Brazilian jazz musician Sergio Mendes, 83, dies after battle with Long COVID

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On September 5, world-renowned Brazilian-American pop musician, arranger and bandleader Sergio Mendes died in a hospital in Los Angeles at the age of 83. According to an Instagram post published by his family, for "the last several months, his health had been challenged by the effects of long term COVID."

His name needs to be added, in other words, to the long list of musicians and other artists whose contributions were cut short by the decision of the American and global establishment to allow the pandemic to ravage the population.

The media has made almost nothing of the manner of his death. Unsurprisingly, the *New York Times*' September 6 obituary of Mendes simply refers to the family's statement "that his death, in a hospital, was caused by long Covid." In fact, the musician, like many others, may well have spent the final months of his life suffering painfully from an entirely preventable condition.

Mendes first became professionally active in the late 1950s and is widely recognized as a popularizer of Brazilian music styles, particularly for US audiences. He is still perhaps best known for his version of Jorge Ben Jor's "Mas que Nada" (translated roughly as "Oh, come on now"), released in 1966 by Mendes' group Brasil '66.

As a measure of his talent and versatility, Mendes collaborated with a diverse roster of musicians. Many of the collaborations involved "unlikely" stylistic partnerships previously unheard of. Always working in the context of the music industry, with its instinctive tendency toward repetition, staleness and triviality, Mendes brought innovation and excitement to jazz over the course of a career spanning six decades.

Mendes was born in 1941 in Niterói, a municipality in the state of Rio de Janeiro, facing the city itself across a bay. It is located a short distance from Copacabana, a Rio neighborhood that was at the time a burgeoning cultural and nightlife hub. The son of a doctor, Mendes was trained as a classical pianist at a parochial school, and then at the Niterói Conservatory. After hearing recordings by Dave Brubeck, Mendes shifted his focus to jazz, forming several ensembles and performing for audiences around the city.

Rio at the time was the scene of the rapidly developing Bossa Nova musical style ("New Wave" or "New Trend"), which in part fused elements of American "cool" bebop jazz and traditional Brazilian samba rhythms. The thriving musical environment was possible due to significant changes in Brazil's social and economic life in the postwar period, widespread industrialization and urbanization, and the emergence of a generation of youth determined to follow new paths. (For example, the proportion of city dwellers rose from less than a third of Brazil's population to approximately three-quarters by 1990.)

Mendes was part of an artistic milieu that included notable musicians such as Antonio Carlos Jobim, Luis Bonfá, Baden Powell de Aquino and João Gilberto. Jobim was a bandmate of and mentor to Mendes in his various projects. At the time these musicians were beginning to rise to international prominence through touring and recording, particularly among American jazz musicians.

By the early 1960s, the youthful Mendes had begun to record and tour Europe and the US. In 1961, he recorded his first album as a leader for the Phillips label, titled *Dance Moderno*, which featured a combination of songs written by Jobim and Gilberto and standards from the jazz and Great American Songbook repertoire.

The following year, Mendes recorded an album with Cannonball Adderley, already famed in the US for his work with Miles Davis and other internationally acclaimed bebop musicians.

Brazilian music, as written and performed by figures such as Mendes, Jobim and Gilberto, had an immense impact on American music (and audiences) during the early to mid-1960's, acting like a breath of fresh, invigorating air with its elegance and fluidity.

Major jazz artists and pop music stars, including Charlie Byrd, Stan Getz, Oscar Peterson and Frank Sinatra, began to incorporate Bossa Nova into their work, often leading to chart-topping success. Getz and Byrd's crossover hit album *Jazz Samba* peaked at #1 on the US pop charts. The collaboration album between Getz and Gilberto, simply titled *Getz/Gilberto* (also featuring Jobim and the vocals of Astrud Gilberto), sold two million copies within a year of its release, and was the first jazz album to win "Record of the

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Year" in 1965.

Mendes developed a wide following and considerable reputation in the American music industry. By 1965, he had befriended trumpeter/bandleader and record producer Herb Alpert, who later produced the album *Herb Alpert Presents Sergio Mendes & Brasil '66*. The album became an overnight success, rising to #7 on the Billboard 200 chart and to #2 on the Top Jazz Album chart. It contained mostly Brazilian songs, as well as a cover of the Beatles' "Day Tripper," representing a further crossover into rock styles from Bossa Nova and jazz.

The US government inevitably attempted to make use of the rise of Bossa Nova and other Brazilian music for its own purposes during the period of the Cold War. American imperialism tried to solidify its control over Latin America through political and cultural, as well as CIA-military means. In the early 1960s, the State Department was known to have sponsored concert tours by American jazz musicians to Brazil and vice versa, as well as radio broadcasts and recordings of Brazilian musicians. In April 1964, the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson supported the military coup which ousted the democratically elected Brazilian president João Goulart.

The coup and subsequent bloody dictatorship are known to have posed problems for Mendes' return to Brazil. After 1964, he resided permanently in the US until his death, having been arrested at one point by agents of the newly installed Brazilian regime. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, he continued to release albums through Alpert's A&M label, occasionally also recording for Atlantic, Elektra and Bell records. He eventually became a top-selling artist in Japan, second only to the Beatles. In the US, he was invited to perform in the White House, including by Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan.

For his efforts, Mendes was well compensated, although the amount he accumulated over five or six decades was nothing compared to the sums racked up by contemporary performers such as Jay-Z, Rihanna, Taylor Swift.

By the 1990s and through the first two decades of the 21st century, Mendes continued to garner critical acclaim in the US, winning the Grammy Award for Best World Music Album in 1993 for his album *Brasileiro (*Elektra*)*, the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005 and the 2010 Grammy Best Brazilian Contemporary Pop Album for his *Bom Tempo* (Concord). In 2007, Mendes collaborated with a host of R&B, neo soul and alternative hip hop artists on his album *Timeless* (Concord), including The Black Eyed Peas, Erika Badu, Justin Timberlake, Stevie Wonder and John Legend.

Mendes worked in the commercial music industry for decades and inevitably came under its pressures. While many of his earlier, especially his instrumental works represent a substantial and important contribution to the development of modern jazz, the best of his later work is captured in the infectious samba rhythms contained in albums like *Brasileiro*.

Despite Mendes' confinement to an artistic environment eventually unconducive to genuine creativity, his individual talents and sensibilities allowed him to nurture some lasting contributions to popular music. To whatever extent it was possible to bring to wide audiences the more democratic musical traditions from American jazz and Brazilian styles, he will be treasured by history. His boldness, musical adventurism and willingness to experiment will endow his memory with an enduring relevance.

As noted above, while much of the recent press coverage has naturally focused on Mendes' achievements and deserved accolades, little of it has drawn attention to the tragic character of his death. Mendes and millions of others are victims of the vast social crime of "forever COVID" policies implemented by capitalist governments around the globe.

An August review published in *Nature Medicine* estimates there have been roughly 409 million cases of Long COVID within the first four years of the pandemic, making it among the most common medical conditions on the planet. A WSWS article posted last month provided the following description of the condition.

> The "cardinal" symptoms of Long COVID include brain fog and memory changes, fatigue, rapid sudden onset of heart rate, significant sleep disturbances, and immense sense of discomfort and illness after exerting oneself. There are no cures and, worse, no diagnostic tools that can tell someone they have Long COVID. Only recently have healthcare workers and researchers begun to identify treatments for Long COVID, but there is an absence of randomized trials to guide these decisions.

The fact that Mendes' family has cited Long COVID as a factor in the artist's death is a further confirmation of the catastrophic character of the official response to the pandemic.

In the midst of the ninth wave of the pandemic, by many accounts the worst since the emergence of the Omicron variant, governments continue to undermine—and even in some cases outlaw—the most basic public health measures.

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