

Claudio Slon

The Master Of *Brazilian Jazz*

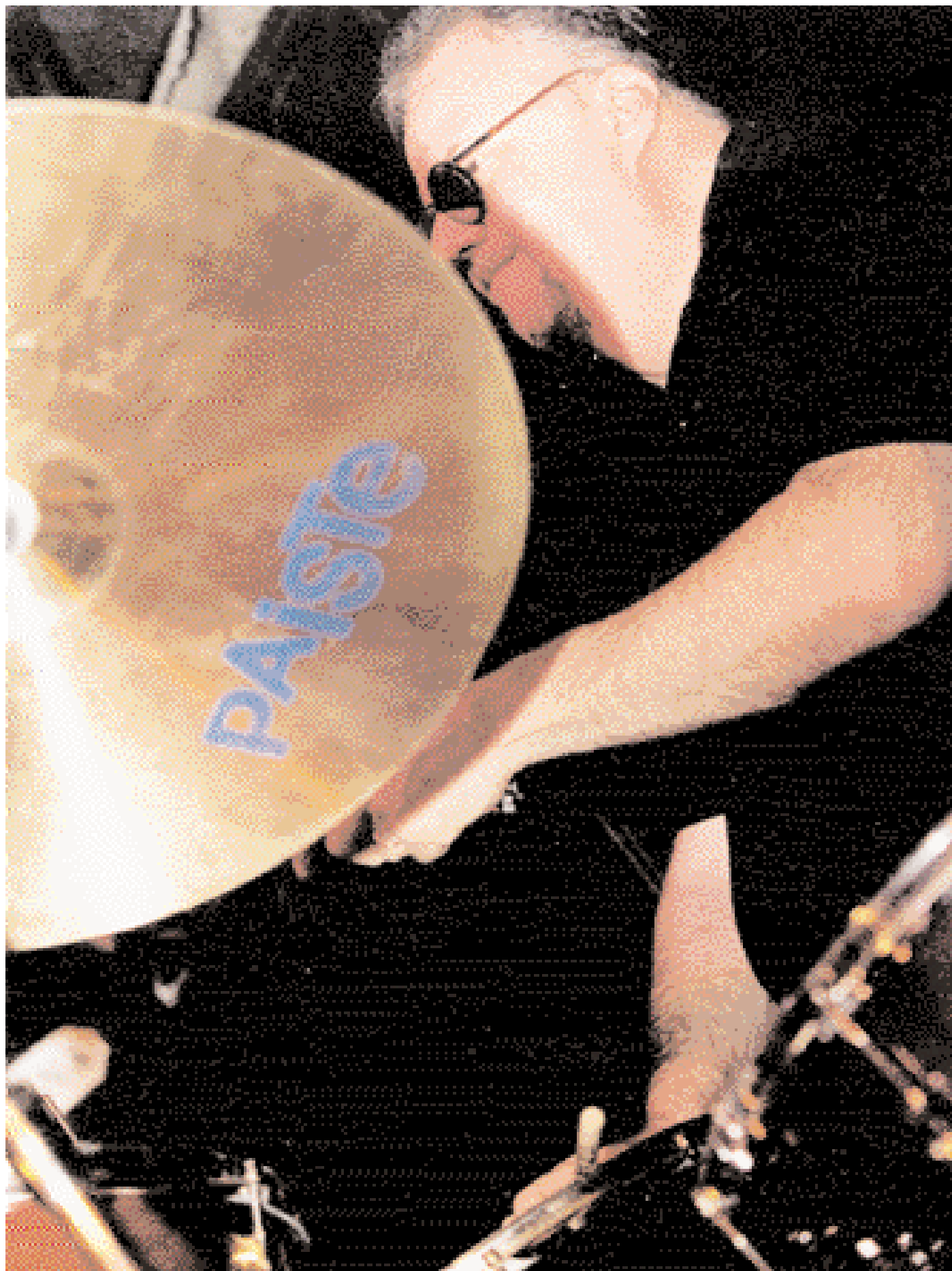
by Kevin Winard

Claudio Slon may not be a household name among drummers, but chances are you've heard him on record at some time or another. The artists he's worked with are a who's who of Brazilian, jazz, and popular music. In his thirty-plus year career, giants like Frank Sinatra, Herbie Hancock, Sergio Mendes, Ivan Lins, Herbie Mann, Hermeto Pascoal, Dave Grusin, Astrud Gilberto, Joe Pass, Billy Eckstine, Stan Getz, Barry White, Benny Golson, Lee Ritenour, The Jacksons, Clare Fischer, and Antonio Carlos Jobim have hired him for his magic.

Slon's style is fluid, grooving, and always musical. He has influenced *numerous* Brazilian drummers. In fact, if you ever have the chance to ask a Brazilian musician about him, he'll simply say that Claudio is the best. You'll undoubtedly also hear, "He has the greatest feel of them all!"

Claudio is one of those players who, when you watch him, doesn't look like he's moving at all. But when you close your eyes, you're amazed at the sounds and grooves that are coming out. And for some reason, when Claudio plays you can't stop moving your body—or smiling. No question, this is a master of the drums. The feel, the time, and the dynamics are all so deep that you wish the song he's playing will never end.

Claudio was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina and then raised in São Paulo, Brazil. After living in Los Angeles for thirty years, he now resides in Denver, Colorado. Claudio's a humble man who always puts the music first, and he always imparts insightful perspective on music, business, and life. During a recent trip to the mile-high city I had the opportunity to sit with the famed drummer, have dinner (he cooks a *mean* black beans and rice), and talk about his incredible career.



MD: How did you get introduced to music?

Claudio: Through my parents. My father was the concertmaster for the São Paulo Philharmonic for about thirty years, and my mother was a classical ballet dancer/choreographer. I grew up with my parents always practicing and rehearsing. We listened to classical music all the time. Later on I started listening to jazz. When I told my parents that I wanted to be a jazz drummer, they almost died. They said that, at the very least, I should be a classical percussionist.

So I studied for about two years learning how to read and play classical music. I played with the Philharmonic orchestra for about a year and a half. My father was very happy. But then I said, "Are you happy now? Okay, then that's it, I quit." I then became a nightclub jazz drummer.

MD: Do you feel that your classical background helps you musically?

Claudio: It does, because when I would play in a symphony environment, I would learn so much from the conductors about music. One time a conductor stopped the orchestra during a rehearsal and told the flute player that if he wasn't carrying the melody and couldn't hear the melody, then he was playing too loudly. Without my noticing it at the time, that served to develop my style of playing. Even today, without thinking, if I can't hear someone who's taking a solo, I immediately play softer. It doesn't matter if it's a problem with the PA or whatever. I adjust accordingly. You also learn by watching a conductor—how he mixes the orchestra in a live performance, which parts to bring out, and which parts to shade.

MD: Was your first introduction to the drumset in the form of jazz or Brazilian music?

Claudio: Jazz. It was much later that I was introduced to Brazilian music. I started playing in a big band. I was forced to play Brazilian with a big band, which is much harder than a small group. I really had to learn how to play it in a hurry.

When I first started doing that gig, the leader, the bass player, and I would play jazz when the big band would take a break. He had another drummer at the time who played the Brazilian music with the big band. When the big band would play I would watch and listen to the drummer to

see what he was doing. When he left, I took over.

Years ago, all of the Brazilian drummers would criticize me, saying, "He's not a Brazilian drummer, he's just a jazz drummer." And the jazz drummers would say, "What are you doing playing Brazilian?" There are millions of guys who can play Brazilian." So I got it from both sides. After that, most of the jobs that I was called for were Brazilian.

MD: Who were some of your influences growing up?

Claudio: I started with the obvious ones—Buddy Rich and Gene Krupa. Then I listened to Joe Morello, Shelly Manne, Elvin Jones, and Jack DeJohnette. And of course, I loved all of the big band drummers, like Don Lamond, Irv Cottler, Mel Lewis, and Sonny Payne. I really admired how they would carry a band.

MD: I always loved the recordings you made with Walter Wanderley. How did that association come about?

Claudio: Walter had a manager who recommended me. Walter was a typical nightclub musician, the type of guy who would play in very obscure places even if his records were selling well. His manager told

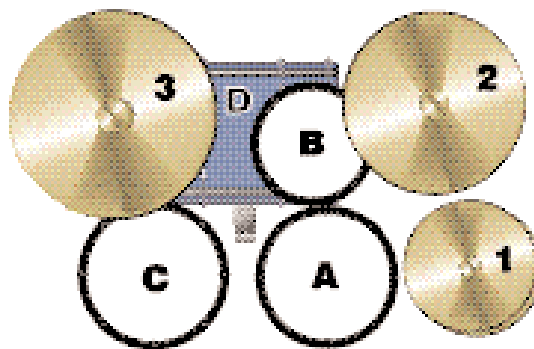
him that he needed to play with younger people, and he told him about me. Walter knew of me only as a jazz drummer, but he said he'd check me out.

I went to the nightclub where he was playing and sat in. The funny thing is that it clicked. It wasn't necessarily because I was a good samba drummer, but somehow the way he played clicked with my way of playing. He liked it, and I started doing gigs and recording with him.

One day in 1967 Walter told me that he had a person who wanted to take us to New York to record for the legendary jazz producer Creed Taylor. Walter was worried that, because I was married and had a daughter, it might be a problem for me to go. I told him my family completely understood that I had to follow my career. So off to New York we went. I was thrilled, as any jazz drummer was at that time, to come to New York.

We recorded for Creed Taylor on the Verve label. For me it was a dream because I had all of the records that he produced. I got there and he was a very nice, simple guy. On the third day in New York a limo came to pick us up and drove us to New Jersey to record at Rudy Van Gelder's stu-

Claudio's Kit



This is the setup that he uses on small jazz gigs.

- Drums:** Remo
- A. 3x13 snare
 - B. 8x10 tom
 - C. 14x14 floor tom
 - D. 14x18 bass drum

- Cymbals:** Paiste Traditionals Series
- 1. 13" medium-light hi-hats
 - 2. 17" thin crash
 - 3. 20" medium heavy ride

Others: A long-time Paiste endorser, Claudio will occasionally use other cymbals from various Paiste lines, including 13" Heavy hats, an 18" flat ride, and a 20" Dry Heavy ride (from their Signature series), 14" Medium hats, a 20" flat ride, and a 20" Medium ride (from their 602 line), and an 18" Short crash and a 20" Dark ride (from the Sound Creation line).

Heads: various Evans models
Sticks: various Regal Tip and Pro-Mark models
Percussion: Toca, Contemporanea (Brazilian company)

dio. His studio was a church that he had renovated. There wasn't any physical separation, but he used very directional mic's with no baffling. I was used to the Brazilian style of recording where they

sorts of radio stations—not only jazz, but also middle-of-the-road and pop. So the label released the album, which was called *Rainforest*.

We then were playing in Santa Monica

fantastic time.

Then, out of the blue, I got a call from Jobim and he told me he was doing a record with Frank Sinatra in Los Angeles. He said that he needed me right away and to get out of any commitments that I had. I spoke to Bola and he understood that it was Jobim and Sinatra and that I *had* to go.

MD: Tell me about that session with Sinatra.

Claudio: It was great. Eumir Deodato was the arranger, and it was the cream of the crop of studio musicians. Ray Brown was on bass, and of course Jobim on piano.

MD: Were you nervous?

Claudio: I wasn't nervous at all. I was introduced to Sinatra; we shook hands, he was a very nice man. It wasn't until we began rehearsing and I put on my headphones and began to hear Sinatra sing that it hit me. Then I had to fight very hard not to get nervous. But I told myself that I was there to play drums with "The Man," and after a couple of seconds I was fine.

Sinatra had amazing ears. On one take he stopped the orchestra and said that there was a wrong note in one of the trombone parts. They checked the score and, sure enough, the copyist had made a mistake. But the session went very smoothly, and it was a real pleasure.

MD: And this session turned out to be the *Sinatra & Company* album. You were on a television special with him as well, correct?

Claudio: Yes. Jobim called me again to do this TV special. It was with Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, and Jobim. I played on the Jobim segment. It was taped, and now it's been released on the series *A Man And His Music*. Nelson Riddle was conducting. Unfortunately, the orchestra was pretty much off-camera, but at times you could see my bass drum. I would tell my kids, "Look, there I am. That's me!" [laughs]

MD: During this era of recording, musicians didn't always get credited for all of the work they had done. An example of this would be Hal Blaine.

Claudio: That's correct. For example, another album that I did with Jobim was *Wave*. They wrote the credits listing Bobby Rosengarden, Dom Um Romao, and myself all playing drums. But I was the drummer on that album and they played percussion. Even to this day people ask me which tracks I recorded.

Primal Roots

These are the recordings that Claudio says best represent his playing.

Artist	Recording
Antonio Carlos Jobim	Wave
Frank Sinatra	Sinatra & Company
Joe Pass	Tudo Bem
Dori Caymmi	Kicking Cans
Edu Lobo	Sergio Mendes Presents Lobo
Sergio Mendes & Brazil '66	Primal Roots

practically tied you up with recording techniques. At Rudy's studio it was like a concert. He was a strict, very exact person. "Don't touch! Don't do that!" But it was a fantastic experience. It was recorded all on two tracks.

The trio was Walter on organ, Jose Marino on bass, and me on drums. We recorded a lot of songs, because Walter didn't do long solos. It was very much a pop approach. For that session we had a lot of favorites from the Brazilian perspective, but Creed thought that the single should be "Summer Samba" on side A and "Call Me" on side B.

During that time, when you made a record, you released a single first, and if that hit you'd release the album. We said to ourselves that Creed didn't know what Brazilian music was about. But we figured, What the heck, we're here, let's see what happens. So the single was released. We then went to Los Angeles, where there was a cocktail party to promote the group, and everybody started coming up to us asking, "How does it feel having a hit?" We said it felt great—but we weren't familiar with the word. Then they told us it was a huge hit and that it was crossing over. What does "crossing over" mean? We had no idea. Well, the single was playing all over the country on all

at a club called P.J.'s, and people from the William Morris Agency came to check us out for possible representation. We started to get cocky at that time, and when we went to record our second album for Creed, we told *him* what we were going to play. The album turned out to be *Cheganca*.

Creed thought that our new approach was too aggressive and that we should follow the success of the first album. He liked the album musically, but he knew that it

wouldn't be as successful as the first. And he was right. Success went to our heads. We then recorded with Astrud Gilberto. I was with the trio for three more years and recorded a total of four albums.

MD: What was Walter like as a leader?

Claudio: He was okay, but was very frustrated because he could have been a great success like Sergio Mendes. When Sergio had his hit with "Mas Que Nada," he knew how to market himself and his sound to continue or enhance his success. Walter didn't.

MD: When did you first meet Antonio Carlos Jobim?

Claudio: We met briefly back in Brazil. Right after working with Walter I began working with the Brazilian guitarist Bola Sete in San Francisco, with Sebastian Neto on bass. Bola was a great guy to work for. We rented a house in Sausalito and had a

"Don't ever be influenced by applause. Just play for the music."

MD: Was that the original recording of the song “Wave”?

Claudio: Yes. That was the first time it was recorded.

MD: It’s amazing to think about all of the drummers who play casuals and have to play that song. What was that session like?

Claudio: It was a very interesting session in that we recorded it in New York with just Jobim on guitar, Ron Carter on bass, and me on drums. Jobim was an excellent pianist, but he played what I call “composer’s guitar”—just enough to show his songs to other musicians. His time on that instrument was sometimes not very steady. Claus Ogerman was conducting the three of us without an orchestra. I would read the charts and imagine that I was playing with a full orchestra.

MD: That’s an interesting point that you made regarding Jobim’s time on guitar. Say you’re doing a session and some of the players are not that solid. How do you deal with that?

Claudio: You just have to block it out and focus on the time. But it does take away from the music. Nobody should think while they play. To think while you play is the death of the feel. Thinking is okay for something else, but not for music.

MD: Let’s talk technically for a moment. I notice that when you play your bass drum on a samba, you have a rolling feel rather than a straight 16th-note feel. Is this a conscious decision in order to emulate the feel of the surdo, and if so, is it something that comes naturally, or did you have to work on it?

Claudio: It was something that came naturally. And yes, it is about emulating the feel of the surdo. Everything in samba is surdo-based. If you play the bass drum like a drum machine, it takes away from the feel.

First of all, I hate when bass players try to duplicate all of those 16th notes by doubling what the bass drum is doing. Many bass players play like that. I think it should be much more fluid. So I always tell bass players to just play like they were playing in two. It flows more. If you’re playing bossa nova, then the bass drum is not that important. Sometimes I just play quarter notes because it should be a much lighter approach. Bossa nova is about the guitar and vocals. It’s like a ballad. On bossa nova I play flat-footed, but for samba I play heal up, depending upon the volume.

MD: You have incredible control of dynamics. How does one learn to play with such

feel and yet so softly?

Claudio: That’s the importance of having respect for what’s going on around you musically. That also goes back to the classical influence that we talked about earlier. If you respect the music, you’ll try to put the drums at a level where you think they should be. The problem with a lot of young drummers is that they feel when they’re onstage that they’re not being noticed—they have to do something. They feel uncomfortable and that they need to call attention to themselves. When they go to a concert and see a flashy drummer getting all of the applause, they want that as well. But that is not music.

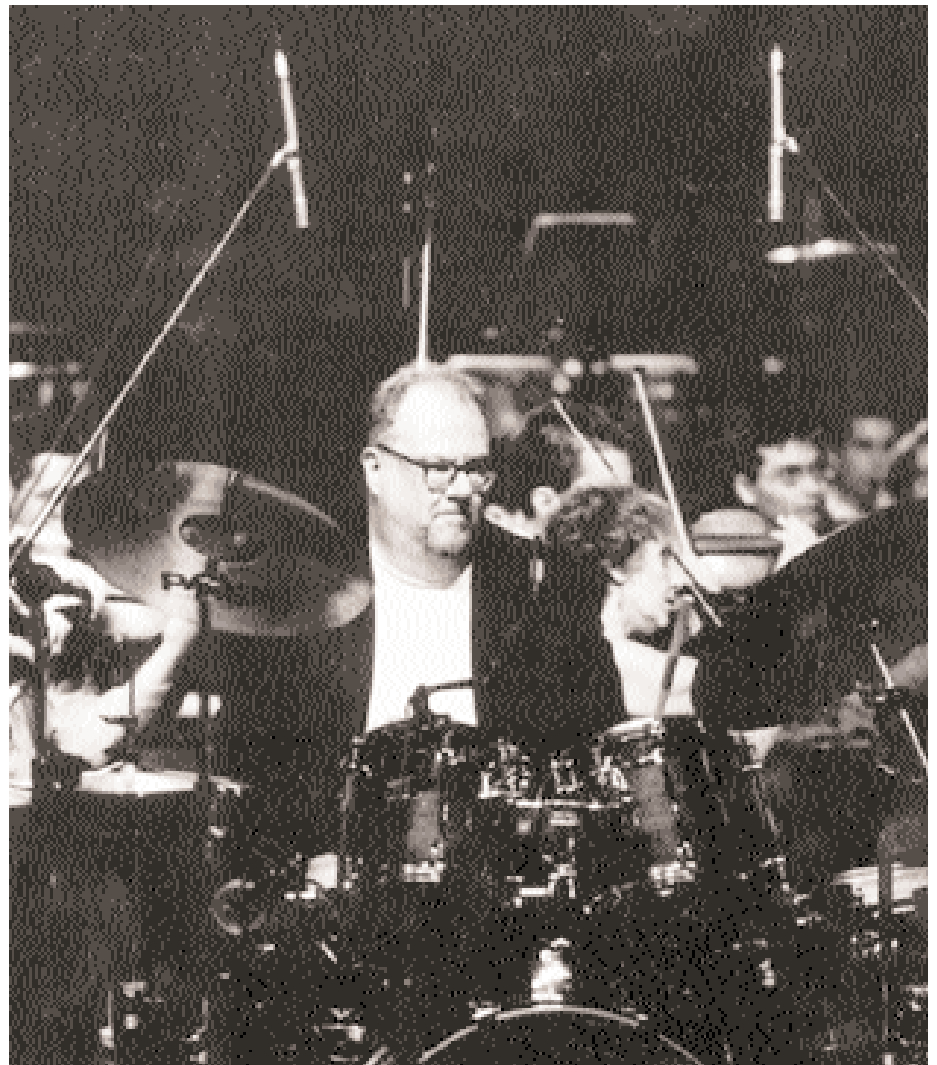
MD: Getting back to your career, how did you meet Sergio Mendes?

Claudio: I knew him in Brazil. When I arrived in Los Angeles with Walter Wanderley, the Brazilian consulate was throwing a party in our honor. Sergio and his band were playing at the party. It’s kind

of a funny story, because at that time we were the stars, and when Sergio came up to me to say hello, I kind of answered very casually. I was pretty cocky at that time because of our success.

Then with Walter, our careers went up and then back down. Sergio’s career went up and stayed up. And I didn’t see Sergio for a long time after that incident. But many years later I was over at [bassist] Sebastian Neto’s house, and [percussionist] Rubens Bassini was there as well. They told me that Dom Um Romao was leaving Sergio’s band and that Sergio was interested in checking me out.

I went to Sergio’s house and played with him and his band, Brazil ’66. I had listened to his records, so I was familiar with his music. After a while the entire band went into the kitchen to talk about my playing. I sat there by myself waiting for their “verdict.” Sergio came out and said that they were doing a record and asked if I wanted to





Vintage Slon: with the chairman of the board (top) and hanging with Buddy.

do it.

At this point I wasn't told that I was a member of the group, they just wanted me for the recording. So we did the record. Then he asked me to be in the group, and I signed a three-year contract. Sometime after that he came up to me and asked if I remembered that party with Walter. I said of course, and then he really let me have it. We had a great laugh over that and became great friends. I worked with him for almost nine years.

Everybody told me that he was very hard to work for, but I never had a problem. If you were professional, knew your parts, and did your job, then everything was okay. When I did my first concert with Sergio, I approached it very much like a recording session. You know, very precise, very controlled. He called me in after the show and told me that I had to play with more energy and not like I was in a studio. The next show I gave him what he wanted, and everything was fine after that.

MD: How many albums did you record with him?

Claudio: Counting the albums I did with him in Japan, fifteen.

MD: The album *Primal Roots* is considered a classic. What was the concept for that

album, and how was it recorded?

Claudio: Sergio always recorded very precisely. Everything was worked out before we got to the studio. With *Primal Roots* he took a completely different approach. He had just finished building a studio in the back of his house, and he hired an engineer from A&M to come in and record us. In addition to the regular band, he brought in Clare Fischer on keyboards and Tom Scott on sax.

Sergio just let the tape roll. There were some basic ideas worked out, but we improvised from there. The whole thing was stream-of-consciousness. Everything was live except for the vocal parts. It was great, but I remember on one of the tracks the engineer

accidentally erased my bass drum. I had to go in and play just the bass drum part, which was not a lot of fun, but it had to be done.

I have to say that I think that record was the most musical album that we recorded. It didn't sell as well as his other albums, but musicians still come up and say that they love it.

MD: The albums you made with Dori Caymmi are so musical. I especially love his version of "Brasil" on the album *Kicking Cans*.

Claudio: Dori is one of a kind. He utilizes influences from the northeast of Brazil and jazz, and is very aware of percussion and drums. He never rehearses before an album because he wants the interpretations to be fresh. His approach is to not do the obvious musically. Sometimes instead of starting a tune on 1, he might start it on 2.

For that session Dori brought in Herbie Hancock on piano as a guest soloist. I remember the bass player looking at the chart and going, "Oh my God, what have I gotten myself into?" Even though this song is a standard, Dori had reharmonized every chord. It was very dissonant with a lot of harmonic tension. Even Herbie was having some trouble in the beginning. I thought that

if *these* guys were having trouble, I better look at the chart. I ended up not playing the bass drum at all for that song. I used a mallet on the floor tom and played the snare with the other hand using a stick. But it was a great record to do because on some tracks we had Dave Grusin, John Patitucci, and Branford Marsalis. It's a very interesting album, and I think that out of all the records I have recorded, it is my favorite.

MD: If a drummer wanted to learn Brazilian rhythms, what would you recommend?

Claudio: First of all, listen to as many different Brazilian albums as you can, because there are many rhythms from Brazil besides samba and bossa nova. There are some great books out there to get you started. You have to use a combination of listening and reading, just as if you were studying arranging.

When I was growing up in Brazil, when we received a new jazz album it was a big party. Back then American jazz albums weren't readily available, so it was a special event. It was also very difficult to get drum equipment, because we didn't have an import/export agreement with America. I think that we valued the music more for this very reason. Today you can go to Tower Records and listen to any style of music that you want. Do it!

MD: Who are some of the Brazilian drummers who've caught your attention?

Claudio: Robertinho Silva, who played with Milton Nascimento, is a wonderful player. There are amazing Brazilian drummers in New York. I love Paulo Braga, who played with Jobim. Duduka Da Fonseca, who wrote a very good Brazilian book, is a fine player. Then there are some amazing American drummers here who have taken the Brazilian thing to different levels. I heard a group from France, Sixun, who had a drummer, Paco Sery, who I think is originally from Africa. He is a monster.

MD: Why did you move to the Denver area?

Claudio: In 1993, Los Angeles had a very big earthquake. Because of that, my wife wasn't comfortable living there anymore. We moved to Scottsdale, Arizona for a couple of years, but there wasn't enough going on for me musically. We then moved to Orlando to be with our daughter, because she was very sick. We brought her to Denver because it was here that they had the best hospital for lung disease. Unfortunately she passed away last year, but my wife and I enjoyed the change of seasons and the

Claudio Slon

scenery, so we decided to stay.

MD: Has it been a difficult transition musically?

Claudio: Yes, because in LA you have maybe a hundred fifty musicians on each instrument who are fantastic, whereas here you may have two or three. And those two or three are so busy that they can't find the time to rehearse or get together to work on new things. It can be frustrating at times. But my wife and I love the quality of life here. Plus a couple of months ago I got together with an excellent guitarist from Boulder named Mitchell Long, and we're getting ready to record.

MD: Is there anybody in your career who you'd like to have recorded or toured with?

Claudio: Milton Nascimento. I really love his music. There are many other people too—Oscar Peterson, Dave Brubeck.... I did miss a lot of opportunities because I was young and foolish.

A long time ago Jim Keltner called me one day. He had heard the song "After Midnight" that I had recorded with Sergio, which was in 7/4. He liked what I played, and he invited me to play at a jam session that he was putting on at Village Records. I played some percussion, and we became good friends. Then one day he told me he wanted to talk to John Lennon about using me. I told Jim that this was way above my head. I thought of myself as a Brazilian drummer, not a rock drummer. I told Jim not to even mention my name to John. I lacked the confidence. Today, I would take an offer like that in a second.

That's another thing I would tell young players: "Don't ever do that!" If you get called, take the gig. If you get fired, at least you can say that you tried. When you get older and think about mistakes like that, it gets very depressing. [laughs]

MD: Do you have any other advice for young drummers wishing to make a career in this business?

Claudio: Don't ever be influenced by applause. Just play for the music. Don't worry about being flashy. Don't get frustrated if you're not the most important part of the band in terms of the show, because you are the most important part *musically*.