From the moment of its first appearance, at the Cannes Film Festival in 1959—where it won the Palme d’Or—it was clear that Black Orpheus was a very special film. Taking the ancient Greek myth of a youth who travels to the land of the dead to bring back the woman he loves, and transporting it to the slums of modern day Rio de Janeiro, this bittersweet romantic tragedy has charmed audiences the world over with its beauty, color, and—above all—its music. In fact, so important is Black Orpheus’ musical dimension that you might say the film’s roots aren’t in images but in sounds.

The first shot shows an ancient frieze of the lovers, Orpheus and Eurydice. But what grabs your attention as it hits the screen is the sound of the music playing underneath it—a guitar softly strumming the chords of the film’s main musical theme. A mood of quiet reverie is created only to be shattered almost immediately as the frieze explodes before our eyes, only to be replaced by a series of fast-moving shots of dancers preparing for Carnival. But even these colorful sights are undercut by a sound that, beginning here, runs through the length of the film—the eruptive, convulsive, infectious beat of the Latin American pop sound known as “bossa nova.”

Though bossa nova had been the cornerstone of Latin American music for many years, it’s safe to say that prior to the release of Black Orpheus the world at large had never really heard it before. The film changed the world of music overnight. Its composers, Antonio Carlos Jobim and Luis Bonfá, became international stars. The film’s main themes, “Manha de Carnival” and “O Nossa Amor,” permeated the public consciousness in a way that hadn’t been seen since Anton Karas’ unforgettable zither theme for The Third Man. But make no mistake, none of these musical glories would have been possible without the film that holds them all together—Black Orpheus.

The Orpheus of myth was the son of the god Apollo and Calliope, a muse. His singing tamed wild beasts and quieted raging rivers. The Orpheus of the film is a lowly streetcar conductor whose singing makes him a favorite of the slum neighborhood where he lives. The original Eurydice was likewise high-born when compared to the film’s heroine—a simple country girl visiting the big city of Rio for the first time in her life. Ordinarily saddling such everyday characters with mythological barnacles would make for dramatic awkwardness. But thanks to the context of Carnival it all works perfectly. A once-a-year blowout where rich and poor alike can masquerade in whatever identities they choose, Carnival is the ideal setting for sliding a mythical mask over commonplace reality. And director Marcel Camus proves to be quite adept at juggling this balancing act between the fantastic and the real.

The figure of Death that pursues Eurydice through the streets of Rio could be the literal personification of fate—or the sort of everyday maniac found on the streets of any major city. Likewise, Eurydice’s death from a streetcar cable is a neat transposition of the
original legend in which she died from a serpent’s bite on her leg. Best of all is the film’s climax, in which Orpheus visits the underworld—here represented by Rio’s Bureau of Missing Persons—and a Macumba ceremony in which he tries to make contact with his dead love. As in the legend, the story of the film ends on an unhappy note. Still this nominally sad conclusion is undercut by the spirit of the largely unprofessional cast (Breno Mello was a champion soccer player, Marpessa Dawn a dancer from Pittsburgh); director Camus’ obvious love for Rio and its people; and the joyous, rapturous, unforgettable musical score.

Cheat Sheet:
The cast of characters in Black Orpheus and their mythological origins

Orpheus/Orfeo: [Mortal] Son of Apollo and, mythologically speaking the greatest human musician alive. Husband of Eurydice

Eurydice: [Mortal] wife of Orpheus

Hades/Death: [Olympian God] god of the dead

Hermes [Olympian God] Son of Zeus, Greek messenger god and also god of boundaries and those who cross them.

Hecate/Serafina: [Goddess] Queen of Ghosts. Charmed by Orpheus

Cereberus: A mythological three-headed dog who guards the gates of the Underworld.

The Story of Orpheus and Eurydice, in brief
Orpheus was the son of Calliope and Apollo, and was considered to be the greatest mortal musician and poet of Greek and Roman myth—it was said that his songs could charm wild beasts and coax even rocks and trees into movement. Orpheus married the beautiful Eurydice who was stung by a serpent, killed and therefore sent to the underworld. Orpheus used his irresistible musical talent to convince Hades, lord of the underworld, to allow him to retrieve his love—something never done by any other mortal. Hades promised Orpheus that he could have his Eurydice back, but on one condition, that as they left Hades he could never look back. Unfortunately, Orpheus did look back and his love vanished back into the Underworld, never to be seen again. Also unfortunately, Orpheus had used his one and only chance—he wasn’t allowed to return to the land of the dead a second time.

Broken hearted, Orpheus fled from normal life and refused to speak with others and instead choose to spend his time making music for himself and singing until he died.

Who is Hades? (Or “Death” as he is known in the film...)

- Hades is the ancient Greek god of the dead and ruler of the underworld.
- He is the son of Cronus and Rhea. When the three sons of Cronus divided the world among each other, Hades was given the underworld, while his brothers Zeus took the upperworld and Poseidon took the sea.
- Hades does not allow his subjects to leave his domain, which is why it was so extraordinary when he granted permission to Orpheus to descend into the underworld and bring back his wife Eurydice.
Hades possesses the riches of the earth, and is referred to as 'the Rich One'. Of all the gods, Hades is the one who is liked the least and even the gods themselves have an aversion of him.

What is the Greek Underworld?

- In older Greek myths, Hades is the misty and gloomy abode of the dead, where all humans go when they pass away and is ruled by its namesake mythical god... Hades. There is no reward or special punishment in Hades, but in later Greek philosophy appeared the idea that all mortals are judged after death and rewarded or cursed.

- The ancient greeks and romans believed several realms or underworlds like:
  - The great pit of Tartarus, which was originally the exclusive prison of the old Titan gods, but later came to mean the dungeon home of the damned souls.
  - The land of the dead ruled by the god Hades, which is called the house of Hades (domos Aidao), Hades, Erebus, the Asphodel Fields, Stygia and Acherontia.
  - The Islands of the Blessed or Elysian Islands ruled by Cronus, where the great heroes of myth lived after death.
  - The Elysian Fields ruled by Rhadamanthys, where the good dead and initiates in the ancient Mysteries were sent to rest.
  - There are five rivers of Hades are Acheron (the river of sorrow), Cocytus (lamentation), Phlegethon (fire), Lethe (forgetfulness) and Styx (hate), which forms the boundary between upper and lower worlds.

So what exactly is the Brazilian Carnival?

![Brazilian Carnival](image)
An annual four-day festival in Brazil that culminates 40 days before Easter that marks the beginning of Lent (a Roman Catholic holiday during which people are supposed to abstain from all bodily pleasures, including the consumption of meat. Carnival is seen by many as an act of farewell to the pleasures of the flesh. (If you want to think about an American equivalent, think of our own “Carnival”…New Orleans Mardi Gras! Mardi Gras is the celebration of “Fat Tuesday”, and falls 46 days before lent.

The way that Brazilian Carnival is celebrated varies from region to region. (The one depicted in Black Orpheus takes place in Rio de Janeiro)

Brazilian citizens used to riot until the Carnival was accepted by the government as an expression of culture.

The modern Brazilian Carnival began in Rio de Janeiro in the 1845s, when the city’s upper class imported the practice of holding balls and masquerade parties from Paris.

To celebrate Carnival, groups of people gather and parade through the streets playing music and dancing. Today they are known as blocos (blocks) that make up a group of people who dress in costumes or specials t-shirts according to certain themes or to celebrate the Carnival.

Blocos are generally associated with particular neighborhoods or suburbs and include both a percussion or music group and an entourage of revelers.

Carnival celebrations start in January and last till the end of the festival (right before lent!), so since the beginning of the year you can see a group of people dancing samba in any street of Rio in the weekends and during Carnival every day.

And what is this Bossa Nova?
The Bossa Nova movement began in the late 1950s,
It led by guitarist-vocalist João Gilberto and composer Antônio Carlos Jobim
It originated in the wealthy neighborhoods that were along the beaches of Rio de Janeiro.
The creators invented an alternative to the traditional binary samba beat
Bossa Nova drew together diverse, rhythms and melodic lines.
A typical ensemble includes an acoustic guitar, voice, and standard drum set.
Bossa Nova lyrics reflected the carefree lifestyles led by the middle and upper classes.
"Girl from Ipanema" and "Desafinado" are two of the best-known songs from this period.
Its creators were strongly influenced by contemporary jazz from up north, and it wasn't long before American jazz musicians were in turn fascinated with Bossa Nova.
A new wave of Bossa composers, songwriting became a form of political protest.
Both styles of Bossa Nova were mixed with Brazil's history and reflect the eras in which they were created -- one a time of growth and the other a time of struggle. And both remain true to the irrepressible spirit of the Brazilian people.

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