

Jobim

ANTONIO CARLOS JOBIM INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER: BURT KORALL

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Q: Okay.

AJ: You know, if you remember when I signed with BMI because...

Q: Wait a minute. Let me tell the transcriber who this is. This is Antonio Carlos Jobim. And the first question is what was your first contact or awareness of BMI?

AJ: Well, that's a funny story. I arrived here in November 22nd. I arrived for the very first time in New York City.

Q: What year was that?

AJ: Sixty-two, 1962. And we had this bosa nova concert at the Carnegie Hall. And this was kind of sponsored by the Brazilian Foreign Service, who sent us here due to the fact that the bosa nova was success here, you know. And the jazz musicians started to record the bosa nova here and also in the Coast, you know. And Stan Getz had this enormous hit with "Desafinado" that sold, you know, over a million records and is still selling. And with our friend, you know, on the guitar, Charles...

Q: Charlie Byrd.

AJ: Charles Byrd, a good friend. And so I was--people told me here, "Listen, you should contact, you know, the

authors, the composers--American Society of Authors--in order to see your rights. And then finally I remembered that one day we had--I had dinner with--I had lunch midtown with Bob Sour.

Q: Bob Sour was vice president of BMI then, wasn't he?

AJ: By then he was the vice president of BMI and Theodora Zavin I believe was the president.

Q: No, no. She was also vice president.

AJ: I see. Well, then I remember, you know, that he said, "You have to sign with us otherwise we won't pay you." It was very funny. Then he said, "You see, Brazil doesn't pay us so we don't pay Brazil. So we won't pay you. But if you sign here, I will pay you." And I was desperately in need of money, you know--the money. And finally I signed with BMI and said, That's very sweet of you, Mr. Sour, you know.

Q: But you were--all right, what made you come to BMI and sign?

AJ: I had to come to BMI, you see, because the Brazilian society, which I still belong, is connected with BMI, you know. It's a more or less, let's say, like a branch, an arm or affiliated...

Q: Well we have an arrangement with them.

AJ: Sure. Sure. But I mean it's almost like an affiliated company, you know. And ASCAP is represented in Brazil by UBC, which is the Union Braziliara Composotory(?).

You know, Brazilian composers union.

Q: What is represented in?

AJ: BMI's represented by SBCEM, which is Societa Braziliara Composotories Educatories de Musica, you know. So I had--by all means I had to belong to BMI because my--most of my songs were published by this Brazilian society--I mean the Brazilian publishers, you know. But these songs were with SBCEM, which is represented here by BMI. And naturally by staying here and becoming a resident of the USA, of the US of A, I became a member of BMI.

Q: Okay. Some writers tell us it was a personal contact at BMI, others say it was the heritage and reputation of the company. Others say their management told them to do it. What was the story with you? When you came here, when you came to BMI, was it a matter of personal contact with Mr. Sour and Mrs. Zavin or was it the fact that the company had a reputation and an interest in all kinds of music?

AJ: Oh, sure, sure. But the company BMI had already in '62 had a reputation of being, you know, active, you know, and very, you know, efficient. And with also the publishers and everything. You know, more alive, you know, instead of...

Q: more interested in the music.

AJ: Yes. And more, you know--there are so many Latin American composers that came to the US, you know. I look for this these incredible lyricists that you have here, you know.

Guys like...

Q: Norman Gimbel.

AJ: Yes. But I mean besides Norman Gimbel--Norman Gimbel was given by--I was introduced to Norman Gimbel through Leeds Music, which was Lou Levy and Sal Kantor. And these guys introduced me to Norman Gimbel that at the time Norman didn't have the--it was not as famous as now, you know. But the guys I'm referring, you know, the incredible lyricists that were here like Johnny Mercer, you know, and Cole Porter was alive and he wanted to see me, to get in touch with me, you know. And he was already very sick, you know.

Q: But anyway, if affiliated with BMI you couldn't have collaborated with them.

AJ: That's right. At the time, you see--I've been with Johnny Mercer several times in California and he said--I said, I've tried, you know, to write with you. And he said, "Try harder," you know. He said try harder. But, you see, I also wrote songs with Ray Gilbert which was an ASCAP member and, you know, I couldn't--at the time it was very difficult to...

Q: To collaborate with an ASCAP writer.

AJ: Yes. And also I spent about one year, one year and a half, you know, with ASCAP. And they simply could not pay me because they didn't have the songs, you know. So it was theoretical...

Q: What do you mean they didn't have the songs?

AJ: The didn't have the publishing rights here.

Q: Oh, all right, so that's the reason you came over here because of the personal contact with Sour and Zavin and the fact that the financial arrangement would be better for you.

AJ: Yeah. Well I didn't have much of a--you know, to decide. The power to decide since I was very confused because my English was very limited and people, you know, tried to help me. And first "The Girl From Ipanana," you know, was released through Leeds Music which was an ASCAP firm, you know. I mean affiliated to ASCAP. Now Lou Levy changed that, you know, and then moved "The Girl From Ipanana" to Duchess Music.

Q: It's a BMI firm.

AJ: It's a BMI firm. So what happened is that all my songs went to BMI, you know. I'm happy, you know. I'm happy to be, you know, with you and also, you know, the warmest, how to say, welcome, you know, that I had from Theodora Zavin, you know, and other people. You know, we became friends, you know.

Q: That's good. All right, now did you have friends or colleagues who were already BMI writers?

AJ: Yes. These writers helped me, you know, with lyrics. Like Norman Gimbel, you know. Also Norman Gimbel switched from ASCAP to BMI, you know. So this was a kind of

new blood, you know. I had Gene Lees, you know, who also wrote lyrics for my songs. I had Norman Gimbel. And these guys, you know, are great writers. Because one of the problems that, you know, that goes on all over the world is the problem of versions, you know. Like, you know, Cole Porter song gets--goes to Brazil, you know. Then the version--it's absolutely ridiculous, you know. And I had this problem here when my songs, you know, started to come here and they used to put these coffee and bananas lyrics, you know. This was very disturbing for me, you know, because I was starting to understand the English language and I was saying, But this is not it, you know. This has nothing to do with the song, you know.

Q: Okay. Tell me about your memories concerning your first check from BMI.

AJ: Yeah. Well that is good memories, you know. That's very sweet if you, Mr. Sour, you know. You know, there's an old saying, an Italian saying, that says, you know, translators, you. "Tratatori, tragitori," you know. You always with thing of translating, you know, Shakespeare into French, you know. It's such a problem, you know.

Q: So you were very happy about the check but the basic problem you had was having the lyrics written that would be appropriate for your songs.

AJ: Oh, sure. I was very happy and I was very happy and I remember that it was about \$30,000, you know. And this

was--at the time this was a fortune, you know, for me. You know, because I was living here--lived with, you know, a few change that the Foreign Service sent to the--because all the people that played the concert at the Carnegie Hall, you know, has the--this was in November--as the New York winter came...

Q: You didn't have any winter clothes?

AJ: No, no. And all these people, all these Brazilians, they fled, you know. They said--you know, they couldn't speak English and they had no overcoats so they flew. They flew home, you know. And I decided to stay, you know. I was younger, you know. I could--I had a good blood circulation, you know, at the time. And I remember that a guy from TV, you know, he saw me--an American TV director, I believe, from CBS, you know. We were doing a program with Gerry Mulligan and Judy Holliday was there, you know. They had a kind of a penthouse in Manhattan. And the guys were shooting, you know, filming. And I was so--I was feeling this cold, you know. I've never heard of something like that, you know. And then came this TV director and took his overcoat and put on my shoulders. And I was very thankful, you know, and I said, "And you?" He said, "Well, I'm used to it," you know. He was quite a redneck, you know. Used to the cold weather.

Q: All right. How important has BMI been to your career?

AJ: Well, BMI is the base of my career, you know. It's the--everything that I have here, you know, is BMI. You know, is my friends, my Burt Korall, Thea Zavin--everything that I have, you know, comes from BMI, you know. And I was fortunate because the--I have seven or eight big standards, you know, in BMI besides, you know, a hundred songs that are not that famous. But as Irving Berlin used to say, you know, that to have a hit is normal. To have two, you know, to have three, okay, this is an exception. But to have eight, nine, ten, that's, you know--because God likes you, you know. God is how to say...

Q: God is nice to you.

AJ: He's nice to you or has this--likes you, you know.

Q: Okay. Can you think of any personal experience with regard to BMI that sticks in your memory?

AJ: Well, you see BMI, you know, just gave me, you know, this wonderful party, you know, that we invited so many friends that I have here, you know. My American friends. And Burt Korall, you know, helped me very much to invite these people, you know, and to organize the party, you know.

Q: All right. That's good.

AJ: And I have this--you know, these standards that kept me, how to say--as you say here--kept the wolf away from the door.

Q: That's what I was going to say. Some writers tell us they particularly appreciated BMI's support at down times.

You know, times in your life when things weren't going to well. Has that ever been the case with you? It certainly has, hasn't it?

AJ: Yes. Very much so. Also, you know, I have an important company. I have ??? (please specify; couldn't make out name on taper) Music, you know, with all the--with many standards that... I have an important firm which is a publishing firm, you know.

Q: So in other words, BMI has been very supportive to you when things weren't going to well.

AJ: Very, very much. And also I was fortunate that the songs--how to say--endured. The songs...

Q: Yes. That's a good word.

AJ: ...survived, you know. All the changes, you know, because when I got to the States you had the singer, you had the arranger, you had--now the picture is completely changed, you know. All the kids, you know, they...

Q: They sing and write their own songs.

AJ: They sing their own songs, their own music, their own words with their own company, you know, the publishing company. So I'm very happy that I had this, you know, chance to make a clean copy of my life. You know, like a--you know, instead of... I had a rough sketch. I had three hundred songs recorded in South America, you know, but they didn't mean much, you know. I mean money-wise, you know.

Q: Until you got here and then BMI was very supportive.

AJ: Very supportive. And I got all these standards, you know, to--how to say--to psyche some of them. You know, "The Girl From Ipanana," "Desafinado" and "How Insensitive," "One-Note Samba," "Wave," you know, all these...

Q: I know. And all of these endured. But at the beginning I guess BMI was very supportive. That was not a good time in your life, when you first got here.

AJ: Oh, no, it was, you know, tragic, you know. I didn't know, you know--I was freezing and the only thing I could--I was living in the Times Square area in a third-class hotel. And roaches everywhere. And I used to go to the corner and have ham and eggs or bacon and eggs. I thought the Americans would eat only bacon and eggs, you know.

Q: All right. Many writers tell us their personal contact with a person or persons at BMI has been meaningful.

AJ: Sure.

Q: If there is anyone at BMI who has been significant in your career, could you tell us a little about them?

AJ: Well, you see, for instance, a guy that would compose--we worked together for a long time--was Norman Gimbel, you know.

Q: No, no. It has to be somebody that works here at BMI. Would it be Mrs. Zavin?

AJ: It would be Mrs. Zavin. You know, I don't make much of a social life, you know. So my contacts are very few because, you know, also Mrs. Zavin was there, you know, and

she was--she is a brilliant woman, you know, very, very intelligent woman. And with all the know-how, you know, and the--to counsel me, to help me to--to advise me, you know, about, you know. European rights and all these things. All these, you know, technicalities, you know. And...

Q: So she's the one?

AJ: Yes, she's the one.

Q: Okay. Now the next group of questions are about the profession of song writing and how it has changed over the years. The first question is what did your contemporaries and friends feel about your decision to become a writer? I guess this was in Brazil.

AJ: To become a writer. Well...

Q: I mean how did they respond, your contemporaries and friends, to your decision to become a writer?

AJ: A composer? Well, you see, I've come--how to say-- I've come a long way, you know, since--I was born in '27, so in '46 I started--you know, I left the classical music, you know, with--I was studying to be a pianist, you know, to be a concert piano player, you know. And then I got married and I had to work and I went to the nightclubs of Rio de Janeiro and I was playing there, you know. American songs and French songs and tangos from Argentina.

Q: So how did you--I mean what was the response of the people you knew to the fact that you became a composer?

AJ: Well, they--suddenly, you know, I--they started to

realize that I was capable of writing my own tunes, you know. And I've been an arranger for--also, you know, when I left the night life, you know, that was very--it was a hard life, you know, playing until 4 o'clock in the morning everyday, you know, to pay the rent. And then I got a job, you know, in--daylight job, you know.

Q: A day job.

AJ: A day job, you know. That was a big step.

Q: So in other words, your composing was a very positive step because it got you out of the nightclubs and you could do--you could really live a more normal life.

AJ: Yes. I could see the sun.

Q: Okay. What do you think the major changes are in the writing process since your career began? Let me just add something. Some writers tell us there are now more collaborations. Some say the jobs are more specific. There are melody creators and lyricists. What do you think the major changes in the writing process since, you know, you began in the forties?

AJ: Yes. Well, you see, when I began in the forties, you know, the record industry--you know, I started this day life and I started to... In other words, I changed, you know. I became an early bird and so every morning I would go to take the bus downtown to work for a company, you know. A record company. Byington (spelling???), you know, owned by an American--Brazilian/American guy--family.

Q: Were you writing then?

AJ: Yes. I was starting to write, you know, the--to arrange, you know, orchestrate, you know, all the time. I had this suitcase, you know, full of arrangements.

Q: Now what I actually want to focus on is the writing process, you know, at the beginning. You remember what it was like then. Now how does that compare to what it is now?

AJ: Oh, sure. Lots of things change, you know. When I started, you know, I had--how do you say--the copyist to take all the scores to the copyist and then to distribute the strings, you know, the studio, you know, in the fifties. And this was a slow process, you know. Before the Xerox, you know, and all the electronics started to--how to say--to take over.

Q: So what you're really saying is that as the modernization of writing with the technical situation and so forth--has this benefited the writer of not?

AJ: Well, I think it--sure, it benefited. Sure. For by all means, you know. My son today, you know--my son is a musician. He writes in the computer, you know, on the computer. He doesn't know, you know, what's the pen and--he doesn't...

Q: He does it in the computer. How do you feel about that?

AJ: Well, I feel good. Right now he is making my songbook, you know, with the help of the computer.

Q: But you don't write that way. You don't want to write that way.

AJ: No. I'm an acoustic musician, you know. I studied to be an engineer to I know some math, you know, and some numbers. I could have taken this machine, you know, these innovations, you know, but now my grandson, for instance, you know, he only plays the keyboards and the electronic instruments, you know.

Q: So there is some benefit to it?

AJ: I believe so. Yes. You know, everything, you know, airplanes and music and guns, you know, and medicine, you know. Everything--how to say...

Q: Has improved.

AJ: Improved. Progress, you know.

Q: Okay. Do you like to collaborate or do you prefer to work alone?

AJ: I like to collaborate, you know, and I like--I'm in my second marriage, so I've been always with kids in my house, you know--home. And these kids always listen to the rock 'n roll music, naturally, you know, since the Beatles, you know. Before the Beatles I was already--the music, you know, home was always, you know, the new music because of the kids, you know. Now I have kids here, you know, with a nine-year-old boy and two-and-half-year-old girl. So they are--you know, they listen to the...

Q: So that keeps you young.

AJ: Yes.

Q: But it doesn't really affect your work that much, does it?

AJ: No. No. But, you know, I'm well informed, you know. I watch the news. I listen to a lot of--how to say-- up to date...

Q: Music.

AJ: Contemporary music. You know, the music that's being played. Sometimes, you know, music disturbs me. When I work too much, you know, during the day and then my--you know, someone turn on the radio. You know, I'm a bit fatigued of the sound. I would prefer to chat...

Q: How does that come into--what do you mean, you like to collaborate as far as lyric writers go.

AJ: Well I've been writing, you know, a lot of lyrics because--you know, out of necessity. You know, necessity is the mother of invention. I had, you know, some--I wrote the lyrics that were considered good by Leonard Feather, you know. Like the "Waters of March," you know.

Q: So in other words, you collaborate as far as lyrics go, but lately you've been writing some of your own.

AJ: Yes. But it doesn't stop my collaboration, you know, with other--with writers, you know, with specific...

Q: Lyric writers.

AJ: ...lyric writers. Yeah.

Q: What do you think the key is to exploiting or

promoting your work?

AJ: Burt Korall, I'm not very good at...

Q: Do you think it's recordings?

AJ: You see, the records are completely obsolete things, you know--objects, you know. Records, they break, you know. The kids destroy them, you know. CD is a great--it's been a great thing for my work, you know. Because now most of my work is already in CD, you know.

Q: So you think that's the key to promoting your work, CD's?

AJ: No. I mean to preserve, you know.

Q: Preserve, and promote, I guess.

AJ: To preserve and promote. Also--speaking about the promotion, you know, television and the movie industry, you know, Hollywood, used several tunes, you know, that naturally the media is so important, you know. Because, you know, a record is such an obscure thing, you know, that you have to--now television, you know, and films.

Q: So in other words, to get wide-spread exploitation and promotion you need to have your music heard in films and on television.

AJ: Yeah. The videos, you know, because music became a visual art, you know. It's not anymore as the--not for the ear, you know.

Q: It's a visual art. That's very interesting.

AJ: It's a visual art, yeah. When you talk about

music, you know, you see a red shirt, you see another--the hair and you see the shoes and you see things, you know, on TV. You know, dance, ballet and movement.

Q: Makes the music linger in mind longer.

AJ: Yes.

Q: Okay.

AJ: Music is there, you know, it's part of a vast complex media, you know, that includes the--how to say--the visual arts, you know.

Q: Okay. Have you had problems with writer's block? You know, not being able to work. If so, how did you deal with it?

AJ: With writer's... ?

Q: Block. That means when you have difficulty writing. When you have difficulty writing, what do you do about it?

AJ: Difficult to--you mean, to write?

Q: You know, to write songs. When you find it difficult to write. When it doesn't flow and it doesn't--the ideas don't come.

AJ: Well, you see, I have too many ideas, you know. I have to get rid of ideas, you know.

Q: So in other words, you don't have any problem with that?

AJ: No. My main problem, I believe, you know, is the language. You know, my English is a late acquisition. So it's not the same thing, you know.

Q: Well, you seem to do very well with it.

AJ: To be born here--you know, I should have come here not when I--I was thirty-five when I got to the US of A. And I should have gotten here when I was five, you know, or four.

Q: I think you've done very well with it. All right. Do you think writing is a God-given talent, or do you feel that composers or song writers classes can help develop craft and insight regarding the writing process?

AJ: Yes. I believe you can develop some craft. I believe so. But I think what helped me with my music was that I was born, you know, by the sea and, you know. the forest by the sea. The Atlantica forest, you know.

Q: What is it called?

AJ: The forest--the Atlantic forest, you know. I mean that's the coastal range, you know, that you can--from the forest you can see the sea, you know. So very--you know, the fish and many species of fishes, you know, and the birds and the animals, you know, wildlife, you know...

Q: So that was your inspiration.

AJ: Very much, you know. And also, naturally, the girls, you know.

Q: Yes!

AJ: I mean it's a wild animal, you know, and very beautiful.

Q: All right. Now, do you think that writing is a God-given talent?

AJ: Well, I--maybe we have, you know, some genes that can be helped, you know, by a father or a mother. My grandmother used to play piano by ear very well. She had the absolute pitch and maybe, you know, this--but I think we need a lot of work, you know, to...

Q: So work and classes can help you?

AJ: Sure. I studied--you know, I had a German teacher. I had, you know, harmony and things, you know, that I studied. I studied, you know, the orchestra music and everything, you know.

Q: All right. So you do feel it's worth while. All right, let me ask you another question. What is the primary source of your inspiration?

AJ: Oh, I would say that it was, you know, that we were--how to say--we were ecologists, but I didn't know this word by the time, you know, I became a ecologist. We just used to...

Q: So you were inspired by the environment?

AJ: The forest, you know, was so beautiful. You know, the forest, the...

Q: The forest in Brazil by the sea?

AJ: Oh, the flowers, the--all sort of animals, you know. And eagles and falcons and wild fowl, you know. And everything, you know--snakes, fish...

Q: All right, I understand.

AJ: And naturally, you know, the girls. The girls by

the sea.

Q: "The Girl From Ipanema."

AJ: Yes. It's got a beach civilization, you know. Because it seems, you know, we are destroying so much the environment, you know. What has been destroyed all over the world, not only in Brazil. But also in Europe and the US, you know. The US is such a beautiful country, you know. And naturally, you know, progress. The way we--progress goes there's a lot of smoke or fumes, pollution, you know. We have to have all this--progress but without destroying, you know, the destruction of nature. We will eventually cause the destruction of humanity.

Q: All right. Do you write everyday, Antonio?

AJ: Almost every day. You see, now, right now, I'm doing my homework here in New York. I'm in the process of writing the songbook, you know.

Q: Okay. Is the world market affecting your writing? What do you think about the internationalization of popular music?

AJ: Well, it's good, you know, because the distances became so short, you know. To go to Europe it used to take, you know, weeks and months. And now everything is so fast. You take the Concorde and in three hours you're in London, you know. So I think that is a great improvement. Also I see many composers now, many artist, you know, also painters, as life became such a difficult thing in the big cities, you

know, they go to the woodland--they go to the mountains--and they use the fax, you know, to compose and to...

Q: What do you mean, they send them fax--F-a-x, you mean?

AJ: Yes, f-a-x. Yes. So like I can write a song with a guy in Los Angeles. You know, I don't have to go there, you know. He doesn't have to come here.

Q: So again the technical aspect sneaks in and makes it easier for people.

AJ: For sure.

Q: And this makes for more of an international quality to life.

AJ: Yes. And now, you know, you cannot live on the desert, you know. I mean literally you have to communicate. Communication, you know, is indispensable. So that's how we are talking here, you know, over the phone. And you are recording, you know, this...

Q: Well that's it. I'm finished.

AJ: Yes. This is very essential, you know, that you can--I can right now compose a thing with, you know, with a French guy, you know, or whatever.

Q: So it's really affected your work?

AJ: It did. It did. Also, you know, to make a clean copy of the songs. You know, now I'm in the process of writing the songbook, you know, before I leave this beautiful little planet, you know, in need of...

Q: You aren't going anywhere.

AJ: No. I mean leaving the planet, you know. Our little mistreated paradise. I think that...

Q: You want to leave your legacy behind.

AJ: Yes. That can be--how to say--readable. That can be--how do you say?

Q: Readable and can be--the songs are a legacy.

AJ: Sure. To have--how to say--that you can consult the material. You know, if I want to record a Gershwin song, you know, I have the Gershwin song here. You know, like for instance South America, you know, the songs come and go and they disappear and nobody knows, you know, what happened. Because there is no...

Q: So it's important that you leave a record.

AJ: It is very important. Suppose that Chopin and Debussy didn't write their music, you know, they wouldn't exist right now, you know.

Q: Okay. That's it.

Q: This is an addendum to the Jobin interview. Many writers tell us they have role models or someone they looked up to professionally. Do you remember any as far as your concerned?

AJ: Well, finishing what I said about recordings thing, you know. I mean to keep--for the archives, you know. I mean--you know, I'm referring also the brand new songs, you

know. I'm not talking, you know--it's not a nostalgic...

Q: I know that. But the thing I really want to know is were there...

AJ: Yeah. Well, many, many people I looked up--and, you know, I look up, you know, like performers like so many--so many wonderful jazz musicians that...

Q: Well name two or three.

AJ: Yes. Well, Gerry Mulligan and Chet Baker and Louis Armstrong and...

Q: Any composers?

AJ: What's the name of the piano player...

Q: Bill Evans?

AJ: Bill Evans. Dave Brubeck. Dave Brubeck and Billy Taylor and...

Q: Okay.

AJ: You know, so many other--the great jazz musicians inspired me very much, you know. And composers, you know, they've been my--you know, I have worshipped, you know, Gershwin, Kern, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin and so many. So many, you know.

Q: Okay. That's it. You like Burt Bacharach.

AJ: Well, so--yes, yes. But I mean so many great artists you have like Jimmy Webb and more...

Q: It goes on and on, doesn't it?

AJ: It goes on and on, you know. This is an infinite list, you know.

Q: All right, that's enough.

AJ: And also, you know, I can't forget Ella Fitzgerald who did, you know, a Jobim songbook, you know. A record, you know. Sarah Vaughan or Frank Sinatra. I've made records with all these people, you know. Which are incredible singers, you know.

Q: Okay. That's enough. I will see you--talk to you at 2:30.

AJ: Yes, 2:30 I'll call to give you another...

Q: Five songs.

AJ: Five songs.

Q: Okay.

AJ: Thank you, Burt. Bye-bye.