

Scott Feiner: Pandeiro Jazz

By Malcolm Lim



SCOTT FEINER
World Clinic . Friday @ 12:00 P.M.

The Brazilian pandeiro is known for its strong cultural identity within traditional Brazilian music styles. However, it is an instrument whose popularity continues to grow both within Brazil and around the world, constantly broadening its horizons. At PASIC in Austin, Scott Feiner will speak about the pandeiro's traditional roles as well as demonstrate some newer uses of the instrument, including his own Pandeiro Jazz project.

Feiner is perhaps the only North American *pandeirista* living in Brazil today. His passion for the pandeiro drew him to Rio de Janeiro, where he has been living. As a player he is helping to forge new ground for the instrument with his innovative Pandeiro Jazz project, and his Website, pandeiro.com, is helping to bring worldwide recognition to one of Brazil's most challenging percussion instruments. Since this interview was conducted, Scott has released his second recording with Pandeiro Jazz, *Dois Mundos* (Two Worlds), for Biscoito Fino.

ML: *What is the Brazilian pandeiro?*

SF: If you showed it to most Americans they would say it's a tambourine. It's not but, of course, it's from the same family, the frame drum. A typical pandeiro is about 4.5cm in depth and 10 to 12 inches in diameter. The head is usually either goatskin or a synthetic material. There are typically five or six sets of jingles, which are called *platinelas* in Portuguese. All of these specs can vary, of course. For example, years ago guys often played pandeiros without jingles. The true beauty of the pandeiro is that it's a very complete drum. You have high, mid, and low tones, and it can emulate a larger percussion ensemble all by itself. If you had to pick one percussion instrument to represent Brazilian music, it would probably be the pandeiro.

ML: *Where did the pandeiro come from, and who uses it?*

SF: I'm not a great student of history, nor have I ever gotten a great answer to this question from the pandeiro masters in Brazil. However, the basic answer is this: Originally all drums come from Africa, but jingles are distinctively Arabian. Most likely what happened is that the Moors brought a pandeiro-

like instrument into Portugal and Spain, and it made its way to Brazil via the Portuguese. Then the Africans who were brought to Brazil during the slave trade got their hands on it, and got it to swing! Once again, this is a very loose history lesson, so please don't hold me to it. One of these days I'm going to get a musicologist who truly knows the history to write an article about it for pandeiro.com.

ML: *Could you tell us about some of the great pandeiro players of Brazil?*

SF: A lot of people play the pandeiro really well in Brazil. For traditional playing, whether samba, partido-alto, *farró* or *côco*, you can find people all over the place who play with great groove and feeling. I'm talking about people who don't even consider themselves musicians! Then you get into the category of percussionists and you'll find a ton of people who play really well. But then you have what is called a *pandeirista*, or pandeiro player. This tends to be a person who has truly dedicated himself or herself to the instrument. From a practical standpoint, a *pandeirista* is someone who can carry an entire band just on pandeiro—and do it for an entire gig.

When you start to talk about the great

pandeiro players who are known around Brazil, you sort of need to break them into categories, because stylistically, and especially sonically, they might be quite different—just like if you were talking about great guitarists and you mentioned Wes Montgomery and Jimi Hendrix in the same list. You have certain players who specialize in playing skin-head pandeiros and others who only play plastic-head drums. You have players who come from different “schools” of playing. For example, players from the Northeast of Brazil tend to play quite differently from *cariocas*—players from Rio.

So, finally to name some names: If you're talking about great *pandeiristas* who play samba and choro on skin-head pandeiros you must start with Jorginho do Pandeiro. He's 76 years old and still sounds great. If you ask Jorginho about whom he heard when he was developing he'll talk about João da Baiana and Gilberto D'Avila. Jorginho's son, Celsinho Silva, is also a master and has expanded his father's school of playing even more. Marcos Suzano listened a lot to both Jorginho and Celsinho, took what they had developed, mixed it with other musical influences and developed his own variation of it from a technical, musical, and sonic perspective.



PHOTO BY LEO AVERSA

Post-Suzano you have quite a few people taking the instrument into interesting places. Someone who impressed me a lot when I first got to Rio was Sergio Krakowski. He was 21 years old at the time and was already trying to break down the “rules” of pandeiro playing. His playing was considered controversial, but it helped me see how you could stretch out with the instrument. Some other guys to note are Netinho Albuquerque, who is Jorginho’s grandson, and Guello, from São Paulo.

There are a lot more great “traditional” players. Guys like Bira Presidente from the group Fundo de Quintal who comes from the school of partido-alto playing and was part of the original movement, which later became known as *pagode*. This list could go on and on, but I’ll leave it at that for now.

ML: *Could you tell us about your musical training?*

SF: When I was ten years old I asked my mother for drum lessons, but that request was quickly shot down due to the fact that we lived in an apartment in New York City. At 13 I was a bit better at negotiating and convinced my mother to give me guitar lessons. I took lessons for a couple of years and was accepted to the High School of Music & Art in Manhattan, which became the LaGuardia High School of the Arts. I continued taking private guitar lessons and then went on to receive a Bachelor of Music degree in Jazz Studies/Guitar at the Hartt School of Music, under the direction of the legendary jazz saxophonist Jackie McLean. I can proudly say that I was the first guitarist he ever let into his sacred saxophone class, where everyone got to get their butts kicked by Jackie himself during closed-door jam sessions.

ML: *How did you get interested in Brazilian music, and especially the pandeiro?*

SF: In the early ’90s, when I was still a guitarist, I was a part of the New York City jazz scene and led a gig a couple of nights a week at a club called Augie’s, which later became Smoke. I played a lot with a great piano player from Italy named Renato Chicco, who was constantly prodding me to play some Bossa Nova tunes on the gig. At that time my only exposure to Brazilian music had been on wedding gigs, unfortunately, which is to say, I had heard it all wrong! So I had developed a bad attitude towards Brazilian music before ever hearing the real thing. Renato wound up lending me three CDs by João Gilberto and said, “Check these out

and then talk to me.” Hearing those recording changed my life. I was totally blown away by hearing João playing/singing solo.

My introduction to the pandeiro came about six years later, in 1999. I had already stopped playing guitar and was visiting Brazil for the first time. I was in the Northeastern city Olinda and walked by a kid playing around on a pandeiro in the street. I then visited Rio for three days and heard a couple of professional players playing samba and choro. I went back to New York determined to learn how to play it.

ML: *How can one best approach the music of another culture?*

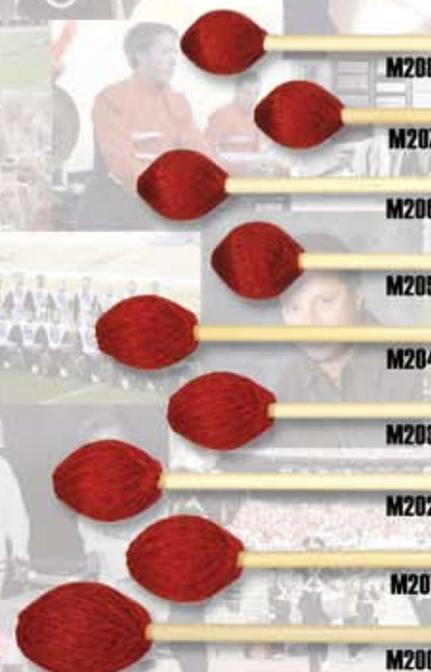
SF: First, the passion has to be there, then, for sure, respect and humility. Then you just have to dive in and absorb yourself in it until it becomes a part of you. Ideally, you’d actually spend time in that culture, or with people strongly tied to it.

Between 1999 and 2001 I took three trips to Brazil. Each time I got deeper and deeper into the music and the pandeiro, as well as trying to speak Portuguese. It became this dream to spend more time here, perfecting both my *pandeiro* playing as well as my Portuguese. At the time I was working in the Internet business in New York City, and pandeiro playing had become a wonderful hobby for me. I used to practice on the roof of the office during my lunch hour. People thought I was nuts! Then the Web business took a dive in early 2001 and I got laid off. It was the perfect time to spend a few months in Rio. I arrived on April 1, 2001 and have been there ever since. It sounds romantic, but there have been plenty of ups and downs and things to get used to. There are a lot of great things in Rio, but it’s not necessarily an easy place to adjust to.

ML: *Could you elaborate on your own style of playing the pandeiro?*

SF: It’s a mixture of all the great players I’ve been fortunate enough to hear. But if I have my own style of playing I think it comes from the mixture of my pandeiro influences and the fact that I used to be a guitarist. That experience influences my playing in a couple of different ways. First of all, I have experience with playing melodies, building solos, and accompanying. So that gives me a deeper level of sensitivity when it comes time to make music. The other thing is that I listened to so many great drummers for years, on the bandstand as well as on records. So all of that stuff is in my head and heart.

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I'll never forget when I was showing someone a rough mix of my *Pandeiro Jazz* CD and he said he could hear Elvin Jones in my pandeiro playing. I was so happy I almost fell over!

ML: *How do Cariocas react to your personal style of pandeiro playing?*

SF: I think I'm pretty accepted here, which isn't necessarily the easiest thing for a gringo to do. I started out with sitting in for a tune next to another *pandeirista*, then graduated to playing alone. Then one tune became a whole set, and eventually a whole night. Then came the first call to sub for someone on a paying gig.

I remember a couple of moments, which I will never forget, when I realized that I had become accepted. The first one was several years ago at a club in the Lapa section of Rio. I was sitting in with a very well-respected young percussionist in Rio named Pretinho, who's not known for small talk. During the break we were at the bar and he turned to me and said he was really impressed with my samba/partido-alto playing. I said, "Thanks," and he said I had nothing to thank him for and that my days of being a "gringo" player were over and not to take that abuse from anyone. It sent chills down my spine and almost brought tears to my eyes. I was really touched. This happened again a year or so later while at a "roda de samba" with one of the legendary samba players in Rio, Paulinho da Aba. I didn't know him at all and he turned to me and said, "you're playing your butt off," handed me a belt of his *cachaça*, and passed his microphone to me for me to be able to be heard better for a while. Deep experiences!

Now with my *Pandeiro Jazz* project I have a chance to do my own thing. I don't have to worry about how you're "supposed" to play pandeiro when I'm playing my gig. I can do whatever I want, since there's not tradition of playing jazz with the pandeiro. I've been quite lucky, in that I've become friends with my pandeiro heroes, guys like Celsinho Silva and Marcos Suzano, and they encouraged me with this project. Suzano heard the CD before it was even mixed. Celsinho Silva sat in the front row at one of my first concerts here in Rio, and he was overwhelmed at the end of the gig—so happy to see me doing my thing. He said, "Man, you're not trying to sound like anyone; you sound like you! Your sound, your feel. You were influenced by us, but you mixed it with your own thing. But if I closed my eyes and just listened to you play samba I'd have no idea you were a gringo!"

ML: *Tell us about your documentary film, Meu Coracao e um Pandeiro.*

SF: The title means "My Heart is a Pan-

deiro," a line that comes from a song called "Morena Boca de Ouro" by Ary Barroso. Back in 2001, just before heading down to Brazil to stay for a while, I developed really bad tendonitis and couldn't play at all. So, I was trying to figure out a reason to continue with my plans if I couldn't study and play. I had always wished that I had captured some images of the guys playing down here on previous trips, and I had always liked documentaries. I have a photography background, so I decided to buy a MiniDV cam and some other gear and just dove in. My first months in Rio were spent running around like a nut filming and interviewing people. There have been several starts and stops since then, and besides tons of raw footage, there's only a little demo/trailer which has been edited and can be viewed on pandeiro.com.

The current plan is to find funding for the project and to do it right—meaning, hire a real film team and film not only in Rio, but travel around Brazil documenting different players and styles. I've talked to Suzano about him getting involved in the traveling part as well, as sort of a consultant and host. It could be really great. We just need money!

ML: *Could you tell us about your site, pandeiro.com?*

SF: The initial idea was somewhat similar to the idea behind the documentary film. I simply wanted to share my love and fascination for this instrument and the people who play it so well. But I also knew that a lot of people have trouble finding good handmade pandeiros, as I did when I was back in the States, so I started to offer handmade pandeiros by several Brazilian luthiers. It turned out to be a good idea. The site has been up for about three years now, and I've sent pandeiros to people in 32 countries so far. It's also been number-one in the Google results for "pandeiro" for quite a while. The site has a lot of other information, the most popular by far being the video clips. I've made a lot of friends around the world via pandeiro.com, and I'm truly proud of what it's become. I'm doing my part to spread the word about this great instrument and its master players.

ML: *Tell us about your CD, *Pandeiro Jazz*, and the musical ideas behind it.*

SF: *Pandeiro Jazz* is a true fusion of my musical life to this point. Basically, I stopped playing jazz around 1996 when I put the guitar down. Once I found the pandeiro and started getting into playing it, it was generally in the context where you'd expect to find it. In Rio, that would be a *roda de samba* or *roda de choro*. All of those experiences were very important for me, and I still love playing all of that music.

However, I found myself very early on after I arrived in Rio missing the improvisational sophistication of jazz, as I had been exposed to so much in the States. So, on a trip back to New York City in 2004 I wound up being offered a night in a small club to do whatever I wanted to. I played duo with guitarist Freddie Bryant, who has a strong background in jazz as well as in Brazilian music. Saxophonist Joel Frahm came down and sat in, and luckily I recorded the gig on a minidisc. In the end, it was the non-Brazilian repertoire that got me the most excited. Playing a Wayne Shorter or Horace Silver tune, but with pandeiro, it seemed to just immediately take on its own life. So, really, *Pandeiro Jazz* was a very organic project. The true challenge is picking the right material and working around the pandeiro's strengths and weakness, from a sonic standpoint.

The CD features Joel Frahm on saxophone, Freddie Bryant on guitar, and Joe Martin on bass. These are cream-of-the-crop players from New York City. Beto Cazes, a great percussionist from Rio, also overdubbed some extra percussion on one tune. I also have a Brazilian edition of the band here in Rio, which features Marcelo Marints on saxophone, Jessé Sadoc on trumpet, David Feldman on piano and Alberto Continentino on bass. They all recorded with me on *Dois Mundos*.

ML: *What inspires your compositions and improvisations?*

SF: I'm just starting to compose again after a very long time. There is no real deep answer regarding inspiration for composing—just ideas that pop into my head. Lately I've been trying to come up with melodies while I practice a groove on pandeiro. Then I'll grab a guitar to try to figure out what I was hearing.

Regarding improvisation, that's an area I really want to improve on. Many people who play pandeiro spend a lot of time working out little tricks and licks—flashy stuff. But I've always been more focused on the groove. When it's time to improvise I try to play off the other guys in the band, and, of course, drumset players have influenced me a lot. I occasionally get frustrated with technical limitations, so I plan to start working on this side of things more. I've seen some players with hand drumming backgrounds doing some wild technical stuff that could definitely help to widen my vocabulary.

ML: *What have been some of the most special musical moments for you as a pandeiro player, in Rio, New York City, and elsewhere?*

SF: Here in Rio it's been the chances I've had to sit in with some of the master percussionists. I've sat in a number of times with

a singer named Teresa Cristina here in Rio. Two of her percussionists are Mestre Tram-bique and Marcos Esguleba. They are two of the most in-demand samba *percussionistas* in Rio. I can't begin to explain the feeling of playing samba with those guys! It's truly a natural high and an honor. The groove is just so strong and authentic. I'll never forget those moments.

There have been numerous other moments, including playing with some of the old samba greats in informal "rodas" with people like Moacyr Luz, Nelson Sargento, Wilson das Neves, Wilson Moreira, and Beth Carvalho. Also with great instrumentalists from more recent generations—guys like Hamilton de Hollanda and Trio Madeira Brasil.

As far as New York City goes, when I first started playing I had some special moments sitting in with the Brazilian music community there. But for sure, the more recent special moments have been my performances with my Pandeiro Jazz project at the clubs Smoke and Jazz Standard. These are top-level jazz clubs, and I'm pretty sure that I was the first pandeiro player to lead a band in those rooms.

ML: *What kinds of pandeiros do you use and in what contexts?*

SF: For my Pandeiro Jazz project I use an old 10-inch pandeiro with a medium-thick goatskin head that's been messed with quite a bit. If I'm playing a more traditional gig I'll grab a pandeiro that's a bit more appropriate for the setting, but it's still going to be a 10-inch with five sets of jingles. I love to get a chance to use one of my plastic-head pandeiros to lay down some partido-alto for hours! I used to do that a lot more, and it was a great way to keep stamina and endurance up.

ML: *How do you practice? What are you focusing on musically at the moment?*

SF: I wish I had a good answer for you! I've never had the best practice habits. I've always been someone who enjoys playing with other musicians a lot more than practicing. I was like that with guitar and even more so with the pandeiro. That said, of course I spend time behind closed doors working on things. These days I try to make sure to spend a decent time with the metronome. I used to play more with recordings, but lately it's been more with the metronome. I also recently started to have some fun using the loops that come with Apple's *GarageBand* program. I've found that's actually a great way to practice and lots of fun. I just need to look around and see if there are some loops with Brazilian rhythms. I tend to use what they have for other stuff—funk, rock, Latin, etc.

With Pandeiro Jazz I have a huge responsibility regarding not only the time, but also the energy of the music. If nothing else this presents a huge challenge from a physical standpoint; anyone who's played *pandeiro* for even a few minutes knows what I mean. So I have to keep my arms and hands in shape via practicing and playing, or else I will pay the price.

ML: *What are your aspirations?*

SF: To continue growing as a player and bandleader and to see where I can take the Pandeiro Jazz project, both musically and professionally. I'm aware that I'm introducing a lot of people to the pandeiro, and that's both an honor and a responsibility. I've realized that if I just stayed around Rio playing in traditional settings I'd never really be anything but another good pandeiro player. But with my project I have a chance to do something a bit different: playing an instrument that's not from my culture and then putting that instrument in a musical setting where it's usually not found—and not allowing it to just become a novelty.

It's nice to see so many people interested in the pandeiro. I'm trying very hard to book more gigs and workshops wherever I can. Hopefully good things will continue to happen.

I hope more people will take the time to get to know the pandeiro a bit. It's an instrument with a great history and, without a doubt, an instrument with a lot of future ahead of it.

Malcolm Lim is a freelance percussionist living in Calgary, Alberta. He performs with the Calgary Philharmonic and is musical director of the Calgary School of Samba. **PN**

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