

CRITICAL BRASS

Street Carnival & Musical Activism in Olympic Rio de Janeiro

ANDREW SNYDER



Critical Brass

Andrew Snyder

CRITICAL BRASS

Street Carnival and Musical Activism
in Olympic Rio de Janeiro

Wesleyan University Press Middletown, Connecticut

Wesleyan University Press
Middletown CT 06459
www.wesleyan.edu/wespress
Text and photographs unless otherwise noted
© 2022 Andrew Graver Snyder
All rights reserved
Manufactured in the United States of America
Designed by Mindy Basinger Hill
Typeset in Minion Pro

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the AMS 75 PAYS
Fund of the American Musicological Society, supported in part
by the National Endowment for the Humanities
and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
available at <https://catalog.loc.gov/>
cloth | ISBN 978-0-8195-0018-2
paper | ISBN 978-0-8195-0019-9
e-book | ISBN 978-0-8195-0020-5

5 4 3 2 1

FOR MY DAUGHTER, INA MABEL ELEANOR BISSLER



FIGURE 0.1 Map of center and south zone of Rio de Janeiro.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Companion Website xiii

INTRODUCTION An Alternative Movement in an Olympic City 1

ONE Revival: The Death and Life of Street Carnival 34

TWO Experimentation: To Play Anything 67

THREE Inclusion: Whose Rio? 104

FOUR Resistance: Nothing Should Seem
Impossible to Change 141

FIVE Diversification: Neofanfarrismo of the Excluded 171

SIX Consolidation: The HONK RiO! Festival
of Activist Brass Bands 208

CONCLUSION Carnival Strike 237

APPENDIX Carioca Bands and Blocos
Discussed in the Book 245

Notes 247

Bibliography 267

Index 281

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The prospect that a growing, internationally connected brass band movement that seeks to claim public space, spread inclusive musical education, and militate for a different world even existed in Rio de Janeiro was far from my mind when I entered graduate school in 2010. A first trip to the city in June 2013 at the height of the momentous protests that were to alter the course of Brazilian history introduced me to some of the brass musicians who at the time were musically helping to mobilize the protests. They took me in as one of their own when I began fieldwork between 2014 and 2016 as well as during subsequent trips.

I first want to thank, therefore, the musicians whose creative work made my research possible and who inspired me to believe that it is indeed possible to change the world with music. I owe an invaluable debt to the brass ensembles in Rio de Janeiro, especially the ones with which I had the most engagement, including Cordão do Boitatá, Céu na Terra, Orquestra Voadora, Bagunço, Fanfarada, Damas de Ferro, Os Siderais, Favela Brass, and BlocAto do Nada. Special thanks to Juliano Pires and Clément Mombereau for providing various forms of access to the community. I wish to honor the memory of three young movement participants who left this world before this book was published, the second two of whom I interviewed: Pedro Dorigo, Chico Oliveira, and Bruno de Nicola. All the organizers of carnival brass blocos, brass bands, political actions, HONK! RiO, and all the HONK! and brass band festivals that are the subject of this book deserve thanks for doing what you do. The San Francisco Bay Area brass bands, who are linked in direct and indirect ways with the Brazilian scene, also gave me invaluable musical and political experiences. Thanks to all the musicians in the Brass Liberation Orchestra, Inspector Gadje, Extra Action Marching Band, East Bay Brass Band, Fanfare Zambaleta, and Mission Delirium.

Rio's brass musicians also helped me through the various challenges of living in the city. After a production meeting for the HONK RiO! brass band festival, for example, three local musicians and I were robbed by a drive-by car with four men armed with guns, and my trumpet was stolen along with other friends' valuables. The brass band community took it upon itself to throw events called "HONK! Aid," a reference to Live Aid, and busked in the streets to fundraise and help us with the costs of replacing stolen property. In this spirit of mutual aid, I, like other gringo musicians in the movement, have brought from the United States musical products, which are much more expensive in Brazil due to import taxes, including a sousaphone. But no amount of tubas or acknowledgment can equal the warm reception and invitations these musicians gave me.

My mentors in graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley, who helped bring the writing of the dissertation on which this book is based to fruition, all bear influence in these pages. My dissertation advisor, Jocelyne Guilbault, provided caring, thoughtful, and demanding attention throughout the research and writing process. My dissertation committee—Christopher Dunn, T. Carlis Roberts, and Angela Marino—also provided years of intellectual engagement and support. Other scholars at many points in the research and writing process supported the development of this project, including Carla Brunet, Peter Glazer, Geoffrey Lee, Elena Schneider, Bonnie Wade, Martin Stokes, Candace Slater, Ben Brinner, Matt Sakakeeny, Sean Bellaviti, Emily Allen, Maria Sonevytsky, James McNally, and Dan Sharp. Brazilian scholars too provided immense support and resources; many thanks especially to Samuel Araújo who welcomed me into the intellectual community of ethnomusicologists in Brazil. I was fortunate to have been financially supported by Berkeley's Music Department to undertake graduate studies, and the financial support of the John L. Simpson Memorial Research Fellowship, Brazilian Studies Association (BRASA), Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS), and Berkeley Dissertation Completion Fellowship also helped make this project possible.

The transformation from dissertation to book owes thanks to many others beyond my time at Berkeley. Many thanks to Suzanna Tamminen, Jeremy Wallach, Alan Berolzheimer, Jim Schley, the editorial board at Wesleyan University Press, and the anonymous reviewers who worked assiduously to improve this book. Feedback on presentations given at the Society of Ethnomusicology, the Latin American Studies Association, the International Association of Popular Music Studies, the Society of American Music, and other conferences trans-

formed my perspectives on the project. The responses of the editors and reviewers of the *Luso-Brazilian Review*, in which an earlier version of chapter two was published, and the *Latin American Musical Review*, in which an earlier version of chapter four was published, were vital in sharpening those book chapters. Related research not contained in this book was published in *Ethnomusicology*, the *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, and the *Journal of Festive Studies*, and those review processes also helped nuance the arguments in this book. My work with Reebee Garofalo and Erin Allen on our co-edited volume *HONK! A Street Band Renaissance of Music and Activism* helped produce vital perspectives on this project, as did my work with Brenda Romero, Susan Asai, David McDonald, and Katelyn Best on our co-edited volume *At the Crossroads of Music and Social Justice*. Looking further back, I am also extremely grateful to the faculty of Reed College—including David Schiff, Catherine Witt, Ginny Hancock, and Mark Burford—who gave me the tools to pursue ethnomusicology.

Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco's position as visiting professor at UC–Berkeley in the last semester of my graduate studies gave me new perspectives to think about the neofanfarrismo movement in relation to heritage that are also present in this book. She invited me to present my research at the Instituto de Etnomusicologia, of which she is the founder, at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa in Lisbon, Portugal. This trip led to a successful application for the postdoctoral position of Investigador Júnior, as a recipient of the Concurso Estímulo ao Emprego Científico Individual funded by Portugal's Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, at Lisbon's Instituto de Etnomusicologia beginning in 2020. This research position here in Lisbon has provided the time and focus to finish this book and embark on related and new research projects.

My last thanks goes to my family who support my eccentric endeavors. A multitude of thanks to my parents, Liz Bryant and George Snyder, and my “step-parents,” Peggy Hendrix and Bob Goodman, whose strong involvements in traditional music communities in the United States instilled in me a passion for ethnomusicology and engagement with a diversity of musical communities from an early age. Thanks, Dad, for visiting the brass parades of Rio de Janeiro before you got sick, and I'm sorry you couldn't live to see this book materialize. I am grateful to my wife, Claire Haas, trombonist and community organizer, without whom I might well have never picked back up the trumpet and joined a radical brass band in the Bay Area. Thank you for being an integral part of the fieldwork, my musical life, the revision of this book, and more conversations than

you would have liked to have about this project. Thanks to our (currently) little daughter, Ina Bissler for helping me remember that there are other things in life besides academic endeavors. I hope you too feel the intoxicating exhilaration of musicians animating crowds in the streets.

Andrew Snyder

LISBON, PORTUGAL

COMPANION WEBSITE

Audio and visual examples discussed in this book are provided on the author's website (www.andrewsnydermusic.com), at the site's *Critical Brass* page under the Writing tab.

At the bottom of this page, there are links to resources for specific chapters, including all the musical examples referenced in text and endnotes. Examples are identified in the book and on the website by a shorthand for "Companion Website.Chapter.Example": for instance, CW.Int.Ex2 refers to the second example of the introduction, and CW.Ch1.Ex1 refers to the first example of chapter 1.

The links relevant to chapter 3's discussion of the performances of Fela Kuti's song may be of particular pedagogical value. Please note that some of documentaries featured are not in English.

Other writing and performances by the author are also featured on the website.

INTRODUCTION

An Alternative Movement in an Olympic City

In the summer heat of the carnival Tuesday of 2019, Orquestra Voadora's three hundred brass and percussion musicians play to an estimated one hundred thousand people on the grassy park that lines the coast of Rio de Janeiro's Guanabara Bay. Voadora has entertained carnival crowds annually since 2009 with a diverse set of music. Balkan brass, New Orleans second line, countercultural songs from the rebellious Tropicália movement of the 1960s, and much more are mixed with Brazilian rhythms, from Rio's *samba* to Northeastern *frevo* and *maracatu*. Imaginatively created carnival costumes—superheroes, unicorns, and rainbows—disguise fraternizing musicians and revelers. They pass around beer, sugarcane liquor (*cachaça*), alcohol-laced popsicles (*sacolê*), and joints during the slowly rolling march through the park. Stilt walkers blow glitter into the air above the musicians, covering everyone in a sparkly rainbow dust.

Musicians have traveled from throughout the Americas and Europe to play in this participatory ensemble. Seasoned professional musicians play alongside those who enrolled the previous year with Orquestra Voadora's smaller professional band to learn their instruments. The latter have prepared in weekly classes with Voadora throughout the year, weekly rehearsals for five months before the event, and a seemingly constant series of informal brass jam sessions in the city streets. I am doing my best to play my parts loudly and make up for some of my fellow trumpet players who, despite having studied all year for this moment, are now struggling after having taken various drugs before the parade began. Despite some large variances in tuning audible from inside the ensemble, the



FIGURE 1.1 Celebrations after Voadora's carnival performance.
Photo by author on February 9, 2016.

total sound created by the booming percussion and blaring horns heard from outside amid the audience is driving, rhythmic, and energizing to the multitude of people in attendance (figure 1.1).

Orquestra Voadora is one of hundreds of *blocos* of the city's "street carnival" (*carnaval de rua*), a movement of proliferation of free musical events in public spaces that has grown exponentially since the country's dictatorship fell in 1985. Blocos are mobile street music organizations associated with carnival that are often highly participatory with a wide range of instrumentation, and "street carnival" primarily refers to Rio's bloco scene rather than the city's more well-known samba school parades. Orquestra Voadora's bloco is one of the most popular of the brass and percussion ensembles that form a submovement of street carnival known as *neofanfarrismo*. Roughly translating to "neo-brass-bandism," the term emphasizes the community's innovative and alternative character by using "neo-" before the Portuguese term *fanfarra*. Here I translate *fanfarra* as "brass band," but in Rio *fanfarra* can refer to a variety of mobile ensembles of brass, woodwinds, and percussion of variable instrumentation and numbers.

Though *neofanfarrismo* emerged from carnival celebrations, its practitioners

have increasingly come to regard the community as a social movement made up of committed musical activists, as the “-ismo” suffix suggests. Indeed, the opportunity of carnival not just for playful satire but for outright denunciation of Brazil’s right wing and the status quo has become Voadora’s yearly tradition. In the 2019 carnival, for example, the Orquestra Voadora bloco would receive notable coverage from media giant Globo for its politicized performance in homage to Marielle Franco, Rio de Janeiro’s leftist, openly gay, Black city councilwoman who was assassinated the year before and whose image was memorialized around the city in the years after. This performance can be viewed on this book’s companion website (CW) along with other audio-visual material referenced throughout in footnotes, which I encourage consulting to see these ensembles in action (CW. Int.Ex1).¹ In the parade of the 2016 carnival, the bloco had launched the event by calling out the city’s government for the evictions and destruction in the Vila Autódromo *favela* where the Olympic Park was being built. Far from an obscure fringe of the city’s cultural landscape, that year the bloco won Globo’s coveted *Serpentina de Ouro* prize for best bloco of the city’s street carnival.

Voadora’s actions represent a trend of politicizing carnival as Brazil’s crises—brought on by reckless mismanagement of mega-sporting events, precipitous economic decline, corruption scandals, and the rise of far-right populism—deepened during the 2010s. Over the same period, musicians who play with Voadora have carnivalized politics as well, incorporating carnivalesque repertoires into explosive protest settings. These brass musicians, for example, often break into Chiquinha Gonzaga’s carnival march “Ó abre alas” (Open the Wings), a song traditionally used to launch street carnival marches, to push protesters forward amid the sounds of tear gas explosions and rubber bullets. This and other songs performed by brass and percussion musicians in the carnival season have made their way into spaces of political contestation, where strongly differing visions of Brazil’s future have violently confronted each other. Musical activism in neofanfarrismo goes beyond explicit protest, with a wide variety of projects committed to inclusive musical education, while other bands within this largely middle-class movement have focused explicitly on fomenting the musical participation of marginalized populations, including women, Blacker communities, and those living in favelas.

The vision of an explicitly activist brass movement, as opposed to an ostensibly apolitical, carnivalesque manifestation, was consolidated with the founding of the annual HONK! RiO Festival of Activist Brass Bands in 2015. Originally inspired by a global network of alternative brass band “HONK! Festivals” that

celebrate free and accessible musical culture in the public commons, Rio's festival has since spawned four other HONK! festivals in Brazil alone (see Snyder, Garofalo, and Allen 2020). HONK! RiO cast the city's carnivalesque brass community that emerged in the local carnival as a cosmopolitan, transnational, and activist movement. The festival has solidified its status as a definitive element of Rio's cultural landscape, and it was even cited as justification for the 2019 law that declared brass and military bands to be Intangible Cultural Heritage of the State of Rio de Janeiro.²

The politicization of carnival and the carnivalization of politics that typify much of the street carnival community and especially the neofanfarrismo movement represent not merely the overlapping of two distinct domains of social life between politics and music, but a continuum of cultural action and expression. Many neofanfarristas argue that the ritual of carnival—one that mythically valorizes inversion, equality, participation, and festivity—should be the rule, not a seasonal exception nor a mere performance. In this book, I tell the story of how this explosive carnival brass band community gave rise to an activist musical movement in Rio de Janeiro at a time of severe political crisis in Brazil. The chapters focus on *revival* of carnival practices, *experimentation* with carnival repertoires, *inclusion* of marginalized communities, *resistance* against hegemonic power, *diversification* of the movement, and finally *consolidation* of an avowedly activist movement. Through these lenses, I examine the processes of this transformation from carnivalesque to activist expressions by exploring the popularization of brass blocos during the post-dictatorship street carnival revival at the turn of the millennium to the explosion of HONK! festivals in the late 2010s. In doing so, I theorize carnival and the carnivalesque as constituting rationalizations and enactments of political critique and action, and I offer a case study in musical movement building. I ask what powers festive traditions in public space have to forge communities of opposition presenting vibrant alternatives that counter the unjust, violent, and unequal realities of urban life in a major neoliberal city confronting diverse forms of authoritarian oppression.

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF CARNIVAL

Orquestra Voadora's animated video, "Anthem of Orquestra Voadora" (2011), offers a creative, utopian answer to this question, suggesting that participatory music making in public space is indeed an effective mode of transforming capi-

talist urban society (CW.Int.Ex2).³ The music is based on a fusion of a carnival march (*marchinha*) rhythm and the theme song of the Japanese superhero show *Spectreman*. It begins with a foreboding voice narrating over bleak urban images of trash, sanitary catastrophes, and urban chaos: “Like all metropolises, Rio de Janeiro meets the biggest enemy of humankind: pollution . . . Who will be able to intervene?” The beginning of a carnival march rhythm then accompanies a superhero image of Orquestra Voadora, which subsequently is embodied in a Transformer robot who fights a monster personifying urban chaos. The city’s Christ the Redeemer statue launches to life and takes control of the Transformer in solidarity, and, as the monster punches the Transformer, musical instruments fly out of it into the hands of the terrorized people in the streets. As the people begin to play, the pollution monster is distracted and starts dancing, letting the Orquestra Voadora Transformer easily dispatch him. The Christ statue retakes its place on the iconic Corcovado mountain, and a new, beautiful day dawns on Rio de Janeiro. Such depictions of musicians as superheroes with the capacity to mobilize participatory music making that can transform social and political life are playful, but in neofanfarrismo these ideas are taken seriously, inspire action, and dramatize real practices. Indeed, Orquestra Voadora translates to “Flying Orchestra,” and the image of flying is often spoken of in the community as a practice of freedom and going beyond what seems possible.

For many “alternative” Cariocas (residents of Rio de Janeiro), such ideas are inspirational, and the neofanfarrismo community has become an all-encompassing lifestyle. These mass musical events in the streets have provided a space for participation in carnival for middle-class residents many of whom were uninterested in, or even alienated by, the famous samba school parades—though, as we will see, the movement has been in a process of diversification on many fronts. Many middle-class musicians view the poorer and largely Afro-Brazilian samba schools as homogenous, commodified spectacles, and they do not consider them part of what many view as the “more authentic” street carnival due to the expensive entrance fee to the closed-off spectator space of the parade route (*sambódromo*). This view is espoused, for example, by one of neofanfarrismo’s central actors, Juliano Pires, an enthusiastic musician who during my fieldwork showed up to almost every brass band event and stayed to the earliest hours of dawn. He playfully goes by “Juba,” rhyming with “tuba,” or “Ju Bones,” for the trombone, which recalls the Brazilian tradition of musicians being known for the instruments they play. He explicitly describes street carnival as a liberatory, critical, and egalitarian practice in contrast to the samba schools:

I'm inspired by [Mikhail] Bakhtin who writes of carnival and street culture as forms of resistance. During carnival in the middle ages, laws were loosened and there wasn't so much hierarchy or domination. The nobles would go into the street and treated everyone as if they were equal. Carnival was a form of irony and subversion, of resistance to oppression . . . The sambódromo represents a false carnival according to the principles of carnival. The street carnival is the carnival in which you become equal with everyone together. The sambódromo is just a stage, with people observing, not participating. In carnival, you have to participate actively. Only in the street is there this possibility. (Interview 2014)⁴

In citing “principles of carnival” derived from the famous carnival theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, perhaps Pires is thinking of such passages from Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*: “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people: they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people” (1984 [1941], 7), or “All were considered equal during carnival” (10). Bakhtin views carnival as constituting the people’s “second life,” all that is opposed to institutions, hierarchy, order, and spectatorship. This question of carnival’s political potentials and efficacy has long been a debate of theorists, musicians, and politicians, toggling between Bakhtin’s “resistance” theory and the “safety-valve” theory, which posits that carnival lets off steam to ultimately reassert the status quo (see, for example, Gluckman 1965). In recent decades, carnival scholars have generally moved past this either/or revolutionary vs. repressive debate and pointed instead to the “inherently equivocal nature of carnival” and its lack of universal meanings and functions (Godet 2020, 6). Likewise, I reject the notion that carnival has any inherent meaning or that these conventional theories can be neatly imposed on diverse practices as interpretive frameworks to understand them.

This debate fails, however, to engage with the central question posed by Pires, namely: how do the ideals of carnival inspire political and social engagement? As Brazilian sociologist Roberto DaMatta writes, “we are much closer to the participant when we look at Carnival in terms of what it suggests, presents, and offers by way of attraction” (1991 [1979], 24). In articulating a musical activism based in the practices of street carnival, or his “principles of carnival,” Pires interprets Bakhtin’s understanding of carnival as a revolutionary, participatory, and egalitarian tradition and reinterprets them as foundational ethics of activist praxis. Though Pires’s words cannot be understood as entirely representative of the diffuse neofanfarrismo community, his conception of carnival as an activ-

ist practice is a prominent discourse in the street carnival and neofanfarrismo movements and is one he, in particular, helped to promote. For him and other neofanfarristas, it is not whether Bakhtin's insights into carnival are empirically true that is important. It is that they believe that they *should* be true.

It is worth noting, moreover, that Pires cites one of the foremost theorists of carnival, but one little known beyond humanities scholars. In this highly educated movement in Rio de Janeiro, one of the cultural capitals of the world, such scholarly references were not uncommon, and they point to the relatively privileged class position of the neofanfarrismo community. The movement emerged as a predominantly middle-class, Whiter,⁵ and male community, but it has been in a long process of racial, class, and gender diversification, another transformation that this book explores, as the movement has increasingly framed itself as activist. Privileged leftist movements that view themselves as cultural and political vanguards and seek to unite with marginalized groups for common cause are, of course, not new. Alternative middle-class movements in Brazil and elsewhere, such as the 1960s' popular song movements, presented the middle-class artist as a populist figure who spoke, or sang, for the masses. As an instrumental movement, however, neofanfarrismo represents an example distinct from well-studied forms of musical activism whose critiques are based primarily in semiotics, representation, and mediation of lyrics. As Judith Butler writes about social movements, "it matters that bodies assemble, and . . . the political meanings enacted by demonstrations are not only those that are enacted by discourse" (2015, 7–8).

How might we evaluate the musical activism of a participatory musical movement that seeks to mobilize what Butler calls public assemblies by claiming public space through the affect of sound, a movement that does not only represent excluded Others through song but attempts to engage them as musicians, playing alongside and mobilizing them in city squares, streets, parks, favelas, and beaches? What obstacles and opportunities does a privileged musical community face in building a populist musical movement across the racial, class, and gendered lines that typify social life in Rio de Janeiro? I ultimately argue that such privileged festive activism can promote tangible alternatives to the neoliberal city even as it faces many challenges in an extremely unequal society. In this book, I look seriously at the possibilities, limitations, and contradictions of cultural social movements led by the more privileged sectors of society, sometimes called "vanguards," as they confront a world that is becoming more unequal, more violent, and more authoritarian.