Relation Of Bossa Nova To The Social And Political Conditions In Brazil

For this assignment I will be studying how bossa nova relates to the social and political conditions in Brazil when the style first came to rise. Brazil has a rich music culture and a long history in many distinctive styles emerging from the country. Author Chris McGowan wrote “In Brazil, music is everywhere” and this is clearly evident when looking all the way back to the 17th Century when slaves were brought over from Africa (the slave trade).

The music of Brazil “is a unique blend of European harmony and melody, African rhythms along with Native American culture.” It goes without saying the country has come a long way since then, as well as the styles coming out of it. Look at any other country or continent and you’ll see the countless styles which have stemmed from the culture and the history. But what makes Brazilian music so unique is it could be considered a mixing pot of many cultures, such as previously mentioned, and the social and political climate which has contributed to that. Around the 1930s and 40s, Brazilian music started to become more melody focussed which was audibly appealing to the rest of the world; bossa nova was “brand-new sound … [that] rocked the Brazilian music scene and eventually the rest of the world.” Bossa nova (meaning “new trend” or “new wave”) began in the late 1950s and became a big pop-music trend throughout the early 1960s. The style being a fusion of jazz and samba typically contains instruments such as classical guitar, acoustic bass, drums, and piano. Looking at it from both sides (from performer to listener), could be suggested that the popularity of the style could be due to the acoustic instruments making it more accessible to Brazilian musicians – considering Brazil had a large amount of poverty and slum areas – and for the listener it being a relaxing and the melodies used were appealing audibly.

Many famous artists who had a large following at the time such as João Gilberto, Leny Andrade and Stan Getz all performed bossa nova - this would also help spread the style across the country and even the world. “João Gilberto is often referred to as the founder of bossa nova. He created the style by playing variants of samba rhythms on the guitar and layering in more complex harmonies than were normally heard in Brazilian popular music.” During the 50s, there were ensembles such as the Grupo Universitário de Brasil (also known as the University Group of Brazil) who most notable performed an early style of bossa nova long before Brazilian musicians started to collaborate with the likes of America’s musicians. In today’s jazz world, bossa is still performed today (such as Eliane Elias and Diana Krall). “Many bossa nova songs have worked their way into the jazz repertoire, especially Jobim’s “The Girl From Ipanema,” “Corcovado (Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars),” and “How Insensitive.” Often, musicians will apply the bossa style to songs that were not originally bossa nova.” Bossa nova is generally identified with a time of hope in Brazil as the styles’ growth accompanied in the modernisation of the country and its people.

Prior to 1960, the country was led by former President Juscelino Kubitschek whom wanted to lead the country in to a new age. By doing this, plans for a new capital called Brasilia were made back in 1821 but was estimated to take over 50 years to achieve full progress. Brasilia, now Brazil’s federal capital, is located in the mid-western region of the country and is estimated to be Brazil’s 3rd most popular city . This development in the country took place alongside the

rise of bossa nova and therefore became associated at the contemporary music of the time and coincided with the beneficial changes that were taking place. “The early sixties witnessed both unprecedented belief in the potential social impact of popular music and its practical identification with on-going community work aiming to organize citizens around political goals and to raise consciousness.” Students in universities across Brazil were radicalised by politics and wanted to raise awareness; they demonstrated that through music. This community of people were known as a university-based CPC (meaning Centro Popular de Cultura) and sought to break the divide in social classes through songwriting and performance. As the movement mostly developed due to teenagers, the bossa nova style was almost a juxtaposition in regard to the music itself and its content.

The optimistic, upbeat feel of a typical bossa nova song, contrasted greatly with the lyrics which spoke of the suffering and oppression of the dictatorship in previous generations. Leading on from this, in 1964 a coup occurred in Brazil which had little effect at first; a fairly faint dictatorship with little repression that allowed the continuation of composition and production of music. However, this escalated in to a much more heavy and brutal dictatorship resulting in excessive censorship and a more open repression. “Some fled the nation and the ones that stayed were drawn to write music fuelled by the economic and social strife brought on by the drastic change in political ideology. ” Bossa nova’s idyllic themes of positivity and cultural progression soon went out the window and the style became out-of-step with what was actually happening within the country. Soon after, a new style known as Música Populara Brasileria (or also known as MPB) replaced the bossa style with the more rebellious sounding, politically fuelled lyrics which resonated more with the impotent state of the country at the time. There were festivals which were highly popular with teenagers and even older generations of Brazil which performed MPB music. “[these] events became public forums, places to raise or debate issues- through song, performance and response-that the military's suffocation of free speech and political activity had disallowed in normal channels.” As proven by archival footage, alongside live recordings and oral histories, the public felt emotionally affected by these festivals which highlighted the importance of the abusive, restrictive dictatorship and other surrounding political issues at the time. An example of a politically-focussed bossa nova song is the piece Aos nossos filhos written and performed by Ivan Guimarães Lins. This song captured “the poetic sublimation of freedom and of the trauma of the recent repression” and apologizes 'to our children' for the 'cara amarrada / pela falta de ar / pela falta de abraço / pela falta de abrigo...' (frown/lack of air/lack of embrace/lack of shelter ...), trying to find an alibi: 'os dias eram assim' (that is what the days were like).” This song talks about how there was little left for the children who endured the repression and thus caused a generational gap. “The one who speaks in the song seems to be a ghost of oneself, enduring the hard times, unable to return to the normality of (civil) life. However, the hope in the future is present in the knowledge that his children will 'wash away the dirt / redeem the soul / reap the fruit', and unlike the normal course of tradition, will teach their parents the new democratic utopia.”

Bossa nova continued to capture the social effects of Brazil during the time since its birth and songwriters used the style to reflect on the evolved society at the time. “Songwriters from the Northeast like Belchior, Ednardo, Alceu Valença, and Zé Ramalho among others reinterpreted the youth culture and merged regional elements from the Northeast with pop, in a critical and creative operation about the impact of the modern on the traditional.” As the style not only was represented by, but appealed to teenagers, the general mood and emotion of the population of Brazil was captured in this style. Stephanie Haag, an internet-based musicologist stated, “Without Bossa Nova, the young people of Brazil may never have spoken out.” By December

1978 the censorship of Brazilian music became much more relaxed due to the expiration of the AI-5 (authorities who organized and over-looked the performing arts); this by itself was a huge sense of freedom and relief for music artists in Brazil whom spanned an array of styles. Unfortunately for bossa nova, the style and its popularity had faded quite a bit since its peak in the 1960s. For sure, the style was not extinct and has never been deemed extinct to the present day, but the composition and the performance of bossa nova has definitely slowed since then. A country which has so much history and is a melting pot of climates and cultures, the bossa nova style really represents Brazil and the people who live there. Generations upon generations have grown up with the music and have encountered so much political and social change over the decades where I feel the music reflects that.