

Bossa nova's boss back

November 10, 2006

Sergio Mendes is exploring new worlds, Jonathan Alley reports.

SERGIO MENDES transcends the worlds of cult reverence and Vegas trappings with a style and grace befitting a man dubbed the King of Bossa Nova. Lionised by greats such as Frank Sinatra and invited to perform for US president Ronald Reagan in 1982, Mendes is also revered by British tastemaker Giles Peterson, whose BBC radio show has long championed Mendes as the most important musical originator to emerge from Brazil. It's this universal sense of inspiration that's created *Timeless*, a new collaboration with Blackeyed Peas head man Will I Am. With his group Brasil 66, Mendes created a soulful mod lounge sound for the mid '60s; and with Jorge Ben's *Mas Que Nada* he gave bossa nova its anthem; a new version of the song - partially recorded in Sao Paulo - opens *Timeless*.

The album successfully recasts Mendes as an influential figure in hip-hop culture, via duets with Q Tip of Tribe Called *Quest*, Black Thought from The Roots, and Jurassic Five's mellifluous Chali 2NA. Will I Am reportedly arrived at Mendes' door with an armful of vinyl, claiming he'd first sampled a Mendes album at the age of 14.

Mendes - inevitably - was flattered. Speaking to *EG* from LA on the eve of his first Australian visit in 21 years, Mendes has an almost fatherly admiration for Will's immersive knowledge of Brazilian rhythms, and is effusive about the synergies of hip-hop and bossa nova, admittedly with minor reservations.

"He knew everything I've ever done. Every song - he knew about it! He was very knowledgeable about all the rhythms of Brazil . . . That was fascinating to me, that he loved that kind of music.

"The most important thing to me is melody. Will and I were talking about hip-hop, and I mentioned that I miss melody. There are lot of great rhythms and loops and stuff but they're not as melodic as I'd like. I think melody brought us together - Brazil is all about great rhythms, but also great melodies with it. It's in everybody's soul and everybody's blood down there."

Mendes has lived these rhythms. Growing up in Niteroi, across the bay from Rio de Janeiro, he was schooled as a classical pianist from five, playing Debussy, Beethoven and Ravel before discovering Dave



Sergio Mendes, known as the King of Bossa Nova, has a new album and is about to tour Australia for the first time in 21 years.

Photo: *Supplied*

Brubeck at 11. Jazz changed his life at the very moment that bossa nova leapt to the world stage.

"It was very difficult to get those records in those days! They were imported. Some of my friends were able to get them. We used to go to each other's houses and listen to figure out what kind of chords were being played. I listened to other pianists like Art Tatum and Bud Powell, and I was totally fascinated by jazz."

In a few short years, Mendes had formed the Bossa Rio Sextet, played the inaugural bossa nova festival at New York's Carnegie Hall in 1962 with contemporaries Antonio Carlos Jobim and Joao Gilberto, and met his idols Stan Getz, Dizzy Gillespie and Julian Cannonball Adderley. He recorded Cannonball's Bossa Nova with the alto saxophonist in 1962.

His resurgence seems timely. In June, Mendes and his contemporaries, including A&M records main man Herb Alpert and original Brasil 66 vocalist Lonnie Hall, played a 40-year anniversary show at LA's Hollywood Bowl, featuring album guests India Irie, Q Tip and John Legend. Most recently, Mendes has contributed to Will I Am's as-yet-unnamed solo debut, due for release in January.

One gets the impression that this gentleman of modern music remains chiefly thrilled by collaboration.

"That's the magic for me - the experience of working with great people like Cannonball, Jobim, Sinatra . . . now in a reversible position with Will I Am . . . I'm the older guy in the movie!"

Sergio Mendes and Brasil 06 play the Arts Centre, Tuesday, November 14.

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