

**The Funkeiros Fight**  
**A Hidden Social and Cultural Movement**

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## I. The Emergence of Bailes

Baile funk originated in the 1970's as simply a party held in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro. For the next forty years, funk functioned and grew without record labels, the media or mainstream attention. *Funk* initially emerged as a reaction against the social stratification that was such a defining feature of Rio's neighborhoods (or Brazilian cities).<sup>1</sup> It was an artistic medium produced spontaneously by individuals at a completely grassroots level, that came to define Carioca (term used to refer to individuals from Rio) culture. Mainstream Brazilian society, however, understands funk music and its movement as an example of all their preconceived notions of lower class behavior and claims that it encourages drug use and violence. Since Funk Carioca is perceived this way by the majority of the Brazilian population, during the last forty years and especially in this last decade, the movement has had to fight against the government and censorship for their right to simply exist. If funk initially emerged as a way to contest economical, racial and social classifications, today it has grown into one of the largest cultural manifestations of the masses in Brazil that reflects the very unique experience of a particular social group. Through the use of often politically charged lyrics, artists and musicians voice their discontent with Brazilian society. *Funk* can be defined as a social movement that uses art as a way to call attention to social tendencies that are ignored by the majority of the nation's population.

To understand the current state of the movement, it's important to have a minimum of historical knowledge concerning the origins of the music. As previously noted, funk music was born in the 70's in the peripheries of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The *bailes* (dances) were made by and for the people and occurred far from the wealthier neighborhoods. These events were important to the habitants of *favelas* because it gave them the opportunity to a disagreeable and violent reality. An authentic Brazilian funk had not yet emerged in this era but the dances would permit the musical and social movement to come into formation ten years later.

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<sup>1</sup> NATAL, Bruno. **The Funk Phenomenon**. XL8R Magazine

When the first *bailes* were held in the 70's, a hundred percent of the music spun was soul – and later disco- from the United States. When rap and electronic music appeared in the U.S. at the end of the 70's and beginning of the 80's, you heard both genres in the favelas. The two artists that had the most influence on indirectly shaping a Brazilian funk soundscape were Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash - both instrumental in the early development of hip-hop and it's melding with electronic music. Grand Master Flash is one of the pioneers of hip-hop DJing, cutting and mixing, and Afrika Bambaataa developed a style of hip-hop that used electronic instruments, such as the synthesizer. In 1982, when Afrika Bambaataa released "Planet Rock" – with a hook borrowed from German electronic pioneers Kraftwerk - both hip-hop and electronic music changed dramatically. The release of this record also spawned a new genre "funk" – referred to as "funk carioca" or "baile funk."<sup>2</sup> As it adopted and nationalized a specific American sound, *funk* would embark on its own path to becoming a musical genre with its own defining characteristics.<sup>3</sup>

In the 80's, funk carioca music drew most of its inspiration from Miami Bass – a type of hip-hop that was rooted in the electro-funk sound pioneered by Afrika Bambaataa.<sup>4</sup> At the time many Carioca DJs traveled to Miami to buy American records, and brought home the sounds of a sustained kick drums, synthesizers and freestyle rap. Funk carioca does not resemble American funk, but it sounds like Miami Bass fused with Brazilian singing, rapping and drumming. It blends Miami Bass style beats with some traditional Afro-Brazilian rhythms. Most of the tracks are produced in small-scale studios in the slums of Rio, which makes the sound much more raw. Like hip-hop, funk carioca relies heavily on samples and the interpolations of other songs. This marked an important transition: the imported American funk sounds were imported passed through a nationalization<sup>5</sup> process

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<sup>2</sup> SOUTO, Jane "Os Outros Lados do Funk Carioca"

<sup>3</sup> MARTINS, Denis. . **Direito e cultura popular: o batidão do funk carioca no ordenamento jurídico**, p 23

<sup>4</sup> VIANNA, Hermano. "O Baile Funk Carioca: Festas e Estilos de Vida Metropolitanos."

<sup>5</sup> Brazil has a history of adopting something that isn't there's, changing it and making it their own. Nationalization is a Portuguese term used to define this process

that eventually gave place to *funk carioca*. One of the first involuntary nationalization steps was taken when Brazilian MC's decided to take hip-hop tracks and roughly translate the lyrics in Portuguese because none of the partygoers understood English. Later, DJ Marlboro's release of Funk Brazil N1 in 1989 is considered the first marker of this cultural movement. Thanks to his many contributions during the formative years of funk music, DJ Marlboro (Fernando Luiz) is often referred to as the "father of funk." The genre fully came into its own identity when local MC's started to write original lyrics in Portuguese, which consequently attracted more people to the parties. What was originally a simple dance had now metamorphosed into a cultural phenomenon.

## II. Moments of Violence

Broadcasted through local public radio stations in the 90's, funk music was gaining significant popularity amongst the inhabitant of Rio's favelas. The lyrics reflected daily realities pertinent to their community. Funk music was also a source of pride because each community was represented by their own MC. Sometimes the rivalry between groups would become apparent during *bailes* as members from each community came to support their MC in freestyle battles.<sup>6</sup> [This rivalry was more of a competition rather than outwards demonstrations of violence.] Unfortunately funk carioca gained an unfavorable reputation in the 90's when violence became increasingly present. *Bailes* had previously been held in clubs, but the local government soon banned them by making it difficult for club owners to obtain the necessary licenses for their venue. Therefore, in order to survive, the *bailes* moved into the slums controlled by drug lords. Naturally the different crews used *bailes* as a medium to confront each other and, these nights that were once reserved for a fleeting moment of leisure, were now becoming dangerous. In 1992, at the heart of the South Zone, a raid took place on the beaches of Copacabana and Ipanema. Later the authorities claimed that this raid was a consequence of an

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<sup>6</sup> VIANNA 25

ongoing conflict between two rival crews that had confronted each other the night before at a *baile*.

According to sociologist Denis Martins, from that moment on funk carioca was seen to be associated with criminal activities and disturbance of peace. Not long after that, the media started to demonize every aspect of funk music. It's important to clarify that the polemics surrounding funk culture are about the acts of violence that sometimes occur during the *bailes*. Funk culture's sphere of influence extends far beyond just a dance. The violence is difficult to prevent in parties because it's a daily occurrence in slums controlled by drug lords. Media sources and authority figures have never able to separate violent episodes in *bailes* from the culture as a whole. For example, when there was a sudden escalation of violence in Rio, police forces blamed the funk movement as the source and propagator of this sudden rise of violence. Funk culture became the scapegoat for something drug traffickers were doing. Authorities assumed that whomever attended these events were part of a *galera* (drug crew.) Due to systematic oppression from authorities, funk carioca culture suffered a decline during the second half of the 1990's.

Blinded by constant prejudice and negativity, average Brazilians did not notice the many peaceful *funk* tracks. In fact, a majority of *funkeiros* would prefer that no violence outbursts take place during *bailes*. These events were once regarded as safe spaces of leisure often used as a form of escape for the community's youth. During his fieldwork, sociologist Hermano Vianna came across a group of underprivileged youths that would go out to *bailes* in search of a much-needed distraction.<sup>7</sup> He emphasized that their objective was to have fun with their friends, dance, forget reality and simply live for the present moment. Perhaps this could be read as a modern demonstration of Emile Durkheim's assertion that pure forms of diversion "made men forget the real world (*"elles font oublier aux hommes le monde reel."*) Apparently a common search for an ephemeral moment of happiness unified these youth and led to the formation of a collective identity.

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<sup>7</sup> Hermano Vianna (34)

Contrary to what the majority of Brazilians believed, when violence showed its face during parties, it was unanimously unwelcome. Many funk lyrics refer to violence as something that impedes on the individuals right to happiness and pleasure.

*“Pedimos pra parar com a  
violência no salão  
Quando eu falo violência eu lhe  
digo nunca mais  
Porque brigando, meu amigo,  
parecemos animais.”  
(Rap do Pirão, D'Eddy)*

“We ask to stop  
The violence in hallways  
When I speak to violence I tell  
It never more  
Because when fight, my friend,  
We seem like animals”

### III. Demonization of the Movement

*Funk* music does have a subgenre – called *proibidão* - whose lyrics often seem to glorify the gangs and the drug trade. The controversial MC Catra explained that *proibidão* does not only speak about the leaders of the trafficking trade, but it also addresses police corruption.<sup>8</sup> At times, it reflects the discontentment of the population through aggressive lyrics. Even if MC Marlboro described this era as the “obscure years of funk,” he still agrees that these young individuals were rapping about what they experienced in their daily lives, and it happens to be a very harsh reality. “They speak of the drug dealer with the same rupture that exists between habitants of *favelas*, they are the ones who sees him as a hero, as the person who wont enter his house shooting, who won’t put his foot in the door of his house, will not kill his childhood friend. Instead they see the drug dealer as the communities benefactor.”<sup>9</sup> He believes that despite the dark lyricism people cannot deny that this subgenre still presents an aspect of reality. “Funk is the sonorous trail of everything that happens in Rio –whether good or bad” continues DJ Marlboro.<sup>10</sup> Instead of being criticized, *proibidão* lyrics should be studied by sociologists, anthropologists, and authorities in order to understand and subsequently attempt to change the

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<sup>8</sup> NATAL, Bruno. (2005) **The Funk Phenomenon**

<sup>9</sup> ESSINGER, Silvio (238)

<sup>10</sup> Idem

context in which these people are living or are being treated by the general population.

Funk is a suburban activity frequented by a primarily black and mulato population. *Funk* is poor, it's ethnic and it originates and exists only in *favelas*. For this reason it is subject to discrimination. Some of the wealthier Brazilians generally assume they live in a society that is "racially democratic" or that functions in absence of "violent racial preconceptions." Because of the constant violence and because it belongs only to the lower class, *funk* culture is ultimately ruining this image. Therefore, they would like this culture to be purged or purified through the process of *embranquecimento* (whitening process), so that they could finally be rid of this "repulsive" black culture and problem that is breaking their illusion.<sup>11</sup> It seems that it is exactly this that *favelados* reject today: the notion of Brazilian as a racially unified nation.<sup>12</sup> Anthropologist Jane Souto explains, "through the lyrics of funk music, the young habitants of the favelas and of the suburbs sing a protest against the structure of conditions that have historically been used to either marginalize or stigmatize them."<sup>13</sup> The Brazilian government has always had a problem with *funk* because they see the parties as a reunion of criminals who wish to sell drugs. Combined with the fear of the elite class of Rio who apply pressure on authorities, the government has had to control and prohibit *bailes*.

The upper and middle classes have a particular problem with *funk*, especially *proibidão*, because they believe the violent and sexually explicit content to be the leading cause of propagating violence in the state. Naturally, when you remove the track from the context in which it was created, the underlying message is lost. Individuals with preconceived notions about the movement don't actually know what they are criminalizing. They don't understand both the importance of such a movement and the benefits brought about by its formation. This type of ignorance –

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<sup>11</sup> FREYRE, Gilberto. "Towards a **Mestizo Type**", in *The Gilberto Freyre Reader* Nova York, Knopf

<sup>12</sup> YUDICE, George. "A **Funkificação Do Rio**" (Trad, de Valéria Lamego)

<sup>13</sup> SOUTO, Jane. "Os **Outros Lados do Funk Carioca**"

or misinformation- leads to unjust policies. In 2008, Rio's ex-chief of police, Álvaro Lins, presented a state law that stated ways in which they could prevent and eventually eliminate the existence of *bailes*. The bill not only demonstrated a desire for homogenization, but also showcased the Brazilian government's nationalistic tendencies. Lins' bill passed – and pushed the movement to venture deeper into criminal activity in order to survive. Brazilian documentary filmmaker, Fernando Barcellos, believes that the government's problem isn't with *funk*, but with favelas.<sup>14</sup> This law exposed the fundamentally and morally erroneous prejudices embedded deep within Brazilian society. In the end, criminalizing *funk* became a new excuse to marginalize the working and lower class.

#### **IV- Funk's Social and Economical Values**

Lins' bill did this in a number of ways, perhaps the most fundamental of which was its repression of a newfound dream among the youth: the dream that it was possible to one day leave the favela, not just as a drug lord or soccer star, but as an MC or DJ. There were already many young men that had abandoned the drug trade in order to invest time developing their music careers. *Funk* is marketable and commercially viable – therefore it is able to compete with drug trafficking. In an interview, 17-year-old MC Tevê explains how funk music helped and encouraged him to leave behind a not so promising future. *Funk* not only had a positive influence on youth, but also contributed to the local economy. In fact, as soon as the movement passed through the “nationalization” process, it became a cultural industry with an important market. The emergence of a new market included the professionalization of various categories of workers such as disc jockeys, masters of ceremony, musicians, sound engineers, and dancers.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, *funk* music now uses many different mediums of the media for promotional purposes such as the radio, television, newspapers and magazines. Nowadays, funk music takes up the majority of Rio's radio stations daily programming. The research institute of the

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<sup>14</sup> UCHOAS, Leandro (2009) *Som de Preto, de Favelado, e Criminalizado*.

<sup>15</sup> SOUTO, Jane.



Getulio Vargas Foundation (Instituto de Pesquisas da Fundação Getulio Vargas) revealed that activities surrounding the movement generate about 10 million real monthly, about 100 million real by year and contributes to the creation of millions of jobs in Rio de Janeiro. <sup>16</sup>

The most important characteristic of the movement is that it gives young adults from *favelas* a possibility of work and hope of employment in the future. The combination of a constant increase of social inequalities with societies unfavorable viewpoints of *favelados* leads to a profound feeling of non-belonging in the white man's world, funk music seems to be youths only means of escape. In reality, there's no space for these young kids in the selective work world. As Jane Souto indicated in "The Other Sides of Funk Carioca" (Os Outros Lados do Funk Carioca), the only option generally reserved for poor youth in the Brazilian market place is one with "a succession of heavy, monotone and poorly remunerated tasks, filled by long working hours, without legal protection and with little relation to the definition of professionalization according to the Constitution, and when not this, it's unemployment." It comes as no surprise that the youth sees this option as slavery. However, the *funk* movement has given this population the potential of having, for the first time, a creative profession because it has the power to invent and sustain new market. It should be seen as an instrument capable of creating new economic opportunities for lower income youth. The government demonized *bailes* without paying attention to their value and hoped that the movement would clean itself up without investing or aiding in any way the marginalized areas where *bailes* were born.

## V. Need For Expression

Something perhaps equally disturbing to ignoring the movement's economic value is the deliberate censorship of a population's voice. It's a censorship that seems to be born of deeply rooted stereotypes. Criminalizing this emerging culture

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<sup>16</sup> Idem

is yet another example of criminalizing the underprivileged. Adriana Facina, sociology professor at UFF, points out an interesting discrepancy. Soccer games held at the Maracanã stadium require police intervention each time, but they are not prohibited. Perhaps it's because soccer is part of Brazil's national identity, and it's not a social movement. The same cannot be said for *funk*. Because the media describe *funk* exclusively in a negative light, it is also largely responsible for propagating an unflattering portrait of the movement. The media often imposes wider social problems onto *funk*, as it presents the culture as engendering corruption in Rio. The criminalization of this music only reinforces the negative image of *favelados*, in turn rendering the social gap between upper and lower classes even more obvious.

The irony of this situation is that corporations and cultural institutions avidly consume these tragic and violent stories in order to feed the incessant voyeurism society's elite ranks. These repackaged stories are decontextualized and thrown through "the whitening cycle." The mainstream's dislike of *funk carioca* seems to originate from their total lack of influence on the movement's development. Except the *funk* movement has been pushing to create a space for social integration and discussion, but government figures don't want to converse. They're unable to see that the movement is actually one of joy, led by a style of music that celebrates life while at the same time operating as a medium to expose a hidden reality.

The lyrics and rhythms of the songs carry a message that is tragic, yet still full of hope. The *funk* anthem "*Eu só Quero é Ser Feliz*" (I Only Want to be Happy) by Cidinho and Doca, demonstrates perfectly a community's desire to have some form of happiness present in their daily lives. MC's also expose their audience to certain problems encountered in the favelas that deter them from their path to peaceful living. The opposition between tourist and *favelados* in the track, points out an obvious separation between rich and poor. The two juxtaposed narratives emphasize the difference between postal card Rio and *favela* Rio. Admits all this one cannot miss the hopeful chorus:

“*Eu só quero é ser feliz  
 Andar tranquilamente, na favela onde  
 eu nasci, é!  
 E poder me orgulhar,  
 e ter a consciência que o pobre tem seu  
 lugar.  
 [fé em Deus,DJ]”*

“I only want to be happy  
 Walk tranquilly in the favela where I  
 was born.  
 And be able to be proud  
 And have the conscious that the poor  
 has his place.  
 [Faith in God, DJ] ”

Nevertheless, this optimism seems to be reserved for the future because it's optimism that currently exists only through rhymes that makes us dream. The melancholically hopeful voices meld with the words that highlight both sadness and suffocation of their people. This song reflects the way of life of individuals that reside in *favelas*. How can people not understand that these songs allow this group to express and represent themselves in a society where they are marginalized? It's necessary to ensure that young underprivileged black youth of Rio have a means of expression. A lower class narrative should be heard. Individuals who participate in this movement need to know that their voices matter, and that they are in fact cultural agents. *Funk* music can be a tool of empowerment.

Furthermore, in a country where they proclaim, “we are not racists” it seems that the government would try to silence a culture that is relatively colorblind. One of Amilkar and Chocolate's tracks – two funk MC's from Rio- talks about the music and movement's powerful qualities.

“*É som de preto  
 De favelado  
 Mas quando toca ninguém fica parado  
 [...]  
 O nosso som não tem idade, não tem  
 raça  
 E não tem cor  
 Mas a sociedade pra gente não dá valor  
 Só querem nos criticar pensam que  
 somos animais  
 Se existia o lado ruim hoje não existe  
 mais*

*Porque o funkeiro de hoje em dia caiu  
 na real”*

“ It's a Black sound  
 A favelado sound  
 But when it plays no one stays  
 motionless  
 [...]  
 Our sound doesn't have an age, or a  
 race  
 And it doesn't have a color  
 But society doesn't give us any value

They only want to critic us, think that  
we are animals  
If a bad side existed today it no longer  
exists

Because today's funkeiro has fallen in  
reality"

This is an example of another Carioca anthem that reveals an overlooked aspect of the genre: the role it plays in combating class and color frontiers. Simultaneously, the two MC's disclose the difficult reality of being constantly subject to discrimination and disrespect. The notion of pride, a sentiment shared by all inhabitants of *favelas*, is also visible in these lyrics. It's a type of pride that stems from the artist's ability to make a multitude of people dance and to see all these bodies melded together for one night. These young men are modern poets who are gifted with the ability to convey their obscure reality without being morbid. A weighty message of suffering transmitted through the joyous and energetic rhythms of Brazilian percussions.

Thanks to a few individual - namely MC Leonardo, president of the Association of Professionals, Friends of Funk (APA Funk), anthropologist Hermano Vianna, the group BassNeurótico and deputy Marcelo Freixo- the Lins' law of 2008 was fortunately repealed. In September of 2009, the state law 5543 was approved after hours of discussion and presentations from various prominent members of the *funk* community. This law finally allows the voices and language of these people to continue to exist and grow with the respect of all Rio de Janeiro. The law recognized *funk* as a cultural and social movement with pedagogic abilities. Renowned funk DJ and funk movement leader, Sany Pitbull, has promoted this genre as a pedagogic instrument for many years. He has contributed to the construction and creation of workshops in schools, workshops that teach kids to use the various sound and DJ equipment such as turntables or MPCs. In the future, he wishes to create a class where he could shape young kids to become professional DJs. It seems that Sany's dream of one day witnessing "the *funk* movement be truly respected as it deserves"

is seeing the light of day.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the passing of this law was a huge victory for the movement, as well as visible proof that it can survive far away from criminal activity.

#### IV. Conclusion

As legendary Brazilian samba artist, Gilberto Gil points out in a video interview: how can you prevent a movement that gives any child a means of rapid expression and, with today's technology, the opportunity to share his feelings with millions of people? The time has come for Brazilian's to realize that *favelas* can be centers of creativity full of communities waiting and hoping for an opportunity to be heard. Censoring these MCs is censoring a form of poetry. MC's are poets; they are produce rhymes with melodies and lyrics that carry the experiences of their community's. Rio's *favelas* are places where creativity is impeded on ever since Samba was born. It's a place where artistic talents are rendered invisible by the mass market, but if you pay close attention you can notice -through the delicate back and forth of a dancer's body to the distinct sound of drums – a stupendous passion pulsating in the hearts of *funkeiros*. The message of *funk* culture is not strictly carioca; it's a movement relevant to many Brazilians. It's literature, it's poetics, and it's the depiction of a very Brazilian way of being. An ability to live, day-to-day, with a permanent tension between the obscure and often tragic side of life, and the more luminous one. "Sadness and happiness walk side by side," indicates the Cidinho and Doca song. They talk about the ability of living in the middle of tragedy and yet still retain this vitality, and a happiness that is unique to Brazil. If you walk down the streets you can hear the rhythms that carry this passion, this joy and this ability. Once understood, once felt, once heard, it's impossible to stay inert.

Recently this musical style seems to have had an increase of supporters as more people start to accept *funk* as a cultural phenomenon. Although this genre was

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<sup>17</sup> NATAL, Bruno. (2005) **The Funk Phenomenon**. XL8R Magazine (versão eletrônica)

previously known only in Brazil, it has gained international recognition thanks to the documentary “Favela On Blast.” Produced by American DJ, Diplo, this documentary presents *funk* as a cultural movement through interviews of individuals who contribute daily to the development and growth of the genre movement. The documentary is full of first account narratives, which gives the inhabitants of favelas a voice that not only they’ve rarely had before, but one that stretches out internationally.

As previously mentioned, *funk* initially emerged as a contestation against class segregation. It’s also an example of a culture spontaneously produced by individuals. Funk music is recognized today as the electronic rhythm of Rio de Janeiro. As Sany Pitbull said “after forty years of persecution, forty years of fighting and forty years of dancing, it seems that funk will finally have a legitimate role in society.” Additionally, the dialogue occurring between *funkeiros* and government officials is creating a neutral territory in a city that has been extremely divided. A bridge is being built in between two distinct worlds that need to find each other after so many years of separation. Thus, *funk* can be seen as engendering social progression and unifying Rio de Janeiro. It seems that it’s in the most improbable and repressed of places that are hidden volcanoes of creativity. As the *funk* sound circulates in Brazil, and internationally, you can hear its influence in Europe and in the United States where artists play tracks and initiate collaborations with Brazilian funk musicians. It’s not going to take much longer for our popular culture to be infiltrated by *funk*. It will spread itself in the musical world carrying with it all the voices and stories of *favelados*. Hopefully the world will learn a little bit more about this Brazilian ability.

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