

A DAY IN A (DOUBLE) LIFE: CLAUDIO RODITI

Bob Bernotas

Claudio Roditi appears at the top of the stairs, waiting in the doorway to his Brooklyn apartment. He is wearing a dress shirt and there is an unknotted necktie draped over his shoulders, not the usual look for a jazz musician at 11:00 on a Friday morning.

“Just yesterday I got called for a lunchtime gig,” the Brazilian-born trumpeter explains. Later in the afternoon he will be rehearsing for another gig coming up this weekend. A gig, a rehearsal, and an interview – it may not be the typical “day in the life” of a jazz musician (even if there were such a thing). But it offers an ideal opportunity to spend time with Roditi in his “natural habitat,” as it were.

Born in 1946 in Rio de Janeiro, Roditi grew up in the small inland town of Varginha. He began piano lessons at the age of six, but when he was nine he developed an irresistible attraction to the trumpet. “There was a band that used to rehearse right behind our house,” Roditi remembers. “It was a Catholic school. I used to listen to that band playing and I was always amazed. One day I went into the band room of the school and looked around, and when I saw the trumpet, I said, ‘I want to play this instrument.’”

Without realizing it the young trumpeter began gravitating toward jazz. “In those days,” he continues, “whenever there was a record with a trumpet on the cover, I asked my father to buy it, which meant I got some records by Harry James, Louis Armstrong, and Ray Anthony – remember him? – ’cause those were albums that were issued in Brazil.

“Then around 1958 I went to spend some holidays with my mother’s sister in Bahia. She had married an American man, and during those holidays I realized he had a collection of jazz records. I mean, that word, ‘jazz,’ was alien to me at the time, but he kind of pointed out to me what it was. And he had some of the modern sounds as well – Charlie Parker on Dial with Dizzy Gillespie and Miles. A cousin of his had a very nice album that I’ll never forget – [trombonist] Frank Rosolino in the *Stan Kenton Presents* series with Sam Noto on trumpet. So I heard some very wonderful sounds, and I fell in love with that music.”

He progressed through a series of musical mentors – a priest in his school from whom he learned trumpet fundamentals, a valve trombonist in the town band (“he taught me a lot of new tunes”), a cousin of his father, Moises Sion, who played piano. “He had jam sessions at his house in the city of Santos. So there I started going to my first jam sessions and getting my feet wet. His son, Roberto Sion, became a prominent saxophone player in Brazil.”

In 1959, after his father’s death, Roditi moved back to Rio and began studying at the conservatory there. A few years later, at the age of 20, he was named a finalist in an international jazz competition held in Vienna and won a scholarship to the University of Graz. After a year in Austria he returned to Brazil, where he worked as a studio musician, and later took some gigs in Mexico City. In 1970 Roditi came to Boston to study at the Berklee College of Music and has lived in the United States ever since. He gigged around the Boston area for a few years, relocated to New York in 1976, and soon after began working with the late tenor saxophonist Charlie Rouse. He also spent a couple of years with flutist Herbie Mann. But Roditi landed his most prominent sideman spot in 1983, when he joined saxophonist-clarinetist Paquito D’Rivera’s combo.

“I met Claudio through the Cuban drummer, Ignacio Berroa,” D’Rivera recalls. “I was telling Ignacio that I needed another soloist next to me because I was very tired, being in front of the band by myself. I needed somebody by my side in order to play some solos, and I needed somebody strong. Ignacio told me, ‘Why don’t you call Claudio Roditi? He’s a beautiful player and a very fine guy.’ And then I got in touch with Claudio through Ignacio and [Brazilian guitarist-composer] Thiago de Mello. From the first day we played together, I felt so happy with Claudio, so much alike. You call that *affinity*.”

Roditi’s dark, mellow timbre complimented D’Rivera’s bright, almost trumpet-like approach to the alto saxophone. “He is like the trumpet,” Roditi agrees. “We kind of reverse roles. As a matter of fact, any time I played flugelhorn, that was his favorite instrument. Actually I played valve trombone for a while, and the valve trombone was the one he *really* liked, ’cause the trumpet kind of got in the way of his thing, you know?” Unfortunately, the larger trombone mouthpiece began to interfere with Roditi’s trumpet embouchure, so he decided to give up the horn, to his friend’s dismay.

“I was fortunate enough that in those days Claudio played the valve trombone,” D’Rivera remarks, “which is an instrument that I love. I hired him because he was a good player and also because he played the valve trombone. Well, one year later the son of a bitch explained that didn’t play it anymore! Not only that he didn’t play it anymore, *he sold it!* That way I could not call him to play just one tune on the valve trombone, you know? I think he was one of the greatest valve trombonists I ever heard in my life.”

D’Rivera and Roditi (minus the valve trombone) performed and recorded regularly for about eight years, and they still reunite whenever possible, as on a pair of 1992 CD releases, Roditi’s *Milestones* and D’Rivera’s *Who’s Smoking?!* D’Rivera also arranged for Roditi to join the all-star United Nation Orchestra, led by one of his earliest musical heroes, Dizzy Gillespie.

“The first record I bought,” he recalls, “with my father’s money, of course, was a Dizzy Gillespie record. Some people had recommended Chet Baker to me. So I went to the record store and said, ‘Do you have any Chet Baker albums?’ and they had none. But they said, ‘We have this here,’ and it was a record by Dizzy Gillespie and Roy Eldridge, a trumpet battle. And I said, ‘I’ll take it.’ So this was the first modern jazz record I bought. And then thirty years later – more than that, even – I was playing next to him. It was pretty unbelievable.”

Shortly before the United Nation Orchestra’s debut performance, Gillespie decided to add another trumpet player. D’Rivera, who was in the band, recommended his friend. “Paquito and his wife, Brenda, were at a party in Washington,” Roditi explains, “and somehow my name came up. Dizzy’s manager, Charlie Fishman, called me up from this party and said, ‘Listen, there’s a possibility for you to play this gig here with us tomorrow. Can you come to Washington early to rehearse?’ I said, ‘Sure.’”

He made the gig but afterward did not know what to think. “That night Dizzy never gave me a solo,” Roditi goes on, shaking his head. “*Never gave me a solo.* But somehow, maybe personality-wise, they must have dug something about me because they called me for all the next gigs, and so I was in the band from the very beginning.” He soon got his share of solo space.

But he needn’t have worried, D’Rivera asserts. “Dizzy was delighted with Claudio’s playing and with Claudio’s personality. I remember once, it was in the south of France at a jazz festival. Claudio had been away for a time – he didn’t play with the

orchestra – and Dizzy approached him and said, ‘I miss your warmth a lot.’ Claudio almost cried when he heard that.”

As the interview proceeds, Roditi begins checking his watch and struggling with his tie. Finally he completes the knot and is ready to catch a cab into Manhattan for the gig. It is a guest appearance at a weekly lunchtime jam session. Every Friday a group of doctors and corporate executives gather in an East Side restaurant-bar and get their kicks playing with a top-flight jazz musician. Roditi was called in when the scheduled performer had to postpone at the last minute. He will make \$100 for about an hour of playing. “This will pay my cab fares for the rest of the weekend,” he says with satisfaction.

The regulars run through a few tunes in a strangely hybrid, Dixie-bop vein before Roditi comes on for a set with the rhythm section. He wants to open with “Speak Low,” but the pianist doesn’t know the Kurt Weil–Ogden Nash standard, so he settles for “Secret Love,” delivered with a crisp, clear articulation and a full, confident tone. Next Roditi decides to play – and sing – “Triste,” a bossa nova composed by that titan of Brazilian popular music, Antonio Carlos Jobim. As a singer, Roditi is no Billy Eckstine, but he delivers the Portuguese lyric with a charming style and a pleasant voice, the kind that seems to sound better in a foreign language. “I prefer to sing in Portuguese, or maybe in Spanish,” he admits with a smile. “In English it seems like I don’t have the right feel for the language, to sing. It feels ‘abnormal.’”

He picks up his flugelhorn for the ballad, “Body and Soul.” During Roditi’s solo the piano player gets lost in the form and goes to the bridge eight bars early. Unfazed, Roditi follows him as if nothing has happened and smiles graciously when the tune is finished. After roaring through John Coltrane’s minor blues, “Mr. P.C.,” Roditi, back on trumpet, is joined by the full group for the closer, “All the Things You Are.” He trades fours with the tenor saxophonist, taking care neither to condescend nor to show up his less experienced counterpart. The session’s host thanks his guest for coming on such short notice and proclaims in a hokey, but good-natured way that “Claudio is more exhilarating than all the cups of coffee in Brazil.” (Roditi, by the way, is a decaf drinker.)

It has been an instructive hour. The MDs and VPs were competent players, but like all gifted amateurs they tended to accept, rather than challenge, their limitations. The rhythm section kept good, steady time, but Roditi expects more than background from his rhythm players. He wants them to push and propel, to “instigate things,” as he puts it. And as soloists, the other horn players simply could not nudge Roditi toward the level of exuberance and creation that he reaches alongside a worthy counterpart like Paquito D’Rivera. Consequently, Roditi’s performance was more craft than art, thoughtful and clean, but not the kind of inspired presentation for which he is known. In other words, he played capably and professionally despite, rather than because of, his surroundings.

A cross-town taxi ride carries Roditi to the Upper West Side recording studio–rehearsal space of drummer Jimmy Madison, where, joined by pianist Harold Danko and bassist Tarik Shah, they will prepare for a two-night gig this upcoming weekend. The quartet also will make a demo tape, which they hope might help them get more bookings. Once the musicians set up and Madison checks the recording levels, they begin running through the tunes, deciding formats and solo orders. Although Madison is the nominal leader, all the players have ample input.

The first number they try is “Antiqua Nova” by Danko, who admits that he hasn’t pulled it out in quite a while. “Smell the mothballs?” he asks. Immediately a difference in Roditi’s playing is evident. In the presence of a professional rhythm section – even at a rehearsal, playing a tune that is new to him – the trumpeter feels more at ease, certain that they will not get lost in the form or play too thinly.

Next up is “Come Rain or Come Shine,” a track from Roditi’s current CD, *Jazz Turns Samba*. “I took jazz standards that I’ve always loved,” he explains, “dressed them all with a samba beat, and redesigned the melodies a little bit so that they fit the rhythms.” The quartet quickly masters the rhythmic anticipations and tricky offbeat accents that Roditi has added to Harold Arlen’s familiar melody.

Madison wants to play Roditi’s samba, “The Monster and the Flower.” “I just found out that it came out on a bootleg label in Germany,” the trumpeter mentions, shaking his head, “and they put a different title and a different composer on it.” But it’s his tune for sure, and he attacks it with fire and verve.

Roditi, Madison reveals, taught him about Brazilian rhythms during a tour of Spain. “I guess it was in 1984,” the drummer recounts. “It was right when the Socialist government took over and they had this arts program. They hired a sextet of American jazz players, billed them as ‘Los Profesores,’ and we would do a seminar for a week. We did that in Barcelona and in Madrid and then up in Zaragoza. And some other places we did just concerts without the seminar.

“So we were traveling on trains in between the cities, and Claudio and I were always talking about rhythms. We’d be standing around in between the cars, and he’d be saying, ‘Hey, check this out,’ and he’d start banging on the side of the train with his hand or whatever. Or he’d have this little hand drum that they play in Brazil in his bag. He’d take it out and start banging on it. And little by little I’d picked up a lot. He showed me a whole different way of playing the Brazilian rhythms that was much more authentic than what I was doing, which was sort of a second-hand version of an American-version of Brazilian rhythms.”

After the samba Tarik Shah hands out lead sheets to his composition, “The News on Puff” (the musicians’ nickname for singer Betty Carter). The bassist watches as Roditi looks over the page. “Cat’s reading the notes and whistling in tune,” he marvels. “That’s heavy.” They handle Shah’s minor key shuffle flawlessly, but to everyone’s disappointment Madison did not record it. “That would have been a take, man,” Roditi moans. “I thought he was fooling when he said he wasn’t taping – to relax us.” “Well, we can tell everybody about it,” Shah suggests.

They play it again and this time the tape is running. “Good enough,” Madison decides. “The other one was *the* one,” Roditi insists. “Well,” Danko suggests, “if they like this one, we can always say, ‘You should have heard the first take!’”

During a break they discuss the configuration of the club as well as whether – and what kind of – sound system they may need. They’re about halfway through the rehearsal now, and Roditi, having played that lunchtime gig, is growing tired. He hasn’t eaten anything since breakfast and it’s almost 5:00, so he is also hungry.

But there are more tunes to learn. Roditi pulls out his original ballad, “How I Miss Rio,” switches to flugelhorn, and, ignoring his weary chops and empty stomach, wraps his warm, dark tone around the plaintive melody. A couple more ballads, Roditi’s

Brazilian-funk version of Lee Morgan's "Ceora," a feature for Madison, and at last, nearly two sets' worth of material have been prepared to everyone's satisfaction.

Since it's getting late, the musicians agree to fill out the sets with a couple of head arrangements on standards, "so we won't be reading all night," Danko says. Roditi mentions "Speak Low," the tune he couldn't do at the lunchtime gig because not everyone knew it. With these professionals that is not an issue. Madison notices that they haven't done a blues yet, so Shah and Danko show Roditi the head to Duke Ellington's "Take the Coltrane." They discuss how they will dress for the gig – "I'm a tie-wearer," Roditi remarks – and the rehearsal is over. The four musicians depart, having accomplished a great deal in just three hours.

Walking toward the subway that will carry him back to Brooklyn, Roditi discusses how much he is looking forward to the gig, especially since it will feature the blend of American jazz and Brazilian samba that is his forte. "Not very often do I talk about it," he observes, "but I do have something that most American musicians don't have, which is my Brazilian background, and I like to incorporate that." So does Roditi think of himself as essentially a jazz musician or a Brazilian musician who plays jazz?

"That's a good question," he responds. "I don't know if I think of myself as a jazz musician necessarily. I like to think of myself mostly as a musician, period, who is into jazz primarily and then Brazilian music secondarily." Then, in a sense, Roditi must feel like he's living double life, musically. "Oh, always, always. Therefore, the titles of my albums – *Gemini Man*, *Two of Swords*, *Jazz Turns Samba*. There is a duality there."

And since he also has worked with such giants of Afro-Caribbean music as Mario Bauzá, Candido, Mongo Santamaria, Tito Puente, Eddie Palmieri, and, of course, Paquito D'Rivera, it's really more like a triple life. "That's true," Roditi agrees, "I'm totally split. Yet, in a sense it's always possible to connect all these elements." He pauses for a moment. "Let me rephrase this. It's *possible* to connect them, but they are not necessarily compatible all the time. When I was with Paquito, we talked about things like that. The Cuban concept of rhythm is so established that if you infuse it with elements of samba, it kind of disrupts the tradition, you know? And it doesn't create anything that exciting. It's really best to keep Cuban music Cuban and Brazilian music Brazilian, as far as rhythm is concerned.

"I've played with many, many non-Brazilian Latin artists," he continues with typical honesty, "but I can't claim that I really understand that tradition of Cuban music, Puerto Rican music, because it's very complicated. It would take a lifetime of study to fully understand it. So when I play with them, I try my best to feel the rhythms and get in the groove. On the other hand, many times that I've heard Latin non-Brazilians playing, or trying to play, Brazilian music, the feeling to me is always too heavy. There is a certain lightness in the samba or bossa nova that a lot of people don't grasp. The essence is that: a lightness about it that you must try to understand to come close to the soul of this particular kind of music.

"Now a fusion of jazz and Brazilian music is possible because what you gain from jazz are the elements of improvisation and harmony, and melody a little bit. And you leave the rhythms Brazilian. So when I'm improvising in a Latin context, Brazilian or Afro-Cuban or whichever, I use lines that come from bebop, but I try also to interchange my improvisation with rhythms that fit better with the context."

But that fusion, Roditi warns, goes only so far. “I always consider that jazz is another language. Some people tell me that when I play jazz, they hear a certain influence of Brazilian music, meaning that I use a lot of different rhythms within a solo, not just eighth notes or triplets. But Lee Morgan used those kinds of rhythmic phrases, too, so I wouldn’t say that’s strictly ‘Brazilian.’ If I tried to apply Brazilian rhythm to a straight-ahead jazz tune, it usually doesn’t fit.”

In other words, this rhythmic diversity is not an inherently Brazilian trait. Rather, it’s how Roditi plays in any musical context. “I like to use rhythms. It took me a long time to figure this out,” he reflects, “but finally, after listening to some recordings of myself, I understood that this is the way I think. I don’t like to play just runs. I like to put things together with rhythmic phrases. And I’m always listening to the drummers. I’m always catching ideas that I hear coming from the drums.”

Add to that an innate lyricism that comes through at any tempo, ballad or burner, and an overriding sense of economy and taste, and you have the essence of Claudio Roditi. “There is no bullshit in his playing at all,” Paquito D’Rivera testifies. “Claudio doesn’t even try to be original and he is. He is such a sincere player. He doesn’t play to try to impress anybody, he plays just music. I learn a lot just playing next to him. I learn a lot from his way of approaching music, the honest way to play the music. The way he plays is so noble.”

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Claudio Roditi continues to live – and love – his double musical life, as illustrated by the titles and programming of two of his subsequent CDs, Samba Manhattan Style and Double Standards.