Anat Cohen

PERFECT ACCENT

By Allen Morrison | Photo by Shervin Lainez

The "great room" of clarinetist Anat Cohen's ultra-modern Brooklyn loft apartment has many luxurious attributes—high ceilings, open kitchen, a gleaming black Steinway grand piano and a treasured view of the East River—but the most striking feature is an oil painting that adorns one wall.

The painting, by Paul Oxborough, is titled *At Jules*. It depicts Cohen with one of her early New York groups, the Choro Ensemble, performing at the East Village bistro of the title, where the band played a weekly gig from 2001 to 2007. With the group apparently in mid-song, she is portrayed, clarinet in hand, smiling rapturously. The profound, expressly Brazilian swing of choro music—joyous, yet with a bittersweet tinge—is palpable.

One of the most acclaimed clarinetists in jazz, the Israeli-born Cohen has somehow also managed to become one of the world's foremost practitioners of Brazilian jazz. Indeed, she is now to the clarinet what Stan Getz was to the tenor saxophone in the 1960s: a jazz musician who speaks the language of Brazilian music so fluently that she has become a beacon of Brazilian music to the larger jazz world.

"Anat is 100 percent jazz musician, but she's also 100 percent Brazilian," said Marcello Gonçalves, the Brazilian guitarist with whom she has recorded a new album of duets. Cohen's playing of several different genres of Brazilian music is so faithful that she fits easily into the company of the best native-born musicians. Like Getz, Gonçalves said, "Her accent is perfect."

A little less than two decades after joining her first Brazilian band as a fledgling Berklee College of Music graduate in Boston, Cohen has just simultaneously released two addictive new albums of Brazilian jazz: *Outra Coisa (Another Thing)—The Music Of Moacir Santos*, with Gonçalves; and *Rosa Dos Ventos (Weathervane)*, her second album with Trio Brasileiro, one of Brazil's most accomplished choro groups. Both are on the Anzic Records label, which Cohen co-founded with her business partner, producer/arranger Oded Lev-Ari.

Outra Coisa is a duo album that achieves something very rare: It reduces the big band arrangements of the great Brazilian jazz composer Santos down to just two musicians—Cohen on clarinet and Gonçalves on seven-string guitar. The mastery of the two musicians is such as to render additional instruments superfluous.

Rosa Dos Ventos is inspired by traditional choro music but consists of new compositions by Cohen and each member of Trio Brasileiro. The musicians—guitarist Douglas Lora; his brother, percussionist Alexandre Lora; and Dudu Maia on 10-string bandolim (Brazilian

Anat Cohen's two new albums explore Brazilian musical styles.


CLARA ANGELEAS

Cohen collaborated with Trio Brasiliero's Alexandre Lora (left), Douglas Lora and Dudu Maia on *Rosa Dos Ventos*.

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mandolin)—are masters of the choro style, which requires precision but also enough confidence to swing in a way that makes the music "a little dirty," as Maia put it in a phone interview from his home studio in Brasilia, where the album was recorded.

"I met Anat in New York in 2006," recalled Maia, one of Brazil's finest players of bandolim. "I went to see her play with the Choro Ensemble, and I was totally blown away. I mean she can really do it. If you, as an American, see someone from a different culture playing jazz standards, you are probably very picky. You can tell if he digs it or not; you can tell the accent and the vocabulary. I was amazed. … She was playing choro like I've never seen it."

Choro (which means "cry" in Portuguese) had its origins in the late 19th century and predates the development of samba. A choro revival has taken place in Brazil in recent decades and is spreading internationally. The best analogies are to traditional New Orleans jazz, with its emphasis on collective, simultaneous improvisation; and to ragtime, with its syncopation, copious use of contrapuntal melodies and formal structure (choros are usually in rondo form). New Orleans jazz combined the influences of African, European and Latin music; similarly, choro merged European melodies, harmonies and structures, but with African and indigenous Brazilian folk rhythms. The two styles had other things in common: They were played for dancing, and the clarinet had a central role.

"I had my first affair with Brazilian music when I was living in Boston" in the late 1990s, Cohen said. "At Berklee, I was already playing Afro-Cuban music. After I graduated, I started to play Brazilian music, and I just felt so at home, right from the get-go." She gigged around Boston with a quartet led by Brazilian bassist Leonardo Cioglia; they played Brazilian tunes from every era. The gigs there, and later in New York with drummer Duduka da Fonseca, among others, brought Cohen into regular contact with expatriate Brazilians. She soon became a devotee of all things Brazilian.

After learning conversational Portuguese from Barron's foreign-language books and cassettes, one day in 2000 Cohen packed a bag and flew to Rio de Janeiro. She stayed for two months. She now makes an annual pilgrimage to Rio, where she plays and hangs out with some of the finest musicians in Brazil.

"With the music came the culture," she said. "For me they were inseparable. I loved playing it, but I also loved the way Brazilian people hung out, their warmth and passion for life. There were always parties. I was such a …" She trailed off, then explained, "I didn't even drink beer before that. I was like, 'Hey, can I have some water?' and they'd say, 'No, there's only beer!' And I'd say, 'Oh, OK [*laughs*].'"

Cohen's fluency in Brazilian jazz started with her playing in a Dixieland band in a Tel Aviv high school for the performing arts. "There was something about the polyphony that I loved—people playing lines at the same time but making it work. I play horn, so I don't [normally] accompany. But when you play the music of New Orleans—or choro music—you can accompany with musical lines. … I love the way everything fits together, the swing—it's so happy. That's the way the 3 Cohens works," she said, referring to the band she's in with her older brother, Yuval (soprano saxophone), and her younger brother, Avishai (trumpet). "We have no harmony instrument—my parents stopped at three," she added.

When she was 16, she said, "a teacher in high school told me, 'Bring any saxophone, but don't bring the clarinet.' Maybe it seemed old-fashioned to him. But that was the last time I brought the clarinet. I liked the saxophone, and I fell in love with Dexter [Gordon] and Sonny [Rollins]. But the clarinet stayed my friend." She continued classical clarinet lessons but eventually had to choose between it and her new-found love of jazz—which meant saxophone. Jazz won.

Hanging out with Brazilian musicians in Boston, she was introduced to choro and wanted to play it. Her friends said she would need to play clarinet because that was part of the style; the saxophone wouldn't really fit. "'Oh, my god,' I thought. 'I haven't practiced clarinet in a long time.' There's a physicality to choro—it's very challenging. So it got me to dust off my clarinet case and start playing again."

Still, when she arrived in New York in 1999, the sax was her main instrument. She joined the Diva Jazz Orchestra as a saxophonist around 1999. In 2000, the band played the March of Jazz Festival in Clearwater, Florida. There she met Kenny Davern, Buddy DeFranco and Ken Peplowski, three giants of jazz clarinet, and had an experience with them that proved pivotal.

"It was [saxophonist] Flip Phillips' 85th birthday. We were all on stage with the orchestra playing 'Happy Birthday.' And it turned into 'Rhythm' changes, and people started to play choruses. Stanley Kay [manager of the DIVA Jazz Orchestra] said to me, 'Where's your clarinet?' I said, 'It's up in my room.' 'Well, go get it!'

"I ran up to my room, and by the time I got back, everybody is playing solos. So, I go on stage with the clarinet. And nobody has really heard me play clarinet before." When it was her turn, she took two choruses. "And when I finished those choruses, Kenny Davern pulls me by my shoulders and put me between him and Buddy DeFranco. And from that moment, suddenly, it became like, 'OK, you're one of us.'"

Between playing choro in Boston and listening to her clarinet heroes—including Paquito D'Rivera, with whom she now sometimes performs—she changed her opinion of the instrument: "I was like, 'Wow, the clarinet is actually great.' They reminded me that it was."

Cohen began playing with Choro Ensemble in 2000, but she still viewed herself as a saxophonist. "It wasn't until 2006 that I realized that I was doing most of my gigs with clarinet—I'm playing Venezuelan music, Colombian music, Brazilian music—so let me make a clarinet album. That's when I turned to Omer Avital, and we recorded *Poetica* [Anzic, 2007], the first album on which I played only clarinet." The same year she recorded *Noir* (Anzic), on which she played tenor and soprano sax, and clarinet.

"I wasn't trying to change my career; I just love this instrument. I have a different relationship with it than I do with the saxophone. … When I play clarinet, I feel that anything is possible. I can take any melody and make it my own. The instrument is an extension of my body; it's instinctual."

Cohen's clarinet expertise has been a key element in her collaborations with Gonçalves, who turned her on to the brilliance of the composer/arranger Moacir Santos (1926–2006).

"One day [Gonçalves] wrote to me and said, 'I have a dream—an image of playing the music of Moacir Santos with just clarinet and guitar,'" Cohen said. "I thought, 'Oh, cool.' Then he sent me a little demo. The next time I was in Brazil, I said to him, 'Hey, Marcello, don't you want to hear those Moacir arrangements?' He said, 'Sure,' and I said, 'OK, let's go.'" She expected Gonçalves to book a rehearsal studio, but instead, he booked a recording studio and brought his charts. The duo recorded the material in two days.

Gonçalves had spent a year working out reductions of the Santos big band charts. His orchestral approach to the guitar provides bass ostinatos, rhythm chords and lead lines, laying down a groove that allows Cohen to soar.

In *Rosa Dos Ventos*, a follow-up to Trio Brasileiro's first collaboration with Cohen, 2015's *Alegria Da Casa* (Anzic), they have continued their deep dive into new original songwriting combining choro with other styles. Their intention, explained Maia, here and on the band's own recent album, *Caminho Do Meio* (triobrasileiro.com), is to extend the possibilities of choro, incorporating influences from Spain, India, salsa music and even rock.

"We were looking not only at the shape of the music, but the texture," he said. When Cohen solos on *Rosa Dos Ventos*, she weaves in and out of the music in a way that reminds Maia of Wayne Shorter. "She's not so much leading the whole thing, but making it more colorful," he added. The mood often shifts dramatically, like the weathervane of the title, from the jubilance of "Choro Pesado" to the *saudade* of "Teimosa," and sometimes within a single song (Maia's rollicking, then haunting, "Das Neves").

As central to her career as Brazilian music has become, the restless Cohen is equally involved with modern and traditional American jazz. Her next album, due in the fall, will be the first recording of her new tentet, which includes horns, accordion, vibraphone and cello, as well as a rhythm section.

As the interview concluded, Cohen retrieved a cherished memento: a framed DownBeat magazine cover from 1961 that was given to her by a fan. The cover image is a drawing of a clarinet player facing some symbolically empty folding chairs, with the headline "The Clarinet in Jazz—What Happened?"

After a long period of decline engendered by bebop, which favored speedy saxophone lines, the clarinet appears to be regaining favor, thanks to players like Cohen and D'Rivera, Peplowski, Don Byron and Marty Ehrlich. Cohen believes its future is promising as musicians not only rediscover traditional jazz, but also experiment with it in other styles.

"It's at least as promising as the future of the saxophone or the trombone," she said. "It's a diverse instrument. Slowly, people will stop associating it with music of the past and see it more as part of the music of the present." **DB**