

Lorraine Leu  
University of Bristol

## MUSIC AND NATIONAL CULTURE: POP MUSIC AND RESISTANCE IN BRAZIL

*“Aprender a ... ouvir rádio e assistir TV com certa malícia. Aprender a captar mensagens indiretas e intenções ocultas em tudo o que você vê e ouve. Não vá se divertir muito com o jogo daqueles que pensam que são mais inteligentes do que você e estão tentando fazer você de bobo com um simples jogo de palavras.”*

In the late 1960s Brazil was experiencing a boom in its television and record industries, as part of the so-called “Economic Miracle” (1968 - 74) brought about by the military dictatorship’s opening up of the market to international capital.<sup>2</sup> Censorship was introduced more or less simultaneously and responded in part to the military’s recognition of the potential power of the audio-visual media in a country in which over half of the population was illiterate or semi-literate. After the 1964 coup and until the infamous 5<sup>th</sup> Institutional Act (AI-5), introduced in 1968 to silence opposition to the regime, the left wing cultural production that had characterised the period under the government of the deposed populist president, João Goulart, had continued to flourish. Until 1968, the military had largely left the cultural scene alone to face up to the failure of its revolutionary political and cultural projects. Instead the generals focused on the brutal repression of student, trade union and grassroots activists who had collaborated with the cultural left, thus effectively depriving these artists of their public.

Chico Buarque, one of the most censored performers of the period, maintains that at this moment he was saved from retreating into an introspective formalism in his songs and musical dramas by the emergence in 1965 of the televised music festivals, which became one of the most talked about events in the country (Buarque, 1979, 48). Sponsored by the television stations, which were themselves closely monitored and regulated by the government, the festivals still provided oppositional songwriters with an opportunity to re-

---

<sup>1</sup> From an anti-communist manual issued by the military regime urging vigilance from Brazilian citizens. Quoted in Magalhães, 1997, 211.

<sup>2</sup> In 1960 only 9.5% of urban homes possessed a television set, but by 1970 the figure had increased to 40%. This level of growth was stimulated by government incentives and massive investment after 1964, when the Military sought to develop a modern communications network which would support its programme of centralised authoritarianism. Skidmore, 1988, 111. In the phonographic industry, the sale of records rose by 813% between 1967 and 1980, five years before the end of military rule. (Araújo, 2003, 19).

connect with a public which had expanded due to television and to make interventions into this enlarged cultural arena. The festivals played a significant role in the development of MPB (Música Popular Brasileira), as the body of music produced in response to the re-thinking of Brazilian identity after the coup became known. The role of the songwriter at this time was also enhanced by the move away from the revolutionary poetry produced during the Goulart government. It was felt that the performing arts would be better able to reach out to the public and respond to the needs of the political moment. As a result, song writing and performance became intensely politicised counter-cultural activities. The festival stage became a battle-ground, with the battle being played out around divergent identitarian claims made for the nation.

The military had initiated an intense nationalist campaign, based on a combination of highly moralistic, conservative family values with a modernising project based on “savage capitalism”. In response, the cultural left became further entrenched in its own nationalist ideology, which had been forged before 1964 and inspired by popular cultural traditions. The left’s rejection of the military’s modernisation drive, and of the internationalisation of Brazilian society and culture that accompanied it, also included a wholesale rejection of foreign influences in Brazilian popular music. Aesthetic choices were thus collapsed into political choices and festival audiences felt that they could take an oppositional stance to the regime by supporting entries based on traditional instrumentation and vocals, with coded, politically committed lyrics. This limited outlet for the expression of political opinion took on an acute intensity, to the extent that the festival public (constituted primarily of university students and the middle class left) was soon effectively policing these events, by vociferously and aggressively rejecting those songs that departed from the accepted practices of *canção de protesto*.

The fans were harsh critics, on one occasion even directing their ire at Chico Buarque, one of the cultural scene’s most prominent opposition figures. Buarque’s ongoing struggles to “driblar a censura” had produced a particular tactic of contestation that one cultural commentator would later describe as the “linguagem da fresta”, a type of lyricism operating in between the gaps of officially sanctioned cultural expression (Vasconcellos, 1977). This was evident in early songs like “Apesar de você”, a samba disguised as a diatribe against a former lover: “Quando chegar o momento/ Esse meu sofrimento/ Eu cobrar com juro, juro/ Todo esse amor reprimido/ Esse grito contido/ Este samba no escuro” (*Chico 50 anos: o político*, 1991). In later songs the “linguagem da fresta” becomes a sophisticated and masterly manipulation of musical and verbal structures, such as in “Construção”, which suggests the human cost of the military’s economic miracle, beginning to reach its peak when the song was released in 1971. The lyrics of Buarque’s entry for TV Globo’s 3<sup>rd</sup> International Song Festival in 1968, “Sabá”, a lament for a lost homeland inspired by Gonçalves Dias’s 19<sup>th</sup> century poem, “Canção do exílio”, was, however, considered by the crowd as too subtle in its critique. Their preferred choice for festival winner was “Caminhando” a protest anthem with a dirge-like rhythm and lyrics that spoke of universal suffering and solidarity. Its writer, Geraldo Vandré, was compelled to appeal to the crowd to show respect to Buarque and his co-writer Tom Jobim and to remind them of the limitations of the festivals. Vandré’s declaration to the crowd that “A vida não se resume em festivais”, reflected a disquieting sense that the public was more concerned with the

ideological battles of the festival space than with the real political confrontations taking place in the streets at the time (Treece, 1997, 27).

The near fanatical reception characteristic of the festivals naturally had a marked effect on song writing practice, as political concerns began to take priority over aesthetic values. Simultaneously, however, a group of songwriters and performers originating in the northeast of the country, in particular the state of Bahia, was attempting to raise an oppositional voice to the military dictatorship which was also ranged against the dominant version of cultural nationalism espoused by the left. They were following developments in cinema, theatre and the plastic arts initiated by Glauber Rocha's film *Terra em Transe* (*Land in Anguish*) [1967], which did not spare artists of the left and populist politics from its critique of contemporary Brazil, and had encouraged an aggressive approach to cultural production which came to be described as "Tropicalist", after an installation by the artist Hélio Oiticica. The Northeasterners, who adopted the name "Tropicália" for their musical movement, sought to introduce new issues into the debate and dispute over the national question. Tropicália aimed to attack the ideological stamp which MPB had acquired and formulate its own critique of authoritarianism; revive the importance of aesthetics in the production and reception of popular music; and re-think Brazilian national identity without ignoring the changes that had been brought about by modernisation and internationalisation.

Tropicália's attempts to resist the political and cultural hegemonies of both the right and the left led them to emphasise individual responses to social and political conditions. In practice, this meant challenging ready-made ideologies and musical conventions in virtually all aspects of their song performance. For example, Gilberto Gil's combination of the Northeastern *baião* with rock in the song manifesto, "Geléia Geral", with lyrics by the poet Torquato Neto which cited many of the commonplace images of Brazil and re-signified them by placing them alongside symbols of contemporary society and culture; the Tropicalist choice of instrumentation - juxtaposing the *berimbau* with the electric guitar, which was introduced to the festival stage by Gil and considered as cultural-political heresy at the time; their style of dress, combining hippie outfits with Afro-Brazilian traditional garb, Black Power Afros and *macumba* beads with futuristic space cadet suits; their provocative live performances, inspired by the "happenings" then occurring in the plastic arts and the radical "theatre of violence", which sought to encourage critical exchanges with the public. The most notorious Tropicalist happening was perhaps Caetano Veloso's attack on the crowd at the semi-finals of the 1968 TV Globo festival, in which he accused them of "wanting to police Brazilian music" and compared the bullying tactics of the left to right wing paramilitary authoritarianism. Veloso's performances and personal style, in particular, which often relied on a highly ambiguous presentation of his sexuality, represented an assault on the conservative morality of the military and its supporters.

The Tropicalists also intervened into the dispute over the "popular" in Brazilian music that was closely tied to issues surrounding national identity. They re-valourised forms of popular culture that were previously derided by high culture and the cultural left and not admitted into representations of Brazilian identity. Their appearances with rock singers like Roberto Carlos, perceived by the left as politically alienated, and on the hit programmes of the unashamedly kitsch television host, Chacrinha, represented a validation of public tastes and a resistance to official or intellectualised taste cultures, as well as emphasising the

right to personal choice. In fact, Tropicalist identity politics was very much based on the politics of choice - of pluralism over authoritarianism in any form, whether articulated through musical tastes, personal style or sexuality. The discourse of social revolution had that dominated music making of the left before 1964 and that had become more coded and camouflaged due to censorship after the coup, was not as prominent in Tropicalist music production. Instead, the Tropicalists were more concerned with initiating a musical revolution - a radical re-working of musical, lyrical and performing conventions - that would compel a process of questioning of the ideologies which upheld consecrated cultural practices (Leu, 2006).

Gil and Veloso were among a number of MPB performers forced into periods of exile by the early 1970s, a moment which coincided with the decline of the festivals as a space for political contestation, as the government moved to regulate these events more closely (Stroud, 2000, 89-90). Clashes with the censors continued for those oppositional songwriters who remained in the country, while exiled songwriters resumed these battles on their return to Brazil. Cultural criticism and musical historiography have tended to focus on the 1970s in terms of the military's success in repressing the overt oppositional politics of MPB. However, outside of the arena of MPB, with its largely middle class public, different forms of politics and different kinds of contestation which *Tropicália* had hinted at still flourished. A recently published, detailed and important piece of research into *música popular cafona*, the kitsch romantic music much loved by the popular classes, criticises the dominance of MPB in musicological analysis and in the social memory of resistance to the dictatorship (Araújo, 2002).<sup>3</sup> Paulo Cesar de Araújo's study shows how the writers of these ballads, boleros and sambas articulated opposition to authoritarianism and social exclusion from the most deprived sectors of society, suffering censorship and repression like their MPB contemporaries.

A similarly in-depth study is yet to be undertaken on the production and reception of what the press dubbed the Black Rio music scene, which existed during the most repressive period of the dictatorship. Black Rio developed around large dances that were held in the Zona Norte of the city, where black Brazilians would go to hear US soul and funk music. Michael Hanchard has pointed out that Black Rio offered the first opportunity for a collective definition of black identity with a point of reference outside of Brazil (1998, 113). It was, therefore, not a form of cultural expression which could be appropriated to represent the national and easily consumed by all. Additionally, the adoption of American soul and funk can be seen as a tactic for eluding the censors, as imported records with lyrics in English were subject to less scrutiny. The Brazilian soul scene was attacked and derided by the state and diverse sectors of society, including left wing intellectuals, for its perceived foreignness, lack of "authenticity" and commercialism. Black Rio (and later, Black São Paulo) clearly flouted conventional notions of the national-popular and was accused of political alienation and cultural colonialism (Vianna, 1988, 28). In press interviews and in the Brazilianised soul and funk songs with lyrics in Portuguese that were played alongside the American imports, performers tried to play down any radical political messages in their music. This did not stop the military from branding some exponents of Brazilian soul as communists with links to clandestine groups and subjecting them to surveillance and harassment.

---

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Sean Stroud for a copy of this book.

In fact, although not overtly political, Black Rio's assertion of racial identity and black pride in a country that still clung to its self-perception as a racial democracy, and in which the military had banned any references to racial discord, was seen as a potential threat. Songs like "Mandamentos Black", by Gerson King Combo (who modelled himself on James Brown), called for blacks to articulate their ethnic identity through distinct cultural and social practices: "dançar como dança um bleque/ amar como ama um bleque/ andar como anda um bleque/ usar sempre o cumprimento bleque/ falar como fala um bleque/ ...viver sempre na onda bleque/ ter orgulho de ser bleque". However, in the face of persecution by the state and accusations of advocating racial hatred, even by those sections of the middle classes and the elites who opposed the dictatorship, they stopped short of militancy: "...os bleques não querem ofender ninguém/ ...saber que a cor branca, brother/ é a cor da bandeira da paz, da pureza/ ...e eu te amo também, brother" (*Gerson King Combo, 1977*). King's assertion that blacks "just want to dance and have a good time with the beat" is a sentiment that is echoed in other soul songs of the period. Black Rio's adoption of a politics of pleasure - based on the release and display of the dancing body, with Afro hairstyles and flamboyant styles of dress which acted as markers of ethnicity - was its way of disrupting the racial status quo that required social invisibility from the black population. In addition, the dances provided an important space for black Brazilians to congregate and experience a sense of belonging based on racial identification, as one young, female soul fan described: "Numa festa soul eu me sinto muito feliz, livre. Não pela música, mas por ter muito negro junto, entende?" (Quoted in Frias, 1976, 6). This sparked fear in the state and dominant social groups (with one contemporary chronicler even describing the revelry of soul dancers as a national security issue), as the dancers were also exposed to images of the US black power movement in the slide shows projected during the dances and leafleted by the black social movements active at the time.

Brazilian soul was unable to survive state repression, the takeover of the scene by white club owners from the middle-class Zona Sul and the rise of disco - which offered an alternative body politics not tied exclusively to race. However, the tactic of looking outside of Brazil for a musical style to question Brazilian race relations would be taken much further in the post dictatorship period by Brazilian rap artists. The country's return to democracy had been characterised by a process of negotiation with the military that excluded popular participation and marginalised the left, which meant that tackling social injustice did not appear high on the list of priorities of the new government. In this context, when questions of social inequity were being sidelined from political discussion, rap was particularly significant in giving prominence to the issue of racial prejudice. It represented the first overt challenge from the cultural scene to the national myth of racial democracy that has played a part in suppressing coherent and sustained political organisation among the black population. One of the first groups to focus national attention on the issue of racial prejudice was the Racionais MCs from the deprived *periferia* of São Paulo. The song "Capítulo 4, Versículo 3" on their 1998 album, *Sobrevivendo o Inferno*, opens with a denunciation that sets the agenda very clearly:

60% dos jovens de periferia sem antecedentes criminais já sofreram violência policial. A cada 4 pessoas mortas pela polícia, 3 são negras. Nas

universidades brasileiras apenas 2% dos alunos são negros. A cada 4 horas um jovem negro morre violentamente em São Paulo. Aqui quem fala é Primo Preto, mais um sobrevivente.

Another telling fact not mentioned in this monologue is that the majority of Brazil's prison population is black. Unequal access to education and continued discrimination suffered in the job market, even by those who have managed to attain a considerable level of education and skills, make criminal activity one of a limited range of options for many Brazilian blacks. A whole sub-genre of rap that denounces such discrimination emerged from the notorious, now destroyed Carandiru prison in São Paulo, represented by groups like the Detentos do Rap and 509-E.

Rap has made Brazilian blacks much more visible on the cultural scene on their own terms. It offers Brazilian blacks forms of self-representation that are not mediated in the ways that samba came to be during the process of appropriation and national valorisation under Getúlio Vargas's Estado Novo (1937-45). Rap is being used to emphasise ethnic difference and to completely reject the ideology of *mestiçagem* established during the Estado Novo, through which Brazil traditionally imagined itself. Rappers also reject the idea of a national community by placing great importance on articulating local, community identities, and their songs and CD acknowledgements constitute a comprehensive list of everyone they believe to form part of their local hip hop scene, naming neighbourhoods, local community organisations, fans and supporters.

This emphasis on the local and the international as a means of contesting the national was to be taken up in the late 1990s by the mangue beat movement originating in the Northeastern state of Pernambuco. A combination of severe, periodic droughts, landlessness and government neglect has meant successive waves of migration from the region's hinterland towards the south of the country. The state's capital city of Recife has been subject to the kind of uneven processes of modernisation that produce huge social contrasts and inequalities. Mangue beat sought to challenge the legitimacy of national discourses based on narratives of progress, by highlighting these inequities, as well as the persistence of the pre-modern in late 20<sup>th</sup> century Northeastern society. Culturally, some Pernambucan musical and dramatic forms brought over by the Portuguese date back to medieval times. They endure, hybridised with African and indigenous traditions, due to the region's isolation from the national developmentalist thrust. Mangue beat set about revitalising those traditions and creating a dialogue between them and the transnational mass culture and modern technologies that globalisation had made a part of everyday life in the city of Recife.

The movement's manifesto was launched on the Internet and was written by the two unofficial leaders of mangue beat, Chico Science and Fred Zeroquatro, leaders of the bands Nação Zumbi and Mundo Livre S/A respectively. It de-centred the reference points for cultural identities away from Rio de Janeiro, citing influences as diverse as rap, John Coltrane, Northeastern popular culture, the graphic arts and cyber space. The manifesto made clear the movement's intention to utilise global mass culture to stimulate the promotion of local difference and local identities in mangue beat music. On one hand, the mangrove swamps of Recife, which give the movement its name, located mangue beat in a very specific place. The movement's musical practice was informed by Northeastern musical forms and performing traditions, such as

*embolada*, *maracatu*, *coco-de-roda* and *ciranda*, played on instruments traditionally used in Northeastern music, such as the *rabeca* and the *sanfona*, and with a thematic treatment of regional society and culture in its lyrics. However, the swamps were also symbolic of the movement's shifting spaces of identification, and it brought local cultural forms into contact with global culture in order to defy fixity of place and identity. This de-stabilised any notion of homogeneity with regard to the national, but also as regards the local identities that the movement itself articulates, as in Mundo Livre's "O Mistério do Samba". The song mixes samba with bossa nova (the latter a genre whose jazz influences provoked much debate about its "authenticity" in the late 1950s and early 1960s) and disenchant essentialist notions of identity in samba: "O samba não é carioca, o samba não é baiano, o samba não é do terreiro.../ o samba não é do salão.../ Como reza toda tradição/ É tudo uma grande invenção" (*Por Pouco*, 1998).

The politics of songwriters like Fred Zeroquatro is based on a recognition of the contradictory nature of identities that enables him to speak from different places at different times. Zeroquatro can therefore position himself in a peripheral, local space, while simultaneously making use of the culture and technology of the global to denounce the effects of "globalised speculation", "financial genocide" and "neoimperialism" (liner notes, 1998), and to speak out in support of Brazil's indigenous population, the Movimento Sem Terra and the Zapatista movement. Zeroquatro's political concerns and his musical experimentation mean that he often falls foul of the large, multinational record companies that are a product of globalisation. Mundo Livre's most recent album (2003), the band's most experimental and explicitly political to date, was published with the independent Recife label, Candeeiro, and the band has since stated that their next album is likely to be available solely via downloads from the Internet. The album was conceptualised by Zeroquatro (the death of the prodigiously talented Chico Science in 1997 left Zeroquatro as manguê beat's key ideologue) as an attack on a contemporary Brazilian pop music scene that is primarily aimed at "acumular capital para grandes empresas" (Quoted in Sanches, 2003, E9). The album does not retain as much of the mix of samba, bossa nova, rap, *eletrônica* and Pernambucan traditional music that characterised the band's previous output. Instead, the use of many spoken passages, journalistic techniques and samples from interviews (Zeroquatro trained as a journalist) led one critic to describe the album as non-musical (Sanches, 2003, E9). While critics generally found the album politically and socially important, some believed that it is more political pamphlet than pop music.

This brings us back to our starting point with the music festivals of the 1960s. By the late sixties, under pressure from the festival public and in its attempts to provide an oppositional voice to the dictatorship, protest song had reached a point when political considerations took precedence over aesthetics, and pop was close to becoming propaganda. Its ideologies and forms of musical practice were becoming hegemonic, as the music scene's only acceptable form of contestatory politics. Popular music treads dangerous ground when it attempts to control or regulate political agendas and forms of dissent. To do so, as Susan McClary has observed, is to ignore a broader and crucially important aspect of the politics of music, as a site for imagining and fashioning diverse, sometimes competing notions of the self that are potentially threatening or disruptive to the status quo (1994, 31).

To examine some key moments of resistance in Brazilian pop music history is, therefore, to consider how alternative identities proliferated and different oppositional positions were occupied with regard to official or dominant cultural forms and discourses. By mentioning here some of the systems of identification that have made popular music a terrain for contesting hegemonic ideas, it will have become clear that popular music can express political dissent through many aspects of its production and reception. Broadly speaking, the performing space can be politicised by lyrical content that registers social protest; through the use of new or alternative musical styles that challenge conventions and value judgements; through the body and the experience of pleasure; or through attempts to preserve creative autonomy in the context of the recording industry. These forms of resistance should not be evaluated in terms of overall success or failure with regard to stated, or unstated aims. Much more interesting and revealing are the meanings of these struggles for listeners, and the continuous, complex processes of negotiation of political and social conditions, which make the field of culture, in Stuart Hall's words, "A battlefield where no once-for-all victories are obtained, but where there are always strategic positions to be won and lost" (1981, 234).

#### Works cited

- Araújo, Pedro Cesar de. *Eu não sou cachorro não: música popular cafona e ditadura militar*. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2003.
- Buarque, Chico. "Confrontation with music", interview in *Index on Censorship*, Vol. 8/No.4, July/August (1979), 47-51.
- Chico 50 Anos: o político. Polygram. 522799-2. 1991.
- Combo, Gerson King. *Gerson King Combo*. 2451 093. Polydor. 1977.
- Frias, Lena. "Black Rio: o orgulho (importado) de ser negro no Brasil", *Jornal do Brasil*, Caderno B, 17-07-1976.
- Hanchard, Michael. *Orpheus and Power: the Movimento Negro of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, 1945-1988*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Hall, Stuart. "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular" in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, Ed. Raphael Samuel. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981. 227-40.
- Leu, Lorraine. *Brazilian Popular Music: Caetano Veloso and the Regeneration of Tradition*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006.
- Magalhães, Marionilde B. "A lógica da suspeição: sobre os aparelhos repressivos à época da ditadura militar no Brasil", *Revista Brasileira da História*, 17/34 (1997), 203-220.
- McClary, Susan. "Same as it Ever Was: Youth Culture and Music", in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 1994, 29-40.
- Mundo Livre S/A. *Por Pouco*. Abril Music. 1107038-2. 2000.
- O Outro Mundo de Manuela Rosário*. Candeeiro. CAN002-2. 2003.
- Racionais MCS. *Sobrevivendo o Inferno*. Cosa Nostra. ZA-001. 1998.
- Sanches, "Deu a louca no mundo", *Folha de São Paulo*, E9, 22-08-2003.



- Science, Chico & Zeroquatro, Fred. “Caranguejos com cérebro” (Manifesto do movimento manguê beat”),  
<http://www1uol.com.Brazilian/diversão/science7.htm>.
- Skidmore, Thomas. *The Politics of Military Rule in Brazil, 1964-1985*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Stroud, Sean. “Música é para o povo cantar’: Culture, Politics and the Brazilian Song Festivals, 1965-1972”, *Latin American Music Review*, 21.2 (2000): 87-117.
- Treece, David. “Guns and Roses: bossa nova and Brazil’s music of popular protest, 1958-1968”, *Popular Music*, 16.1 (1997), 1-29.
- Vasconcellos, Gilberto. *Música popular: de olho na fresta*. Rio de Janeiro: Graal, 1977.
- Vianna, Hermano. *O mundo funk carioca*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1988.