistas were the most serious enemies of the regime. But in that little room of the army police, I did not have the strength to feel proud: I was merely afraid.” None of that fear can be heard here. Instead, bravado and bold assurance run through every number. At the center of it all is Veloso, with his swagger and full belief in the power of his songs to dance around the tanks and petroleum companies, to triumph over both the CIA and Uncle Scrooge. Amid the album’s blinding color and tropical fronds that would make Carmen Miranda proud, Veloso made a stand against the dictatorship without saying anything about it.

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