7. Viva Tropicália!: Covering the Movement and its Legacy

Published by

Popular Culture: Arts and Social Change in Latin America.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/100444.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/100444
7. Viva Tropicália!: Covering the Movement and its Legacy

John Kroondyk

Introduction

In October of 1967 from São Paulo’s Teatro Paramount, TV Record broadcast the third “Festival de Música Popular Brasileira,” known as “O Festival da Virada.” It was aptly named, as it marked a turning point in Brazilian popular music (MPB) with the debut of the famous tropicalistas, Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil. In fewer than two years, the pair of musicians would record their last concert prior to their forced exile in London at the behest of Brazil’s military regime.

Fast-forward to 1997 and the juxtaposition is profound. To celebrate the movement’s thirty-year anniversary, the Bahian carnaval was tropicália themed. Powerful northeastern politicians donned T-shirts with caricatures of the big names of tropicália, and TV Globo offered official sponsorship. However, Caetano Veloso had transferred his embrace of antropofagia to globalization. It was clear that the situation had changed over the decades.

These scenes highlight the differences between tropicália and tropicalismo. As Charles Perrone employs the terms, tropicália refers to the movement itself, understood as occurring from 1967 to either 1969 or 1972 and, at its most active, around 1968 (Perrone 2000, 2). Tropicalismo, on the other hand, is an all-encompassing label for the continuation of the movement. However brief tropicália may have been, the watershed moment had a profound and lasting impact on Brazilian society.

This paper will provide a brief overview of tropicália and its legacy. This is followed by a survey of the available research that explains the importance of the tropicalistas. There are various issues that arise when attempting to cover tropicalismo in an academic library, such as the many eponymous albums from the period, which will also be explored.

Overview

Tropicália marked a convergence of music, literature, film, theatre, and the visual arts. It became a cultural movement that fused Brazilian genres with international influences, avant-garde experimentation, and mostly covert critiques of the military regime that had taken power in 1964. Tropicalistas
absorbed and digested various styles of music, envisioning them anew as a unique mixture. The result was supremely innovative and highly controversial.

The movement centered on a group of musicians from the Brazilian Northeast, including Gal Costa and Tom Zé, but especially Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil. These *baianos* were influenced by bossa nova and traditional Brazilian music, as well as Anglo-American rock ‘n’ roll. Veloso and Gil unveiled their *som universal* during the previously mentioned popular TV Record music festival in 1967, backed by rock band Os Mutantes as well as classical instruments. The tropicalistas used television to their advantage, even performing on their own program, *Divino Maravilhoso*.

The tropicália movement was not expressly aligned with protest singers, or the more sophisticated and urbane bossa nova contingent, although it was definitely influenced by both. Instead, tropicalistas combined the two with experimental rock overlaid on a pastiche of traditional genres. Avant-garde composer Rogério Duprat arranged the record to provide a classical touch. Veloso and Gil worked with their fellow baianos, the bossa singer Nara Leão and the group Os Mutantes, to create a pivotal LP that defined the style, *Tropicália: ou panis et circenius* (Duprat et al. 1968).

These linkages across musical genres were mirrored in connection with other art forms. The name tropicália itself came from the interactive and immersive exhibit of Hélio Oiticica by the same name (Dunn 2001, 8). Caetano Veloso claims to have developed his concept for the movement after watching Glauber Rocha’s *cinema novo* classic, *Terra em transe* (McCann 1998, 149).

All of the tropicalistas were heavily influenced by Brazilian modernist literature, especially Oswald de Andrade’s idea of antropofagia, the concept of cultural cannibalism that he used to describe Brazilian culture. As understood through the lens of antropofagia, Brazil is a metaphorical representation of cannibalism, in which Brazil eats European influences to create something new. The Teatro Oficina performance of his play, *O rei da vela*, is a key tropicalía fusion of the performing arts (Patriota 2003, 148). As for their literary contemporaries, “concrete” poets Decio Pignatari, and Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, were very interested in the movement and also collaborated with the Tropicalistas (Dunn 2001, 32).

**Legacy of the Movement**

Tropicália has evolved from being an innovation of outsiders into an integral part of the modern canon of Brazilian popular music. It is certainly well established in the realm of MPB. Indeed, Caetano Veloso places it squarely in the midst of his evolutionary line within that music. At this point, the tropicalistas have essentially been enshrined in the musical pantheon of Brazil, and they continue to enjoy widespread success at home and abroad. Their continual rediscovery in US and European markets has increased this success and
reflected it in Brazil, most exceptionally in the case of Tom Zé (Dunn 2001, 194).

Currently, there is another revival of interest in the movement. A new documentary, *Tropicália: O filme*, was released and premiered at international festivals in 2012 (Machado et al. 2012). Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso, and Os Mutantes continue to tour internationally and maintain lives in the public eye. Gil was even appointed as Minister of Culture from 2003 to 2008 under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

In New York, the Archive of Contemporary Music (ARC) organized a Brazilian World Music Day on September 7, 2012 to coincide with Brazil’s Independence Day (The ARChive of Contemporary Music, 2012). This was just one year after the New York charity Red Hot released yet another compilation album, uniting tropicália greats and contemporary American and Brazilian musicians in the production of *Red Hot + Rio 2* (Dranoff et al. 2012). Aside from popular interest, there is also a deep scholarly history on the role of popular music in Brazilian society, as MPB has enjoyed not only a preeminent cultural position in Brazil, but a certain amount of influence in politics as well.

**Research**

There also have been many investigations into the various aspects of tropicalismo. These range from close readings of individual lyrics and in-depth analysis of the music itself to more over-arching treatments of the movement and its political impact. The first work of note is from as far back as 1970, when Roberto Schwarz wrote “Culture and Politics in Brazil: 1964–1969,” and attempted to explain how the leftists managed to dominate Brazilian culture during a period of right-wing military rule (Schwarz and Gledson 1992). When *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* published an entire issue devoted to current studies of tropicalismo in 2000, credence was duly given to Schwarz as the logical starting point of research on the movement (Johnson, 2002, xi). Yet, much more work has been published in the decades following tropicália.

Christopher Dunn (2001) has offered the most comprehensive and accessible English-language work on tropicalismo to date. *Brutality Garden Tropicália and the Emergence of a Brazilian Counterculture* provides an excellent overview of the movement and addresses the legacy of the tropicalistas. This, along with his continued scholarship on tropicalismo, has made Dunn a leading scholar in this area.

Along with Dunn, Charles A. Perrone has published extensively on the topic, and the two have collaborated on various projects covering Brazilian music. They co-edited *Brazilian Popular Music and Globalization* (2001) which includes multiple chapters on tropicalismo. It is Perrone’s distinction between the terms tropicália and tropicalismo that proves most useful when covering this complex subject.
Of course, there has been much research from Brazil itself that treats this period and its legacy. Notably, Carlos Calado has written at length on the movement, with the standout text, *Tropicália: A história de uma revolução musical* (1997). Celso Favaretto’s *Tropicália: Alegoria, alegria* (1979) is also an important contribution, republished in 1996 as tropicália saw a revival. It was around the same time that Caetano Veloso wrote his own account of the movement, *Verdade Tropical* (1997). It was praised by many as required reading, and has even been considered the best work on tropicalismo to date (McCann 1998, 151).

**Issues in Covering Tropicália/Tropicalismo**

There is certainly a wealth of information to be found on tropicália, yet this does not necessarily imply that it is well-covered from a library perspective. Indeed, the popularity and large volume of writing on the subject mirrors the more general problem of information overload. A simple search for tropicália will return plenty of results, but the potential failures of this type of keyword search are already well known. Of particular interest in this paper is the difficulty of locating the primary sources themselves, e.g. the music, and the way in which they are linked to the other areas in which tropicália was influential.

**Eponymous Albums**

One issue that will hinder any search is the plethora of eponymous albums that the tropicalistas produced during the period. The big names of the movement all released consecutive self-titled albums. Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil each recorded three albums under their names during the tropicália years of 1968, 1969, and 1971. Similarly confusing are records such as *Os Mutantes* (1968) and *Mutantes* (1969), as well as Gal Costa’s two 1969 releases, *Gal Costa* and *Gal*.

Two more factors expand this confusion regarding the primary source material. There are now many “best-of” compilation albums that are simply titled with the artist’s name. In addition, most library catalogs only include the date of publication for the item itself, not the original release date of the recording. Thus, many albums are dated in the 1990s and 2000s when they were re-released as compact discs. If notes with original dates are not included, users are left to compare track lists in the catalog record in order to differentiate between albums.

This set of issues created the situation at New York University where five separate albums are listed as four versions of the same title, *Caetano Veloso*. Two are best-of compilations, another is his 1969 release, usefully including the original date, and two more are listed as the 1971 album, but dated 1990 when the CDs were produced. One recording was actually the 1968 release but had been miscataloged. No doubt a small and easily corrected mistake,
this is nonetheless important because that particular album defines Veloso’s tropicália sound more than any other, and its first track is the song Tropicália itself (Veloso 1968). This is one way that a seemingly miniscule detail can affect users researching this area, and why in the discography that follows, all final dates except that in the first entry which signifies a recording date, pertain to original releases and not CD reissues.

Connecting with Other Art Forms

The linkages among music and other arts are not as easy to find when keyword or subject searching. For example, cinema novo and poesia concreta are certainly of interest when investigating tropicália, yet they are not generally categorized under the subject heading, nor should they be. The nature of tropicalismo as a dialogue between many different areas of the arts creates a horizontal arrangement, not well suited for standard classification.

This is one of the main reasons that it is particularly useful to have a research guide to resources related to tropicalismo. With such a guide, various areas can be linked and explained in terms of their relation to the movement without necessarily classifying them under tropicália, which would be an overreach. These difficulties are the reasoning behind the creation of a LibGuide at New York University to pull together some of the various resources associated with the movement (Carreño and Kroondyk 2012).

Applications in the Library

To ensure adequate coverage of tropicalismo in an academic library, important lessons can be learned from the movement itself. These include the cultural cannibalism of Oswald de Andrade, whose ideas were so important to the tropicalistas. A central tenet within his work was the blending of supposed contradictory elements. Tropicália blended high- and lowbrow, denying the contradiction between them.

Librarians also blend a variety of resources in their work, combining access to subscription-based services with a selection of resources freely available on the web. It is not a choice between one and the other, but a conscious synthesis of the two. As a part of this process, another topic of particular interest is the centrality of presentation and utilization of new media. In the case of tropicália it was television and, in the present day, the ever-expanding role of the Internet.

Antropofagia

The embrace of Oswalde’s antropofagia is one aspect that librarians can reflect on in their own work. In the current information environment, librarians must choose from myriad sources and a constantly increasing quantity of knowledge. In many ways, this involves the consumption, digestion and rearranging of information into something new. What the library adds is
organization, quality control, and discoverability. A prime example of this would be the Latin American Network Information Center (LANIC) at the University of Texas-Austin (Palaima and Norsworthy 2012). LANIC organizes links to open-source resources on Latin America, both thematically and geographically. It adds control and organization to a variety of websites, and is a powerful tool for discovering quality online resources.

One great example of the popular resources needed for approaching the topic of tropicália is the Brazilian website, Tropicalia.com.br (Oliveira et al. 2007). It is a great entry point for further study and, most valuably, combines information about the music itself, the personalities involved, and the political and cultural context. It is also very well designed and includes text in English and Portuguese. The site offers some summaries, written by Ana de Oliveira, and reproduces many important essays. While the site is not yet indexed in LANIC, it seems to be a perfect fit for their Brazilian music section.

**Conclusion**

So much has already been said about tropicália, and in so many different disciplines, that it may seem as though this brief cultural period has been over-exposed. There is surely a danger in simply being nostalgic for an interesting historical moment, especially with regard to the late 1960s. Yet, there is so much depth to this movement, that was so pivotal in Brazil and popular abroad, that it continues to deserve scholarly attention. However, the fact that many resources exist does not mean that they are well organized or easily accessible.

Librarians can aid in the discovery of resources relating to tropicalismo, in various ways which tie in with current trends in libraries. With renewed interest in the movement and a growing place for Brazil on the world stage, students will no doubt continue to seek out tropicália music and research this influential period. Hopefully, librarians will be able to facilitate that process and, in doing so, demonstrate one of the many values of librarianship in the current information environment.

**WORKS CITED**


**DISCOGRAPHY**


