



Photo courtesy PAOLO SORIANI

## ROMERO LUBAMBO

by Ed Benson



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A few months ago I was in Savannah visiting Howard Paul at the Benedetto factory. It was there that I had the opportunity to meet, hear and have lunch with Romero Lubambo—an extraordinary musician. I was not aware of him until we met. He played some tunes fingerstyle and it was obvious to me that he was someone who JIG's readers need to learn about. He was in the process of ordering a 16B archtop. A true master of the Brazilian guitar and more

**EB: Tell us a little about your early years. When did you first take up the study of the guitar? Did you play any other instruments? Was your family musical and did they want you to pursue a career in music? were they concerned when you didn't pursue your engineering education? Does your education in mechanical engineering help you in you playing? after studying classical guitar and piano when did you become interested in jazz? Were there any musicians that inspired you to make the move into jazz?**

R: I started studying classical piano when I was 8 years old. My mother Nirinha played the piano well, and I always liked the sound of that instrument. But I stopped studying piano when I was 10. In my family, almost everyone either played some instruments or

sang very well. We are a very musical family. We always listened to classical music, jazz and Brazilian music. Besides that, my youngest uncle Ilvamar played piano and sang well. My oldest uncle Magalha played guitar very well and sang, also. Our house always had live music and I think that was a great beginning for me. I learned a lot and was inspired by my family. But no one had a real career in music. That was something out of our reality in the 60s in Brazil. I saw so much the guitar being played by my uncle that when I was 13, I started playing the guitar by myself. I remember I had a few classes with a neighbor and that was it. I loved that instrument and became crazy about learning the guitar!! I was self-taught and practiced all the time. At 14, I started playing in my uncle's band for parties, dances, and clubs. That was the beginning of my experience on stage. Still I had no idea that I could be a professional musician. My destiny was to become an engineer! I kept researching and practicing music always, in addition to my regular school. When I was 17, I started studying classical guitar at the Villa Lobos Music School in Rio de Janeiro. For 5 years I studied there and I'm thankful that I have the knowledge brought to me by classical studies. But from the beginning I wanted to play jazz. It was impossible to find teachers or schools for jazz at that time in Brazil. No one could teach me what I wanted to learn, that's why I was self-taught and had to learn with LPs and, when possible, by listening to other musicians. It was very hard to get information about improvisation and how to play jazz. I really valued every recording I could get and tried to get the most out of every one. The first really big influence was Wes Montgomery. I was just crazy about his phrases, sound, ideas and sensibility. Until today! But I like to listen to and learn from every good musician, so George Benson, Barney Kessel, John Scofield, Pat Metheny, Mike Stern, Baden Powell, Helio Delmiro, and Luiz Bonfa are among the great influences I have. And many more...

I got my degree in mechanical engineering in 1981 and although I never worked in that field, I think it helped me with music. There is a part of music that is very mathematical, and I developed different parts of my brain by studying engineering. Once I had my diploma, my family didn't mind me pursuing a career in music. For the first time in my life, I could devote all of my time to music !

**EB: Did you study formally and if so for how long**

**and where? What was your practice schedule like? What type of music were you studying when you started out? What books did you use? Did you play gigs in Brazil?**

R: The only type of music I studied formally was classical music. When I started, I was already playing in my uncle's band and playing all styles of music. My classical guitar teacher asked me to stop everything and just study classical guitar. I said yes, but never stopped playing jazz, Brazilian music and pop music. I liked all sorts of different music.

About practicing, I used to practice all the time! Every minute I had free I would play the guitar. I always wanted to get better and I still do. After I finished college, I started playing in Brazil mostly with jazz groups and bands. It was a very good experience for me.

Before I moved to New York in 1985, I had a gig for 3 years in a jazz club in Rio. Every day playing just jazz! That was a wonderful time for practicing on stage.

**EB: Do you only play fingerstyle or do you use a pick sometime?**

R: I do mostly fingerstyle but play with a pick sometimes. The pick gives a different attack and sounds more aggressive than fingerstyle and sometimes I want exactly that. But if I have to play fast, or chordal solos, fingerstyle is much easier for me. And for comping also I prefer fingerstyle. I feel that I'm closer to the strings and this gives me more control of the sound. I really like the feel of plucking the strings with my fingers.

**EB: When and why did you decide to come to the USA? Were there better opportunities for a musician here?**

R: The USA was always a country I wanted to experience. First, because of the engineering accomplishments: cars, planes and everything mechanical that I love. Second, the music was fantastic, and I wanted to get closer to jazz musicians. It was a very natural choice for me. To play instrumental music, I would have much more opportunities here than in my country. So, in 1985 I finally came to New York to see up close the jazz music world that I liked so much. And I'm still here.

**EB: Were you able to get gigs when you first arrived here? If so with whom and where did you play?**

R: In the beginning I was just playing with friends to show my art and to meet people. Duduka da Fonseca,

Claudio Roditi, Nilson Matta, Thiago de Mello were the first musicians that I played with. Nilson Matta came to New York with me, and with Duduka Da Fonseca we formed Trio Da Paz, a Brazilian jazz trio that is still going strong with several CDs out there.

**EB: What was your first paying gig in the states?**

R: I have to say that it was with Astrud Gilberto. She is famous for recording the original "Girl from Ipanema". Right away, the first year I was here, she invited me to be part of her band and I started traveling and playing many shows with her. At the same time, I met Herbie Mann, the great flute player. And with Herbie I worked the last 17 years of his life. It was a wonderful learning experience. Not only in music but in life as well. I consider him my American father.

**EB: Any gigs that stand out-good or bad?**

R: There was many great gigs!! When I started with Astrud, it was very good for me to travel everywhere including Japan, Europe, the States. It was very special. Many gigs with Herbie Mann were unforgettable like the first time we went to Hawaii and stayed 3 weeks playing almost every night and staying in front of the beach...it was heaven. I'm lucky to have had many great gigs with so many fantastic musicians: Paquito D'Rivera, Wynton Marsalis, Dianne Reeves, Leny Andrade, Mike Stern, Cesar Camargo Mariano, Kenny Barron, and many more. There were several concerts at Carnegie Hall that included guests such as Al Jarreau, Michael Brecker, Gilberto Gil and Dori Caymmi. I remember one show at Disney Hall in Los Angeles where I was a special guest for Pat Metheny. Pat and I were the only humans on stage that night. It was during his Orchestration Tour, and it was one of the most amazing experiences on stage in my life.

**EB: When did you start to work with Dianne Reeves? Did you have to audition with her? Do you rehearse much or just wing it? When playing with her and another guitarist are arrangements worked out?**

R: The first time we played together was in 1996. We were both invited to go to Brazil and play some concerts with Cesar Camargo Mariano, the great Brazilian piano player and arranger. Also invited were Michael Brecker, Ivan Lins, Mark Walker and Leo Traversa. After those incredible shows I continued to play and do arrangements for Dianne Reeves in many different

*Romero Lubambo is not just a great guitarist (though a great guitarist he most certainly is). He's also a musician who employs his considerable skills to create wonderful music. As one of his generation's finest heirs to the incredible traditions of Brazilian guitarists, it should be no surprise that having mastered the many indigenous styles of his homeland, he blends these rich resources into captivating musical performances. He also is a marvelous improviser in virtually any musical setting in which he finds himself. From solo guitar to ensembles of various sizes, regardless of bag, Romero excels, even as he impresses. Like Brazilian guitarists from earlier generations, such as Baden Powell and Toninho Horta, Romero's interaction with jazz traditions is no mere flirtation. His playing is built upon and imbued with rhythmic precision, harmonic insight and melodic inventiveness, and he swings his derriere off! He's fun to listen to, and he's such a nice guy that no matter how envious others may be of his chops, it's virtually impossible to resist digging him!*

— Ken Hatfield

*Romero is most amazing; not only as probably the greatest player of the Brazilian repertoire but as a wonderful improviser in all idioms. His combination of harmonies and fluid single line melodies is spectacular. He is also a brilliant accompanist which, I'm sure, stems from his overall goodness as a human being. I'm always in his audience, in the front row, if possible.*

— Gene Bertoncini

configurations. Duos, trios, quartets, orchestras and everything in between.

We still play a lot together. We rehearse mostly during the sound checks when we need to try new arrangements or new songs. We have special rehearsals when we need to create a completely new show. For example, when we started the Strings Attached show with Russell Malone, the three of us got together at Dianne's home and created that show. It was easy to play in that configuration with Russell. The arrangements were done right there just letting the music flow. It's very important to know how to listen to the other musicians and just add to the music. We three can do that naturally.

**EB: Who else have you performed with?**

R: Yo-Yo-Ma, Paquito D'Rivera, Grover Washington, Jr., Mike Stern, Luciana Souza, Eliane Elias, Larry Coryell among many others. You can see more on my website: [romerolubambo.com](http://romerolubambo.com)

**EB: Are you doing any private teaching? I see where you are giving on line lessons. How is that going? Is it via skype? Are most of your students professionals?**

R: Private teaching is rare because I travel all the time. But sometimes I find time to do that, too.

Online lessons are doing well, there are different packages and some include Skype lessons. You can check

the site [www.lubambomethod.com](http://www.lubambomethod.com) and see how it works. It's very interesting because I'm actually showing everything I developed and explaining in detail how I think about comping, soloing, Brazilian rhythms, phrasing, and all of the aspects of my very personal style of playing. Most of the students are guitar players that like my music and want to see up close how I do it. I meet many of them during my travels and they are enjoying it!!

**EB: What guitars have you owned and what do you use now? I heard you are getting a Benedetto 16B. That seems to be a departure for your style of playing.**

R: I have had many guitars since the beginning. Many acoustic nylon string guitars, and many electric guitars: Stratocaster, 335, Parker Fly, Yamaha 1500, Pacifica, Les Paul and Gibson 175 are some of the electric guitars I have.

But now Benedetto is making a 16B especially for me!!! I'm extremely excited as it is the most incredible guitar around. And for me who plays so much acoustic guitar, the Benedetto is the perfect combination of electric and acoustic. The sounds and the playability of those guitars are amazing. I'm really happy to be part of the Benedetto guitar family now!!

For the nylon string guitar I use a Richard Prenkert guitar. He makes them in California and it's an excellent

guitar! It not only sounds great but it's also strong enough for the road. You can see it at Prenkert Guitar on the internet. Also, that acoustic guitar has a Barbera pickup that really sounds great at live performances. Loud and clear!!

**EB:How has your playing changed over the years?**

R: I think my playing changes all the time because I'm listening and performing with different musicians and I'm always open to learn more and more. I think some aspects of the music you develop by being exposed to all sorts of musicians, styles of music, stages, studios, and time. For my music it's healthy to have so many different influences for so many years.

**EB:You've made a number of cds. Tell us about the newest cd Setembro that was released in September. Any more recordings planned?**

R: Setembro was the second CD I did just as a solo guitar project. It's very interesting to be so exposed as a musician. Exposed because I'm alone doing rhythms, melodies, improvisations, and conveying the arrangement for each song. It's challenging, but I love it. On Setembro I used acoustic guitar as well as an electric guitar for half of the CD. I recorded some Brazilian standards, American standards and some originals of mine. On a solo guitar CD you can really hear my soul coming out of the speakers!

**EB: What's the secret to playing bossa nova correctly?**

R: I think for learning any new language the most important factor is to listen. You have to put that music inside your head before your fingers can follow those ideas and make the music right. Then it's good to see musicians that play that style well. Also to have some lessons would help. On my online lessons I try to be very clear explaining right hand, left hand, percussive ideas and all the aspects of Brazilian rhythms including bossa nova.

**EB:What guitarists do you enjoy listening to today?**

R: Today it's harder to listen to a lot of music because I'm always working and preparing for some shows or doing arrangements, but I still love Wes, Benson, Scofield, Metheny, Scott Henderson, Chico Pinheiro, Sergio and Odair Assad, Baden Powell. Plus I listen in my car to CDs that some young musicians give to me. And some friends also. Often I like what I hear.

**EB:You are known as a superb improviser. Can improvisation be taught?**

R: For improvisation I think you need a lot of information that can be taught. But good improvisation involves much more, including the good taste of each musician. That is what will make the choice of notes and silence appealing to the listener. And I believe that we have to develop our own voice, even sharing the same information with everybody else. So basically I think that part of the art of improvisation can be taught, but the rest we have to develop ourselves and follow our hearts.

**EB: Is the US market much different than Europe or South America?**

R: What I can say is that everywhere there are people open to be touched by the music you make, and as long as you are honest with your feelings on stage you make the audience happy no matter where you are. USA, Europe, Japan, Brazil, all love music and appreciate the energy that you create on stage.

**EB: Is there someone you would like to perform with that you haven't as yet?**

R: Never played with Herbie Hancock. I would love that!

**EB: What do you do in your spare time?**

R: When I still have energy I try to study something on the guitar, otherwise I like to watch programs that I record on the TV. Relaxing time. I love to stay home. If it's sunny, I love to be outside walking or fixing something in the backyard.

**EB:What is it like to perform with someone like Yo Yo Ma**

R: Yo-Yo-Ma is very unique. He is one of the most amazing human beings that I have met in my whole life, at the same time he is a genius of a cello player! And what he doesn't know he wants to learn! So, it's just a fantastic experience to perform with him. You finish the job really happy. That's how it is. Heaven on earth!