

How I finally saw Brazil

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Midwinter in Rio de Janeiro. It's late June, the temperature is a very agreeable 25°C (80°F) and the sun is shining in a cloudless ice-blue sky. Standing on the top of Corcovado mountain at the foot of the concrete Christ (actually an impressively austere deco sculpture clad in mosaic), looking around at the unsurpassable view, you have to admit there is no more beautifully positioned city in the entire world. Cape Town, San Francisco, Vancouver, Hong Kong or Sydney don't even come close. It helps to be this high, of course - even the *favelas* look picturesque. Down at ground level things turn a little bit more Miami Beach.

Until the end of the second world war, Rio was a splendid 19th century city with tree-lined boulevards, ornate apartment blocks and grand public buildings in the Parisian vein. Ruthless redevelopment in the 1950s and 60s has left few vestiges of the original urban plan. If they hadn't knocked almost everything down Rio would have easily outdone Buenos Aires for the "Paris of South America" title. No matter, Rio still has its own unique magic: the sheer, forested mountains surging up here and there, the vast bay and the ocean beaches more than compensate - and everything costs approximately one tenth the price of Europe.

I went to Rio this year to see the city and experience something of Brazil. Or should I say Brazilians. Rio is as much Brazil as New York is the US - it's almost impossible to grasp the vastness and diversity of the country. Yet something of Brazil's heterogeneity can be found in the city - its music. And here I have to confess to a long-term Brazilian obsession. Very early on in my writing career my books were published in Brazil and they continue to appear there regularly. But up until this year I had never managed a visit (for various frustrating reasons) and the measure of my frustration was expressed in a short story I wrote in 1996 called "Never Saw Brazil", in which a London mini-cab driver redeems his sad, shabby life through his love of Brazilian music. I too love Brazilian music and play it constantly. I love it in an uncomplicated, almost ignorant way. I listen with enthusiasm to the great singers and song writers of recent decades - Milton Nascimento, Elis Regina, Ivan Lins, Maria Bethania and so on - but as I don't speak Portuguese most of the content of the songs is lost to me: their potent allure becomes solely a question of rhythm and melody. So one of my ambitions when I went to Rio was to come to closer grips with Brazil's music. I decided I wanted the real thing. And the real thing had to be samba.

I made inquiries. Yes, you can hear authentic, wonderful samba in Rio but there is a problem. Most of the best clubs are in a district called Lapa - not a place for the innocent, music-loving tourist to venture alone. On this trip, however, I had a guide, who was not only a native of Rio (a "*carioca*"), an artist and an expert on the history and culture of the city but was also an accomplished musician. His name was Fabio Sombra. Over several days Fabio guided me safely through hidden and undiscovered Rio and he also educated me about samba. Thus, any pretensions to expertise in this account owe everything to him: I

just kept my ears open.

Lapa is in the centre of Rio and, up until fairly recently, was one of its most seedy and dangerous quarters. Perhaps because of its reputation it has been spared the developers' bulldozers and its streets are still lined with crumbling 19th-century houses and warehouses of that era. In the past few years, however, it has begun a slow regeneration: theatres and clubs have opened; the drinking dens, the transvestite prostitutes and drug-dealers are less in evidence. Lapa is becoming the place in Rio where you go to hear music.

I went on three separate nights to three extraordinary clubs. The first was the Centro Cultural Carioca. The club itself was in an enormous first floor room - a huge space that could happily accommodate 300 people. We were here to see Teresa Cristina, a new samba star - a singer - and her group, the Grupo Semente. Teresa Cristina - in her 20s - sings classic samba. As an introduction it was ideal because the Grupo Semente was a prototypical samba band. The instruments were heavy on percussion. A tambourine (forget all nursery school associations: in samba the tambourine is a dominant presence, played in an extemporised way you have never before witnessed), a small hand-drum, a big bass drum (the *surdo*) and a small conga drum. Then there is the *cavaquinho*, a tiny four-steel-stringed guitar that looks like a ukulele and which gives samba its inimitable melodic line, and, finally, a seven-string guitar. In a way this is all you need for a samba band. The assembled percussion produces a heavy, driving rhythm that is incredibly exciting, and above this, the icing on the percussive cake, you have the steely-shrill chords of the *cavaquinho* and the seven-string guitar providing a kind of rich semi-bass line. And then you have the singer's unique voice.

One factor that was quickly evident in samba is that there is no "attitude". Everybody dresses down. Even Teresa Cristina, a big emerging talent, does nothing pop-starry: she stands demurely at the microphone - wearing a dress, a frock - and sings. It's all about serious music-making. And dancing, of course. Almost everybody watching was dancing and some of them were amazing dancers.

Our second Lapa club, a few nights later, was the Café Musical Carioca da Gema. *Gema* means "yolk" - a slang expression loosely translated as "the genuine article". The night we were there it was hosting a scratch band of session musicians under the aegis of a middle-aged samba legend called Paulo Seite-Cordas - a world expert on the seven-string guitar. It was his evening and he'd invited a few friends along to play. The club was a fair-sized, 19th-century house. The main room, with a mezzanine, had exposed brick walls hung with semi-abstract paintings.

Somewhere there must have been a kitchen because you could order food (and drink) as you watched the show. Paulo's band had even more percussion. The now familiar *surdo*, two tambourine players, a mini conga and a small snare drum. The guest singer was Rhichah - a massive Barry White figure, perspiring copiously, dressed in a cream linen suit. Another classic samba instrument was in evidence this night: the *cuica*. A piece of wet cotton is rubbed on a stick, which is attached to the underside of a drum. This somehow produces the intermittent eek-eek-eek sound that you hear among the aggregate of samba rhythm effects. Apparently, it takes great skill to play the *cuica* properly. The conga player

would occasionally set aside his congas and pick up the *cuica*, drawing spontaneous applause. We were sitting very close to the band and I was aware of the palpable effect of the drums: you could feel the sound waves of the *surdo* reverberating through your body.

The third excursion was a perfect completion of my samba education. We went to a huge night club in Lapa - three floors, each opened up by a central atrium. By day it functions as a store for film production props, by night it transforms itself into a club called Rio Scenarium.

This is why you see 10 ancient bicycles hanging on the wall, three dozen bird cages, telephone booths, cabinets full of dolls and antique umbrellas, papier mâché dinosaurs, many, many varieties of chandeliers, and so on. The walls are lined with great floor-to-ceiling swags and swathes of blue and red PVC. Huge vases hold enormous bouquets of lurid plastic flowers. Each floor, thanks to the central atrium, has its own view of the stage on which the band plays. On a busy Friday night it can take hundreds of people (its success has prompted the owners to buy the derelict building next door - this is the future of Lapa). It costs about \$2 to get in. Fabio said this was a bit pricey for Rio.

In the event, the music we saw that night was sensational. We started off with a bossa nova band. Now, samba enthusiasts are contemptuous of bossa nova. They call it "samba-lite". It was a jazzy form of samba created for North American and European tastes by Joao Gilberto in the 1960s. In Brazil it is going out of favour with the resurgence of traditional samba (bossa nova is huge in Japan, intriguingly enough). The three-person band we saw was first class but, blooded now by real samba, I could sense immediately how bland and easy-listening the music was. And nobody was dancing. You chat while you listen to bossa nova. Samba urges you on to your feet.

The samba band that came on after the bossa novians, Nicolas Krassik, was named after its founder, a violin player (from France). This was a more eclectic samba band with elements of Bahian music from north-east Brazil (more African-influenced). There was an accordion player and a rare type of big drum called a *zabumba*. Apart from Krassik himself, the surprise was to find a young woman called Nilze on the *cavaquinho*. A child prodigy, she is a star in Brazil. Nilze sang, as did another girl, with a great deep, rich voice. The sound that Krassik produced was most unusual. This was modern samba: a classic samba foundation with new ingredients. With the violin and the accordion playing it could sound, from time to time, almost Celtic or bluegrass - as if country and western had travelled south to meet samba - but this note was endlessly counterposed by the familiar pounding rhythms of the *zabumba*, *surdo* and congas. Africa always dominated. Rhythm ruled.

After a two-hour set we went out into Lapa, ears ringing, stirred and exhilarated. It was late and Lapa was buzzing. In a square we saw the cheap liquor stalls plying their trade and the "cat" barbecues (nobody knows what the meat is) were sizzling away. Blazing neon lit the 24-hour car-repair shops and incredibly young prostitutes were beginning to gather on street corners. We wandered off to look for a taxi. I was already contemplating my next trip back to Rio, but the next time I plan to detour north as well - to Bahia. Now I've seen Brazil, I have to go back.

William Boyd's 'Fascination', a collection of short stories, was published this month in the UK by Hamish Hamilton at £16.99. He is also the author, among many other titles, of 'Any Human Heart', 'A Good Man in Africa' and 'An Ice-Cream War'

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