

3.1. Independence or death: alternative music in the Brazilian 80's

Tereza Virginia de Almeida¹

Abstract

The '80s are mainly known in Brazil as a period of transition between dictatorship and democracy. From the late '70s on, the artistic scene changed because of the emergence of new attitudes in regards to the production and circulation of cultural artifacts. The phenomenon manifested in literature, drama and music. Homemade poetry books sold in bars and restaurants, collective cooperative drama companies and independent musical labels are some examples of such cultural phenomena, creative counterparts to both the cultural industry's economic challenges at the time and to the political complexity associated with the experience of dictatorship.

This paper - the title of which ironically references the sentence purportedly spoken by Dom Pedro when he proclaimed Brazil's independence in 1822 - aims to address a phenomenon that appears in the 1980's: the independent music labels. Both a response to economic restrictions in the record industry and an artist solution challenging the aesthetic patterns imposed by the major label, independent labels are responsible for both the appearance of sophisticated artists on the music scene and the emergence of product that was able to confront the cultural industry's serialized musical output.

Artists and bands who took part on what is known as the "vanguarda paulista," as well as Grupo Boca Livre in Rio de Janeiro, invented a new track to success that precipitated the emergence of several independent labels throughout the country.

Keywords: alternative music; Brazilian culture; independent label; aesthetic

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My title references ironically the sentence purportedly said by Dom Pedro when he proclaimed the Brazilian independence in 1822. Indeed, it aims to address a phenomenon that appeared in the 1980's: the independent music labels. This phenomenon is responsible for the current existence of an entire musical tradition which could have been impossible without the gestures of the generation that decided to challenge the power of the majors and to find ways of taking responsibility for the production and circulation of their music.

¹ Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil.

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Artists and bands who took part on what is known as "vanguarda Paulista" (Paulista avant-garde) in São Paulo as well as "Boca Livre" group in Rio de Janeiro, invented a new track to the success that precipitated the emergence of several independent labels throughout the country.

Therefore, one decade before the appearance of the compact disc format, Brazil was able to witness an avalanche of creativity due to the emergence of groups of artists that decided to get rid of the industry dictates and finance their own music.

Then, in the mid 70's the majors started an ostensive movement to incorporate the so called "garage bands", which were considered a form of low-cost investment by the entrepreneurs. These bands did not demand any investment in musicians and arrangers. Their work was ready for sale since they came out with their own identities and ready repertoires in which simplicity was the rule. This easiness explains the boom in the 80's of what has been acknowledged as the national rock, most of which was originated in the garage bands.

On the other side, the independence was defended mostly by musicians of solid musical training who tried to produce their musical products cooperatively and resist to the patterns imposed by the dictates of the majors. Still, the refinement of their work did demand a certain investment, which was an opposite feature in comparison to the garage bands. At least, their work requested time and, consequently, it could not be produced and consumed as fast as the national rock.

However, some of those very musicians also recorded albums through majors, especially when it could be done with no kind of cooptation. This was the case of Arrigo Barnabé's second album: *Tubarões voadores*. It was released by Ariola, but it did maintain its aesthetic coherence to what the artist had shown in his first album, *Clara Crocodilo*, which had been independently released. In this specific case, one can say that the independence gesture defined the aesthetic patterns which were respected by the major. The negotiations could not have been coherent with Arrigo's interests if he had released the first album through a major. The independent gesture had the function of conquering a public, defining a style and shaping an aesthetic pattern outside the cultural industry's immediate commercial interests.

The example above testifies a relation of complementarity more than of contradiction between independent and major labels. As Márcia Tosta Dias asserts, the independent labels can function as means for testing musical products, so that the majors can make safer investment choices (Dias, 2008, p. 129).

It is not difficult to realize that in certain cases the imposition made by the major in the negotiation with an artist who was already independently established could have led to negative consequences. There could have been a reaction from the public that was already identified with the marginal form of distribution and with some characteristics of the work. In certain cases, for example, even a change in the magnitude of the concert halls could have pushed the public away.

If one considers the title of this conference, *Keep it simple, make it fast*, it is important to observe that the independent musicians in the Brazilian 80's were not seeking a simplification in terms of the musical patterns applied, but quite the opposite. However, this generation did

express a desire for keeping it simple and making it fast when they decided to take both the stages of production and distribution of their musical artifacts in their own hands.

The independents were reacting to a complexity in the very cultural industry. The process of recording music was getting more and more artificial, but at the same time it became extremely rational in order to respond to the demand for serialized production. This meant, for example, the emergence of a collective creator for the mass product that was the result of the work carried out by a group of professionals responsible for the social production of the song more than the expression of an artist (Dias, 2008, pp. 72-73).

It is not difficult to imagine what this superposition between mass culture and music meant to a generation of musicians that had grown up listening to the sophistication and challenges of *Bossa Nova* and *Tropicalismo*. They could not passively accept to see their creations being excluded from the cultural industry by products like the ones coming from the boom of the dance music and other mass products originated from North America. For the independents, their generation was not only confronting an economic crisis but a political question, since the mass culture was being clearly orchestrated by the American imperialism.

At the same time, this generation had learned not to discard the importance of some elements that were mainly exploited by the cultural industry, such as the language of the pop culture. Actually, this was a lesson already learned from the *tropicalistas*, who did take advantage of the scenic and visual demands created by the television as a main media for the music distribution. In the same way, the relationship with the musical cultural tradition, the inscription of styles and references taken from the past as one can find, for example, in the works of "Grupo Rumo" and "Premeditando o Breque", and even in "Boca Livre", are also features that had already been shown by *Tropicalismo*.

This form of reaction to and within the cultural industry is part of what Luiz Tati calls a "force of permanence", which corresponds to something that can be recognized even inside the majors when working, for example, on the emergence of local and regional artists. It occurs despite the pressure presented by the demands of the cultural imperialism on the predominance of the North American musical patterns (Tatit, 2004, p. 232-233).

Therefore, it is possible to state (especially about the Paulista avant-garde) that the independents from the 80's found a way of following the *tropicalista* tracks and that they had to do it outside the majors, which were committed to the treatment of music as a mass product.

The claim for independence from the market dictatorship was also a claim for cultural independence, a response to the demand for the Brazilian musical tradition continuity that had been producing remarkable artistic responses to what happened in the country. In fact, the musical works accomplished by the *Tropicalistas* and also by Chico Buarque de Holanda, as well as the singer Elis Regina's ones are good examples of this response. Despite the constant confrontation with the dictator's censorship, they all counted on their musical label's investment for the production and distribution of their records.

The independents from the 80's were a direct consequence of changes in the very organization of the musical labels, of the cultural industry complexity and of the economic crisis that had transformed the mass music into a pattern from which any musical sophistication would turn out as a challenge to the ears and to the market laws as well.

Fifteen days before her death, Elis Regina, who was considered at the time one of the best Brazilian singers, gave a long and last interview on TV. It was January 5th 1982 and Elis spoke about her dissatisfaction with the cultural industry. She complained about being only a number

in the middle of a big machine: “The record label thinks that the product is the record, not the artist”, she said. At a certain moment of the interview she answered specific questions about the independents addressed to her by Maria Rita Kehl. Did she know them? Why did not she record one of their songs? Her answer was clever: in her own words, she made clear that the power of the independents was in being free from the type of weight a name like hers would impose to their songs. They needed to remain marginal since there, in the margins and outside the cultural mainstream, their power of contestation could be more effective. “Let the madness free”, she said enthusiastically about the independents’ experimentation. In her opinion, if she recorded a song by Arrigo Barnabé, she would be diluting the counterculture inside the official culture. For her, the most important fact was that the independents had built a space where she did not feel allowed either to invade or to eliminate through its incorporation to her own career (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ax-p-Zr8cyg>).

The political character of Elis’s own musical career is unquestionable: in the beginning of her career she had denied going on being just a clone of another singer, because in her first album she was supposed to mimic Cely Campello. Besides the search for singularity in her style, it is important to stress that a considerable part of her repertoire is constituted by songs which confronted the dictatorship, such as the renowned “O bêbado e a equilibrista”, written by João Bosco and Aldir Blanc. However, it is possible to infer from her answer that by that time she did not see any possibility of contestation coming from an artist whose music was recorded by a major. The enemy now was not the censorship but the industrial machine and its emphasis on numbers. The enemy was not the Brazilian dictatorship anymore but the standardization of taste.

It is important to emphasize that the music produced independently had no predominant style characteristics. However, it is impossible to deny that Arrigo Barnabé in São Paulo was the most radical example of the counterculture and of the kind of resistance we are trying to address in this paper. Why do we consider him the most radical one? His music challenged the ears through the inscription of atonalism, serialism and dodecaphonism. At the same time, at the literary level Barnabé composed on lyrics made of narratives where characters of the post-industrial society appeared. In “*Diversões eletrônicas*”, one of the songs quoted by Elis Regina in her interview, the theme is the new fashion of the videogames in big cities like São Paulo. Besides, technology is also simulated by the very performance, since the high tonalities in which the female vocalist sings fits into the building up of the post human world’s atmosphere. Also, the human figure is substituted by mechanized stereotypical characters of the metropolis: the office boy; Neide, a manicure and pedicure; the drunk in the middle of the night as well as the girls from the streets, who seem like automatons in a megalopolis made of concrete and other industrial materials.

Arrigo Barnabé released two albums in the 80’s: *Clara Crocodilo* (1980) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=co17YM3fVVE> and *Tubarões voadores* (1984) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bohaCWrzaGU>. In both of them the titles allude to hybrid figures: partly animal and human, partly animal and machine. Also, in both of them the characters are threatening hybrid monsters within a sonorous atmosphere that mimics thrillers and cartoons soundtracks. The humor is mostly demarcated by the playful and caricatured Arrigo’s narrative voice as it happens in the beginning of “*Clara Crocodilo*” (*Clara Crocodile*). In this song the plot is revealed as a science fiction story that happens in the year 2000, when an office boy sells himself to a multinational company and he is genetically mutated into a hybrid creature. Or when Arrigo’s voice presents the threatening “*Tubarões voadores*” (*Flying*

Sharks) using a voice that mostly resembles a narrator of those popular radio programs in which crime and urban tragedy are the main ingredients.

This humor is even more stressed by the graphic designs where the use of the comic books aesthetic is dominant. In the case of the second album, the songs were composed over Luiz Gê's drawings who also signed the lyrics what turns the album into a sort of musical comic book. In the humorous character of Arrigo's work there is a clear inclination to a satirical approach related to the post industrial world, since its colors and sounds are at the same time incorporated and transgressed through mockery. *Clara Crocodilo's* plot, for example, can be easily read as a satirical and metalinguistic allegory related to the fear of having the very avant-garde music mutated into a monster if it was sold to a multinational.

Arrigo Barnabé stopped performing for a long period, and the proof of the power of his independent gesture is that in the last years he has been presenting the songs of his album from the 80's accompanied by younger performers. Independent from the commercial demand for the consumption, Arrigo Barnabé's albums have been inscribed in the canon of the Brazilian alternative music and have been conquering the newer generations who still listen to his work as transgressive and challenging to the contemporary acoustic patterns. Given the mass media contemporary tendency to shorten even more the space for any kind of aesthetic experimentalism, by transforming the musical experience into a sequence of an easily recognizable formula, the avant-garde effect of Arrigo's sonority tends to last for even more time, being able to affect and challenge future generations.

Considering just Arrigo's music is putting aside the power of his performances that were accompanied by the vocalists and musicians, where the theatrical element was extremely exploited. At this point, it is important to highlight that the music of the Paulista avant-garde as a whole was conceived for the stage. Moreover, this aspect has a strong connection with the valorization of the body as a means of communication and expression in the 80's artistic scene. It was a period when several collective drama companies appeared in the Brazilian major cities. In fact, the body awareness had a significant role for the new groups that followed Augusto Boal's experience with Teatro do Oprimido from the 70's. A good example of the kind of group theatrical experience from the 80's is the "Asdrubal trouxe o trombone" group from Rio de Janeiro, which was created in 1974 and that was the pioneer in cooperative production. As Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda notes, trying to reveal an "Asdrubal effect", the group intended to find creative alternatives for the absence of money for the productions, and had the actor's body as the most important scenic mean. Also, it exploited a mixture of languages with very distinctive origins, always searching for a significant connection with the everyday reality of its own generation: "rhythmic, video, visual arts, choreography, rock, pop" (Hollanda, 2004, p.9-11)

That was a time for the discovery of new ways for performing, and that can also be identified in the importance played by the performances of the independents. If they were sophisticated, high talented musicians who wanted to be differed from the mass products, showing themselves alive was a must. Vania Bastos and Tetê Espíndola, for example, Arrigo's vocalists, proved in their performances that they could not only sing in very challenging vocal regions, or be very precise in the most difficult melodic intervals: they could also dance at the same time! Consequently, just like Arrigo's strong scenic personality, their singularity could never be reproduced.

Although Arrigo Barnabé can be considered as the most challenging independent from his generation, it is important to say that the futuristic character of his work is singular in that



context. The independent attitude certainly connected him in terms of production and circulation to other artists, such as the ones from "Grupo Rumo" or his friend Itamar Assunção, to whom he dedicated a posthumous Cd, *Missa in Memoriam* in 2007. However, Arrigo's challenge to musical tonality certainly made of him the most radical alternative.

It seems difficult to think about the independents without asking about the physical space they occupied, or where their presentations took place. In this sense, it is important to mention a specific theater: the Lira Paulistana, a small theater in São Paulo with two hundred seats where most of the independents played for a public mainly composed by university students.

In the 80's, in Rio de Janeiro a special place for all kinds of alternative experiences appeared: the Circo Voador. It was created by one of the members of the "Asdrúbal trouxe o trombone" group, Perfeito Fortuna. The circus was first built in Ipanema beach and later (where it is up till now) in the bohemian area of Lapa, in Rio's downtown. Nowadays, the circus is the stage of big productions but throughout the 80's many independent groups, including the ones from the Paulista avant-garde, performed there at really popular priced tickets. They targeted the youngest generation which was avid for new aesthetic experiences in a country where there would be no democratic rights until late in that decade. If Arrigo's music was full of references to the postindustrial world, it is also important to emphasize the relationship that the independents had with the musical past. Part of "Grupo Rumo's" experience, for example, and the very way the group conceived the popular music had to do with a certain understanding of the essence of the Brazilian song. "Rumo" explored the micro intervals already present in the intonation of speech. One of the group's composers, Luiz Tatit, is also a semiotician who has theorized about the connection between the speech intonation and the melody as the central element for a popular song efficacy.

According to those beliefs, "Rumo" was not creating something new but only radicalizing what they considered essential in the work of popular songwriters like Sinhô, Lamartine Babo and Noel Rosa. In 1981, "Rumo" recorded two albums: one dedicated to their own music and the other one to the interpretation of those composers from the past (Fenerick, 2007, p. 110). "Rumo's" songs surprised the most traditional ears for sounding like a speech, which was possible through the group's interaction with tradition. Their process of composition and performing was an attempt to attain what they considered to be the essence of the song itself.

At the same time, what can be understood as a simple process of composition was presented through sophisticated arrangements where unexpected instruments were used in a mixture of popular and erudite references, a strategy that can be recognized in other groups at that moment (Fenerick, 2007, p. 111)

A similar relation with the past can be found in the work of the "Premeditando o breque" group. Its name can be translated as "Premeditating the break". *Breque* or break is a very traditional resource in the Brazilian popular samba and it characterizes the "*samba de breque*". The "*breque*" relates to the moment when there is a break in the music. In other words, all the musicians stop playing, and during some compasses only the singer's voice can be heard. In most cases, the singer performs a speech taking advantage of its intonation and rhythm. It is not without irony that the group from São Paulo used the resource, especially because they were not exactly a samba group. "Premeditando o breque" performed rock, *marcha*, *choro* and inscribed in its compositions and arrangements a lot of erudite references. The samba "*Brigando na lua*" (*Fighting on the moon*) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXQvlwpSrE>, for example, starts with a citation of a dodecaphonic piece by Anton von Webern (Fenerick, 2007, p. 125). In the samba lyrics the

narrator meets a group of green creatures in the middle of a desert night. One of the breaks is totally silent, since it is supposed to represent the narrator's attempt to communicate with the extraterrestrial creatures through gestural movements.

It is possible to perceive that the past is not denied for the avant-garde's independents from São Paulo. The past is inscribed, but most of the time it appears in a mixture with contemporary erudite music or other popular musical genres.

It is also important to realize how much this praise for the past is related to the postmodern aesthetics that turned out to be the major form of expression since the 80's in all kinds of artistic expressions. It is easy, for example, to establish an analogy between what happens in the song "*Brigando na lua*" and the citations of old styles that appear in postmodern architecture; a Greek column or a clock from the XVIII century can appear through the modern designs and materials. The postmodern seems to emphasize the idea that the present can accommodate references from different times, including the past and the future with no hierarchy, as if only the present existed in an endless praise for the artistic human archive.

However, not all the independents can be designated as avant-garde. In order to understand this concept it would be important to remember a group from Rio de Janeiro: "Boca Livre". A vocal and instrumental quartet formed by Claudio Nucci, Mauricio Maestro, Zé Renato and David Tygel, "Boca Livre" released its first album independently in 1979 and turned out to be recognized as a phenomenon: they sold one hundred thousand copies. Unlike the independents from São Paulo, their sonority could not be characterized as a challenge to the ears so that it could be defined as avant-garde. However, the refinement and the dissonances performed in the vocal arrangements, the sophisticated lyrics and the quality of the singer-musicians who sounded completely connected transformed the group in a singular reference for the next generations.

"Boca Livre's" reaction to the musical *statu quo*, however, did not take place through denial, parody or satire. Their reaction was carried out through the affirmation of their own work where two elements called the attention: the poetic level reached by the songs and the constant reference to a sonority coming from rural regions of the country, such as Minas Gerais, which contrasted with the urban space where the group lived. This sonority was reached through the presence of genres like "*moda de viola*" and through the instrumental: contrabass and acoustic guitars, among which was the 10- string guitar, or "*viola caipira*", a traditional instrument characteristic of the folk music played in rural areas.

Many other groups and artists could be quoted in this paper. "Língua de Trapo", Itamar Assunção in São Paulo, "Cão sem dono" and the singer Clara Sandroni in Rio who, besides dramatic interpretations, also sang the humorous compositions of his brother Carlos Sandroni, whose style reminded the spoken singing of "Grupo Rumo's" songs. However, the selected examples seem to provide a sufficient picture of what the independents' choice meant in the Brazilian musical scene in the beginning of the 80's.

The very heterogeneity of the independent music scene testifies something that was very difficult to be reached through a major: freedom. The independents were not only free from the market laws. They were also free from any other kind of rule like the ones established by coherent movement platforms. Their rule was to make the music in which they believed, the music they knew how to make and that for most of them had cost years of training. While the majors searched formulas for successful investments, the independents ran their works with no formula in their hands.

The independent experience also had the important role of bringing to the artists much more awareness about the entire process involved in what they produced. In many cases, it could help the negotiations with the majors. The next decades were characterized by political changes, the appearance of the compact disc and later the rise of the Internet. Nowadays, the artists can instantly promote what they are doing through the web. The technologies are being increasingly dominated and there is a radical change going on in terms of the role the artist takes in the process that goes from production to distribution. Despite the fact that anyone can put music online, the independent sector is still responsible for much of the Brazilian musical production that is considered of good quality. Nowadays, being independent may have many different implications and meanings, but for the ones who still make this choice out of a sense of quality preservation, it is not difficult to conclude that the lessons of resistance were taken with the independents from the 80's.

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