

## STILL SWINGING - Sergio Mendes Talks Cheltenham, Sinatra ... and Pele.

Written by Charles Waring

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We live in an age where the words 'legendary' and 'iconic' are overused and bandied about by mainstream media commentators with indiscriminate abandon to describe anyone who's been in the public eye for more than a couple of years. But in an era of ephemeral celebrity, **SERGIO MENDES**

is someone who lives up to the true definition of 'legendary' and 'iconic'. A noted pianist and bandleader, he's a bona fide legend of Brazilian music who rose to fame in the mid to late 1960s when he and his group Brazil 66 took the alluring music of his homeland to a wider audience with big US pop hits like 'The Look Of Love,' 'Fool On The Hill,' and 'Scarborough Fair.' Fifty years on and Sergio Mendes, who recently celebrated his 78th birthday, is still going strong. He's the subject of a forthcoming documentary,

*In The Key Of Joy*

, which is due for release soon, and is working on a new album, the 43rd of his career.

Sergio is due to fly in and do a handful of concert dates in the UK later this year and his short itinerary includes a stopover at **Cheltenham Jazz Festival**, where he and his band are due to perform a 75-minute set on Saturday May 4th at 2.00pm. Ahead of his Cheltenham gig, the Rio-born maestro talked exclusively to SJF's Charles Waring about his forthcoming trip to the UK and his long and storied career...



**Sergio Mendes** is a man who seems to radiate joy. He's rarely seen without a beaming, beatific smile etched on his face and his music - bright, colourful, and vibrant - transmits feelings of love, elation and harmony. It's no surprise, then, that a forthcoming documentary on him, which is due at the end of April, is called *In The Key Of Joy*. It's a title that encapsulates the euphoric essence of both Mendes' personality and the uplifting effect of his music. And at 78, it's that sense of joy - as both a giver and receiver of it - that continues to drive him.

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Sergio, who's talking to me from his home in Los Angeles, where's he lived for half-a-century, reveals that he's bringing a full band with him to the Cheltenham Jazz Festival in May: *"In my band right now, I have two singers. One is my wife, Gracinha Leporace, the other one is Katie Hampton. Then I have drums, bass, guitar, a percussionist, saxophonist and flute and a rapper."*

With a huge repertoire of songs at his disposal, it might seem a difficult task to whittle his repertoire down to a 75-minute set. *"I have so many songs to choose from,"* states Sergio, *"but I like to call my concerts a musical journey. Coming to England, I know a lot of people like the classics - 'Mas Que Nada,' 'Fool On The Hill,' and 'The Look of Love' - and great songs from the bossa nova period. So that's what we'll play and we're looking forward to it."*

The last time Sergio Mendes was in Britain was at the 2013 Glastonbury Festival. *"A lot of people told me it was going to be complicated,"* laughs the pianist, *"but we had a wonderful time."*



Despite being popular in the UK during the 1960s, his first trip to the UK wasn't until 1980. *"I remember opening for Frank Sinatra,"* reveals Sergio.

*"We toured with him and did two weeks at the Royal Albert Hall."*

The Brazilian pianist remembers 'Ol' Blue Eyes' with much affection.

*"We became very close friends,"*

he reveals.

*"He lived in Los Angeles and I saw him many other times. We did a tour in the United States. He loved Brazilian music. He was fantastic and every night I had the chance to watch his show and be in awe of him and his beautiful voice. It was just an amazing experience for me to have had that opportunity to work with him."*

A doctor's son from Niteroi, a municipality of Rio de Janeiro, Sergio Mendes began playing the piano early on in his life. *"I started learning classical music when I was seven years old,"* he

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says, though it wasn't an activity that he was especially passionate about at that age and it was more a case of doing his parents' bidding. But a musical epiphany five years later changed his attitude

*"When I was 12 years old, I had a jazz record by Dave Brubeck, and that was really like a wake-up call for me,"*

he discloses.

*"I said wow, this is beautiful, and I started listening to jazz and all the great pianists like Horace Silver, Bud Powell, and Thelonious Monk."*



Inspired by his American jazz heroes, Sergio led some local groups in Rio, and then in the late 1950s, he was caught up in the Brazilian bossa nova explosion that was spearheaded by Joao Gilberto and Antonio Carlos Jobim (Pictured with Sergio above). *"I was working in a little club in Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro, and I met Antonio Carlos Jobim, the great Brazilian composer,"* remembers Mendes.

*"We worked together and that was a wonderful period of my life."*

Sergio regarded the older Jobim as a major influence on him. *"He was my mentor, friend, and teacher,"* he says. *"I learned a lot with him. He was a great composer and just like the Gershwin or Cole Porter of Brazil. Everybody recorded his songs, from Sinatra to Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, the great singers of our times. And he was very funny, very intelligent, and I have great memories with him. And I miss him."*

Sergio performed with Jobim and many other of his compatriots at a special showcase for Brazilian music at Carnegie Hall on November 21st 1962. That was where the touch paper for the bossa nova phenomenon was lit. *"Great melodies, great harmonies.. it was a wonderful musical time,"* exclaims the pianist, recalling the rise of bossa nova. As for the appeal of Brazilian music in general, Sergio believes that it's down to three things: *"I think it's very sensual, it's very romantic, and you can also dance to it. Those three components make it very, very beautiful. And it has great melodies, melodies that you can remember. Brazilian music is also very joyful. If you go back to the classics of Brazilian music, they all have these characteristics."*

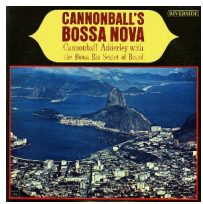
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Sergio Mendes' debut album, 'Dance Moderno,' was released by Philips in Brazil in 1961 but in 1965 (by which time he was working in the USA), the pianist signed a recording deal with Atlantic Records in New York, which resulted in the instrumental LPs, 'The Swinger From Rio' and 'Great Arrival.' *"My friend (producer) Nesuhi Ertegun signed me,"* recalls Sergio. *"He came to Brazil in 1959 to do an album with Herbie Mann and he saw me play in this club in Rio called The Bottles Bar. He asked me if I would come to the studio and play on the whole album, and then he said, if you ever come to New York, come and see me, which I did later on. So I made records for him, playing piano with different people and different guests. He was a dear friend of mine."*



During the same period, Sergio appeared on a highly-regarded Brazilian-tinged jazz album called 'Cannonball's Bossa Nova,' by revered alto saxophonist Cannonball Adderley. *"It was after the Carnegie Hall concert,"* remembers Sergio.

*"I went to Birdland to hear Cannonball and he said why don't you come and jam with us here, which I did, but I was shaking and scared. Then he said, why don't you stay two weeks and let's make an album together, and we did. He was amazing. I remember that very well. Cannonball was a wonderful guy - very nice, very warm and very funny. I had a great time working with him."*

1966 was a pivotal year in Sergio Mendes life when he signed to Herb Alpert and Jerry Moss's newly-formed A&M label leading a six-piece group called Brasil 66: *"We were auditioning here in LA for record companies and one day Herb Alpert and Jerry Moss came in and introduced themselves to us. They were just starting A & M, and asked us if I'd like to join them."*

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