

# SAX SYMBOL



Flying Dutchmen Records

Despite failing eyesight, Gato Barbieri, now 70, continues to perform live.

## Sax Symbol

### 'Last Tango' composer's still kicking

By ERNESTO LECHNER

When the call for this interview came, saxophonist Gato Barbieri — whose torrid theme song for the movie “Last Tango in Paris” put him on a global stage in the 1970s — was alone, listening to an old Miles Davis record in the Midtown New York apartment he shares with his wife and young son.

Throughout the interview, Gato spoke in a melancholy tone that accentuated his Argentine Spanish. Even though he has lost most of his eyesight, Gato, 70, continues to perform live.

#### **What are you listening to over there? It sounds like Miles Davis...**

It's “Milestones.” I only have 15 percent of my eyesight left, so I listen to a lot of music. I'm trying to understand this record, even though music is mysterious by nature and cannot be explained. This Miles quintet was something else. The critics complained that Coltrane was playing out of tune. It's always the same, I guess — people have a hard time understanding new things. I think critics are just frustrated musicians [laughs].

#### **Is there one dream project that you still would like to record but haven't?**

I'd love to record in Cuba. Get a good rhythm section and play a variety of beats. Not only stuff like this (he hums a salsa tune) but also some slow songs. I have to find someone who'd be interested in recording it. Anyway, my blindness is also giving me trouble with my memory. I've been a bit depressed, to be honest with you. It's apathetic, this life that I've been leading for the last four years.

#### **Do you have a family to support you right now?**

You never met Michelle, did you? She was my first wife. We were together for 36 years, but she died in 1993. Then I met this wonderful lady, Laura. We got married and have a seven-year-old boy, Christian. The first Barbieri on my side of the family. I think it's just fantastic.

#### **Argentina is such a big part of your musical identity. What made you decide to leave your homeland?**

They say you can't be a prophet in your own land — *uno no es profeta en su propia tierra*. Even [tango master] Astor Piazzolla had to leave Argentina in order to be recognized. Can you believe the old *tangueros* said that he didn't know how to play?

#### **It sounds to me like your life has been filled with blessings.**

That's not true. My first 12 years, growing up in the provincial city of Rosario and then in Buenos Aires, were really tough. Life is a constant struggle. Right now, I'm struggling against my blindness and my fading memory. I look at it like this: I keep rowing and rowing until God breaks one of my oars.

**Catch Gato live November 23-27 at Iridium, 1650 Broadway at 51st Street. (212) 582-2121. \$30-35.**