

The Funk Phenomenon

Words: Bruno Natal

Forget samba. Funk is the biggest music in the favelas (shanty towns) of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Not the James Brown sort of funk, something else. Call it funk carioca, favela funk, or simply funk, like the locals do.

This offspring of Miami bass, electro's distant cousin, has been moving Rio's youth for quite some time now. A world in itself—running independent of major labels and the media for years—funk attracts hundreds of thousands of people to balls happening all over town, sells thousands of records, and propels the biggest radio show in the country, which boasts 500,000 listeners per minute. It's a complete culture that combines its own codes and dance styles with the clothing fads and slangs of the favelas, which often end up incorporated in the vocabulary of the whole city.

Up until the mid-'80s, Rio's upper class and mass media were mostly unaware of the baile funk (funk ball) phenomenon, which was promoted by soundsystem crews like Furacão 2000, Cash Box, Curtisom, and Pipo's. Since this music was happening in the suburbs—in the poorest neighborhoods—it wasn't perceived as relevant or important. Things begun to change when anthropologist Hermano Vianna published the book *O Mundo Funk Carioca* (Rio's Funk World), the first social study of these parties, and anthems such as DJ Marlboro's 1988 "Melô da Mulher Feia" ("Ugly Woman Song") began receiving enormous airplay.

Funk has recently received tremendous international hype, from the massive airplay that Tejo, Black Alien & Speed's "Follow Me, Follow Me" received in Europe (after being featured in a Nissan TV spot) to tracks on Diplo's *Favela on Blast* and Piracy Funds Terrorism mixtapes reaching the ears of American hipsters. But funk isn't brand new, and in order to understand it we have to take a few steps back.

The Beginnings of Baile

Brazilian culture has an anthropophagic tradition; cultural influences from all over the world are always accepted, but once they find their way in, they never stay the same. That's what happened with samba—it fed on everything from African rhythms to waltzes to tango before it reached what is now considered the classical form; the same goes for bossa nova, which combines samba and jazz.

Funk traces its origins to the mid-'70s, when black music parties (bailes black) began happening in the suburbs of Rio. "These parties played solely American soul music," explains DJ Marlboro. Regarded as the godfather of favela funk, Marlboro produces a considerable amount of the tracks coming out, hosts the aforementioned radio show, and owns one of the biggest funk holdings, Big Mix, which also encompasses a label, a publishing company, a soundsystem, and a magazine. "There were other balls dedicated to rock, but by the end of the decade they went disco. When soul artists such as Kool & The Gang or The O'Jays brought a funk vibe to disco, the two bailes came together under one name: baile funk."

Even though synthesized sounds (such as those of Kraftwerk's "Numbers") were already played at these parties, the real turning point was when Afrika Bambaataa's "Planet Rock" hit the floor. The popularity of its electronically programmed beats set a whole new standard for the DJs to follow. "After 1982, with the rise of Miami bass, 2 Live Crew's 'We Want Some Pussy,' Freestyle's 'Don't Stop The Rock' and 'It's Automatic,' and J.J. Fad's 'Supersonic' became a must," recalls Marlboro. The bass-heavy sounds and electronic beats of these songs provided the blueprint for what was yet to come.

Favela Tech

Funk has always had its own distinct personality. Despite resembling the Miami sound, its hard-driving, booming reverberations seem rawer, dryer, and more metallic, the bass even more preeminent. The speakers you'll find in Marlboro's studio are not fancy—at first they may seem odd, cheap—but he's not worried about how his music will sound on top-of-the-line stereos. From day one, funk has been intended for huge handmade speakers, spitting heavy bass as loud as possible.

Although Marlboro created his first tracks on a Boss DR 110, given to him by Vianna, newer drum machines (SP 1200, Roland's TR 725 and 808) and MPCs have led to the sampling of samba and other styles. "The most amazing aspect about funk's use of samples is that, most of the time, [the producers] don't have a clue about the original track," Vianna states. "I remember once commenting to Marlboro about a 'Rock The Casbah' sample, but he had never heard The Clash song before. They just take things off of sample records. It's a favela strategy—just like they don't choose the materials they will use to build their houses, whatever is at hand gets sucked into the music."

More meaningful than the samples are the actual lyrics. Entirely in Portuguese and with melodies closer to Brazilian folkloric chants than American rap, they have crystallized funk as its own style, while giving the slums a fresh instrument to voice their message. Funk lyrics detail ghetto realities—the struggles, the violence, the sexuality—as well as calling for peace. "All I want is to be happy/walk calmly around the favela where I was born," say Kátia and Julinho Rasta in "Rap da Felicidade." Of course, not all funk lyrics are quite as, uh, uplifting. Even though most of the people making funk don't speak English, they've inherited 2 Live Crew's "booty rap" vibe and down dirty lyrical content—a fact that critics can't seem to let go of.

Dancing With Danger

Rio is a city squeezed between the sea and the mountains—some of the biggest favelas are located right on Rio's South Zone hills, where most of the upper class lives. This geographical situation means rich and poor are constantly sharing the same grounds. In 1992, a riot took place at Arpoador Beach and images of black youths running around and fighting were shown across the nation. Quickly the chaos was credited to the funkeiros, as baile goers are called.

"I have doubts about if what happened that day was really a fight," says Vianna. "There's a chance that maybe the crews were only reenacting the 'theater of violence' they do at the bailes, in the same way that punk rockers dance at concerts can be seen as violent by outsiders".

"Notice I don't say funkeiros," he continues. "I say crews, groups of people from different areas. You can't identify a funkeiro in the streets like you do with a punk rocker, for instance—unless you start calling every black, poor young kid funkeiro. Furthermore, the rivalry between these groups is a consequence of the rivalries between favelas, [which is] sometimes older than funk."

"Society uses funk as a convenient label to unload their prejudice against the lower classes," agrees Marlboro.

After the incident, baile funk was criminalized. Previously, bailes were held in clubs in the suburbs, where it was possible to regulate them. Suddenly, parties were forbidden, and no promoter could get a license to throw one. Promoters went to the only place they could go to get away from the officials' eyes: the trafficker-dominated favelas.

Once funk got into the favelas, in the '90s, everything changed. "Before, funk was like samba, the slum singing to the rest of the city, telling them about their issues. After, it became the slum singing for the slum," recalls Marlboro.

Some of the music developed a relationship with crime. A sub-genre of funk arose, the proibidão (very prohibited). In this gangsta rap-style funk, funkeiros sing about the drug dealers, celebrating their crime organizations. Turbulent bailes began to take place with a lot of fights and gunshots. It was funk's darkest days. Mr. Catra, one of funk's most controversial artists, used to make proibidão tracks. "We sung what the communities wanted to hear," he explains. "Proibidão doesn't talk only about the drug lords, it also addresses issues of corruption, the dissatisfaction of the poor people—it's about reality."

Although now legal again, bailes still happen mostly in the favelas, where you can't do anything without the drug lords' permission. At these parties, it's not uncommon to see 16-year-old kids with AR-15 and AK-47 automatic rifles in front of gigantic walls made of subwoofers. Out of context, this has led some to conclude

that all funk is drug trafficking music or that bailes are violent. But this is an over-simplification. Just like hip-hop and dancehall, funk is ghetto music—and the ghetto is what's violent, not the music or the parties.

So International

Funk had at least one chart anthem every year throughout the '90s, but it usually retreated back to the favelas afterwards, where it continued to appeal to millions. This trend didn't bother Marlboro. "The best moments are when funk isn't in the media," he says. "When it goes mainstream, in trying to appeal to a broader audience, it moves away from its roots."

Nothing could be further from funk's roots than the music going international, but that's exactly what's happening. In the last two years, Marlboro has traveled around the world, DJing from New York's Central Park Summer Stage to Barcelona's Sónar Festival, as well as Boston, France, and Slovenia, among many other locations. There's one place missing, though. "I still haven't got a chance to play in Miami" he says. "I'd love to—it would be like visiting my own personal Africa."

Marlboro has an explanation for all this attention. "Brazil is known worldwide for its music; ever since the electronic music explosion, people abroad have been looking out for what was gonna come from here. First came some great mixtures between drum & bass and bossa nova, but still, this was based on the past of Brazilian music blended with the present European sound. When they heard funk, they recognized it as the original Brazilian electronic music, with a Brazilian soul." Mr. Catra, who has played in Japan, Israel, and Europe, agrees. "When we substituted the foreign beats with our own groove, it became something that could only be made here."

Big Ballin'

Foreign interest in funk has helped boost a revival in the genre, which reached an important milestone with Marlboro's 2003 performance at one of the country's most important concerts, the TIM Festival. The general public has been paying more attention to the cultural aspects of funk, and local artists like Apavoramento, Nego Moçambique, and Tetine are bringing their own sound to it.

Lately, a lot of funk balls have flourished in clubs in Rio's and São Paulo's richest neighborhoods. Trailing Marlboro around to his gigs, you could be calmly sipping a beer at a club at 1AM only to find yourself deep inside a favela at 4 a.m.. The man is an essential bridge between two worlds that desperately need to meet again to start healing the wounds of years of separation.

Meanwhile, Mr. Catra is leading the first live funk band. The sound is closer to the original '70s funk, but spiced up with new elements absorbed in the last decades of the music. His open rehearsals happen at Vila Show, a club located in a red light district called Vila Mimosa. When funk meets fuck, the end result is one of the most hardcore nights in town. Outsiders blend in with the regular crowd of clients and prostitutes, all of them literally shaking their asses. "It's a way of bringing culture to a neutral ground of a divided city, where you find all kinds of people," says Catra. "Also, it helps to elevate the self-esteem of girls who have suffered a lot."

Marlboro welcomes the newcomers, and doesn't resent the fact that the international support is helping to change the way Brazilians look at his music. "Samba had to go through the same process," he acknowledges. "Funk is finally being perceived as the cultural movement that it is and one of the reasons is that the style is reaching its maturity. We are seeing the boom of a genre now, not just some songs."