



Out of sight is jazz drummer's joy

By **Jeff Bradley**
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Jan. 14 - The first thing you notice about Claudio Slon is that he plays the drums left-handed. But over the course of a set or two, something more important emerges. Unlike most jazz drummers, Slon never shows off. He takes few solos, and when he does, they're short and sweet.

Instead, he focuses on creating that mystical commodity known to jazz musicians as a "groove," a term better defined in your bones than in words. A groove isn't just a beat. It's an irresistible force that propels a band forward, never hurrying, never lagging, always there, always swinging, supporting the soloists without getting in their way.

It's the opposite of the Gene Krupa, Buddy Rich, Tony Williams sort of drumming, which draws attention to itself. It's more the Shelly Manne, Joe Morello, Connie Kay school of rhythmic subtlety and understatement - in Slon's case, with a Latin kick.

You can hear the Brazilian all month at Vartan's jazz club, 1800 Glenarm Place (303-399-1111). He plays during the week with local musicians and on weekends with international stars Randy Brecker (Friday-Saturday), Herbie Mann (Jan. 23-24) and Benny Golson (Jan. 30-31).

If you like bossa nova and Brazilian jazz, you're probably already familiar with Slon. In the 1960s, he played on 15 albums by Sergio Mendes and the Brazil '66, crossover hits by Walter Wanderley, LPs by Brazilian composer Antonio Carlos Jobim and the famous 1967 Frank Sinatra collaboration with Jobim, "Francis A. and Antonio C."

"It was a big band with the best-of-the-best among Los Angeles studio guys," recalls Slon, who's lived in the United States since 1963. "I think it was Don Costa conducting. Jobim came in and introduced me to Sinatra, and I wasn't nervous at all. It was just a regular session. Sinatra had a glass partition but sang with the orchestra to get a live feeling. He said, 'OK, let's try the first song.' I put on some headphones, and all of a sudden that voice came through and I realized what I was doing. Oh my God, my heart was thumping. Only slowly did I regain my musical composure.

"He was great, in tune with everybody and in complete control."

Slon also played a TV special with Sinatra, Jobim and Ella Fitzgerald, and Ella could hardly sing, she was so in awe of Ol' Blue Eyes. "Talk about being nervous. I don't know why because she was always the best."

While in Denver, Slon is staying at the Burnsley Hotel, which was owned by Fitzgerald and actor Kirk Douglas when it opened as an apartment house in 1962, according to current general manager Tom Prinz, who now runs it as an all-suite hotel.

Impressed by Slon's Ella connection, Prinz has arranged for him and pianist Milcho Leviev to perform at an exclusive dinner Jan. 29 (for reservations call 303-830-1000). Slon was destined for a musical career. He was born in Argentina. His mother was a choreographer and his violinist father became concertmaster of the orchestra in Sao Paulo, Brazil, where the family moved when Claudio was 10. His grandparents on both sides were from Odessa, then in the Soviet Union, and fled to South America to escape persecution.

Slon began as a classically trained percussionist. "Then I told my father I wanted to play jazz, and there was a big argument. He told me to be a real musician. But I started playing with jazz groups in Brazil."

When he came to the U.S. to record with Wanderley, Jobim and singer Astrud Gilberto, he decided to stay and now lives in Orlando, Fla. "I always admired the jazz scene here and had the dream of being part of it."

The lyrical Jobim, sometimes described as the South American Cole Porter, employed him because he wanted a drummer who wasn't too bombastic, and that cool but riveting style has remained Slon's trademark.

"Drums for too long have been a pervasive kind of thing in which the drummer feels he has to call attention to himself, but I don't really enjoy that. Usually I have the feeling everybody is thinking 'That guy doesn't do anything,' and that's just how I want it."

Being left-handed has been a drag since the drum kit must be set up like a mirror image of the way right-handed drummers play. "I can't sit in on anybody else's set, and they can't sit in on mine."

What does turn Slon on is a groove. "When a groove kicks in and everybody faces the same way, I'm completely realized. I can stay the whole night like that."

From Denver, Slon heads to L.A. to record with Brazilian composer Dori Caymmi and plans a Brazilian tour with Leviev in the spring.

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