

**Laurindo Almeida**

Brazil

Interview

‘The samba is in in my veins.’

Published in *Guitar* magazine. November, 1979.

Venue: London.

Lance Bosman

# Guitar

the magazine for all guitarists

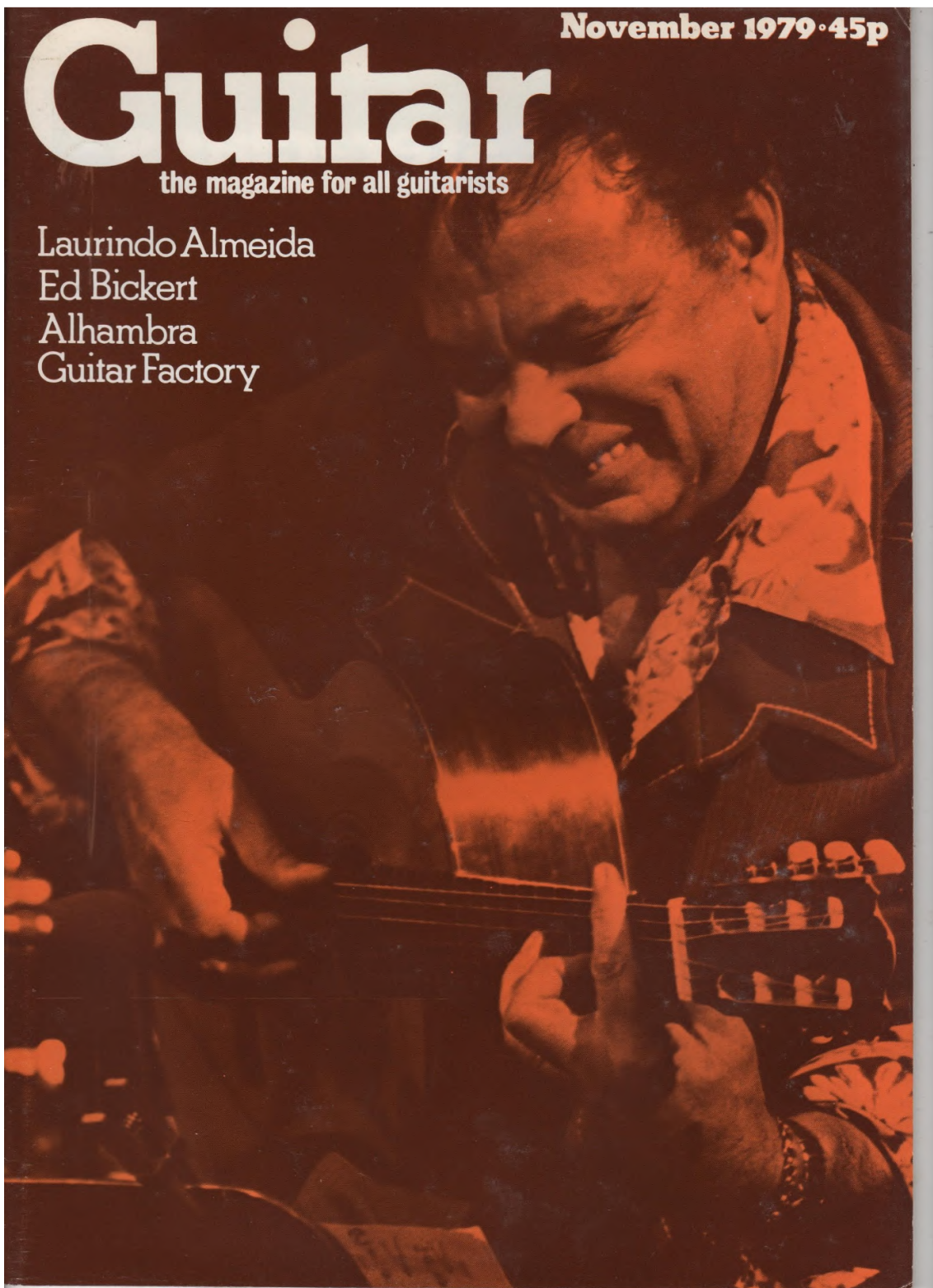
November 1979 • 45p

Laurindo Almeida

Ed Bickert

Alhambra

Guitar Factory



# LAURINDO ALMEIDA

*The Samba is in my veins*



At its peak in the mid-Sixties, the bossa nova had spread across the board from natty jazz combo settings to cloying jingles. Heading the popular front was Jobim's romantic orchestrations of his own compositions, melodies easily remembered for their perky rhythms and sentimental lyricism. To the innumerable vocal and instrumental versions of these tunes were added individual contributions from the players themselves: Stan Getz, Paul Desmond with guitarists Charlie Byrd, Baden Powell and Joao Gilberto. Yet it was some 15 years before this upsurge that the spark of the idiom occurred; and that was when the Laurindo Almeida-Bud Shank team fused Brazilian songs and rhythms with jazz elements.

Born in Sao Paulo, Brazil in 1917, Laurindo Almeida soon gained local recognition as a classical guitarist and composer of solo and ensemble work for the instrument. In 1947 he moved to California, and from that went on to broaden his reputation with world concert tours of

classical and original pieces, with notable performances at the Hollywood Bowl and Carnegie Hall. Aside from public appearances, most of Laurindo's time has been taken as a session guitarist for the Hollywood studios. His distinctive samba style chordwork with inset melodies have supported the scores in a dozen major films plus compositions and arrangements for the underscores of many more.

A somewhat lack-lustre appearance in London of the LA Four group recently reuniting Bud Shank and Laurindo Almeida does little to cloud his prolific recordings, compositions and publications of jazz arrangements and tutors. Of past collaborations, the classical-jazz side of Almeida's guitar found a perfect blend with the Bach-inclined counterpoint of the Modern Jazz Quartet, a move that followed his innovatory matching of the solo guitar with the brass forces of the Stan Kenton orchestra.

**Lance Bosman**



'That was around 1947 when I had moved from Rio to Hollywood. My first work there was in films with Danny Kaye, and I met many musicians, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman. I think it was six months after that I met Stan Kenton and I became a member of his orchestra as a soloist. In those days I was on my own with my style of guitar, everyone else was playing pick and electric style; that put me in a position to shine because I was something new. Then Stan arranged some pieces featuring the solo guitar, one called Lament which I played on tour. He had many brass innovations going at the time with French horns, and there was Shelly Mann, a very powerful drummer. In those days they didn't have the facilities we have today, I had to use a contact mike in my classical guitar; pretty terrible, I had to hold it to the bridge with a rubber band. It's so easy now with it inserted, but even then, with that contact device, we always managed to get the sound across.'

Almeida's guest appearance sessions with the MJQ during the early sixties produced a most imaginative setting of Jobim's One Note Samba. To Laurindo's sketches, the guitar opens with an extensive solo revolving around an open string pedal, followed up with overlapping entries of Connie Kay's drums, Percy Heath's bass and choruses from John Lewis' piano and Milt Jackson's vibes. In addition to standards and originals, the group featured a Bach fugue and a reduced setting to support the guitar on the slow movement of the Aranjuez concerto. Catching a fine balance, the acoustic guitar's comping lent rhythm and depth to the MJQ's backing, and when coming to the fore, provided a further line to their polished counterpoint.

'I live in the west coast and the members of the MJQ live in New York, the east coast, so we were separated by 3000 miles. One day John Lewis phoned and invited me to join them, and I enquired what did he want me to play, and he said he had arrangements of the Villa Lobos Bachianas and the slow movement from the Rodrigo. Well I thought that was very interesting and maybe I could play a couple of solos before they came in. So I accepted and we came to Europe. As for arranging, and this applied to the One Note Samba, I write out every note except the improvisation which is given as chords for the player. If you write the improvisation down, well you just can't do that, it has to be free. You stated the theme first and then you improvise on a chordal routine. But sophisticated groups like the MJQ have special arrangements; yet the format is still the same: state the theme, bear in mind the chords and work that melody round them. It can work the other way too, from the chords to the melody. I took the Bach prelude originally in C minor (usually found in D minor) transcribed it for the quartet and wrote a melody behind it which Bud Shank plays on the saxophone. That's on a record called Nouveau Bach.'

Latin rhythms, melodies eluding the expected accent, altered and extended chords, are the essence of the bossa nova. To evolve as an amalgam, a self-contained idiom, took time and the work of many hands. Yet these elements bear just as prominently in the germination of the form which emerged in the early fifties from the Laurindo Almeida quartet. And it's interesting to compare those tentative blendings of jazz and samba with recent, consolidated versions. Where a familiar bossa nova will maintain its stylistic rhythm from opening to end, the quartet drew upon a range of South American devices, conga drums and the like, alternated with breaks in straight four-time. Where the melodies of later sambas are tinged with lushness, these formative ones pervade more earthy traditionalism, for all the light and fluid passages of Bud Shank's sax. Brazilian music was in fact a primary source, namely Atabaque by Radames Gnattali one of Brazil's leading composers and Barroso's Inquietaco and Terra Seca.

'In 1950 Stan Kenton went sick and the band disbanded; I had been with him for about three years then. Other musicians like Bud Shank had made a home in Los Angeles and I was resident in California. Anyway Bud and I got together to form a quartet with Roy Harte drums and Harry Babison, bass. I had some sambas which I brought from Brazil which I changed around and made a little more sophisticated, and we did an album in 1952. That, you know, was the marriage of samba and jazz; it was this thing, but we didn't call it the bossa nova: it was the Laurindo Almeida quartet. What was there was going to be called eleven years later, the bossa nova; which is what Charlie Byrd and Stan Getz did in 1963. They were very successful, in fact, more successful than us because we did it too early, people were not prepared. But today people come to hear us play, 30 years later, they bring an album and say here's the original.

'The samba characteristics didn't really change much; what changed was the chords. You see, the harmony of the formal samba, to take old songs like Brazil, well the melody's rich but the harmony is poor. So certain songs like that we couldn't use for the jazz purposes we had in mind; so we had to choose those songs that could be adapted to a chordal routine that was jazz, like a minor chord or minor 7th resolving to the dominant. That's the way we worked: given songs with poor harmonies which we changed. There was Terra Seca meaning Dry Land by Eri Barroso who was a Brazilian composer of other popular songs. I changed the harmony and made them sound like jazz. The young players in Brazil like Jobim, Gilberto, Baden Powell, I believe they heard what we did and learned from it and used different harmonies, because before that they were not used; the harmony was formal, just tonic and dominant, maybe a diminished chord. The first fusions of jazz harmony and samba rhythms, that's on the album. It's natural that I should have carried the samba rhythm with me even though my mother was a classical pianist and that was the first music I heard. The popular music of Brazil is syncopated, the samba, and apart from my classical training, the samba's in my veins, I hear it, play it, it's innate.'

With a close and long friendship with Villa Lobos, it's natural that Almeida should perform and record his compositions. As Laurindo recounted, Villa Lobos' familiar syncopated and highly individual mode of writing reflects a less known but equally colourful character.

'He was a very good friend of mine, fabulous man, I always liked him and his music. His personality was so great and he could do many things at the same time. There was one occasion I came to his apartment, and he was writing for an MGM film called Green Mansions. While he was orchestrating on vellum paper, transposing and the lot, he was talking on the phone at the same time, and he had also put on a tape for me to hear of an oratorio he had composed in Paris. I used to visit him in Rio when I was close by, and I recall him being an avid cigar smoker, and physically he wasn't so well, he had something wrong with his kidneys which eventually was to kill him. But he still asked me to bring him some French fries which I brought in a coat to hide from his wife; and when I got in and handed him the chips he shoved them in a drawer. He was a giant and he was a child, a beautiful man really.

'He wasn't much of a guitar player, a cellist mostly, but he knew the instrument thoroughly. In his guitar music, the fingering and interpretation, he allows for certain liberties. It's so difficult to understand what he really meant when he wrote those pieces. Being Brazilian, if you come from that side of the world, you'll know the idiom. You have so many rhythms, a strain here, a strain there that you recognise.' With the advantage of knowing Villa Lobos personally and having an inward feel for his music, does this suggest that

native interpretations are more likely to be faithful to the aims of his compositions?

'Most of the things I hear are not, although well played, are not what he meant. They're not deviations, it's a question of interpretation. I don't want to mention names because professionally that's not nice. But I have a fantastic collection of recordings from guitarists all over the world, Bream, Williams, Segovia; I listen to them and make my own deductions.

'Listening to guitar music relaxes me, the guitar's my life. But after a tour like this I usually take time off. I own a property, a little island and go there and just take it easy. Last November I went to Japan and stopped off after and just layed in the sun, let the world go by. There is a strain in touring and it bears down. Playing at Ronnie Scotts that night, I don't think it went well, I was suffering from jet lag. Flying from Los Angeles put me eight hours out; when everyone's going to sleep, you want to stay awake and the other way round. My way of catching up is to take a long walk, get very tired and then sleep for fourteen hours.'

For solo guitar, Almeida's six jazz sambas 'Bossa Guitara' fall into a mood quite outside that of the usual boyant bossa nova. Slow, meditative and rhythmically intricate, they are designed for the classical guitar, and of a quality that merits them a place in its repertoire. On a wide scale, though with questionable success, is his recently composed guitar concerto, biographically inspired and not without traces of the Hollywood sound.

'There was a demand for those sambas, we got letters. I meant to do more but it's still those six, written with the intention of helping guitarists interested in that idiom. What concerns me now is a concerto I wrote for guitar and orchestra. It's fun to play and I'm interested in spreading it around, giving it to guitarists... Not a formal concerto, it has a cyclic form, and I wrote it emotionally; it has scenes from different times in my life, although it begins in a Vivaldi-like idiom it then turns into something else across three movements and a cadenza. It also pays attention to our instrument, not only to show it here and there for dexterity and effects but also for its practical application. Most guitar concertos, they make it so difficult, you have to be fantastic to play. My concerto is effective and showy, and yet you don't have to sweat. It's written for flute, oboe, two B flat clarinets, bassoon, French horn, timpani and strings with bass.'

In the years spent as a Hollywood session guitarist, Laurindo has composed for, or participated in, numerous major films, Goya, A Star is Born, Wild Bunch, The Godfather, plus many minor productions and television shows. For some he set his own pace, working from home, sketching ideas as the frames suggested; on others, with a work load and deadline to meet, there was little glamour and very little play.

The usual thing is to go to the studio where they run the film through, and you have a switch which you can reverse and re-track again as many times as you like. You make notes and there's the music cutter who works along with you, giving you a script showing the divisions of the film in scenes and reels. I did this kind of work for 25 years, Universal, MGM, Columbia. I was first guitar at Paramount for 15 years. But that's very demanding and you do that solely because of most of the calls; you've got to be at the studio by eight in the morning ready to read something that you've never seen before. Then I got to a point one day when I said I'd like to play a little bit, you know, and got the same group together. We did a lot of work in Los Angeles, and Bud showed interest in coming back, so we formed the LA Four. It used

to be the Laurindo Almeida quartet, but when Ray Brown came into it and Shelly Mann, well with those names, why the Laurindo Almeida quartet, let's call it the LA Four which can be the Los Angeles Four or anything. We introduce alphabetically, legally we have a corporation, it's in the contract, the order of names. Me, having an A, then I come in first. But we are all friends, so what does it matter.

*Bossa Guitara by Criterion Music. For further information on the guitar concerto, write to Brazilliance Music Publ. 4104, Wiztel Drive, Sherman Oaks. CA 91423*