

Bossa nova legend Sergio Mendes winning over new generations

BY LAURA EMERICK Staff Reporter/lemerick@suntimes.com June 24, 2012 9:46PM



In 2011 Sergio Mendes marked 50 years in music with a retrospective release and wrote an Oscar-nominated song.

SERGIO MENDES

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◆ 7:30 p.m. Wednesday

◆ Ravinia Festival, Lake Cook
at Green Bay, Highland Park

◆ Tickets, pavilion, \$65; lawn,
\$27

◆ (847) 266-5000;

www.ravinia.org

Sergio Mendes, the Brazilian icon who helped define the sound of summer as part of the '60s bossa nova wave, first encountered Chicago in a completely different season: the dead of winter.

"Oh, it was so cold, it was in the middle of February, in either 1965 or 1964, I'll never forget it," said the pianist-composer-arranger, 71, who will perform Wednesday at Ravinia. "For a guy from Rio like me, Chicago really made an impression."

While in the Windy City, Mendes also met singer Lani Hall, a Chicago native who would become an integral part of his hugely popular and era-defining group, Brasil '66. It set

American pop to Latin/bossa nova/jazz arrangements for hits such as "The Look of Love," "Goin' Out of My Head" and "The Fool on the Hill."

Hall was singing at the Old Town club Mother Blues, where Mendes also was performing. After meeting Hall, he got the idea for Brasil '66. "I loved the concept of having two lead female vocalists; it set us apart from other groups," he said in a phone interview last week. "Then I decided that along with recording Brazilian songs, we also would arrange well-known songs by Burt Bacharach, the Beatles, and Simon & Garfunkel, and put them into a Brazilian groove. So I owe a lot to Chicago and have lots of great memories about my experiences here."

Last year marked Mendes' 50th anniversary in the business, and he doesn't intend to retire anytime soon. To mark the occasion, he released the two-disc career retrospective "Celebration" (Verve/Universal). He also picked up his first-ever Oscar nomination for the song "Real in Rio," from the animated film "Rio" (2011).

"I feel I've been really blessed and really lucky to still be around," he said. "For me, every day is a new experience. I think I've lasted so long because I'm very curious. I've always liked trying different things."

That explains his career resurgence a decade ago, when he came out of semi-retirement after will.i.am of the Black Eyed Peas invited Mendes to perform on "Sexy" from the group's disc "Elephunk" (2003). Then will.i.am recruited contemporary tastemakers Justin Timberlake, John Legend, Q-Tip and Jill Scott to appear on "Timeless" (2006), Mendes' first studio disc

since 1996. “It was a great experience and a surprise to learn that they all really love Brazilian music,” he said. “It’s beautiful to see how Brazil music has such an international appeal.”

After his current tour, which begins at Ravinia (where he last played in 1968!), Mendes will start on his next studio disc and the music for “Rio 2.” “I’ve never produced the music for a movie before, so I’m really excited about this project,” he said. “The director [Carlos Saldanha, who also helmed ‘Rio’] is a Brazilian, so of course we hit it off.”

As for his next disc, he’s not sure yet of its direction, but “it’s all about great songs that stay in their heart,” he said. “It’s melodies that have made Brazilian music so important — for the last 50 years, and for me, I hope, many more years to come.”