

Free Rennan de Penha & Rest in Peace Baile de Gaiola

The phone rang at 1 a.m., shattering my two-hour power nap.

“You ready, Kiratiana? It’s time to go! We’re coming by in 15 minutes.”

Helen, a self-described American “*funkeira*,” had finally convinced me to go to a funk party in a *favela*. Just four months ago, I had warned her against going to the city's infamous funk parties alone, fearing for her safety. But tonight, curiosity overruled caution. I even recruited a third friend to join us.

To get to the party, we left Rio de Janeiro's toney South Zone for the working-class suburban North Zone and drove 45-minutes to Complexo da Penha, where a massive complex of *favelas* crawl across the surrounding hills. Our destination was Vila Cruzeiro, a *favela* founded by escaped enslaved Blacks who built their homes on land owned by the Penha Catholic Church.

The Uber dropped us off on the *asfalto*—the paved street that delineates the “city” from the “hill”—and the first people we saw were two policeman holding long-barreled guns. They didn’t say anything to us as we passed them. I avoided any eye contact with them. A long narrow street separated us from our final destination - *Baile de Gaiola*—The Birdcage Party. The further we walked down the street, the deeper we entered into Vila Cruzeiro, one of Rio de Janeiro's 1100 *favela* communities. The party, covered by massive tents in case of rain, snaked down the street for at least a half of a mile. We passed by dozens of vendors selling vodka and energy drinks, snacks, even branded party cups from makeshift stalls. Then came to a stage with a *pagode* samba band. Finally, the main DJ booth was in sight.

As three Black American women, we didn’t stand out much, especially in the dark. The multi-hued crowd ranged in color from Cafe au lait to onyx. A few might have even passed for white in Brazil. But there was no doubt that this was funk music party for Blacks and *favela* residents. Groups of young girls danced with each other. Young men congregated together in an elevated VIP section. Around 3:30am the funk music stopped for a live *pagode* band. Once the samba ended, fireworks erupted from above the DJ booth at the far end of the party. It was time for the main attraction.

DJ Rennan de Penha took to the stage just as the light from a rising sun started to touch the community. Only then could I clearly see the self-built terra cotta block houses that stacked precariously up the hill behind the DJ booth and around the entire party. With the morning sun now shining bright in the sky, I huddled next to the stage in front of the DJ booth to watch a *passinho*-- footwork--dance-off.

"You ready to go?" Helen asked.

“Yup.”

By the time we left at 9am, thousands of people were still there enjoying the funk music. The party wasn’t as suffocatingly packed as it **had been** at 4am but the music was still going hard. We walked down a side street that passed by houses, bakeries and little grocery stores.

I searched my own memories for a US reference to help me understand what I had just experienced. This wasn’t a one-time party. This was an *outdoor* party that easily attracted 25,000 people! And it happened every week in the *middle of a neighborhood*. Part block party, part night club, part music festival: I couldn’t think of a comparable event.

I had just attended the Greatest. Ever. Funk. Party. in Rio de Janeiro. For the next six months, whenever I announced to Brazilians that I had been to *Baile da Gaiola*, their eyes widened with envy and excitement.

“Meu Deus, how was it? I still need to go.”

“It was amazing and everything it was hyped up to be,” I typically responded.

Six months later the party was over, and DJ Rennan was locked up in Rio’s most notorious prison—Bangu Penitentiary.

In 2017, DJ Rennan da Penha created the greatest-ever recurring Funk party in Rio de Janeiro—*Baile de Gaiola*. At the young age of 23, this Black man, born and raised in the *favela*, became the king of funk music in Brazil. He used his massive platform to launch the careers of dozens of local funk singers, introduce a new style of funk music—150 BPM— and recenter Rio de Janeiro as the stronghold of Funk music in Brazil. His reign, though, was short-lived. Earlier this year, Rennan was arrested on charges of connections to drug-trafficking. Rennan wasn’t arrested for packing illegal guns (ala TI), nor drug possession (a la Ja Rule), nor assault (a la Gucci Mane). He was arrested for simply knowing and communicating with the people who he grew up with. For Black Brazilians a favela residents, it’s obvious that these charges were just a front for the racism and discrimination that always seem to target the Black and poor in Brazil.

To understand the phenomenon of DJ Rennan and *Baile de Gaiola*, I called up Bruno Rafael, a Black music culture expert born and raised in the City of God *favela* (yes the infamous movie was about this favela). In 2018, Rafael pushed the city government to recognize traditional “*carioca*” funk as a cultural patrimony. *Carioca* is a catchall term for anything authentically from Rio de Janeiro. Rafael, 38, now a “hip hop head,” spent his teen years attending some of Rio de Janeiro’s largest Baile Funks. I explained to him how dumbfounded I was to see thousands of people partying to funk music in the middle of a *favela*. And it wasn’t even a holiday weekend. It was just a regular Saturday.

“This isn’t a surprise for people who come from a *favela*,” Rafael said. “It’s only a surprise to people who come from the South Zone, or from abroad.”

But *Baile de Gaiola*’s national impact did amaze Bruno, who attended the party three times.

“He did something that had never been done before. He organized a weekly party with 25,000 people in a *favela*. And this party became a national brand. He was this young Black guy from the hood traveling all over the world, traveling to Dubai to DJ,” Rafael said. “This had never happened before.”

Funk is the preferred music of the youth in Rio *favelas*—the hillside communities that Blacks and the poor call home. Its roots lie in Black American hip hop and electronic music, in particular, the Miami Bass sound that Luke Skywalker made famous in the late 80s and early 90s. Baile Funk parties evolved from 1970s Soul parties that had attracted Rio’s Black *favela* and suburban youth every weekend. By the late 1980s, Black music lovers had split into two groups--those who still preferred Soul music and the growing group of Black *favela* youth who preferred the hard beats of Miami Bass.

Back in the 80s Brazilian DJs had to fly to the States to get American music. During one of these trips, DJ Nazz picked up 808 Volt Mix by DJ Battery Brain and started playing it at his parties. This song’s beat helped launch Carioca Funk music, and for the next 10 years, every song used this beat.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKkQjwji8LM>

This explosion of Brazilian funk music in the late 80s and early 90s happened in the shadow of mainstream media, which ignored this cultural phenomenon coming from marginalized Black and poor communities. Within this booming moment, Cidinha and Doca produced the most famous funk song, Rap de Felicidade, Happy Rap. With the 808 Volt Mix beat in the background, they rapped about seeking happiness in a *favela*. In the late 90s, funk artists flipped to the *tamberzão* beat, a tropical mix of electronic music with conga drums. This beat defined *carioca* funk well into the 2010s.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKkOjwji8LM>

Favela communities held (and still hold) their own small funk parties, usually financed by the ruling drug factions, but the most popular parties in the late 80s and 90s were *Bailes de Briga*, or “fighting parties”. Black and *favela* youth from all over Rio congregated in warehouses, dancing--and fist fighting each other--to funk music..

Rafael attended these parties as a teenager in Rio, always returning home bruised, sore and with torn up clothes. “I had to lie to my mother,” Rafael said. “But back then the way you became known was by beating up the most people.”

One night, though, Rafael was standing next to his older brother and best friend when someone started shooting at the party. The bullet hit his best friend and killed him.

“From that moment I decided to embrace hip hop, and I stopped going to funk parties,” Rafael said.

This was probably a good thing. The 2000s became all about “*funk proibido*”—funk that reflected the pain of *favela* life—the violence, gang life, drug use, and death.

But by the end of the 2000s, mounting large baile funks became difficult as *favela* communities underwent *pacification*. To prepare for the World Cup and Olympic Games, Rio police kicked drug factions out of large *favela* communities and occupied them to ostensibly make them safer. The first thing they banned was the weekly funk party.

While Rio de Janeiro “Baile Funks” suffered under new police oppression, São Paulo funk artists and producers filled the vacuum with “ostentatious funk,” funk music about money, partying and girls. The scene also had its own music video producer, Konrad Dantas, also known as Kondzilla. Kondzilla has the largest youtube in the world with 50 million subscribers. 2017’s Bum Bum Tan Tan, a Kondzilla-produced joint that even garnered an international remix, has more than 1 billion views on Youtube.

<https://soundcloud.com/carlos-palombini/tamborzao-puro>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mncSPAhiOeU>

Once the Olympic Flame was extinguished, the city of Rio entered a freefall. The state went bankrupt, unable to even pay the police. The “pacification” projects left most of the *favelas* they had entered just seven years earlier. Violence crept up to pre-megaevent levels. In other words, Rio de Janeiro was returning to its old self.

This created the perfect opening for funk music’s three newest **phenomena**: DJ Renann da Penha, *Baile de Gaiola* and 150 BPM funk music.

At the end of 2016—summertime in Brazil—DJ’s Rennan da Penha and Iasmin Turbininha began to play funk music with an accelerated beat—150 BPM. Traditional Rio funk music had never gone beyond 130 beats per minute. This new fast funk music—created by DJ Polyvox—appealed to *passinho* dancers who wanted to show off their intricate footwork, and to young girls who wanted to practice *rebolando*—booty shaking.

Rennan started DJing a party at Gaiola bar in Penha, every Saturday. With its catchy name, fast beats and “pretty boy” DJ (Rennan), the party started to take over the entire street, often lasting until noon the next day. As the party grew, so did the local commerce. Dozens of tents sprang up selling vodka bottles and

energy drink mixers, cigarettes, branded *Baile de Gaiola* cups, ice, whatever. Like any electronic music party, sales of illicit substances in the community likely skyrocketed as well. The party even created an opportunity for aluminum can collectors, who made sure no can was left on the ground.

“As a funk dancer, this party was marvelous,” said Juliana Barreto da Silva, a popular funk dancer in Rio de Janeiro. “I never felt sleepy or tired. I just wanted to dance. There were numerous times where I stayed from 2 in the morning until 2 in the afternoon.”

And then came the music hits that elevated the party to mythic status. Tu Ta na Gaiola combined a slick melody with a fast beat.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= DKKwWAZnko>

Tu Ta Na Gaiola “You’re at the Birdcage”

Cheiro de lança do bom - It smells like good lança*

(ei tu 'ta na gaiola) - (hey you are at gaiola)

Cheiro de maconha boa - It smells like good pot

(ei tu 'ta na gaiola) - (hey you are at gaiola)

Varias piranha jogando - Many hoes throwing it

(ei tu 'ta na gaiola) - (hey you are at gaiola)

Os amigos faturando - Bros making money

(ei tu 'ta na gaiola) - (hey you are at gaiola)

Vem sentando na piroca - Come sit on my dick

(ei tu 'ta na gaiola) - Hey you are at gaiola

Sentando, entrando na pipoca - Sitting, getting my dick

*Lança refers to Lança perfume, an inhalant drug (made up of chemicals) that produces a brief high.

In 2018, Rennan’s 25th birthday fell on a Saturday in July, and birthdays are important, celebrated events in Brazil. Brazilians really love birthday parties! His attracted more than 40,000 people and lasted until 4pm on Sunday, angering some locals. Complaints about the party were so widespread that even the newspaper reported about Rennan’s birthday party.

“Imagine people wanting to sleep.. absurd! I go to the BRT to get to work, and it looked like a zombie apocalypse. Young kids totally drugged out, drunk and hopeless,” said a social media post that the paper **reported**.

This legendary party helped DJ Rennan to secure his status as the **preeminent** funk DJ in Brazil. Twenty-four year old Rennan crisscrossed the country DJing funk music. **Typically**, all successful **Black** men chase after blond South Zone girls **to prove their 'arrival'**, but Rennan showed off his **Black** girlfriend on instagram. He even took her on exotic trips to Cancun, Egypt and Colombia.

Rio's funk DJ's basked in his shine. On weekends, DJs like [DJ FP do Trem Bala](#), [DJ Zullu](#)—Rennan included—played three to four parties per night. Funk parties blossomed again in *favelas* like City of God and Chapadão. Cities across Brazil held their own *Baile de Gaiola* parties, sometimes with Rennan da Penha. But often not.

INSERT QUOTE FROM WOMAN

Even Rio de Janeiro's conservative evangelical mayor couldn't deny the power of the moment and signed a decree to establish a cultural development program supporting traditional "*carioca*" funk.

"Funk is a cultural movement in this city that deserves to not only be recognized but also strengthened," said Nilcemar Nogueira, then Rio de Janeiro's Secretary of Culture.

Brazil and Rio de Janeiro changed dramatically in the last six months of 2018. Solidifying its hard right-wing turn, the country elected Jair Bolsonaro as President. Bolsonaro campaigned on a "family first" platform in which he declared that "a good thug is a dead thug." Rio de Janeiro elected a reactionary governor who openly admitted to wanting to drop bombs on *favelas*.

Meanwhile, by February 2019, *Baile de Gaiola* funk songs had become the undisputed carnival hits. In Brazil, this is the ultimate test of music popularity—to have your songs repeatedly played throughout **the six-day** bacchanalia. These were the songs that made any crowd—black, white, rich, poor—go crazy. Brass bands played instrumental versions. White DJ's played the songs at VIP parties during the samba parade.

Although the police had clearly benefited (through bribes of course) the party for the last two years, the new governor wanted to shut down all funk parties. *Baile de Gaiola*—the biggest funk party in Brazil—was an easy target. On Saturday, February 16, police entered the *favela* to close down the funk party. Four residents were shot and injured. Just after carnival early on Sunday morning, gunshots interrupted a slam poetry reading that was being held on the party's main stage.

<https://www.facebook.com/alexdoterceirodistrito/videos/304645153567513/>

By early March, *Baile de Gaiola* was on life support.

Next up was DJ Rennan da Penha.

In 2015, police had jailed DJ Rennan for "association" with drug trafficking and participating in events promoted by "criminals" in the *favelas*. But the judge found him **not guilty** because of a lack of evidence. He was subsequently released from jail.

In what seemed like perfect timing, at the end of March 2019, right after Carnival, a chief judge ruled that Rennan da Penha was complicit with drug traffickers and ordered him to prison for six years and eight months. This powerful judge made this decision without hearing any testimony.

The charge claimed that he acted as an eye for drug traffickers when police entered the *favela*, sending them WhatsApp messages. This is a common practice among residents of any *favela* because when police enter, violence follows.

From the perspective of someone who grew up in a *favela*, the charge against Renan made no sense. Everyone knows each other in these tight-knit communities, so anyone can be accused of association

with a “criminal.” Rennan is a funk DJ, but he grew up with the kid who became a drug dealer. And no funk DJ can throw a party without the explicit “blessing” of the area’s ruling factions.

Black and *favela* activists called the persecution of Rennan exactly what it was—racism.

“Privileged people do not like to see a black man from the *favela* on top,” said Raul Santiago, an activist from the Complexo de Alemão community. “Rennan da Penha, who bears the name of the Complex where he grew up, has occupied all media spaces positively, taking the *favela* with him and the strengthening of a part of the culture here, which is FUNK, placing it at the top of the charts,” said Raul Santiago, a community leader from Complexo de Alemão. “This is the same young man who is now on the pages of newspapers, pursued precisely for expanding the name of one of the slums across the country. Being one of those responsible for raising the FUNK 150 bpm to the world; criminalized, for earning fame and money, not from the stereotypes that racist society puts on those who live in the slums.”

A group of activists also launched a social media campaign—#deixaedancar—(ht)letmedance. The website explains why Rennan’s sentence is racist. <https://www.deixaedancar.org>.

“This has always happened to us funk people, Blacks, and *favela* residents. We’re being followed, persecuted, hunted, maligned, arrested and killed all the time, and no one does anything. Do you know what our crime is? Making money talking about the reality of the *favela*, for being Black,” wrote MC Carol on her Facebook.

Right after Rennan was ordered to prison, Circo Voador, Rio’s popular live music venue in the famed Lapa district, held a funk-in, where activists railed against the persecution of funk music.

Before turning himself in, Rennan, visibly shaken as if he had been crying, posted a video on his social media platforms:

“I’m a father of two daughters. I wasn’t born for this. I’m a hard-worker. I went to jail once and I didn’t want to return. I want to thank everyone who loved my work, the LGBT community, my lawyers, the DJs and producers who liked my work. Thank you.”

Although I haven’t attended a Baile Funk party since last year, I can still see and hear the remnants of DJ Rennan’s two-year domination. One time I was at a folklore fair in Rio de Janeiro and a sertanejo (Brazilian country music) band started playing a live version of Tu Ta na Gaiola. The crowd went crazy. Some clubs in Rio’s downtown Lapa district still even have *Baile de Gaiola* parties.

At the end of September, Brazil’s Supreme Court denied a request for Rennan to be released because of unlawful imprisonment. On September 24, Rennan received a Latin Grammy nomination for a song that he produced for Nego do Borel, “Me Solta.”

White musicians can play their Brazilian country version of the songs that made the *Baile de Gaiola* popular. And white Brazilians can still attend *Baile de Gaiola* nightclub parties in downtown Rio. But Rennan da Penha, a Black man who created and led the fleeting cultural movement he named “The Birdcage Ball”, sits in an actual steel cage in the remote western outskirts of Rio de Janeiro.