



Airto Moreira: 2026 NEA Jazz Master

Tune in to JazzTimes.com on September 15 (8 p.m. PT) for a special livestream of the 2026 NEA Jazz Masters Tribute Concert.

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Photo credit: Renata Luiz Ferreira

Editor's Note: The NEA Jazz Masters 2026 Tribute Concert will be held on Tuesday, September 15, 2026, at 8:00 p.m. PT at Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, California. Admission is free to attend in person (with reservations) and available via livestream here at JazzTimes.com.

Airto Moreira has always been a mystery.

If you go back through the history of drums and percussive instrumentation — particularly within jazz, the dawn of progressive rock or even the Latin and African continuums — no matter how free a rhythm may be, it acted as a punctuation to a thought.

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Art Blakey and Max Roach could toss out pulsations as subtle as a comma or as forceable as a period. Ray Barretto and Michael Carabello were the kings of the semi-colon. Ginger Baker and Tony Williams were all exclamation points. Pete La Roca and Elvin Jones were the great question marks.

Airto Moreira. He threw shade. Shadow. Ambience. Light. If his sound was indeed an actual punctuation, it would have to be as an ellipsis — something designed to signal anticipation, the world of possibilities, the possibilities of the world, that which *might* come next.

Long before Brian Eno had pushed Erik Satie's idea of "furniture music" into that which was moodily atmospheric and more easily visualized, Airto — as he was best known, mononymously famous à la Cher and Madonna — was designing temperate, ambient, intriguingly foreign sounds that you could taste, smell and touch.



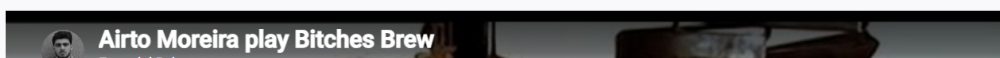
You could peel through a leafy Brazilian forest or climb Pico da Neblina, feeling its grass and craggy rock at your feet through the sounds of *Seeds on the Ground* (1971) and *Free* (the latter 1972 album a game-changing addition to CTI's wriggly funky groove reputation).

If the goddess Flora Purim, Moreira's wife and equal, added her immense breathy voices, sonorous scats and wild, often wordless epiphanies to his proceedings, Airto's music became possessed by all the characteristic elements of wind, from a cool and tender breeze to that of a flame-hot hurricane. Listen to the marrieds' *Flora Purim & Airto Moreira Live at the Hollywood Bowl 1979* and tell me you don't hear all four seasons, and then some, all at once.

From those collective vantage points, Airto not only all but became *the* avatar of epically internationalist jazz fusion, fluid world music and flavorful modal jazz before there were such tags. As a drummer, percussionist and composer, he took that which most of us knew (or felt as a familiar) about "música Instrumental Brasileira" — meaning the soft, easily embraceable tones of bossa nova, choro and samba — and turned all that on its head for his rainforest-worthy soundscapes lined with found sounds, harsh and mellow, ethereal and tactile, natural and unnatural, real and surreal.

As a drummer, percussionist and composer, Airto even managed to redefine "the kit," the jazz toolbox, by adding and maintaining a steady stream of modern and ancient instruments to the mix, from the traditional resonating, single-stringed bowed gourd that is the berimbau to literally newfangled whistles and bells.

If you're not delving into Airto's own immense leader catalog — from the baião-heavy *Natural Feelings* (1970) and the moistly indefinable *Fingers* (1973) through his tasty pop-jazz years at Warner Brothers, Arista, Rykodisc and Concord Jazz, then to his latest righteous recording, *Aqui, Oh!* (Jasmin Music, 2026) with Flora Purim and Ricardo Bacalar — then consider his sideman work and the jazz-rock revolution he helped televise with Miles Davis as part of *Bitches Brew* and *On the Corner*.





Or co-founding Return to Forever with Chick Corea and Stanley Clarke. Or playing alongside and inside of albums with Weather Report, Santana and fellow innovative, wide-scale percussionist Mickey Hart for *The Apocalypse Now Sessions* and *Planet Drum*.

Just for kicks and hit singles, Airtó is playing congas on his friend and fellow Brazilian composer Eumir Deodato's Grammy-winning 1970s outer space-disco sensation "[Also sprach Zarathustra](#)."

All that, and still, Airtó's sound and vision is and will likely always be a mystery, like a trick of the light — where it came from, how it got there, where it's going. Perhaps, rather than be named an NEA Jazz Master, a new category can be given to this singular genius of Brazilian percussion: NEA Jazz Magician. **JT**

A.D. AMOROSI

A.D. Amorosi is Associate Editor of *JazzTimes*. He is a three-time recipient of the Music Critic of the Year distinction from the Los Angeles Press Club's National Journalism Awards, including a citation of Best Longform Feature for his *JazzTimes* piece on Miles Davis and Prince. A.D. has decades of credits in major publications including *Billboard*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *MOJO* and *Pulse*. Currently writing regularly for *Variety*, *SPIN* and *Flood*, A.D. also hosts and co-produces Theater in the Round, airing through the Pacifica National Public Radio Network, Soundcloud and Mixcloud.