

# A Very Brief History Of Choro

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In the late nineteenth century in Rio a new musical style emerged that would become one of the most creative musical manifestations in Brazil. *Choro* is primarily an instrumental form, and to a North American ear might sound a little like a small Dixieland jazz combo playing with strange rhythms, extreme melodic leaps, unexpected modulations, and occasional breakneck tempos. Choro and jazz are both characterized by their use of improvisation and mixtures of African and European musical elements. Interestingly, choro's early development arguably predates that of both ragtime, which first appeared in the 1890s, and jazz, which emerged at the start of the twentieth century.

The first *chorões* (groups that played choro) began to play in Rio around 1870. In its early days, choro was less a genre than a style, with Afro-Brazilian syncopation and a Brazilian flair added to fashionable European dance music of the time, including waltzes, polkas, schottishes, quadrilles, and mazurcas. The pioneering figure Joaquim Antônio da Silva Calado (1848-1880) founded the group Choro Carioca in 1870, the same year that he was appointed a teacher at Rio's Imperial Conservatory of Music. Choro Carioca, the most popular *chorão* of that decade, was an ensemble that initially consisted of flute, two guitars, and a cavaquinho.

The first choro musicians were usually not professionals. They didn't mind playing all night long at parties providing there was a lot of food and drinks present. Between 1870 and 1919, there were hundreds of *chorões* in Rio that spent nights moving from house to house, party to party. The new style may have gained its name from the common use of low guitar notes and "plaintive tones." Choro also means "the act of weeping, crying, or sobbing" in Portuguese. Others think the name derives from *xolo*, a word used long ago by some Afro-Brazilians for their parties or dances.

Choro musicians improvised upon European rhythms and melodies and developed a dialogue between the soloist and other instruments in which the objective was the *derrubada* (drop)--the moment in which the accompanying musicians could no longer follow the soloist's creative and unpredictable riffs. By the turn of century, choro had developed into an independent genre with its own basic characteristics, although choros were still labeled according to the polkas, tangos, and other dances that provided the underlying rhythm.

Ernesto Nazaré (or "Nazareth"), Chiquinha Gonzaga and Pixinguinha were among the early pioneers of the style; guitarist Garoto, flutists Benedito Lacerda and Altamiro Carrilho, mandolin virtuoso Jacó do Bandolim, clarinet and alto saxophonist Abel Ferreira, bandleader Severino Araújo, and cavaquinho master Valdir Azevedo were key choro figures in the mid-20th century; and Paulo Moura, Turíbio Santos, Raphael Rabello, Paulinho da Viola, Hermeto Pascoal and Nó em Pingo D'Água (Knot in a Drop of Water) interpreted and updated the genre in recent decades.