



BIRUNO QUADROS

→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

CARLINHOS BROWN

Alex Robinson on the innovative and influential Brazilian musician who is still relatively unknown in the English-speaking world

remember the first time I heard Carlinhos Brown. It was his masterpiece, *Alfagamabetizado* (1997), which begins with a breathy woman's voice oozing out of the speakers seductively mouthing a series of Greek letters over snivelling violins. Then a bomb bursts with staccato percussion – a sonic rainbow of Bahian brilliance. I had never heard anything like it before, and the album remains an all-time favourite.

Years later I met Brown himself, in his purpose-built studio-cum-community centre in the Candeal *favela* in Salvador, Brazil. He was as intense, colourful and vibrant as his music. He arrived in a huge hat and with an entourage of musicians, personal PR people and kids from the community, and ushered me past a polished black Cadillac, parked in a spiral of colour in his back yard and into his studio. The interview was bizarre and brilliant. Every question I asked elicited a prolix response in which Brown journeyed through

myriad subjects, all of them fascinating.

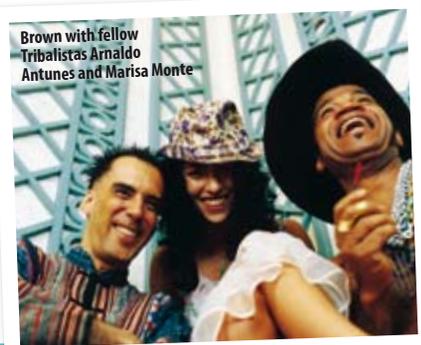
Carlinhos Brown was born Antônio Carlos Santos de Freitas, poor and black in Bahia, a state just below the breast of Brazil. Bahia is nominally Brazil's African heart. But it is also perhaps its most racist state, and in the 70s when Carlinhos was a teenager, it was even more so. African culture was marginalised. The black majority were not represented in local government. They remained poor, ignored and to the tiny white elite, an

embarrassing irrelevance, whose culture was anachronistic and artistically insignificant. Carlinhos worked as an office boy by day and a musician by night, mastering tambourine and the panoply of Brazilian percussion instruments by the age of 11. As he began to gig more frequently, he took a stage name, in homage to James Brown – who had helped to bring African-American culture to the forefront of American life – and H Rap Brown, an African-American civil rights leader, Black Panther and chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Music became, for young Carlinhos, a form of establishing his identity and a connection with an African Brazilian heritage as old as Africa.

"In the US," he told me, "African memory and African-American identity was preserved and consolidated through the written word. Slaves were not permitted to play African music on the plantations. Here in Brazil it was different. We preserved our memories of Africa through ritual and rhythm."

After earning his stripes as a session musician and composer in the 80s, on discs by the likes of João Gilberto, Djavan and João Bosco, Brown launched a solo career. It was the beginning of a lifelong project to raise the status of contemporary African-Brazilian music within Brazil and the world as a whole and break with *tropicália* and MPB (Brazilian Popular Music) and what he saw as the elite music of the Brazilian past.

'We don't do what has already been done... We are an organic and complex generation,' he recently commented in an



interview in Brazil. 'When we try and differentiate ourselves (from the musical past), people say we are too modern – there are huge commercial interests at stake, worth millions. But we are living now we don't make music for the sake of it. Our reality as musicians is different, we want to communicate directly with people who do not have some kind of privileged access.'

In the late 80s and early 90s, Caetano Veloso and a series of other high-profile artists recorded a string of cover versions of Brown's songs, and Sergio Mendes invited Brown to compose most of his new CD, *Brasileiro*. Both were big hits respectively in Brazil and abroad, giving Brown the financial security to realise a plan close to his heart – the founding of a community project in his Candeal favela. He formed a commercial pop band, Timbalada, made up of children and young people from Candeal, who were trained as percussionists by Brown, and who began to play at Salvador carnival. Five thousand favela kids have since passed through Timbalada and gone on to find employment elsewhere and the band has recorded some ten albums.

Brown also released his first solo album, *Alfagamabetizado*. The title was a play on the Brazilian word for illiterate (*analfabeto*). Brown has admitted to being literally semi-illiterate. 'Alfagamabetizado is a rejection of the idea of illiteracy', he said in an interview in 1996. 'I for example do not accept that I am illiterate... with the title of this record, I am trying to suggest that the world is a great classroom.' The 'Alfagamabetizados' he went on to explain are the new literate, not the bookish old literate – a global tribe united by the media of music, the internet and television.

The record was a huge success, especially in Spain where Brown now plays annually to audiences of more than a million in a recreated Bahian carnival. The musician followed it with a string of others. These

included *Tribalistas*, recorded in 2002 [reviewed in #21] with Arnaldo Antunes (of Brazilian super-group Titãs), and Carioca singer Marisa Monte.

As he became more successful, Brown became increasingly outspoken – about corruption in the music industry and the lack of opportunities given to young, poor Bahians. He also became more politically active, initiating a string of social projects in Salvador, ploughing his profits into a new venture, Pracatum Ação Social, which seeks to provide professional training to favela communities – not just as musicians, but in fashion, dress-making, languages, capoeira, dance and African-Brazilian history and culture. Last year Brown opened the *Museu do Ritmo*, a stunning new concert hall and museum of African-Brazilian music in a

It was the beginning of a lifelong project to raise the status of contemporary African-Brazilian music within Brazil

converted colonial mansion in central Salvador [see News story in #66].

Carlinhos Brown has been praised by international organs like UNESCO for his social work and in 2008 was awarded a '12 Months, 12 Causes' award from Spain's biggest broadcaster, Telecinco. But whilst his opinions and social work have earned him respect from the city's local government, they have won him few favours or support from Bahia's entrenched and powerful white economic elite. And whilst 70s Rio funk continues to define Brazilian music in the minds of many Britons, Carlinhos Brown's modern, resolutely African-Brazilian global music remains mysteriously almost unknown to the English-speaking world. ●

BEST...

...ALBUMS



Alfagamabetizado (Virgin France, 1997)
Carlinhos Brown has yet to better his explosive, original first release. The

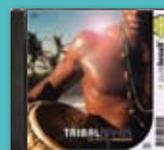
record is one of the landmarks of modern Brazilian music. Every track is a gem from the lyrical 'Covered Saints' and 'Argila' to the pounding rhythms of 'Bog La Bag' and catchy refrains of 'Namorada.'



Tribalistas (EMI, 2002)
Recorded in less than two weeks, this record was one of the biggest hits of 2002 and the

winner of several Latin Grammys. It offers a light, easily accessible introduction to Carlinhos Brown, together with Marisa Monte and Arnaldo Antunes.

...COMPILATION



Timbalada, Pure Brazil: Tribal Bahia (Universal Music 2004)
This 'Best Of' is a decent compilation of

Timbalada's commercial carnival music, and is one of the few of their records available outside Brazil.

...AVOIDED



Omelette Man (Blue Note, 1998)
Pleasant and poppy, but disappointing as a follow-up to the

wonderful *Alfagamabetizado*.

IF YOU LIKE CARLINHOS BROWN, THEN TRY...

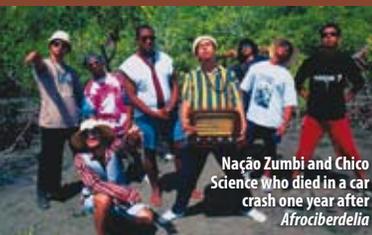
NAÇÃO ZUMBI



Afrociberdelia (Tangara, 1996)

The first great *mangue beat* album from the Pernambuco pioneers.

Contemporaneous with early Carlinhos Brown and as surprising, energetic and original.



Nação Zumbi and Chico Science who died in a car crash one year after *Afrociberdelia*

Carlinhos Brown, who over the years has become increasingly outspoken and political, has been praised by international organisations like UNESCO for his social work

