

# CHICAGO TRIBUNE

BRAZILIAN MUSIC

## Donato brings a Rio good time

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The great Brazilian songwriter and pianist Joao Donato has been performing for more than half a century, but he didn't make his Chicago debut until Thursday night.

He was worth the wait.

Playing before a near-capacity crowd at HotHouse, Donato buoyantly dispatched several of his hits, as well as lesser-known, but no less beguiling, songs. In effect, he showed listeners why many observers rank him in the same exalted class as the iconic Brazilian songwriter Antonio Carlos Jobim.

Jobim's tunes are more famous, as even many casual listeners are familiar with "The Girl From Ipanema," "Desafinado" and "Dindi."

But Donato's works are built on a similar mixture of high craft and remarkable economy, the songwriter saying a great deal about rhythm, romance and Brazilian culture in a few well-chosen notes.

Seated at the piano and accompanied only by a bassist and drummer, Donato performed his immense songbook with seeming nonchalance, tossing off one exquisite miniature after another. Like most artists who are songwriters first, performers second, he cut to the essence of his music. There were no florid passages on the piano, no pyrotechnics in his straightforward, gravelly voiced singing.

Only songs as elegantly crafted as Donato's could withstand such transparency. Yet each piece Donato played sounded thoroughly inviting, for his music epitomizes everything that is melodically alluring and rhythmically seductive about classic bossa nova.

As soon as Donato announced that he was going to perform "The Frog," a cheer went up in the crowd, for Donato connoisseurs recognized the tune as one of his most famous.

Once again, listeners had to be struck by the deceptive simplicity of this music. Its insistent,

repeated-note theme lingers long in memory. Yet underneath this seeming trifle, Donato and his colleagues wove extraordinarily subtle rhythms and cross-rhythms.

Donato's "Amazon" also holds a valued place in Brazilian music, and here, too, the composer layered additional motifs underneath a sleek, attractive melody. After opening the work with a reference to music of Maurice Ravel, Donato slipped seamlessly into "Amazon," enriching it with ultra-sophisticated jazz harmony. Not everything Donato played, however, was quite so melodically lulling. He brought considerable rhythmic tension to his pianism in his "Sugar Cane Breeze"; chanted long, lamenting vocal lines on "Emorio"; and recalled the slightly melancholy style of Erik Satie in a piano solo on Donato's "Aquarius," one of his bigger hits.

Of course, Donato tipped his hat to Jobim, offering an ebullient version of the frothy "I Only Dance the Samba."

Suddenly, the cold chill of Chicago gave way to the balmy breezes of Rio de Janeiro, where Donato now lives.

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