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A Photographer Infiltrates the Rio Funk Scene

Funk carioca, also called baile funk, is a musical style that's been around for more than 25 years, but in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, a new culture of *funkeiros* has emerged. These are people whose identity, lifestyle, fashion, and body language are defined by funk.

Photographer Vincent Rosenblatt spent ten years documenting the funk scene in Rio, and his work was recently featured in the March issue of *National Geographic* in Brazil.

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Here, photo coordinator Edward Benfield interviews Rosenblatt about his project [Rio Baile Funk! Favela Rap \(2005-2014\)](#).



Funkeiros dance at Club 18 in the borough of Olaria, located by the entry of the Complexo do Alemão's favelas.

EDWARD BENFIELD: I've been to Rio and the local culture is electrifying. What drew you to this subject in particular?

VINCENT ROSENBLATT: I was in Rio working on a [youth media project](#), and the funk carioca was everywhere. I could feel the music at home. The walls and windows rattled from the funk pumping through the speakers at a nearby favela street party. The bass had a magnetic attraction.

I started to buy CDs on the streets. I paid close attention to the lyrics, which explained life, behavior, and rules of survival in the favelas.

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I couldn't resist it anymore, so I took a cab on a Saturday night to the Castelo, a popular *baile* [dance party] in the paramilitary-controlled favela Rio das Pedras.

As soon I entered the ballroom, I knew I had found a subject that would occupy me for a long, long time.



Two members of the boy band Os Teimosos (The Nasty Boys), at a baile organized in the hall of a samba school in Rio, 2008. The *sambistas*, or samba musicians, say that 50 years ago it was their music, which then was despised and criminalized.

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The Desejadas girls' band puts on a show in the Acari favela in the Zona Norte of Rio.

EDWARD: How did not being Brazilian influence your relationship with the people you met and the images you made?

VINCENT: Being an outsider might have helped me enter many places locals don't go.

After [I frequented] another baile closer to my home, DJs and MCs started inviting me to their respective favelas. It involved negotiating relationships with some of the unofficial powers in the neighborhoods.

[Many of the favelas are controlled by either state military police or separate paramilitary groups.]

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The artists risked their life for me because in favelas press and photographers are seen as instruments of the repression. And a picture in the wrong context can result in the intervention of military police—meaning a lot of places are underdocumented.

In time, I brought boxes of photos to show everyone and became a part of the party by projecting slideshows.

I considered it a privilege to be invited to these parties, especially since photographs may be the only proof they ever existed in some favelas. In recent years, the authorities have cracked down, severely limiting the parties or banning them outright.



Baile do Castelo, Rio das Pedras, 2005. This dance party in the western area of Rio is well known for its social diversity, attracting “playboys” from the Barra neighborhood, as well as the slum’s own inhabitants.

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DJ Byano and MC Ticão perform at a baile in the favela Chapadão in the Zona Norte.

EDWARD: Baile funk is distinctive to Rio. Can you tell me about the connection between funk and the city?

VINCENT: Funk is like the blood in the veins of the city: Communities connect through the baile. During a party, a favela receives youth from surrounding neighborhoods—from both favelas and the *asfalto* [the wealthier part of the city]. Through the lyrics information circulates, and kids from different origins share the same songs and dance steps. It's a constant dialogue on gender relationships, including the empowerment of women and female MCs.

However, in Rio, funk and bailes are hated by the local media and forbidden regularly by the state military police, who have been known to invade the bailes, burning, stealing, or destroying sound systems.

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To compare with the hip-hop scene in the U.S.A.: Imagine the National Guard invading block parties in the Bronx, armed with tanks and destroying sound systems or attacking prominent artists simply due to the content of their lyrics.



Daiane, aka "Mulher Jaca," then a dancer of the Bonde da Loira group, exhibits her bikini marks. The funk carioca movement incorporates fashion and looks, as well as dance.

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A man dismantles a sound system called Pitbull-Boladinho at 7 a.m., after a baile that gathered at least 500 dancers on top of the favela Morro dos Prazeres. The speakers will be transported by men through narrow lanes down to the entrance of the favela—the only access point for the transport trucks.

EDWARD: What does funk mean to the people of Rio de Janeiro, especially those in the favela communities?

VINCENT: The baile to Rio is what theater was to the ancient Greeks—all the issues of the community are on stage. Through the dances and lyrics, it's a moment of empowerment.

And for the youth, funkeiro culture exists independently of the drug dealers, the police, and the paramilitaries. Many of them emerge from the bailes as MCs, DJs, or dancers to make a living and sustain their families.

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Then, beyond the artists, you have dozens of people in each baile selling drinks and food, carrying the giant sound systems, and transporting the equipment. The bailes generate income for a great deal of people. No social project has ever had such an impact on poor neighborhoods.



Elaine, Cris, Aninha, and Dani, of the group Tchutchucas, rehearse their new choreography on the rooftop of Elaine's house in the Vila Cruzeiro favela.

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Rosenblatt's photos are projected behind the baile in the favela São João, in Zona Norte, in 2010. After spending years documenting the scene, he began to exhibit his work at the bailes.

EDWARD: You photographed this subject for a decade. Looking back, what are some of the central themes that stand out?

VINCENT: With time, and a bit of distance, I see that I [not only] documented a lot of body language and dance steps but also the monumentality of the sound systems and the crowds. I even managed to get portraits that closely resonate with the psyche of the funkeiros. The funk scene evolves constantly, so there's always something new to discover—even when I feel I won't be able to do anything new. The bailes continually sustain my desire for photography and expression.

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Vincent Rosenblatt was born in Paris in 1972. He lives and works in Rio de Janeiro and founded the youth media program Olhares do Morro in Rio's Santa Marta favela. See more of his work on his website and at riobailefunk.net.