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# Walter Wanderley

## Boss of the Bossa-Nova

by Jeff Vorzimmer

In a recent movie starring Treat Williams, he and the rest of the cast find themselves in the elevator of a mysteriously empty cruise ship. They've just begun to suspect that a creature from 50,000 fathoms may be to blame for the disappearance of the passengers and crew. After hearing a bang and a deep moaning sound, Treat's character Finnegan asks, "What was *that*?" As they stand quietly listening, all they hear is the piped-in music in the elevator. "It's 'The Girl from Ipanema,'" his partner answers. Of course, fans of Walter Wanderley's can identify the unmistakable staccato organ of his classic version of the bossa nova standard.

Wanderley has since come out of the elevator and is featured on the soundtracks of numerous other films including *Out of Sight* and *Next Stop Wonderland*. He has appeared on numerous CD compilations and playlists of lounge and jazz radio shows over the past year. In 1998 alone, Verve issued three CDs of Wanderley's music, including a "Best of" package and PolyGram Japan issued another five CDs.

To say that Wanderley's music runs the gamut of style from Esquivel to Martin Denny, would be like describing cachaça as somewhere between tequila and rum in flavor, but it's tailor-made for the lounge crowd. At times, his playing is much like Esquivel and like Denny in that he uses a lot of exotic instruments. The vocal tracks on his Verve and A&M albums sound like Sérgio Mendes and, in fact, the Wanderley version of "Wave" is almost indistinguishable from that on the Brasil '66 album, *Equinox*.

Because some 30 years have passed since the peak of his career and 12 years since his death, very little biographical information is available on Walter Wanderley. He was born Walter Jose Wanderley Mendoza on May 12, 1932 in the city of Recife, in the northeast of Brazil in

an area originally settled by the Dutch, from whom his family is descended. The name *Wanderley* is a corruption of the family's original name, "van der Ley", but is still

pronounced the same way, with the accent on the final syllable with its long "a" sound.

By the age of five he was playing the piano, and at the age of 12 he entered the Lyceu de Artes. At 15, he

had moved to São Paulo, which was and still is, the second largest city in this hemisphere. There, he began his career as a professional musician playing the organ, and within months had landed a recording contract. But it wasn't until his association with João Gilberto, Antonio Carlos Jobim and the bossa nova, that his career really took off. He arranged some of João Gilberto's music, and played on his legendary bossa nova records of the late '50s and early '60 on the Odeon label.

By 1961 he had helped establish the sound of the bossa nova, making the organ an integral part of that sound. By 1962, he had a string of his own hits that included instrumental versions of "Desafinado," "Song of the Jet," "O Barquinho," "Corcovado" and "Meditation." That same year Capitol Records, (which two years earlier had released an album by Gilberto and Jobim entitled "Samba de Uma Nota So") released an album of Wanderley material entitled *Walter Wanderley's Brazilian Organ*.

The album featured his greatest Brazilian hits, which included the first U.S. release of "The Girl from Ipanema."

In 1965, like so many other Brazilian musicians at the time, Wanderley