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Making “Uirapuru”: a musical quest in the Brazilian Rain Forest

Fazendo “Uirapuru”: uma investigação musical na floresta tropical brasileira

Sam Zebba¹

Abstract: Sixty years ago the author, an Israeli film student at the University of California, Los Angeles, set out to make a film based on a Brazilian Indian legend which had been set to music by Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959). Filming was carried out among Urubú-Ka'apor Indians in the state of Maranhão. In Belém, capital of Pará, he was joined by German anthropologist Peter Paul Hilbert (1914-1989) of the Goeldi Museum on an adventurous and creative expedition, culminating in a prize-winning art-documentary film and a life-long friendship between the two.

Keywords: Emilio Goeldi Museum of Pará. Peter Paul Hilbert. Urubú-Ka'apor Indians. Heitor Villa-Lobos. Vinícius de Moraes. Uirapuru.

Resumo: Há sessenta anos, o autor, então um estudante israelense de cinema na Universidade da Califórnia, em Los Angeles, partiu para filmar uma lenda indígena brasileira, fixada em música por Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959). A filmagem foi feita entre os índios Urubú-Ka'apor, no Maranhão. Em Belém, capital do Pará, Peter Paul Hilbert (1914-1989), antropólogo alemão do Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi, se juntou a ele em uma expedição aventureira e criativa, culminando em um premiado documentário artístico e em uma amizade que durou toda a vida.

Palavras-chave: Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi. Peter Paul Hilbert. Índios Urubú-Ka'apor. Heitor Villa-Lobos. Vinícius de Moraes. Uirapuru.

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In 1950 I was studying film-making in the Theater Arts department at University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), one of only two or three universities in the world where film-making was taught at the time. While looking for a theme for my MA thesis, I happened one day into a neighborhood music store, and was attracted by a striking LP record cover. It was a recording, just released, of Heitor Villa-Lobos' Symphonic Tone Poem "Uirapuru", a novel, intricate work, written in 1917, describing an Indian-Brazilian legend of love, transformation, and loss. The powerful, exotic music, evocative of a Diaghilev ballet, as well as the legend itself, moved me to envisage a film to fit the music, in which the legend would be acted out in pantomime by authentic Indians in the Brazilian jungle.

'Uirapuru' is the name of a small singing bird, perching high in the trees of the rain forest, believed to have magical powers in bringing love to whoever captures or kills it. A beautiful Indian maiden, so the legend goes, manages to pierce an uirapuru with her bow and arrow, and as the little bird falls to the ground, it transforms into a handsome young man. There is great joy among the tribesmen as the maiden guides her newfound love back toward her village, but soon an ugly old Indian, the evil spirit of the forest, boldly confronts the young couple, and with his bow and arrow shoots the young man through the heart. As he dies, the young man changes back into an uirapuru, which flies away, leaving the maiden alone and grief-stricken.

To my great fortune, the Theater Arts department, chaired at the time by Professor Kenneth MacGowan, accepted my request to submit a film instead of a written MA paper, the usual academic procedure until then. It was primarily the athletic-looking head of the Department's Film Division, Norman Dyhrenfurth, who supported my plea to allow film students to actually make films for credit. Luckily also, Villa-Lobos, who lived in Rio de Janeiro, granted me permission to use his composition for the film. The New York Philharmonic, which had recorded the piece with Efrem Kurtz conducting, allowed its use for the sound track. And a young consul at the Brazilian Embassy in Los Angeles,

Vinícius de Moraes, arranged a flight for me on an empty Brazilian Air Force plane, with overnight stops in Trinidad and Paramaribo, to Belém do Pará, a sleepy little town at that time, on the mouth of the Amazon River.

It is significant to note that in the years to come, Professor Dyhrenfurth, a dedicated second-generation mountain-climber, headed the famed American Himalaya Expedition of 1963, and became the first American to conquer Mt. Everest – an achievement for which he was honored in the White House by President Kennedy. Vinícius de Moraes, the diplomat turned poet, went on to become one of Brazil's most celebrated lyricists, whose popular play "Orfeu do Carnaval" became, in 1959, the Academy-award-winning film "Orfeu Negro". Were it not for the support of these two extraordinary men, I would never have landed so far from the university or, for that matter, from my home country, Israel.

Belém, its name distorted from the word *Bethlehem*, became my Base Camp. Here I would determine the most suitable tribe for our purpose, prepare the expedition in detail, and collect the provisions to be taken along. My mentor in all this was the area manager of the Government's Service for the Protection of Indians, Senhor [Mister] Miranda. Middle-aged, heavy-set, perspiring and short of breath, he was forever dressed in pajamas, which seemed paradoxically to elevate his status. Twice a year he would visit distant outposts of the *Serviço*, bringing with him whatever meager medical supplies and scant humanitarian aid he could muster for the quickly vanishing Indian population.

My billet for those few weeks in Belém was the Hotel Gareze, a crumbling old residence converted into a small pension. Madame Gareze, the domineering owner, could be heard all day shouting instructions in broken French to her frightened, docile staff. Quiet during the day, at night the Gareze sprang to life. A local band played in the garden below my window, and sleep before the early hours of the morning was out of the question. Lying awake listening, the syncopated Latin rhythms juxtaposed against slow songs of longing, such as "Sad is My Soul", or "Only Yesterday",

captivated me. I began to watch the pianist from close range, the piano being my instrument, and when the fellow invited me to play in his stead, I discovered a new and exciting brand of chamber music. This became routine, the pianist being pleased to have some time off. To my surprise, the harsh Madame Garez, upon my departure, gave me a generous discount on my bill for my services in her nightclub.

Joining me in Belém, intrigued by the project, was Peter Paul Hilbert, a recently arrived German ex-army officer employed as an anthropologist at the local Goeldi Museum. We had met at the luxurious tropical villa of the American Consul in Belém, the much-respected US diplomat George Coleman, who suggested that Peter, having explored Indian tribes in the interior, could be of valuable assistance if he were to join me. Indeed, I liked Peter from the start, realizing the vital contribution he could make. At the same time I felt an unsettling discomfort, considering our

disparate national backgrounds and the shattering events of recent history. My misgivings were alleviated when Peter adamantly declined Senhor Miranda's insistence that we take firearms with us for self-protection. Peter's view to enter and face the Indians unarmed validated my trust in him. He took a two-month leave of absence from the Goeldi to come with me (Figure 1).

Before venturing into the rain forest, I paid a courtesy visit to an aging, chain-smoking Villa-Lobos in Rio, who received me warmly, first in his ramshackle office at the Ministry of Education, empty but for a tiny picture of J. S. Bach hanging on the wall behind him, and later at his small yet cozy apartment, his attentive wife at his side. Villa-Lobos suggested that I look up his good friend, the octogenarian General Cândido Rondon in São Paulo, founder and director of the Service for the Protection of Indians. The legendary general, who



Figure 1. Hilbert in Belém, before we set out on the expedition. Photo by Sam Zebba.

had earned his fame in the 1890s for laying the first telegraph lines through the Brazilian jungles, provided me with much useful information and a fascinating, illustrated volume of Indian culture authored by him. It was this diminutive visionary, allegedly part-Indian, who in 1916 had invited Villa-Lobos to join him in one of his expeditions to the interior, a trip which provided the composer with the inspiration to create the work. Inexplicably, the piece was never performed for almost 20 years, and was first recorded only weeks before I heard it in that neighborhood music shop in Los Angeles.

Armed with a 16mm Bolex camera and a limited supply of Kodak color film, we embarked on the rather dubious adventure, first to find Indians, who were rapidly retreating deeper and deeper into the woods, and then to persuade them to act out the legend for the camera. It was decided that we make our way up the Gurupi river, south of and parallel to the Amazon, as the Amazon itself would have no Indians left until beyond Manaus, over 2,000 kilometers up the gigantic waterway. The tribe recommended to us was the Urubu (or Ka'apor), known for their beautiful feather-wear and, perhaps to relieve any apprehensions I might have harbored, reputed to be a peaceful lot, having killed relatively few whites. We thus traveled along the Atlantic coast to Bragança, a forgotten little town at the mouth of the Gurupi, and up the river, in a rickety supply vessel, to Viseu, a tiny solitary village populated by one Lebanese family, the Rashids. We had reached civilization's end station. There was nothing beyond this point but jungle.

By Senhor Miranda's prior arrangement, the Rashids' prized outboard motor was made available to us, and next morning we were all set to embark on our way to the *Serviço's* remote outpost deep within Indian territory. We waved goodbye to a friendly gathering near the water, Viseu's entire population. The antiquated outboard, however, failed to start, and after countless attempts the motor had to be carried up the river bank, dismantled under a tree, and reassembled again. The next try did not fare better, and the procedure repeated

itself for days, an eager group of spectators following the steadfast Rashid brothers up and down the hill, each time, for certain, key engine parts spread about being lost in the sand. By week's end, and by some uncanny miracle, the motor sprang to life.

Peter and I and a few itinerant porters finally set out. The small boat was heavy, carrying our sundry equipment, provisions, food supplies, medical aid, and also salt, beads, and cloth for the Indians. Not forgotten was a full barrel of gasoline for the outboard, placed, for balance and for safety, at the boat's bow. Thus we journeyed into nature's no-man's-land, treacherous, muddy, piranha-infested waters surrounding us and stretching out ahead. Both sides of the river were flanked by thick, monotonous mangrove trees, seated on tangled roots in the water, rather than on land. Occasionally some animal roared, frightened by the engine's clatter, or perhaps fervently protesting man's ruthless, uninvited incursion.

A few days later, the malfunctioning engine caught fire and the boat went up in flames. By sheer luck we extinguished the blaze before it reached the fuel barrel. Floating helplessly downstream, we managed to requisition an old dugout canoe, and continued our thrust upstream. Gone, however, was the luxury cruise; from now on we had to make do with hand paddles. One seat wide, the canoe's balance was precarious, there was no leg room, and very quickly painful blisters formed on our palms. Despite our hard work, we barely made progress. Where the river tapered and the current became stronger, we would actually lose ground, and when we encountered *cachoeiras*, small rapids, we were on the brink of disaster, saved only by our boatmen's cunning navigation and graceful pirouetting. Nights we would select a landing, cut the bush, and hang our hammocks. One morning, stepping out of my hammock, the ground under my foot started to move, and to my dismay I saw that I had stepped on the back of a crocodile. The beast, seemingly disinterested in me, gently vacated its resting place under my hammock, and slid noiselessly into the

water. For several weeks we traveled this way, depleting our rations too soon, and at times wondering whether we would ever reach our destination.

Peter was nine years my senior, and quite musical. In his native Berlin before the war, he had sung in a choir, and once performed under the great Wilhelm Furtwaengler. On the brown, inhospitable waters we sang rounds, German ones I remembered from my childhood in Europe, and Hebrew ones I taught him. It had been his unrelenting refusal to join the Nazi party that enabled him to emigrate after the war. The toll he paid for being German, though, was high. He had spent six years in the army, his studies were interrupted and incomplete, his leg had been severely mangled in Russia, and his aging father, hastily inducted days before the war ended to defend crumbling Berlin, was immediately killed.

We reached the outpost finally. Senhor Miranda had postulated that we stay there, the *Serviço* man on duty having been notified to accommodate us. The plan was to do the film right there, the outpost being the central gathering point for all Indian tribes in the area. Alas, we found the station all but abandoned. The Indians, we were told, had moved away or died, most likely of the common cold, a white man's disease for which the Indians possessed no natural immunity. Peter, I think, suspected the anthropologist's inescapable truth. To find Indians, a white man must abandon the water and trek through the woods on foot.

Following a few half-Indians who offered to guide us, we carried our packs and pushed through the bush, single file. The blocked-out sun, eclipsed by the enormous trees, and the dense undergrowth, completely deactivated one's sense of direction. So thick was the growth that it took but a few steps' distance for the guide ahead to become obscured and vanish. At times the guides became anxious, freezing in their track, smelling a wild animal nearby. Or they would suddenly race furiously, lifting their feet in a frenzy, escaping from a nest of giant, poisonous fire ants. Peter and I withstood the exhausting trek pretty well, and we credited our resilience to the officers' training we both had, he in the *Wehrmacht* and I in the *Haganah* and in the British Army.

The small band of stone-age Urubu Indians we finally encountered seemed as astonished to see us as we were to discover them. The men wore nothing but a few feathers of radiant colors around their forearms and ankles, a large feather hanging out of their pierced lower lip. Some, their bodies painted with stripes of black and red, wore necklaces of animal-teeth, and most were armed with bow and arrow. This was a hunting party, one of our porters conversant in Tupi-Guarani, enlightened us. The group belonged to the jungle clearing of Chieftain Piahu, where, it was soon agreed, we would be guided, and where eventually, upon presenting the chief with the cloth and the other gifts we brought with us, we were accepted peacefully and offered shelter in a small vacant grass hut.

Luck was on our side. Quickly we were able to cast our Maiden and her Man, as well as the evil old Indian. There were, however, altogether too few Indians to provide the proper scope for the film, particularly for staging the score's wild, primeval dance section celebrating the young man's coming to life. Word of our arrival must have spread far and wide through the jungle, for in a day or two masses of Indians materialized in our clearing. They won't stay long, Peter warned me, and we hastily shot the big dance scene right away, after which the many visitors did indeed disperse, disappearing into the jungle as quietly as they had come (Figures 2 to 5).

The Indians were of course innocent of our purpose and our doings. Nevertheless, they obligingly cooperated with our seemingly bizarre requests. At first I tried to communicate through an interpreter, actually via two. I would articulate the desired action to Peter in German, Peter would describe it to our porter in Portuguese, and the porter would convey it to the tribesmen in Tupi-Guarani. If an Indian had a question, the message would be relayed back to me in reverse. Soon, however, long discourses between the porter and the Indian would ensue, which neither Peter nor I understood. In his eagerness to restore order, Peter would sometimes inadvertently address me in Portuguese, and the poor porter in German. Clearly, this did not get

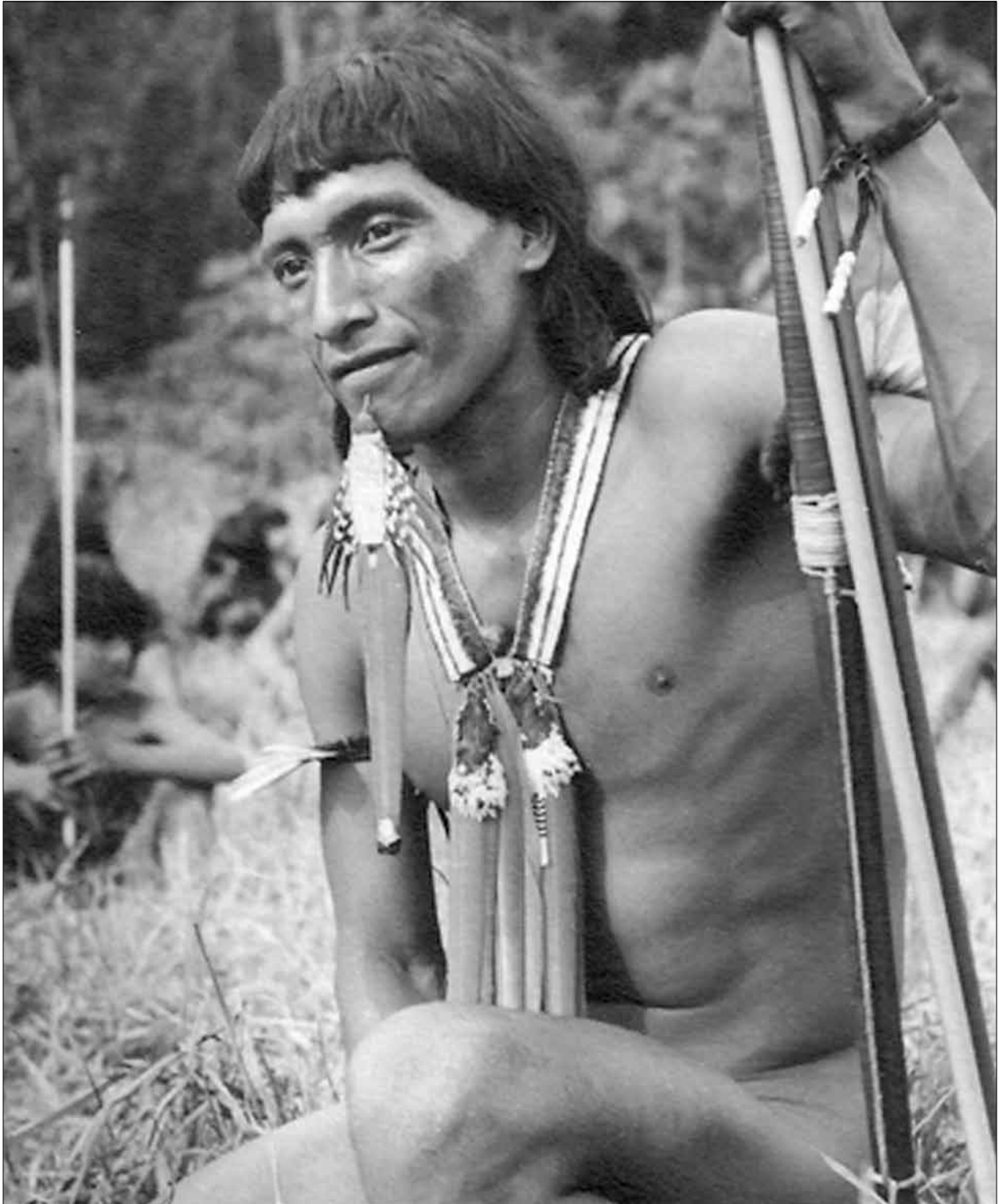


Figure 2. The film's 'star': the young man playing the Youth transformed from the magic uirapuru. Photo by Sam Zebba.



Figure 3. Urubu warriors participating in the Dance Scene celebrating the Youth coming to life. Photo by Sam Zebba.



Figure 4. Urubu warriors participating in the Dance Scene celebrating the Youth coming to life. Photo by Sam Zebba.

us very far. Instead, before each shot, I would perform the action myself, run behind the camera and shoot, while the actors imitated me in good humor and without inhibition. Two words I quickly learnt in Tupi met my directorial needs: Good (*Katu*), and Once More (*amu*). In the absence of dialogue in the film, there was no need for a screenplay. The orchestral score was the basis for the film, and a carefully planned story board saw to it that all the music was covered by appropriate visual images (Figures 6 to 9).

Peter did not cease to amaze me. Every morning he tended to the sick, mostly those with simpler cuts or bruises. We had been warned not to tend to the seriously ill, as that might endanger our lives in the event the

patient should die, and in some cases we sadly heeded this admonition. Another remarkable quality was Peter's unyielding habit of shaving every day, an inconvenience I gladly relinquished in favor of growing a beard. Throughout our stay Peter made copious notes and sketches of plants and utensils. One Indian seemed particularly fascinated by the drawing process, and when Peter offered him pencil and paper, he laboriously drew a short zigzagged line on the empty page. Pleased, apparently, with his creation, the Indian proudly returned the page to Peter. What is it, Peter asked, intrigued. A crocodile, the man answered.

I had brought a stuffed uirapuru with me and a smoke canister, to accomplish the transformation scene,



Figure 5. Urubu warriors participating in the Dance Scene celebrating the Youth coming to life. Photo by Sam Zebba.



Figure 6. Urubú Indians at our location in the village of Chief Piahu. Photo by Sam Zebba.

in which the young man would step out from a cloud of smoke. The stuffed bird came in handy, but the canister, once opened, instantly released its meager contents, leaving us in the lurch. The Indians quickly came to our rescue, bringing a climbing plant which upon burning produced thick smoke worthy of a battlefield.

As we worked, several young Indians became our regular crew. I had brought large rolls of tin foil with me to make reflectors, and, astonishingly, the crew became so adept at using them, especially for close-ups, that calling out lighting instructions quickly became superfluous (Figure 10).

A tricky scene to achieve was the young man's death and his re-transformation to bird. We bound a very thin

wire, which I had brought along, around the young man's chest, one end extending outward from the area of his heart. Over the wire we attached a loosely moving tail end of an arrow, and sent it sliding down on the invisible wire to its target. In the finished film the shot became credible, particularly as it was preceded by a close shot of a metal arrowhead pulled backward into frame before its release, and was followed by a shot of the young man's collapse, tinged with an amount of Heinz Tomato Sauce I had included in our gear. The re-transformation scene was achieved later in the lab, a rising column of smoke printed backwards, showing the shrinking smoke reaching its source - the magic bird nestled in the maiden's hand.



Figure 7. Urubú Indians at our location in the village of Chief Piahu. Photo by Sam Zebba.

Beyond the film's task of following the legend, the intent was to present the Indians' unadulterated way of life as genuinely as possible. We thus shot a variety of the tribe's daily activities, scenes that would be cut into the film to enhance its authenticity. One of these shots caused particular delight and bafflement among audiences—a young woman happily feeding a baby on one breast, and a small puppy dog on the other.

The film's ending, in which the grief-stricken maiden is left alone after the little bird had flown away, called for a gentle touch. There was of course no way of explaining the scene to our maiden or of expecting her to express anguish. So we shot her as best we could, just squatting there. The result was surprising. Viewed in the



Figure 8. Urubú Indians at our location in the village of Chief Piahu. Photo by Sam Zebba.

finished film, the maiden appeared to show genuine grief, restrained by a dignified acceptance of her fate. Such is the power of a close-up in film-making.

Life in the clearing of Piahu had actually become pleasant. We built a table and a bench in our hut, something the Indians had never seen, hammocks being their only home furnishings. Prized were our discarded food cans, which could be used for making metal heads for their long arrows. My famous finger trick, by which I feigned to tear off part of my thumb, came in handy, and was a constant cause of wonderment, especially among the very young, one of whom, sneaking behind my back, eventually uncovered my ruse (Figure 11).

Occasionally Peter and I indulged in a luxury we called Milkshake, remnants of our milk and chocolate powders mixed with fresh water from the rivulet nearby. Our food supply, however, did not last long, and we soon had to switch to our hosts' hunter-gatherer fare, nibbling at unfamiliar and tasteless plants, and occasionally tearing off with our fingers and ingesting pieces from a roasted tortoise, placed live upside down into a fire.

Making a fire, incidentally, was by no means a simple feat for the tribesmen. It was achieved by patiently



Figure 9. Urubú Indians at our location in the village of Chief Piahu. Photo by Sam Zebba.

and laboriously rotating a thin stick of wood back and forth in the palms of one's hands, the stick being nestled in a bundle of dried moss which, when sufficiently heated, would begin to ignite. Most impressive were the tribe's geometrically decorated gourds, their artful feather combinations, the finely crafted combs used widely in caring for their long black hair, and their majestic ornamental headgear. Remarkable also were the rhythmic and melodic songs which, although sung only in unison, were to my total amazement all in perfect pentatonic scale. Could it have been adapted from the overtones left ringing faintly in the bow after an arrow had been released?

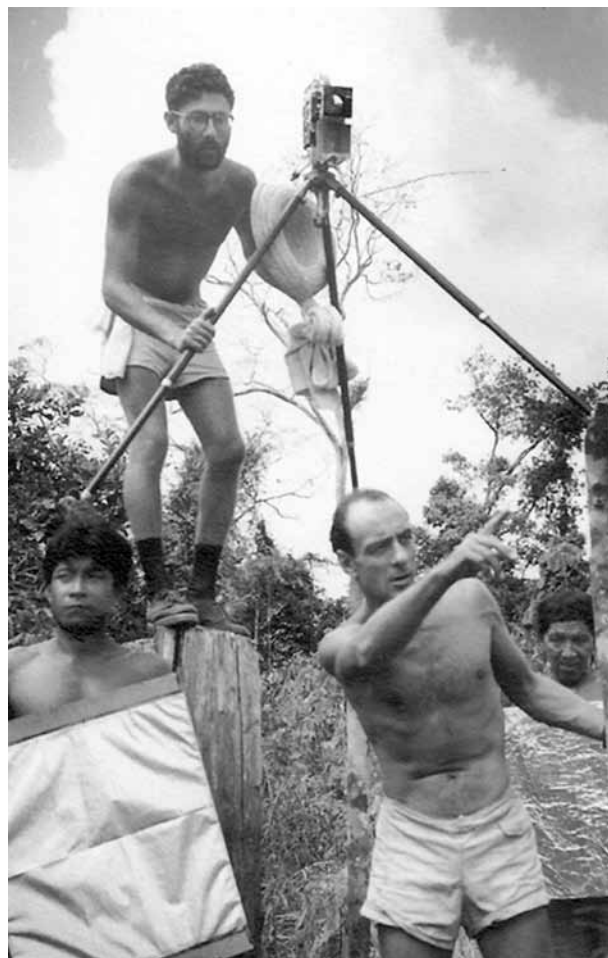


Figure 10. The full production team in action: Zebba, Hilbert, and two Urubú crew members. Self released photo.

What the Indians did not have was a count of time or a sense of seasons, there being none in that latitude and climate. For me it was this lack of hours and years, more than anything else, which defined the twenty-thousand-year gulf between us. When the time came for us to leave, many of the tribesmen accompanied us for days until we reached the river, to say goodbye. Rarely have I felt so honored (Figure 12).

Cut off from civilization for several months, we finally resurfaced in Viseu, thin and bedraggled, unsure of the day's date, but jubilant, with a pack of exposed though yet undeveloped film. Back in Belém we paid visits to Senhor

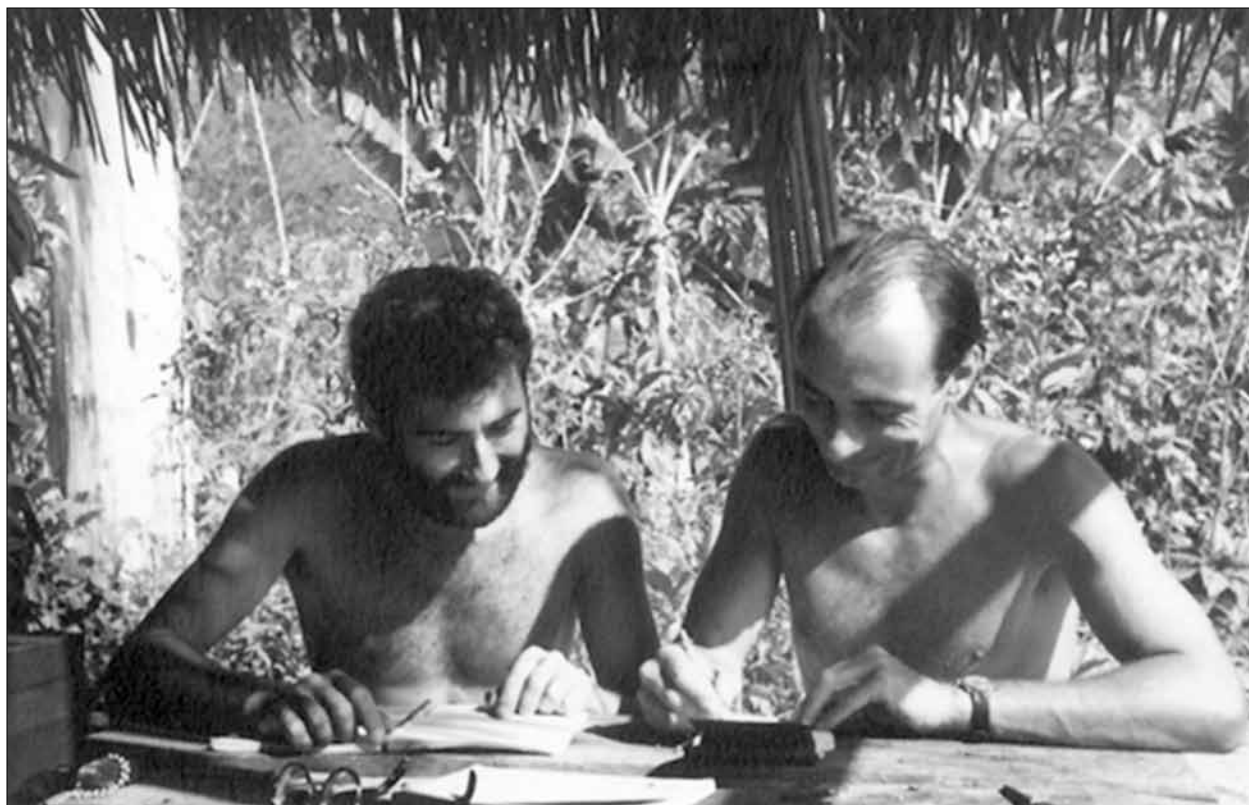


Figure 11. Zebba and Hilbert planning the day's shooting at the table they constructed in their hut. Self released photo.



Figure 12. Zebba with Urubú friends. Photo by Peter Paul Hilbert.

Miranda, to Madame Garez, and to George Coleman. In the end, Peter saw me off to the airport. Our parting was sad, despite our vowing to stay in touch.

Peter eventually went back to Germany. He completed his doctorate and became an eminent Professor of Archaeology, often digging in South America and researching at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. We did stay in touch throughout the years, recurrently meeting in Europe and in Israel. Peter remained one of my closest friends until his death in 1989.

Returning to LA, I finished the film, which I simply titled "Uirapuru", and got my MA, with distinction. A fellow art student, Marvin Rubin, drew the titles, and UCLA Professor

Walter Kingson, of radio fame, willingly recorded the opening narration. The film was shown at UCLA, and ran at New York's Cinema 16, where it won a prize. It was shown at the British Film Institute in London, at the Edinburgh Film Festival, the Venice Bienale, and at a composers' conference in Paris, where Villa-Lobos himself presented it.

Thirty years later, at the First International Student Film Festival initiated and held at Tel-Aviv University, "Uirapuru" was shown as the first accredited student MA film. And fifty years later, in 2000, in my capacity as music director of the Campus Orchestra of the City of Tel-Aviv, I conducted Villa-Lobos' work, to warm public acclaim. It was "Uirapuru"'s first performance in Israel, and to my knowledge the only one to date.

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