

BIOGRAPHY

João Donato de Oliveira Neto was born in Rio Branco, the capital of the state of Acre, on August 17th 1934. His father, also called João Donato, was a pilot and in his leisure hours liked to play the mandolin at home. His mother sang and the eldest sister, Eneyda, worked out to be a pianist. The youngest, Lysias, was inclined to letters and became the main partner of his brother's compositions.

João's first instrument was an accordion, in which he composed his first music, the waltz "Nini", at the age of eight. Before his 12th birthday, he got from his father 24 and 120-bass accordions. In 1945, Donato father was transferred and the family had to leave Rio Branco heading to Rio de Janeiro.

This was the start of a walk to other places. Soon, the musical circuit were parties at the schools of Tijuca and neighboring wards. He tried his luck on TV at the Ary Barroso's talent program. Intransigent, Ary emphatically refused to hear him, with the allegation that he "*did not like children prodigy*". Luckily, there were more attentive ears.

Becoming a professional in 1949, at the age of 15, Donato already showed on his resume the mythological jam-sessions held at singer Dick Farney's place and at the Sinatra-Farney Fan Club, of which he was a member. Johnny Alf, Nora Ney, Dóris Monteiro, Paulo Moura and even Jô Soares, at the bongo, were among the components of these vitaminized jams.

On the first recording he participates, joining flutist Altamiro Carrilho's band, Donato plays accordion on the two tracks of the 78 RPM: Ernesto Nazareth's "Brejeiro", and "Feliz aniversário", by Altamiro himself. Soon after he migrates to violinist Fafá Lemos' band, as a substitute to Chiquinho do Acordeon.

As from 1953, now as a piano player, Donato begins to lead his own instrumental formations, – *Donato e seu Conjunto*, *Donato Trio*, the group *Os Namorados* – with whom he launches on 78 RPM instrumental versions of American and Brazilian music standards (such as “Tenderly”, a Nat King Cole hit) and (“*Se acaso você chegasse*”, by Lupicínio Rodrigues, a samba composer from the state of Rio Grande do Sul).

Three years later, Odeon assigns a beginner to carry out the musical direction of “*Chá Dançante*” (1956), Donato and his band’s first LP album. A certain Antonio Carlos – that later on would have an airport named after him – would be the director of the pilot son’s album. The repertoire chosen by Tom Jobim was really to take off at any debutants’ ball: “*No rancho fundo*” (Lamartine Babo – Ary Barroso), “*Carinhoso*” (Pixinguinha – João de Barro), “*Baião*” (Luiz Gonzaga – Humberto), “*Peguei um Ita no norte*” (Dorival Caymmi).

Afterwards, Donato spends two years in São Paulo. Back in Rio, the Bossa Nova had break out. João Gilberto himself said here and there that he had taken the revolutionary guitar beat while watching Donato play the piano. In that same year 1958, he records “*Minha saudade*” and “*Mambinho*”, a partnership of the two Joãos, Donato and Gilberto.

Invited by Nanai (a former integrating party of the band *Os Namorados*) he leaves for a six-week season at a casino in Lake Tahoe (Nevada). Donato relativized the influence of Jazz, integrated the Caribbean music to the orchestras of Mongo Santamaría, Johnny Martinez, Cal Tjader and Tito Puente. He even went on tour with João Gilberto around Europe.

1962, time to return to Brazil. At least in time to compose two classic, always fashionable pieces of the Brazilian instrumental music – “*Muito à vontade*” (1962) and “*A Bossa muito moderna de João Donato*” (1963), both with Polydor, relaunched in the early 2000’s on CD by Dubas. Donato at the

piano, Milton Banana in the drums, Tião Neto with bass and Amaury Rodrigues in percussion.

About *"Muito à vontade"*, journalist Ruy Castro wrote, by occasion of its relaunching on CD: "it was his first album at the piano and actually the real first one, with nine of his compositions among the 12 tracks (...). Donato, which was living in the United States during the Bossa Nova boom, was a legend among the younger musicians – to some, for the stories they heard, he would be something like the *curupira* (in Brazilian folklore, a boggy-man whose feet point backwards) or the water snake. This album widened them new horizons and put Donato back into a movement that, without knowing it, he had helped to build up". There they are: *"Muito à vontade"*, *"Minha saudade"*, *"Sambou, sambou"*, *"Jodel"*.

"A Bossa muito moderna" introduces some originally instrumental themes which, many years later, would be mandatory in every Brazilian pop music songbook. Among them *"Índio perdido"*, which would become *"Lugar comum"*, when Gilberto Gil made its lyrics. Gil is also partner in the lyrics that would make *"Villa Grazia"* become *"Bananeira"*. Now *"Silk Stop"* is the original theme upon which Martinho da Vila would write *"Gaiolas Abertas"*. The influence of the Cuban music is evident in *"Bluchanga"*, from the time when Donato played with Mongo Santamaría.

He packs the piano player and goes back to the USA. This time, the season would last for almost a decade. He worked with Nelson Riddle, Herbie Mann, Chet Baker, Cal Tjader, Bud Shank, Armando Peraza, etc. He formed, alongside with João Gilberto, Jobim, Moacir Santos, Eumir Deodato, Sergio Mendes and Astrud Gilberto, the team that would really make Brazil internationally recognized for its music.

"Piano of João Donato: The new sound of Brazil" (1965) and *"Donato / Deodato"* (1969) were released by RCA and remained out of catalog in Brazil.

However, the album that better represents the second American season is “*A Bad Donato*” (1970), made with the Blue Thumb, a California seal, and relaunched on CD by Dubas. Recorded in Los Angeles, “*A Bad Donato*” condenses funk, psychedelia, soul music, Afro-Cuban sounds, jazz fusion. A groovy, poisoned-sound dancing Donato, – highly wired with the Californian dream’s experimentalism -, considered as one of the 100 best albums of all times by the Rolling Stone magazine.

In the Christmas of 72, Donato passed through Rio and visited composer Marcos Valle. There he met singer Agostinho dos Santos, which suggested to Donato he should work on lyrics for his songs. This was the password for Donato’s irresistible themes receiving the outlines of popular song. Valle took the chance to invite him to record a new album in Brazil, with its repertoire formed as of this new songbook. João was back, absolutely reinvented.

Donato tells how it was to journalist Lia Baron: “*I was going to record an instrumental in a few days and Agostinho dos Santos said: ‘Are you recording playing the piano again? Everybody has heard it before. If I were you, I’d record singing’*”. Suggestion accepted, Donato is not anymore an exclusive integrant party of the instrumental field and joins the BRAZILIAN POP MUSIC. In addition to Gil, Martinho and Lysias, Chico Buarque, Caetano Veloso, Cazuza, Arnaldo Antunes, Aldir Blanc, Paulo César Pinheiro, Ronaldo Bastos, Abel Silva, Geraldo Carneiro and even the poet Haroldo de Campos and phono audiologist and writer Pedro Bloch became João’s partners.

“*Quem é quem*”, launched by Emi in 1973 includes the musics “*Terremoto*”, “*Chorou, chorou*” (both with lyrics by Paulo César Pinheiro), “*Até quem sabe*” (with Lysias), “*Cadê Jodel?*” (with Marcos Valle). Even Dorival Caymmi sends an unpublished, “*Cala a boca, Menino*”. On a letter to João Gilberto, on September 13th 73, Donato cannot hide his enthusiasm: “It’s my best work in albums to this date, taking into account the time it took, which explains the maximum care given to everything around it. And the outcome is an album that

I find simply adorable". It was also considered as one of the 100 best albums in all times by the Rolling Stone magazine. In 2008 "*Quem é Quem*" was the theme of a program entirely dedicated to him by the Canal Brasil, presented by Charles Gavin; and of a book written by producer and musician Kassim.

The next album, "*Lugar comum*" (1975), by Philips, continues with a vocalist Donato, with most of the repertoire formed by former instrumental themes. There are partnerships with Caetano Veloso ("*Naturalmente*"), Gutemberg Guarabyra ("*É menina*"), Rubens Confete ("*Xangô é de Baê*"). With Gil they are eight, among them, "*Tudo tem*", "*A bruxa de mentira*", "*Deixei recado*", "*Que besteira*", "*Emoriô*" and at least two standards to any anthology of popular song: the title-track "*Bananeira*".

On the text he prepared for launching "*Lugar comum*", on CD by Dubas, Donato revisits a given Summer day in the 70's, at Caetano's home. He had become closer to the group of Bahia and had even made the musical direction of Gal Costa's show "*Cantar*", recorded on album the previous year: "*Everybody was there: Bethânia, Gal, Caetano with Dedé and Moreno (...). They had my two albums "Muito à vontade" and "A bossa muito moderna" and I always teased them, challenging them to make the lyrics. When this melody showed up, Gil invented it was "bananeira não sei / bananeira sei lá (...). Then I said: "quintal do seu olhar". And him: "olhar do coração. As it was ping-pong on its second part"*".

Do you remember the tour to Europe Donato made with João Gilberto, soon after the first American season? Well then, it was in a small Italian village that the banana tree was planted. Donato explains: "*My first lyrics appeared as of those already recorded instrumental themes, which I thought never would have lyrics. "Bananeira" was "Villa Grazia", the name of the small inn where we stayed at Lucca, in Italy, following João Gilberto in a season (...). Ninety percent of my instrumental songs have changed their names, because of the lyrics"*.

After that period time, Donato stayed almost twenty years without recording. The mainstream of the time seemed not to absorb what, luckily, the pop gang started to see as of the 90's. João's return to the album world happens in 1996 (he had launched only the instrumental and live "*Leilíadas*", by Philips, in 86), with the album "*Coisas tão simples*", produced by João Augusto, for EMI. The album brings "*Doralinda*", a partnership with Cazuza, in addition to new collaborations with Lysias ("*Fonte da saudade*"), Norman Gimbel ("*Everyday*"), Toshio Ono ("*Summer of temptation*").

Ever since, Donato has been launching his albums mainly with three independent seals: By Lumiar, of Almir Chediak: "*Café com pão*" (with drummer Eloir de Moraes, 1997); "*Só danço samba*" (1999); the three volumes of the collection Songbook (1999), further to "*Remando na raia*" (2001), a meeting with Emilio Santiago (2003) and the reencounter with Maria Tita (2006). With the Deckdisc, he made "*Ê Lalá Lay-Ê*" (2001), "*Managarroba*" (2002) and the instrumental "*O piano de João Donato*", produced by rock singer Rafael Ramos, in addition to the album recorded with Wanda Sá (2003).

By Biscoito Fino, were released the instrumental meetings with Paulo Moura ("*Dois panos pra manga*", 2006) and Bud Shank ("*Uma tarde com*", this also on DVD). With the Biscoito, Donato made also the DVD "*Donatural*" (2005), where he hosts – on a live recording at the Espaço Sérgio Porto, in Rio – several generations of partners: from Gilberto Gil to DJ Marcelinho da Lua; from Emilio Santiago to Marcelo D2; from Leila Pinheiro to Joyce, even Ângela Rô Rô and his son Donatinho, wild on keyboards and samplers.

The American writer Allen Thayer sentences, among the twelve pages he wrote about João for *Wax Poetics*, the New Yorker Jazz magazine, in 2007: "*João Donato deserves a place among the legends of the Brazilian music, alongside with Antonio Carlos Jobim, João Gilberto, Dorival Caymmi, Ary*

Barroso and many others, despite his (...) experimentation with several genders of music turning any attempt to classify him into a challenge”.

In his turn, blogger Alexandre Carvalho dos Santos is not worried with classifications. On a text posted on the internet, he suggests Donato's music as a form for healing depression: “I recommend a João Donato show not only to someone who is interested in a first class music, an impressive pianist and a selection of historic compositions. I recommend it to who needs an anti-depressive, an acupuncture session or any such other form of deep relaxation. I had my dose on a Sunday evening, on a show in São Paulo. A perfect timing to start a week believing that happiness exists, in spite of the boss”.

João Donato lives in the Urca neighborhood, in Rio. He is married to journalist Ivone Belem since 2001. He is the father of Jodel, Joana and Donatinho.

Julio Moura