

Bola Sete, The Nature of Infinity, And John Fahey

By John Fahey



Bola Sete (Djalma de Andrade), born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (but now a resident of Marin City, California), should be a familiar name to GP readers. He was featured in Dec. '67 and July '74, as well as in numerous articles contrasting the views of various artists. Sete has toured widely on his own as well as with jazz trumpet great, Dizzy Gillespie, and has received frequent musical honors (such as the New Guitarist Of The Year award from Down Beat Magazine in 1965). His style defies classification: It is a synthesis of European, African, Latin, Brazilian, and American influences achieved through a combination of classical, folk, and jazz techniques on a classical guitar.

John Fahey — an acoustic magician himself — is the founder and kingpin of Takoma Records, for which Sete now records.

—Editor

In order to write anything about Bola Sete I must descend from this altitude, this thin air of obscurity, of indirectness, deceit, and hiddenness. I must free myself from what I once considered a great virtue — the demonic stance of Inwardness (*vide* early Kierkegaard). My reactions to Bola Sete and his music are so intense and so subjective that I cannot talk about him *and* be honest without talking a lot about myself. Please forgive me, dear reader. Please forgive me, Bola. Few living people have had such an enormous influence on my life, my music, my soul, my religion — you name it — as has Bola Sete.

I first saw him playing — solo — in early 1972 at David Allen's Boarding House in San Francisco. That night, I was high on drugs as I had been for several years, and — as also had been the case for years — I felt that I was one isolated example of an experimental species that God had forgotten about (I was wrong there). I felt I had been — and was still — walking

and talking among shadows: "People" who had no depth, who were not related to themselves, did not know anything about themselves — endless, phony, shadow-people. And I was one of them. Only when I played the guitar did I, to some extent, make contact with the real John Fahey and with other people (as yet, I was unable to make contact verbally or emotively).

Bola played for about 45 minutes and grimaced and grunted through the whole set. Something was wrong. He couldn't "get it out." I knew how he felt, and I understood. Something was wrong. I was intrigued by his obvious frustration having felt that way myself almost all my life. The performance had been mediocre so far. However, the audience gave him a long ovation, and he reluctantly got up and started to play an encore, still looking frustrated, impotent, mad, seething. I knew that feeling well. But then suddenly he got *hot*. He got so cooking, he played song after song for another 45 minutes, forgetting (or not caring) that he was doing an encore, playing many of the same songs he had just played. But there was *life* in this set. I couldn't sit still. I'd never heard anything like it since Charley Patton, and this was better. This was the turning point in my life, though I didn't know it until much later. I was transformed, purged — I was not the same. (This was only an aesthetic experience, I *think*, but it was almost as if it had religious overtones.) I was so "in touch" with life and reality that I was terrified of Bola, myself, of the whole creation. I could hardly speak. What could I say?

Oh, reader, please forgive me, if much of this sounds testimonial. I hate testimonials myself. I have only been a groupie or sycophant once or twice in my whole life, and I got over it very quickly. Sycophancy is a terrible crime — a symbiotic crime implying guilt of more than one person — a crime on the part of the groupie because he makes someone into an idol (commits idolatry), i.e. makes the one he worships into something he is not, and at the same time makes himself into something other than what he, in his existence, really is. It is an act of bad faith and self-deception. But it even gets me sometimes.

I tell you, I've heard so much music and so many musicians, I am quite thoroughly jaded. It is extremely difficult to blow my mind in any medium. And yet here I was idolizing someone and his music while knowing that I myself hate idolization — especially of me by others. I am embarrassed when I even "like" someone, much less when I find that I love someone. But I am really embarrassed when I *idealize* someone — and I should be, for that is simply a very, very wrong thing to do to anyone — if you do it for more than a short period. Fortunately, sycophancy is usually a disease of only short duration and will give way to love and friendship (or even hatred, which is better than staying a groupie). If it is only temporary, and one is fully aware of it, it's okay. It will go away. We are all human beings; but that, I grant you is sometimes hard to remember. Nevertheless, I got over my groupie feelings, and now Bola and I are friends and love each other very much. Thank God.

My first impression that night, as I told a friend at the time, was this: Here is a man who has lived through hell and somehow miraculously got out of it. I went back to the Boarding House several times that week. I found that Bola's sets have an interesting "plot." They all begin and end with songs whose emotional contour is pretty, happy, light, peaceful, or ecstatic. But after the first two or three songs, the terrain gets rougher and darker, heavier and weirder. By the middle of his set, Bola is giving you pictures of hell, memories of perdition, demonic music. But then Bola gradually lightens

Continued on page 36

BOLA SETE

Continued from page 10

up the spectrum of feeling and leads you out of the cave and into the sunlight, and life is paradise. Only now, one is so changed that one is temporarily *aware* that life really is paradise after all, the world is an ocean, etc. It is like a breath from the 19th Century or before; a breeze from times when people had passion and significance and were not mere shadows. It is as though something has finally changed.

I talked to Bola's wife (I was too shaken to speak to him at the time). "How does he keep from going crazy," I asked her, "when he has so much energy and tension? You can hear it in his music — a lot of passion and tension. How did he get out of hell?" ("How can I get out of hell?" That's what I really wanted to know.) She told me he "meditates" a lot and does a lot of yoga.

So the next day, I went out and started taking lessons from various meditation teachers and groups and swamis, and later (remembering what my dear friend, Rev. Charles Mitchell had told me about meditating) I began meditating on the name of the deity or person or thing I loved and respected

the most. (I went through three or four deities in the next few years until quite mysteriously I finally *knew* which "deity" had chosen me, and also knew that I had always known it but would not face this fact.) As soon as I started meditating, I forgot to want my previously perpetual supply of drugs.

Shortly thereafter, I listened to a record I had cut while on various drugs and was astounded to find that, although I had thought while cutting this album that I was playing fast songs fast, I had in fact been playing them very, very slowly and boringly. (That album had received reviews which all referred to my special "inner sense of space and peace" — it was nothing but drugs.) This record now sounded to me as though it were moving through thick glue. I wanted to play fast songs fast like Bola did. So I asked my friend Jolly to back me at the Boarding House for a week. I wanted to see if I could play straight, and I did it. I played so well I amazed myself, and — judging from their applause — the audience, too. I was so proud of myself that I told the opening night crowd: "That was the first time I ever played straight in public in my life." They applauded again. I

Continued on page 40

BOLA SETE

Continued from page 36

believe they actually found some joy in my achievement (even though it was not me that did the achieving). I started imitating Bola's rhythms and letting myself play enharmonic chords and tunes on stage that I had never played anywhere except in my living room when I was alone. I thought, "If Bola can be that free, maybe I can get away with it, too." If they understood Bola, they might understand me. And they did. Suddenly, I noticed I was gradually becoming *free*.

Later that summer, with a brand new girl friend (Marilyn), a brand new cat, and an almost brand new car, I chased swamis and yoga instructors all over the U.S. and Canada trying to learn about them and about what techniques were best for musicians and for me. I was playing the "ashram circuit." With that girl, I owned the world that summer, conquered it — and not through mere aesthetics. It was conquered through the power of love, and although this ecstasy (this feeling that life is paradise if one will only walk into the garden, this ability to love, to get along with Marilyn to the extent that I did) was *given* to me, I still associate it all — in a way I

don't understand — with Bola and his music.

I still didn't (and don't) know very much about Bola Sete except that he is *in touch* with himself, and in touch with his roots, which are not in this effeminate age, this passionless, unspirited generation. Life is paradise despite this, or maybe because things are getting worse and worse. I don't understand these things with my head. But I do understand that the entire creation will be resurrected; not just people: Animals, rocks, trees, mountains, germs, clams, snails, turtles, rattlesnakes, hippos, spiders. I hear that in Bola's music — something most people have forgotten how to even want.

Bola Sete? He's kind of crazy, like me. He made a lot of jazz records with other people. But, he tells me (now that I have gotten over being a sycophant and gotten to know him a little — he's a very complex character) nobody would ever let him be himself and play what *he* wanted to play, i.e. his own songs, solo. He says he saw me a couple of times playing in the San Francisco Bay Area and that I did exactly what he wanted to do. "Nobody else is as crazy as I am except you and your company," he

Continued on page 42