



Russo, Renato (1960-1996)

by Linda Rapp

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One of Brazil's most popular rock singers, Renato Russo challenged homophobia in his homeland by coming out as a gay man.

Russo was born Renato Manfredini, Jr. on March 27, 1960 in Rio de Janeiro. His mother taught English as a second language, and his father was an economist with the Banco do Brasil. When Russo was seven, the family moved to New York in connection with his father's job.

The Manfredinis remained there until 1975, when they returned to Brazil. The same year Russo was stricken with epiphysiolysis, a rare bone disease that left him unable to walk. He spent the next two years undergoing surgeries and other treatments before he recovered his mobility. During this time Russo began dreaming of starring in a rock band. He invented the surname Russo for his rock persona as an homage to the artist Henri Rousseau and philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Bertrand Russell.

The young musician did not achieve instant success in that field. Instead, he worked as an English teacher, a radio programmer, and a journalist.

His musical tastes were eclectic and included the Beach Boys, the Jefferson Airplane, Bob Dylan, and Leonard Cohen. When punk rock arrived on the scene, Russo, influenced by such groups as the Sex Pistols, the Clash, and Eddie and the Hot Rods, formed his own band, Aborto Eléctrico ("Electric Abortion") in 1978.

The group reorganized as Legião Urbana ("Urban Legion") in 1979. In 1985 they contracted with EMI Records and immediately became Brazil's top band. This ascendancy occurred, as Ernest S. Barteldes wrote, "despite the fact that its other three members couldn't play very well." The public, he stated, was more interested in "Russo's poetry and his fine baritone voice."

Other Brazilian musicians rushed to cover Legião Urbana's songs.

Concert tours by the band proved dangerous because of the passion the group excited. Riots erupted at shows in Brasilia in 1986 and 1988. One person died as a result of the former, and numerous people were injured at the latter.

Russo had not yet found the courage to come out as a gay man in his homophobic native country. To salve his pain and depression at having to live with the deception, he turned to drugs, including heroin.

Although Russo's addiction compromised his ability to perform live, Legião Urbana produced their most popular and critically acclaimed album, *Quatro Estações* ("Four Seasons") in 1989. On that album Russo took a step out of the closet with "Meninos e Meninas" ("Boys and Girls"), singing that he liked both.

In a 1990 interview with the Brazilian magazine *Bizz*, Russo was more forthcoming. He acknowledged his homosexuality. His honesty caused him to lose some fans in the short term, but his popularity soon

rebounded.

During a trip to New York the same year Russo fell in love with an American, Robert Scott, who went to Brazil to live with him. They remained together for two years.

When they met, both were addicted to drugs. Russo checked himself into a treatment program in late 1990. Freeing himself of his dependence was difficult, and he underwent another regimen of treatment in 1993.

After several more albums with Legião Urbana, Russo released his first solo disk, *The Stonewall Celebration Concert*, in 1994 in honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall uprising in New York. The album included English versions of some of Russo's favorite songs, as well as tunes originally written in English, among them "Say It Isn't So" by Irving Berlin and "If You See Him, Tell Him I Love Him" by Bob Dylan. A large portion of the profits went to charity.

Russo's next album, *Equilibrio Distante* ("Distant Balance") (1995), sung in Italian, was a great success. It won the singer new fans and launched a fad for Italian music in Brazil.

Legião Urbana released a long-awaited new album, *A Tempestade* ("The Storm") in 1996. Fans hoped for a tour, but none occurred, as Russo died of AIDS on October 11, just weeks after the album was issued.

Russo had suspected as early as 1990 that he might have the disease but was initially reluctant to be tested for it. When he learned that he was indeed infected, he shared the news with only his parents and a few close friends. They guarded his secret, and so, although his physical decline led to some speculation that he might have AIDS, the general public did not learn of his condition until the announcement of his death.

In his last few weeks Russo stopped taking the "cocktail" of drugs that had been prescribed for him. The medication was causing him great pain, and he knew that the end was near. He remained in his apartment, where he died with his father by his side.

Among Russo's survivors was his then seven-year-old son, Giuliano Manfredini, who is being raised by Russo's parents. Another secret that the family is keeping is the name of the boy's mother.

In the year after Russo's death a solo album, *O Último Solo* ("The Last Solo"), and Legião Urbana's *Uma Outra Estação* ("Another Season") were released. A 1999 album of the group's 1992 concert on *MTV Unplugged* went to the top of the charts in Brazil.

Other musicians honored Russo by re-recording his songs. His friend Ricky Martin offered a tribute to him by including "Gracias por Pensar en Mí" ("Thanks for Thinking of Me"), a Spanish-language version of Russo's "A Via Láctea" ("The Milky Way"), on his 1998 album *Vuelve* ("Come Back"). Martin regularly sang the song during his concert tour the same year and dedicated it to Russo at his performances.

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