

A New Spin on Rio's Favelas

By Stephanie Beasley

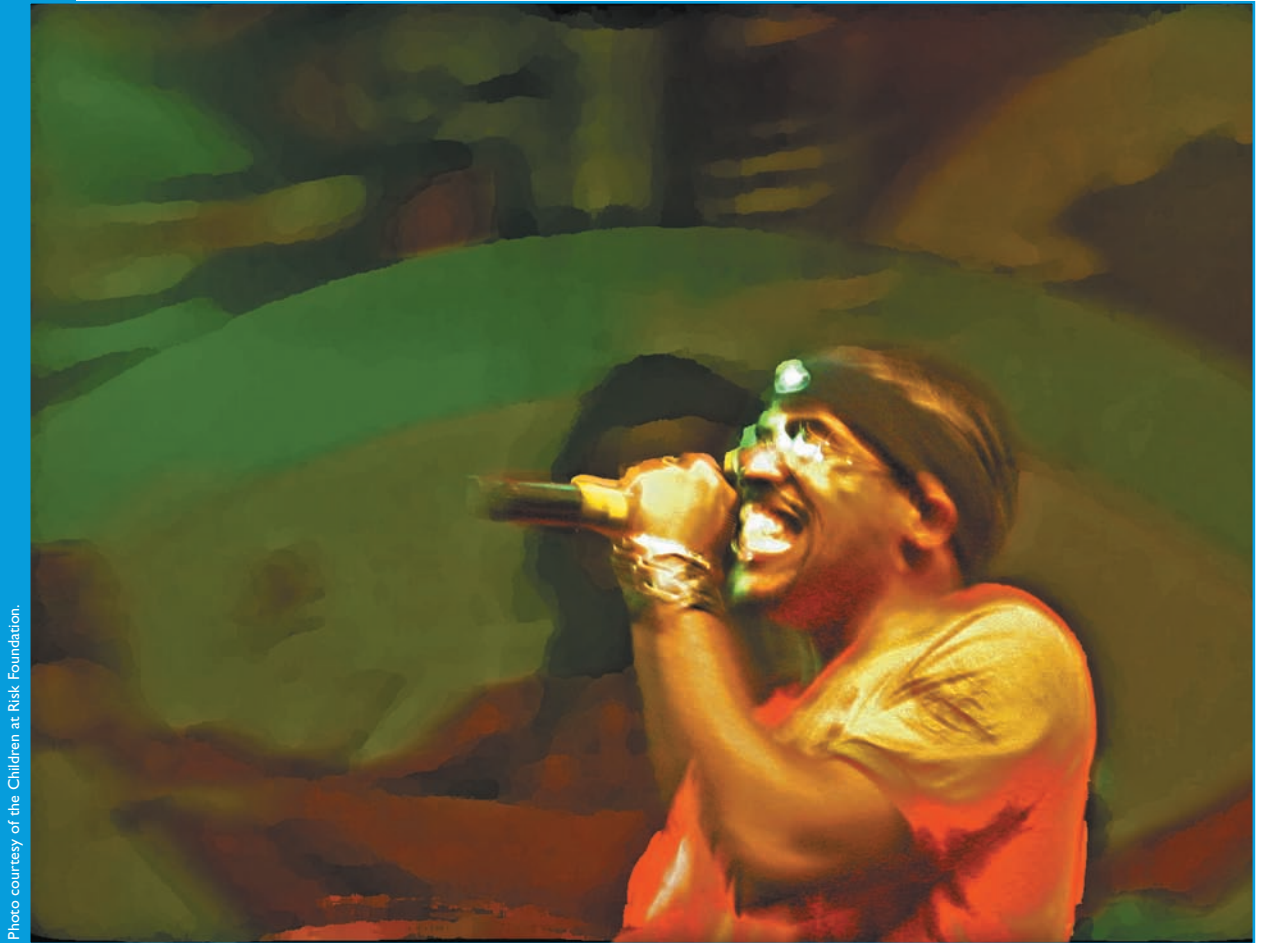


Photo courtesy of the Children at Risk Foundation.

A stylized photo of AfroReggae in concert.

If you reside in one of Rio de Janeiro's hillside shantytowns there is no need to look for violence, it will find you. The question most residents have to ponder is from which direction the bullet will come.

Movies and television have tended to sensationalize life in the *favelas* where the poverty-stricken, predominately black population is threatened by both drug traffickers and Rio's corrupt police force. Fernando Meirelles brought international attention to Brazil's shantytowns in "City of God." Now they serve as the backdrop to American crime shows when domestic street violence no longer seems exotic enough. First-time directors Jeff Zimbalist and Matt Mochary change the formula, however, in the documentary, "Favela Rising." Instead of promoting their own assumptions about their subjects — the members of AfroReggae — they abdicate control, allowing the group to shoot

many of the documentary's scenes.

Unlike showier big-budget offerings, "Favela Rising" is technically simple. With no feats of cinematography to dazzle the audience, it relies on scenes of every day life that only a local would notice — chats on the corner, a woman washing her child with a bucket of water — to grab the viewer's attention. Already it has garnered a "Best New Documentary Filmmaker" award at the 2005 TriBeCa Film Festival and was named film of the year by the International Documentary Association. It screened to a full audience at UC Berkeley's Pacific Film Archive.

In interviews, Zimbalist has said that when he was looking for ideas for a documentary, he hoped to find a story not commonly seen on the big screen: a community working together to overcome its issues without outside interference. Co-director Mochary had that in mind when he stumbled upon the story of Grupo Cultural



Photo courtesy of Jeff Zirin/ballet.

AfroReggae, an organization formed in 1993 by José Junior and Anderson Sá in Vigário Geral, then one of the most dangerous favelas in Rio. Originally, AfroReggae served as the staff of AfroReggae News, a newspaper aimed at young people interested in reggae, soul and hip-hop. As its members increased, AfroReggae began performing as a musical group throughout the favela and expanded its services to include dance and theater workshops and a literacy program for neighborhood children. “Favela Rising” follows Sá, a former accessory to drug trafficking and now the band’s front man, as he tirelessly strives to draw young people away from the lure of guns and fast money while trying to keep his own head above water.

Many of Sá’s early memories are of the violence that he witnessed as a child growing up in Vigário Geral. In one of several scenes where he is alone, facing the camera, he talks about seeing a man gunned down in the street at the age of 10. When his mother tried to shield his eyes with her hand, he peeked through so that he could watch the man’s brain splatter against the pavement. “I just calmly watched,” he recalls. “I was thinking ‘I’m not afraid of dying.’” Despite this proclamation, he admits that murder and gunfire became less appealing when they hit closer to home.

In 1993, one of Vigário Geral’s local drug lords ambushed a police patrol car, killing

four officers. Enraged by the assault, the police retaliated by massacring 21 Vigário Geral residents at random. Sá’s brother was among the victims, none of whom had any involvement with drug trafficking. It was then that Sá began to think about how he could prevent such atrocities from recurring.

Police brutality within the favelas is not unusual. “They Come in Shooting,” a 2005 Amnesty International report documenting nearly a year’s worth of data and interviews with favela residents, highlights several incidents of police violence in Rio’s marginalized communities, including a mass killing of 29 people in the Baixada Fluminense district in March 2005. Amnesty International believes that this kind of police terrorism stems from low salaries and insufficient training. The Rio police often serve as watchdogs for the upper classes but are as excluded from the city’s wealth as those they patrol. Many officers take second jobs to make ends meet.

The drug lords risk their lives for a much higher paycheck. The film places the salary for drug trafficking at \$650 a day, compared to the \$13 a day that the average black Brazilian earns. It is easy to see how the lifestyle would appeal to many young boys in the neighborhood who look at the drug traffickers’ nice clothes, fast motorcycles and beautiful girlfriends and fantasize about being in their place. Sá

A young boy plays the guitar in “Favela Rising.”

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Photo courtesy of Jeff Zimbalist.

Anderson Sá (right) during an AfroReggae show in “Favela Rising.”

understands the mentality but nevertheless tries to dissuade youngsters by pointing out how short-term the benefits are. Most drug traffickers don't live long enough to truly enjoy these perks. Surprisingly, Vigário Geral's drug lords don't see AfroReggae's anti-trafficking message as a threat. The group is well-respected and thus shielded from many of the favela's dangers.

AfroReggae's efforts to transform its community have drawn praise both nationally and internationally. Before the group's emergence in 1993, there were 150 drug lords in Vigário Geral. As of 2004, that number had dwindled to less than 25. By spreading its message through concert performances — usually packed by thousands of screaming fans — the movement has grown to include several favelas and boasts a membership of 2,000 participants. AfroReggae has also received a grant from the Ford Foundation and a music contract with Universal Records which provide resources to reach even larger numbers of Brazilian youth.

On the film's Web site, Zimbalist expresses the hope that AfroReggae's story will “inspire action.” At its UC Berkeley screening the film inspired hoots of laughter, empathetic tears and

raucous cheers. Whether “Favela Rising” lit a fire for change in the audience remains to be seen, but it definitely created a spark. No one dashed away after the film's conclusion; audience members milled around the front of the theater discussing the issues and characters. Instead of the disbelief that films about the favelas usually evoke — that so much violence could exist in a community — what was incredible for most of the audience was that such a unique story of unity and redemption could be true. With this in mind, one can only hope that just as “Favela Rising” has moved audiences, it will also prompt the movie industry to transform how favelas are represented in films.

The Center for Latin American Studies screened “Favela Rising” at the Pacific Film Archive on September 11.

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