



Samba Nova

25 Years in Review

1992 – 2017

Doug Myers, Surdo

With contributions by Arleigh Hood and John van Gorp

Chapter One: Samba Nova

Samba Nova is a community band that has been bringing Brazilian beats to the streets of Halifax for 25 years. Known throughout the city for the infectious rhythms and the obvious delight of the players, it is no surprise that the first principle of the band is to have fun in making music. Samba Nova has always primarily attracted new players through our street performances. Over the years, players have been as young as 8 and as "wise" as 82. Music being the international language, we've wooed players from Thailand, South Africa, England, China, Japan, Argentina, and, of course, Brazil.

From the earliest days of Samba Nova, the band has sought out opportunities to bring our rhythms to the streets. Here's a smattering of the events and parades over the years in Halifax, Dartmouth and Bedford:

- Natal Day parade and celebrations
- Jazz Festival & street parade
- Multicultural Festival & street parade
- Halifax Pride Parade
- Nocturne
- Parade of Lights
- IWK Telethon
- NSCAD (Nova Scotia College of Art and Design) graduation
- NSCAD Artist for a Day
- Bethlehem at Barrington on Christmas Eve at St. Matthew's Church
- Canadian university basketball finals at half-time at the Halifax Forum
- Drumfest
- Halifax Drum Festival 2012, produced by Chris Kennedy
- Bluenose Marathon
- Switch Halifax
- Switch Dartmouth
- Walk With Refugees for World Refugee Day
- Busking at the Halifax waterfront
- Bike Week
- TourTech East AIDS benefit
- La Valada Latin Night at Dalhousie University
- fund-raising events
- conferences
- birthday parties
- weddings
- ... and even (quietly) at a couple of funerals



While all public performances are fun, some have been especially memorable... as in the following examples:

- For a number of years, the band participated in the annual Christmas season Santa Clause Parade of Lights event.... until someone from the organizing committee reportedly decided that samba rhythms were not sufficiently 'Christmassy'... Who knew?
- By way of contrast, Samba Nova once played at large Christmas/New Year's party, sponsored by the Nova Scotia Power Company, in mid-June. This event was held in appreciation of the NSPC employees who, due to severe weather conditions and power failures, had had to work all through the previous holiday season.
- Also splendid was our time at the Chester, NS waterfront bandstand where we attracted a large and very appreciative crowd. Most memorable was a cat lady dancer in skin tight leotards, who sinuously appeared in front of us out of nowhere!
- The Acadian 400th-anniversary celebration was held in Halifax in August 2004, where Samba Nova led a colourful and enthusiastic opening parade all around Citadel Hill, ending at the Garrison Grounds, where a huge evening concert was held.
- In fine weather Samba Nova also seizes every opportunity to play outdoors - in the yard outside St. Matthew's United Church on Barrington Street (right beside the Lieutenant-Governor's Residence and across from the Old Burying Ground cemetery), on the Halifax Waterfront, at the Commons, etc. All these occasions are greeted by enthusiastic responses from audiences (save for one Lieutenant Governor who preferred the windows to be closed during our practices...), and continue to attract new community recruits to the band.

Chapter Two: Matthieu Keijser



The history of Samba Nova is, to a large extent, the story of an Amsterdam-born, classically-trained musician, Matthieu Keijser and his American partner, Joann Tusia, a dancer and former Peace Corps volunteer. Joann had already decided to move here for a new job and Matthieu offered to drive the truck north with her possessions. They immediately liked what they saw about the city, and subsequently married and settled down near Point Pleasant Park.

Matthieu was born in 1952. His mother was a classical pianist and teacher. Although he studied piano, he gravitated towards percussion, first in the context of orchestral work, but later - on a Dutch study grant in the early 1980s - with the New York based 'Drummers Collective'. There, he encountered the Latin and African rhythms that became central to his life and career. The many annual celebrations and street parades in that city and their inclusive spirit were also transformative. These were the traditions and values he brought north.

Halifax, of course, was hardly a hotbed for such traditions, but Matthieu initially found work with Halifax Dance, accompanying, on a continuing basis, their Latin and African classes as their chief accompaniest.

“When a dancer listens to music, he or she sees movement. I look at a dancer and hear the music. Dance, music, movement and sound are one unit”, Matthieu said.

At the same time, he developed and delivered drumming sessions for schools. He also sat in with touring rock and jazz ensembles whenever the possibility arose, and in 1991 co-founded - with Danny Martin, a prominent Nova Scotian trombonist (and carpenter) - a very popular and successful Afro-Cuban band, Salsa Picante. The band became a favourite on the Atlantic club and festival circuit and shared the stage with such well-known Latin music artists as Jane Bunnet and the Spirits of Havana, Bobby Sanabria, and others.

So many who became part of what was to become Samba Nova joined after hearing the group perform at some time or another. I first encountered Matthieu and at least the beginnings of Samba Nova, at an event held at the train station, next to what is now the Westin Hotel, one bitter February evening sometime in the early 90s. This event was, as I

recall, presented as a defiant Break the February Blues celebration - with various musical acts and booths for food and drinks - and it attracted a large, welcoming and winter-weary crowd.

In the midst of the hubbub, there suddenly appeared, marching through the crowd and led by a slight and energetic figure wearing a colourful dashiki and kufi hat, a small procession of drummers, a number of whom I recognized as not being professional musicians, but as people I had met or seen in other contexts. I sought out and asked a couple of them about their involvement with this group and learned that they were either taking lessons from Matthieu and/or participating in one of his percussion groups. The next week I signed up.



These weekly sessions were held in various locations - sometimes at Matthieu and Joann's house, sometimes in the Music Studio at the old CBC building at the corner of South Park and Sackville, and sometimes at Halifax Dance.

The classes were usually focused on conga and djembe drumming - rather than samba instruments - and were very relaxed and enjoyable. Matthieu, during breaks, would play the piano and/or talk about various aspects of percussion. I remember one occasion, in particular, where he reflected at length on the way African rhythms tend to go 'into the ground', in contrast to Latin rhythms that go 'up into the air'. As Joann puts it: "Matthieu's intention was to create venues and to actively involve people - whatever their skill levels or backgrounds - to carry his love for music into the community at large".

Practices eventually settled into the gym at St. Matthew's United Church on Barrington Street. St. Matt's has a congregation with a long history and is noted for its welcoming attitudes and community commitments, meals for the needy, and circus school. St. Matthew's also hosts an



Bethlehem at Barrington around 2015

annual live Christmas Eve nativity event, Bethlehem on Barrington, in which Samba Nova escorts the wise persons, and then plays on stage for a while... but quietly enough so as not to disturb baby Jesus, the donkey, and the sheep.

Thus began Samba Nova's regular instruction and practice sessions on Saturday afternoons, first from 3:00-5:00 and later on, from 2:00-4:00 pm, running annually from the early fall through to the following July. (This time slot changed to Tuesday evenings in 2016, after much debate and discussion). The majority of percussion instruments were provided by Matthieu, and, over time, some participants bought their own, for practice at home as well as to play publicly. For years, Matthieu would bring the drums to Barrington Street each week in his grey van and band members would carry them into the gym.

Matthieu was known for his musicianship and, with full confidence in his players, would often approach the tambourim section, in mid-tune or even mid-gig sometimes, and, on the spot, change the rhythm. We had to be ready, relaxed and totally alert. With shaking heads, wry smiles and stretched brains, we dove in and changed that tune, hoping for the best!

Matthieu was also open and welcoming to other participants and contributors. On one occasion, for example, he brought in Alan Hetherington, the leader and musical director of the outstanding Escola de Samba in Toronto, for a memorable weekend of conversation, demonstration, and instruction. On another occasion, a remarkable Ghanaian drummer, Kwasi Dunyo - the recipient of a Visiting Foreign Artist Grant from the Canadian government - sat in, played and partied with Samba Nova.

During the performances, Matthieu was particularly attentive to the little ones in the audience. He would approach with his drum, encouraging them to dance and play and have a good time. He loved when audiences would move and dance, and especially when children would exuberantly jump in!

In the fall of 1998, Matthieu produced the first of what was to become an annual fall concert event titled Drumfest. Initially a benefit for the Nova Scotia Gambia Association, it immediately became a staple of the Halifax percussion and music calendar. It was held every fall for the next decade in the sanctuary of St. Matthew's church and attracted percussionists and players from across the region. By the final year that Matthieu produced the show, audience attendance had grown to almost 700!

Perhaps the most remarkable of all such public performance occasions, however, was the Tall Ships Festival held in Halifax, August 2001. Prior to this week-long visit of sailing vessels and celebrations, Matthieu had worked closely with the prominent Halifax-based

producer/promoter, Brookes Diamond, who provided event planning services to many groups and organizations that held major conferences in Halifax. On a number of occasions, Samba Nova was booked as part of the entertainment component of such events, including one held in Shediac, New Brunswick.

For the Tall Ships event, Brookes and Matthieu collaborated on a major production, staged on the Grand Parade and featuring the cultural traditions and diversity of Nova Scotia and the Atlantic region. For the entire week, Acadian dancers, Scottish pipers, Aboriginal drummers, Cape Breton fiddlers and singers, military precision drum corps and.... Samba Nova... performed before an enthusiastic audience that packed the area. The weather was balmy and, for both performers and audiences, the show was a memorable experience.



Samba Nova performs in DRUM! during the Tallships Festival in 2000, at Grand Parade in Halifax

Indeed, this was the initial performance - on a grand scale – of *Drum!* - the stage production that Brookes Diamond subsequently developed and took on the road across the United States and Canada to huge success.

Sadly, in 1995 Matthieu Keijser was diagnosed with a brain tumour and began a struggle to deal with it, through surgery. In the years following this operation, he underwent therapy for the intense pain he suffered. Through his struggle, he was supported by Joann, their two children, Zoe and Jonathan, and a host of others whose lives he had touched through his music and his spirit. Joann became deeply involved in his treatment, and actively fund raised for the QEII Foundation and the Brain Repair Centre, headed by the internationally known Dr. Ivar Mendez.

The affection, admiration, and respect in which Matthieu was held by the music community was most vividly demonstrated by a remarkable benefit concert - in his honour - that was held in the North Street church in 1996. The sold-out event featured many of his musical comrades, including, of course, Salsa Picante, as well as the wonderful *a capella* quartet Four the Moment, the comedy troupe Jest in Time, and a number of others.

No one who was there, however, will ever forget the final part of this tribute, when Matthieu himself appeared on the stage alone, sitting and playing on his lap a Nigerian glazed clay pot drum called an Udu. Accompanied by its deep quiet resonance, he chatted about his life and work, family and friends, expressing his and his family's thanks for the community support they had received and to those he had played for and with. (*You can watch this video on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2Fs-5l4z9Y> and see other performances from the event here: <https://youtu.be/6lsewQrdlUw>*)

Matthieu Keisjer passed away on October 14, 2006, after a long period dealing with chronic and debilitating pain. His funeral service was held on Sunday, October 22, at St. Matthew's Church, the home base for his community drumming work.

Just two weeks later, on November 4, 2006, the eighth Drumfest celebration took place: A Tribute to Matthieu Keijser - produced by his son, Jonathan. It featured a who's who list of performers from across the Atlantic region - many of whom had played with Matthieu - and a packed house of hundreds. As always, Samba Nova closed the show, but this time without its beloved leader.



Samba Nova closes the show at Drumfest 2006 - Celebration of the Drum - A Tribute to Matthieu Keijser

Chapter Three: Samba Nova Adrift

Matthieu Keijser's death had a profound impact on the community samba band he had founded and led. On the one hand, its members shared a deep commitment to carry on the tradition he had started, but on the other, the experienced an equal puzzlement about just how to do so without him. He himself had always been resistant to almost any form of structure, but always attracted people who would help out during this or that crisis. There was no obvious leadership successor and most of the players had other full-time responsibilities.

On the first Saturday after his memorial service, the remaining band members gathered at St. Matt's in the sanctuary to discuss the future. Participants described it as a profoundly moving gathering. With Matt's repenique in the centre of their group, they discussed many things, with the final decision that somehow, Samba Nova must carry on. For several weeks, Samba Nova members continued to meet and play at the church, with various members taking turns leading.

Chapter Four: New Beginnings

The band continued to play and function but appeared to be losing some of its capability, due simply to the inconsistency and lack of professional capacity of the rotating leadership approach. One evening however, two of the band members were approached at an Afro-Cuban Allstars show by Carlos Pessoa, a Saint Mary's University faculty and talented Brazilian-Canadian percussionist.



Carlos had come from Brazil to Vancouver to finish high school. He had played in various British Columbia venues while completing his post-graduate studies - culminating in a PhD in Political Science at Simon Fraser University. Carlos accepted a teaching position at St Mary's University in 2004, and also began playing gigs around town, including several with Matthieu. On occasion, he also sat in with

Samba Nova and heard the band play at an event or two. As a result of Carlos' approaching the band members, he was embraced as the new leader of Samba Nova, and he lent his expert approach to reshaping the group and teaching a new repertoire to a thankful and relieved group of players.

During the years of Carlos' leadership, the musicality of the band improved, and it began to resemble the sound and look one would expect of a more traditional samba batucada group. An expanded repertoire was developed, the band adopted the now-familiar green T-shirts with white bottoms, and various musical experiments arose, like having acclaimed fiddler Anna Ludlow join in on a tune, playing at the annual



Brazilian Carnival Festival with Carlos singing along with the band, encouraging some dancing, and so on. One of the pieces the band added to its repertoire was a rhythm originally written by Matthieu, tweaked by Carlos and named Matthieu's Piece. (*You can watch a video of it being led by Ian Taylor on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldPOD9GRCEM>*)

Carlos also arranged for the band to perform in *Rhonda's Party*, an award winning film short by Ashley McKenzie, much to the delight of band members, who while travelling by air in the

months afterwards, were able to view it on Air Canada's in-flight entertainment system when it was released in 2010.

Samba Nova even appeared as a scheduled act on the main stage at the Halifax Jazz Fest.



The band's "hand" logo was designed in this flurry of activity that Carlos initiated to bring Samba Nova up to a level of performance capability and professionalism it had never come close to attaining in the past. Band members formed small working groups to order shirts, to paint the instruments, to order canvas bags for the drums, to fix old gear and create some of the uniformity seen in traditional Brazilian *samba escolas*.

Carlos Pessoa brought a lot of good to the band. In retrospect, nobody would have found it easy to 'replace' Matthieu Keijser as the leader of Samba Nova. His playing was fierce and splendid; his leadership style was indirect, informal and low key. You wanted to play better for Matthieu, so as not to disappoint him, not because he demanded it.

In contrast, Carlos came out of a much more rigorous samba tradition. One Samba Nova player, who later participated in a formal samba summer instruction session in California, described it as much like what he imagined a U.S. Marine Boot Camp experience would be; that is, highly structured and disciplined! In any case, a number of long-time band 'regulars' dropped away and the internal tensions in the band increased. Ultimately, in 2010 Carlos withdrew from his active involvement with the band.

However, Samba Nova faced an even more fundamental existential challenge. There was no doubt previously that Samba Nova was 'Matthieu's band', and then to a lesser degree Carlos' band, but now that they were gone, whose was it? Initially reluctant to change, and fearing excessive formalism and potential bureaucracy, the membership gradually came to accept the need to establish a more formal and structured base, and in March 2011, successfully applied to become a registered Nova Scotia non-profit society.

Chapter Five: Samba Nova These Days

At about the same time, new leadership appeared in the person of band member Ian Taylor, a native of Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. Ian, a much more ebullient personality than Matthieu, fully shared his inventive passion, skill and enthusiasm for rhythm and percussion.

Carlos had recognized Ian's talent and passion for drumming early on. He strategically started grooming Ian on Samba leadership skills so that there would be a back-up leader if Carlos were unable to make a practice.

Ian went west to British Columbia for his post-secondary education and played both horns and percussion in various ensembles. After returning to Nova Scotia, he worked at TourTech East, a company that provided sound, lighting and staging support for concerts and events. He then joined the Media and Technology unit at Dalhousie University.



Ian's musical background began with childhood lessons on piano and sax then after a life-altering Van Halen concert he recognized his passion was; drums! He fell in love with percussion way back then, and became what is known as a "metal head", always trying to capture the thrill of those big rock concerts; especially what he experienced, fist-in-the-air, at a Metallica concert in 1992.

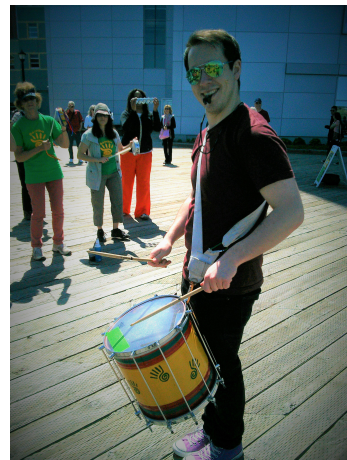
Over the years while learning to be a performer and a composer, he spent two years of his degree in the University of Victoria Music Education program, learning to teach music and training to be a school music teacher. One of the most significant learning experiences for me was in conducting classes - learning how to lead, how to communicate non-verbally to groups of people to get them to express what you are trying to say, how a collective group can speak with a single voice – lessons that apply to Samba Nova.

By his second year he was the principle percussionist and section lead for the UVic Wind Symphony, and in fourth year I was principle timpanist for the UVic Orchestra and Chorus. What struck Ian when performing with a full orchestra in front and a 200-member chorus behind, was that it was the exact same feeling, that same powerful shared experience from the 1992 Metallica show.

Eventually returning to Halifax and looking for places to play drums for fun, Ian found Samba Nova, literally by Googling “drums Halifax”. He stopped in for a practice sometime in 2007 and boom! that was it.

With Ian firmly in place as the new director, the Board recognized that it would be beneficial to have a second musical director, thus ensuring that there would be reliable leadership for the foreseeable future of the band. Enter Alex Nunes.

Alex, who hails from New Brunswick, joined the band in May of 2009 when band member Gilles Sarazin, who was Alex's Audio Engineering classmate at the Centre for Arts and Technology and who was also studying audio engineering, invited him for a practice. “Essentially, I enjoyed myself and I enjoyed the music I was learning to play. I wasn't playing anywhere else since I had just moved to Halifax a few months earlier. I also think the supportive friendly nature of the group kept me coming back,” said Alex.



His musical background included many years of drum lessons as a young man, and performances in school bands and music workshops and camps. He evolved as a leader, from an inexperienced new samba teacher to a confident and focused member of the leadership team. Alex is a vital contributor of the spirit of Samba Nova and the band is pleased to call him *Mestre*!

Supported by the Samba Nova Board, Ian and Alex freely add to the band's repertoire and polish the legacy of rhythms established with the founding of the band. Each leader has composed new pieces and shared their musical vision through fun and sometimes challenging workshops and practices. Their style and relaxed hand during performances always seems to result in the band having a lot of fun and sounding its best.

Chapter Six: The Members:



Pride 2015

The membership of Samba Nova has fluctuated in size and composition over its 25 years from the small group that gathered at the train station those many years ago, to its height of around 35 during Carlos Pessoa's leadership. Besides membership growing and waning over the years, it also varies through the seasons and in the weeks leading up to the Annual Pride parade membership swells, with previous members returning to re-experience the feeling of marching through the downtown of Halifax with the sound of the drums thundering between the buildings. Students come and go and local friends come to play in the band and sometimes leave for good while always maintaining some degree of contact as friends.

At various events, a dance troupe magically appears and performs choreographed steps, often with feathered accessories! Long time samba fan and local dancer Laura MacDonald gathers up a group of her dancing friends to make this happen, all with no fanfare or fuss.

For some of the members, the experience is their very first time playing music with a group of people and for many, it is certainly their first and only experience performing in front of an audience. For these reasons, it's a very empowering and powerful and sometimes life-altering experience. Band member sometimes comment on the feeling of running into a band mate

outside of practice times, and it seems to be a very special type of relationship. There's more to playing in this band than just making music together, it's a real feeling of community.



Doug, Arm and Ian on timbaus and Khothatso on surdo

Here's how one member found her way into the group:

My introduction to Samba Nova was at Switch on Agricola Street 4 years ago. I loved the beat and everyone looked like they were having such fun. A month later I was having coffee with a friend and who else was there but Doug Myers and Mary and of course he was wearing his Samba Nova sweatshirt. I knew Doug as he had given a beautiful eulogy at my Dad's funeral. I said that I had so enjoyed the performance at Switch and thought I would like to try it out. He told me the practice time and said that I should come. Well no sooner had I walked in my door that day but Doug called to say that he would pick me up that Saturday. How could I say no! It was a bit of a struggle at first since I had no musical background but I have always felt welcome and still love the rhythm and beat four years later.

Chris Butler, tamborim

People join the band for any number of reasons. There's never been a concerted recruitment drive and the people who drop in on a whim often find themselves hooked. As former band member Terry McCulloch said, people don't necessarily join the band because they're moved by the specific rhythms or by a high level of musicality, instead, they're intrigued and drawn in by how much fun members are having.

The music is extremely accessible and it's made to be basic and not complicated and something you can play on inexpensive and durable instruments. This is why Samba batucada is such a huge movement around the world. When you hear the music on the street you can't help but move your feet and smile.

The sound of Samba Nova drums, carried by members dressed head to toe in white, echoed through the church honouring the memory of former member and friend of mine, Geoff Clare. Overcome by the power of the band's presence at the funeral, this was my introduction to Samba Nova. Years later as my brother John and I wandered down Barrington St., this same band called passers-by into St. Matthew's church to take part in a fund-raiser for the Sri Lankan survivors of the devastating 2004 tsunami. Drawn by the sound, rhythm, and the strong sense of camaraderie among members (looking at you, Beth and Eleanor!), I stayed as long as I could that day and then started attending practices with John. As a musical novice I had some trepidation about practicing in front of others but was quickly made to feel welcome and comfortable by other members (Wilma and Val!). I've attended as many practices and performances as I've been able to since then and the rest, as they say, is history. Samba Nova has been an important part of my life for thirteen years and hopefully will continue to be.

Carolyn van Gorp, tamborim



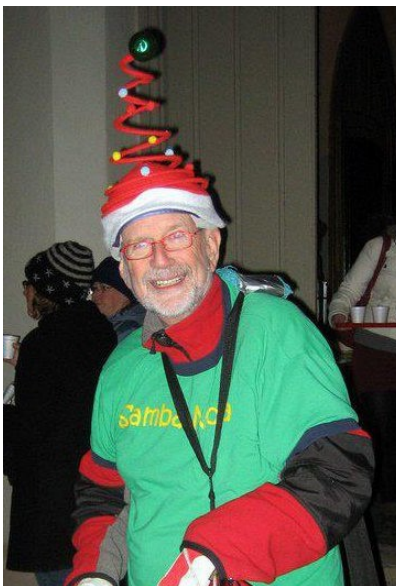
Samba Nova played the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia annual newcomers welcoming barbecue. The joy of our music inspired this elderly Bhutanese refugee to strike up an impromptu and spirited dance.

Chapter Seven: The Future

While this document is a retrospective and a history, it won't hurt to add a bit about where Samba Nova sees itself going forward. Long-time band member John van Gurp says,

“We deliberately set this thing up with a structure just to address this question you have, about the future. The band is more than a few people getting together to bang on drums every week. Our assets are more than just drums and a bank account. It's the relationships and history that keep it going and that's what will keep it here for years to come. I joined after seeing band playing outside one icy cold winter day and I just couldn't get the picture out of my thoughts; watching circle of people making a ridiculously compelling sound with this look of intensely joyful focus on their faces. I knew instantly I had to join! So since then we've managed to keep this band... this community, alive and thriving. We happen to have a registered society and a board of directors to take care of all the stuff needed to make that happen. It's a real community group, and I love it.”

.... and the beat goes on!



Doug - Bethlehem at Barrington