

# Marcos Suzano

## Expanding the Pandeiro

By Malcolm Lim

Translation: Barbara Oliveira-Lim and Malcolm Lim

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**M**arcos Suzano, of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, is widely hailed as an innovative pandeiro virtuoso who has profoundly influenced pandeiro performance worldwide. He has collaborated with Sting, Gilberto Gil, Zizi Possi, Lenine, Alceu Valencia, Alex Meirelles, Adriana Calcanhoto, Ney Matogrosso, and Takashi Numazawa.

The pandeiro is the Brazilian tambourine used in a variety of folk and popular music settings. By developing fresh approaches and using the instrument in non-traditional contexts, Suzano has revolutionized pandeiro performance practice and has become virtually synonymous with the instrument.

**Malcolm Lim:** *Could you tell us about your musical training?*

**Marcos Suzano:** I'm basically self-taught, having studied on and off throughout my formative years. I started performing in Copacabana, in the streets, when I was 14. My friends and I put together a samba bloco [percussion ensemble]. We had three surdos, two caixas, and two repiniques, which is all you need to make a good racket! We used to play on Figueiredo Magalhaes street, until we hooked up with another group near the beach, and then we laid down some real heavy batucadas [samba beats]. There were lots of drummers, sometimes up to, I don't know, 25 guys playing. It was awesome! That was the beginning of it all. From 14 to 18 I did that, and then I was off to university.

I graduated with a degree in economics. Halfway through the program I was already playing music, and when I finished university, I was a professional musician. I've never worked in economics; I've always worked as a musician! I finished school in 1984–85, and right away, I had various music projects here in Rio, playing mostly “choro,” a type of instrumental music. I collaborated with Ze Lourenco, Fernando Moura, Paulo Steinberg, Aquarela Carioca, and No em Pingo D'Agua; that's how it began.

Then I was involved with a project with No em Pingo D'Agua where we had to play some of Villa Lobos' pieces with arrange-

ments of some well-known musicians such as Mauricio Carrilho. Lots of people worked on it. We had to read music, and someone recommended I take classes with Adamo Prince, who ended up being my first music teacher. He taught me western notation, ear training, and rhythm. Really cool. It was with him that I deepened my knowledge of theory, which gave me an advantage in the studio because I could read, too. I was able to pick up lots of recording gigs during my final term at school because of that.



**Lim:** *How is the life of a freelance musician in Rio?*

**Suzano:** Anyone who is a working musician in Rio de Janeiro, based on my experience, is simply lucky to be a musician here, because he is always in contact with various environmental factors that could influence the course of his life and his musical self-expression. You've got the marvelous natural surroundings; you've got the possibility of going back and forth quickly between mountain

and city, between asphalt and hills, between waterfalls and beaches, or you can be shot quickly! You've got the various perils of living in a huge city, you understand? I mean criminality!

In addition, you've got all the major problems of the big city—a high cost of living, for example. All these things influence the life of a professional musician, especially when he or she needs to get from A to B with equipment. It's that same basic problem of the city that outgrew its infrastructure—not enough space and too much traffic.

Despite all this, the music scene is very interesting; however, the situation has declined drastically—this much is clear. Today, we're left with few nightclubs, theatres, and performing venues. We only have venues for large productions. So if you try to produce something for a public of just 500–1,000, you're out of luck, practically unthinkable! So this means that Rio today is geared towards the business of entertainment, rather than music as an art form. In the past, this balance was tilted the other way in favor of the arts. In any case, Rio de Janeiro continues to be an inspiration for many musicians!

**Lim:** *Could you tell us about the important collaborations in your career?*

**Suzano:** Lots! Zizi Possi was very important for my professional growth; she encouraged me to be innovative and was very supportive. The feedback from audiences was excellent. We got along really well on stage, and the performances were simply beautiful. She was the first to acknowledge my personal contribution as being a great inspiration.

Zizi was, without a doubt, an incredible collaboration, along with Paulo Moura, who was my master, through whom I got to know Carlos Negreiros. Others were Alex Meirelles and Jovi. Aquarela Carioca was awesome, too; it was a very important ensemble in the '90s. Alceu Valencia was another terrific collaborator; our disc *Sete Desejos* was very successful. I used mostly moringa [clay pot] and light percussion; it was unique and fresh.

And without a doubt, Olho de Peixe from

the '90s with Lenine was seminal in opening doors and setting off an entire range of rewarding partnerships. Gilberto Gil—I love his projects, his generosity, and his openness in allowing others to deconstruct and rebuild various arrangements of renowned works. They gained new life with the fresh colors and shading. He's very open and his work is fantastic. Also Adriana Calcanhoto. There have been many exceptional artists.

Outside of Brazil there's Sting, who's wonderful; Mio Osawa, my great friend from Japan! Japan is very special; I do a great number of projects there. There's Takashi Numazawa, who is the drummer I most enjoy playing with. I always keep in touch with him. Lots of fantastic artists!

**Lim:** *Let's talk about the pandeiro. What kind of pandeiro do you use?*

**Suzano:** I use a pandeiro of 10 inches in diameter and 5 cm in depth, with five pairs of jingles. The head is made of goatskin—very thick and low in pitch. The metal tension ring around the head is rounded.

**Lim:** *How have you contributed to the domain of pandeiro performance?*

**Suzano:** In certain respects, I am very happy, and I even talked about this with my wife the other day. Yesterday during breakfast, there was a commercial on TV with a big pandeiro as a backdrop; along comes the sound of a traditional samba pandeiro and then the sound of a funkier one. To be honest, without false modesty, this evolution of sound developed largely as a result of my work as a solo artist and my collaborations with various artists such as Zizi Possi, Ney Matogrosso, Gilberto Gil, Lenini, and Aquarela Carioca.

My work has influenced a generation of young musicians, both Brazilian and international percussionists, especially those who left behind that cumbersome Afro-Latin gear—congas, timbales, and bongos, almost a universal “standard” percussion setup. That expectation inconvenienced me somewhat, because when I started to play in Copacabana, I wasn't interested in those instruments. Instead, I'd always wanted to use repinique, caixa, surdo, pandeiro, and cuica.

It was only after I studied the music of Candomblé that things were clarified for me. I saw that we do have incredible music resources here: atabaque, timbal, tam tam. It's incredible that there was a period of Brazilian music when all the percussionists used only the Latin setup. However, these days if someone asks, “Do you play pandeiro?” and you say “No!”, you're in trouble. Back then, if you played pandeiro, people would say, “You're not a percussionist; you're just a *ritimista*.”

The older generation of Brazilian samba percussionists consisted of specialists who

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played instruments in traditional contexts. If you wanted a pandeiro player you'd have called Jorginho, Jackson, Gilberto, Testo, or Carlinhos. No one took these instruments and tried to develop a new urban language using elements from elsewhere, including life experience, but this is my case. I've traveled, been exposed to many things, and listened to all kinds of experimental music. I play pandeiro with lots of pedals; I think about what can be done to push the envelope and go for it. This sort of approach resonates mostly with the younger crowd.

For musicians starting out, it's important to have a beacon—a light showing the way, saying, “Do this; it's cool!” When I was just starting out, I always went looking for recordings by Miles Davis to know what was happening. Then he died and left that tremendous vacuum.

These days, I go and check out Björk; who knows, I could learn something! Or Nine-Inch Nails. You go exploring and maybe find something interesting. Many people have been inspired by my musical approach, and actually, it's time I bring new products to the market!

**Lim:** *How did you develop your particular style of playing pandeiro?*

**Suzano:** I began to develop my personal style when I was playing with Aquarela Carioca, which was a group that blended electric and acoustic instruments: acoustic guitar, cello, saxophone, flute, pandeiro, tabla, moringa, and also electric bass and electric guitar.

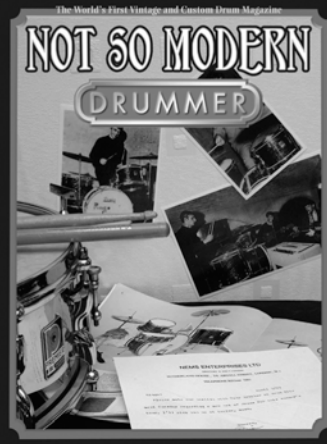
The pandeiro became a vehicle for my concept of sound and rhythm. In order to produce that sonic conceptualization, the tonality of the pandeiro needed to go beyond musical convention. So I started to play with a really low bass in order to simulate a bumbo [bass drum] sound that still had a unique and interesting character; a slap that was drier and punchier; and a more articulate jingle. So when someone hears that wall of sound, he reacts with surprise: “Wow, that guy is just playing a pandeiro!” He closes his eyes and says, “Man, what a heavy groove, but it ain't a drumset.” Opens his eyes and sees the pandeiro again. “Wow, it's coming from just that?”

I don't just play one style. For example, I'm Brazilian, but I'm not going to limit myself to baião, samba, sambinha, maracatu, or caboclinho the whole time—no way! The result is an erosion of the “exotic third world percussionist” stereotype. And as I'm not visually very exotic, I've compensated by developing a musical approach that's a little more thoughtfully elaborated.

I've worked with sound engineer Denilson Campos, who helped a lot. Also, Jim Ball, I think, from the U.S., who was able to elicit a tremendous sound from the pandeiro. He was the one who recorded *Sambatown*. And so the instrument was transformed and re-situated in a much wider perspective. In addition to an immense sound, the beats also evolved, and possibilities for accompaniment expanded. The pandeiro became an incredibly versatile instrument. Really cool!

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**Lim:** *Who are the other pandeiro innovators?*

**Suzano:** Jackson do Pandeiro is fantastic! Others are Jorginho, Sergio Caracorves, and Bernardo. In Sao Paulo you've got Guillermo Castro Alves. In Salvador, Gotko is an incredible musician. Nowadays there's a new generation of 22-, 24-, 25-, 28-year-olds full of talent and potential.

**Lim:** *How do you improvise in your solos?*

**Suzano:** I really find the mathematical logic of Indian music very interesting; it's difficult, but fascinating. I'm even satisfied if I use the concepts in a more simplified way. For example in this album of Gil's there's a piece called "Asa Branca." I had a pandeiro improvisation in which I busted a rapid groove and proceeded to break down the phrases into smaller and smaller sections all the way to units of sixteenth notes. So normally I end up doing an improvisation with a sort of Cartesian organization. There's a lot of that!

**Lim:** *Where do you draw inspiration for your compositions?*

**Suzano:** A large fountain of inspiration comes from exploring sonic surprises. For example, I record a beat on the pandeiro, sample it, use a filter, like a "Scherman" or some other plugin, and something comes up that makes me go, "Hey what's that?" It triggers an idea for a bass line. Then I might add a moringa and you've got a kind of melody. Then I see what comes next.

But basically, lately, I compose through sonic experimentation. I don't conceptualize entire compositions in my head; I create in a rather non-linear fashion. I open up a screen of many possibilities and use small units to construct a big musical quilt. I take advantage of moments of inspiration to compose a piece of music, which often leads to other things. Very interesting how that works.

Technology has opened fresh perspectives and we've got to take advantage of it!

**Lim:** *What are your other preferred percussion instruments?*

**Suzano:** I love the berimbau, the cuica, the surdo—these instruments are extremely special to us Brazilians! I also like the drumset. In addition, my universe of instruments always was inspired by the Hindu and Arabic worlds. I've always used East Indian tabla; I love the tabla. Also, I think that the darabukka is a very versatile instrument timbrally. It's very portable so you can bring it to various places easily. And it's got a great sound, a wonderful range of frequencies. The talking drum is really cool, too; it also has many possibilities.

I classify my sounds by materials—wood, skin, metal. Then within each of these I try to achieve low, medium, and high ranges. For example, in my setup I've got the carom

(cajón), which gives me low, medium, and high pitches on wood. I've got skin on the pandeiro, also with low, medium, and high. Finally in the metals, the same thing.

In addition, by using a trigger and my sampler, I have access to a whole universe of sounds. Today's percussionist has to have a sampler and a trigger. These tools are useful when traveling, too, because you can get rid of your excess baggage costs and still have a huge range of sound effects. They also reduce the number of mikes and cut down on soundcheck time. Plug 'em, play 'em, and go home. Much, much more practical.

**Lim:** *What's your setup like on stage?*

**Suzano:** My setup consists of a carom, a stainless steel tray and plate, a 10-inch snare drum, and triggers. Sometimes I use a tabla or a moringa (clay pot), or I add effects such as various ganzas (tube shaker) and bells.

**Lim:** *Could you tell us about the microphones you use?*

**Suzano:** In my setup, I use the Shure 98 on the pandeiro and the 91 on carom. Then it depends on the instrument—could be the SM 57, could be a Neumann.

**Lim:** *How do you feel about the rise of interest in Brazilian music among foreign musicians?*

**Suzano:** I'm very happy about this because it'll help to dispel myths about our music—for example, that it is some kind of simple, exotic sensation. On the contrary, Brazilian music is a difficult language to master, like jazz or classical chamber music; it's a vast area of study!

**Lim:** *What's the best way to learn the music of another culture?*

**Suzano:** That's a good question! In the case of Brazilian music, it's very important to go to the origin, which in a large part is the music of Candomble. The music of Africa has influenced much of the world's music, and it's very interesting to reflect about that, to research these things. Here in Brazil, if you study the music of Candomble, you'll understand Brazilian music very easily.

**Lim:** *How did you learn about Candomble music?*

**Suzano:** Through the work of Paulo Moura, Carlos Negreiros, and Caboclinho. They really are masters.

**Lim:** *What advice would you have for budding percussionists?*

**Suzano:** First, practice a little bit every day, but you don't have to overdo it and end up full of calluses! Next, listen to wide range of music. Third, be comfortable in the electronic side as well as the acoustic side. Finally, you have to be capable of understanding the form of the piece of music quickly, in two or three hear-

ings—introduction, A, B, chorus. You've got to learn it and compose for it quickly. And you've got to have a strong musical foundation. In my case it is Afro-Brazilian music; the East Indian musician has East Indian music. And from there, you explore other things, but you have to have a solid foundation.

**Lim:** *Would you like to say anything else to our readers?*

**Suzano:** I hope to perform more often in the United States, including my own music, the stuff I do in my own projects. I hope to see this distance diminish between the Brazilian and the North American percussion worlds. Central America, which separates North and South America, has an incredibly strong percussion tradition, and the Afro-Latin culture and people have an immense influence in North America. But our culture also is very rich! Often Americans confuse Brazilian music with the Afro-Latin music, but there is a big difference. In Brazilian music, there is a certain beauty, a special swing that is very important for the North American musician to understand, to research, and to study more thoroughly.

One way to accomplish this is by bringing more quality Brazilian acts to the USA. I've been to New York with Lenine twice. It was terrific—people loved it!

**Lim:** *Where can people find out more about your percussion classes?*

**Suzano:** I've got an instructional video made in Japan by Fuji TV: *Pandeiro—complete lessons*. It's produced really well! And you can get my albums on the Internet.

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Lenine & Suzano: *Olho de Peixe*  
Lenine: *O Dia Em Que Faremos Contato*  
Zizi Possi: *Sobre Todas As Coisas*  
Gilberto Gil: *Acoustic*  
Marcos Suzano: *Sambatown*  
Marcos Suzano: *Flash*  
Fátima Guedes: *Pra Bom Entendedor*

**Malcolm Lim** (B. Music, McGill) is the founder and musical director of the Calgary School of Samba. With support from the Canada Council for the Arts, he trained at GRES Unidos de Vila Isabel and GRES Estacao Primeira de Mangueira, Rio de Janeiro, in 2005 and 2000 respectively. He performs with the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra, the Red Deer Symphony Orchestra, and the Bow Valley Chorus. In addition, Malcolm has taught at the University of Lethbridge, Augustana University College, and the Red Deer Conservatory of Music. PN