

*'I'm making it clear just to confuse you,  
I'm confusing you to make things clear.  
I'm illuminating so I can blind,  
I'm going blind so I can guide.'*  
(From the song 'Tô' on *Brazil Classics Vol 4*)

Tom Zé is a one-off. A joker in the world music pack; he's a musician who has strong roots in the culture and music of north-east Brazil but has also produced some of the strangest but most delightfully original and infectious music in his 50-year career. He has incorporated – if not the kitchen sink – instruments like floor sanders, blenders and typewriters in his music, as well as rather more traditional instruments in his highly idiosyncratic songs.

He was born Antônio José Santana Martins in 1936, in the small town of Irará in the dry area of the interior of the state of Bahia, the *sertão*. "North-eastern life is mind-boggling," he has said. "On the one hand you barely have a survival level of existence, nourished by the simplest, harshest foods: manioc flour and sun-dried meats. But on the other hand you have a rich and varied cultural life." The desolate region and Zé's music is enriched by Indian, Portuguese and African heritages.

Zé began his life as a modern troubadour with songs of street life and paeans to his home town. He learnt cello at music college in Salvador, the capital of Bahia. There he studied the classics from Beethoven to Schönberg – being particularly interested in atonality, while noting the dissonance present in so much local folk music.

Zé was also a huge fan of the *forro* greats; the accordion-driven poets of the *sertão* like Jackson Do Pandeiro and the artist Manu Chao calls "the Bob Marley of Brazil" Luiz Gonzaga. "North-eastern musicians like to play with rhythm, to make it complex, pleasurable, tasty. Southern music is soft and melodic, while north-eastern music is dry – a dehydrated God."

In 1967, he came to wider attention as part of the *tropicalia* movement, joining Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, Gal Costa, Os Mutantes and Maria Bethania on the era-defining album *Tropicalia ou Panis et Circenses*, [featured as a Classic Album, #36]. The music was described as cannibalistic – devouring influences from The Beatles as much as soul music and samba, with a considerable dash of avant-garde classical influences. The attitude and lyrics, while often surreal, were part of a revolt against the political dictatorship after the coup of 1964. The movement was not just musically innovative but has been highly influential and of lasting impact.

While Veloso and Gil became pop stars

Tom Zé: "We north-easterners have one foot in poverty and another in cultural riches."



## → BEGINNER'S GUIDE TOM ZÉ

Peter Culshaw celebrates the career of a true musical maverick and one of the *tropicalia* movement's original pioneers

PHOTO ANDRÉ CONTI



Tom Zé with Gal Costa (above) and fellow tropicalia innovators on the era-defining *Tropicalia ou Panis et Circenses* album (right)

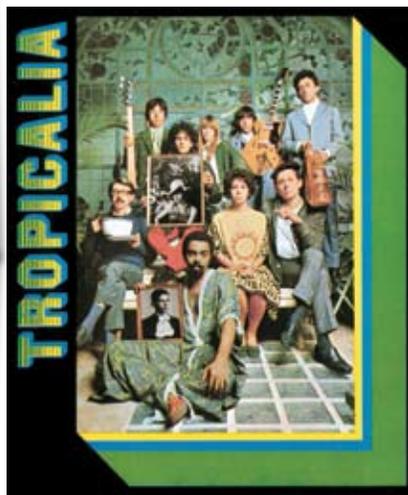
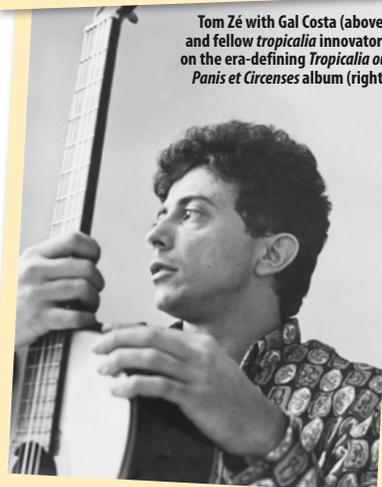


figure in the US and Europe, with the likes of Beck and the Beastie Boys citing him as one of their favourite artists.

Having not released a new album since 1984's *Nave Maria*, Zé was inspired by this new interest in his work to write new material. Luaka Bop released *Brazil Classics 5: The Hips of Tradition* in 1992, which showed Zé on top, playful, form. As usual, there was an abundance of ideas, including a meditation on the physical body and the mass media in 'Tatuarambá' – which include the lyrics, roughly translated as 'Bring the body to the brushes of electronics/To wear the poem-commercial, made naked the body in samba/Defile the ass of samba/Hold the samba's ass, yes, that's it!' Genius? Madman? Provocateur? Probably a combination of all three.

There was a six-year hiatus until his extraordinary *Com Defeito do Fabricação* (Fabrication Defect), which with its typically odd blend of sambas, bottles and guitar effects was a meditation on the "defects of human genetics" which prevent us from becoming androids and cause us to "think, dance and dream."

Zé's reputation as a restless experimentalist was further confirmed with the release of *Estudando o Pagode* in 2006 in which the 70-year-old Zé composed a kind of lo-fi opera in three acts: "a vision of women seen through men's gaze."

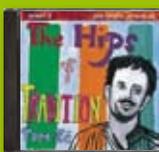
Now 74, Zé hasn't been in great health, so the forthcoming visit by him to these shores is to be treasured. One source of originality is that he claims not to listen to anyone else's music. For entertainment he says he "listens to the transmission of soccer games on the radio. Or maybe news, although politics has become quite unbearable lately." ●

**DATES** Tom Zé plays at the Southbank Centre, London on July 18 as part of Festival Brazil

**ONLINE** You can hear tracks from Tom Zé on the interactive: [www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/69](http://www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/69)

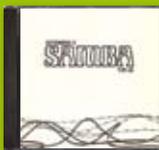
# BEST...

## ...ALBUMS



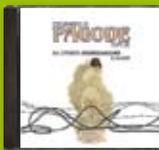
**Brazil Classics Vol 5: The Hips of Tradition (Luaka Bop, 1992)**

The first new material Tom Zé had recorded for David Byrne's Luaka Bop label makes a good introduction to the eccentric mind of Zé – strange without being wilfully obscure. With some catchy tunes and great liner notes, too.



**Estudando o Samba (Continental, 1975)**

The album Byrne discovered in a record store which revived Zé's career. Clever word-play, challenging arrangements and collaborations with his long-term collaborator, guitarist Vicente Barreto.



**Estudando o Pagode (Luaka Bop, 2006)**

Zé's exploration of *pagode* – a style of samba – is a hugely avant-garde piece of work. A Top of the World review in #38.

## ...COMPILATIONS



**Brazil Classics 4: Tom Zé – Massive Hits (Luaka Bop, 1990)**

A fabulous collection gleaned from several 70s albums. The album which started the Zé craze outside Brazil and revived his career. Infectious, meticulous, splendidly weird pop music which remains the best introduction.



**Postmodern Platos (Luaka Bop, 1999)**

Remixes of Zé's music from the likes of Sean Lennon, the High Llamas, Amon Tobin and John McEntire of Tortoise. A few tracks are little too dance-music-by-numbers, most illuminate the inner workings of the Zé oeuvre.

## ...AVOIDED



**Correio Da Estacao Do Bras (Continental, 1978)**

In what may be an elaborate joke, Zé goes smooth, almost middle of the road. If you want melodic charm and a beautiful voice – try Caetano Veloso or any of a multitude of other Brazilian artists.

## & COMING SOON

Luaka Bop will be releasing a box set called *Studying Tom Zé* later this year.

## IF YOU LIKE TOM ZÉ, THEN TRY...

### JACKSON DO PANDEIRO



**Millenium (Universal, 1999)**

Zé dedicated his *Hips Of Tradition* album to Do Pandeiro, a musical hero of his childhood and if you want to discover the north-eastern roots of his music, this is the place to start.

Statue of Jackson Do Pandeiro in Campina Grande (Paraíba), Brazil



ALAN BRICK