

KEEP IT SIM- PLE MAKE IT FAST!

AN APPROACH
TO UNDERGROUND
MUSIC SCENES (VOL. 4)
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Keep it Simple, Make it Fast!

An approach to underground music scenes (vol. 4)

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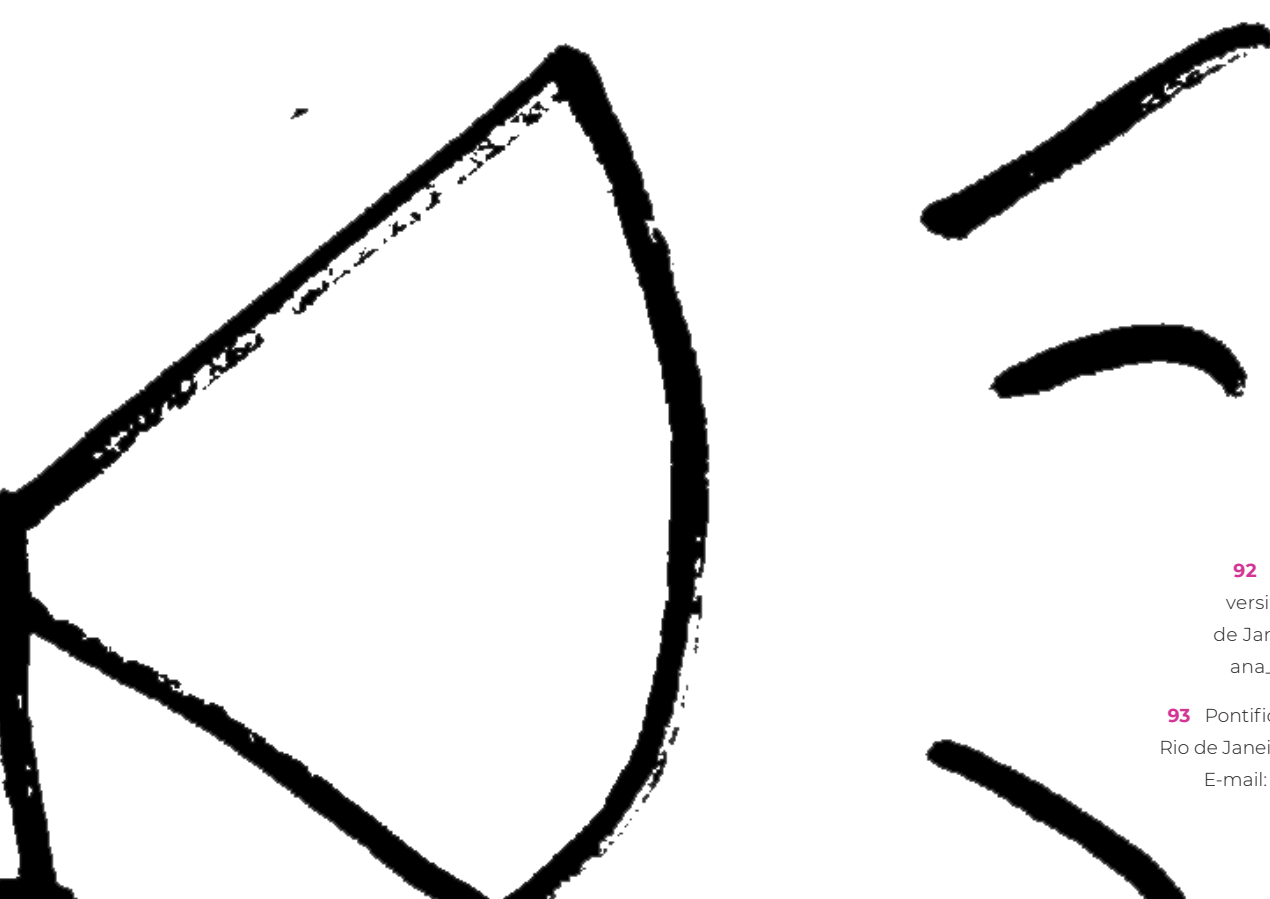
4.1. Even if you cannot sing, even if you cannot play...Do-It-Yourself! The 1980s Brazilian music scene and the emergence of BRock

Juliana Müller⁹² & Cláudia Pereira⁹³

A b s t r a c t :

This paper intends to reveal the ways by which the punk attitude and its D.I.Y. philosophy have influenced the 1980s Brazilian music scene by inspiring the emergence of a national rock style known as BRock. It also relates this fact with the political opening taken place along that decade in Brazil, after more than twenty years of military governments that led the country under a wide cultural censorship. Other subjects to be approached by this paper involve the fact that the creation of BRock was led by a group of white middle-class young males that was aware of the D.I.Y. philosophy that came from abroad; and, also, how the music festival named *Rock in Rio* - first held in 1985 - has supported BRock bands that until nowadays present themselves to the festival's audience which now congregates people from different generations.

Keywords: *Brock, DIY, Brazilian music scene, punk, Rock in Rio.*



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Samba and *bossa nova* are usually the musical genres internationally recognized as some of the best samples of authentic Brazilian music. But this paper intends to provide a complementary perspective to this idea, by presenting an overview about the emergence of Brazilian rock and roll. More precisely, the Brazilian rock of the 1980s, considered by a group of local musicians, journalists and academic researchers as (1) a very particular music scene⁹⁴ that played an important role in the country's recent history (2) a movement that was directly influenced by the English punk attitude and its D.I.Y philosophy that had become recently known in Brazil and (3) a milestone for those youngster's generation which more than thirty years later still reverberates among the country's youth cultures.

Brazilian professor, journalist and former drummer of amateur punk bands Arthur Dapieve wrote one of the first books regarding the history of rock in Brazil along the 1980s (Dapieve, 2015). One of this paper's authors had the chance to interview him in person⁹⁵, so this work mainly results from a compilation of pieces of information taken from both his book and interview, together with additional theoretical contributions that will help us to support some of the main ideas to be here presented. At first it is important to mention that the emergence of 1980s Brazilian rock came along with one of the most relevant moments in the twentieth century history of the country: the beginning of political opening after twenty-one years of military governments (1964-1985)⁹⁶ which, among other consequences, led the country under a strong cultural censorship.

By taking advantage of his professional experience as a journalist that covered the musical accomplishments of the 1980s youth generation – his own generation, as he usually highlights – for some of the largest media vehicles in Brazil, Dapieve figured out a particular argument regarding the emergence of Brazilian rock; we are going to present it in the author's own words: "The argument is that rock only gained Brazilian citizenship in the 1980s, overcoming decades of ideological distrust thanks to its participation in the redemocratization process"⁹⁷ (Dapieve, 2015, p.7).

According to his argument, rock genre had certainly manifested itself in Brazil before the 1980s, mostly due to the inspiration brought by 1950s and 1960s both English and American music scenes. But at the local level such influences were then subjected to criticism – even by youth cultures – for being considered naive, demonstrating no connection with the local culture besides being unaware of the main social and political issues the country was going through. At that time, the already mentioned *samba* and *bossa nova*, together with a few songs of protest that managed to dribble the military censorship, were considered more authentic and culturally aligned with the national context. But still, not everybody felt fully represented by what it was then considered as "real" Brazilian music. That was when the early 1980s brought two great news: first, the end of the military dictatorship; second, the DIY (do-it-yourself) attitude mostly provided by the English punk movement in the 1970s that started becoming popular in Brazil a few years later.

Dapieve states that the punk's influence in Brazil at that time was certainly given by this music style but most widely by the philosophy intrinsic to it. The title of this paper is in fact a fragment taken from his book that intends to illustrate such influence: "do-it-yourself, even if you cannot sing, even if you cannot play"⁹⁸ (Dapieve, 2015, back over). The DIY attitude then served as an inspiration for a group of young Brazilian musicians to create a local type of rock and roll, sung in Portuguese, which addressed common subjects to youth

⁹⁴ We take into account the concept of the term *scene* provided by Haenfler (2011, p.23): "Scenes exist at several levels and the term holds a variety of meanings. Generally, scene refers to a subcultural identity, overlapping networks of people that hold similar interests and beliefs and follow similar styles. It also signifies a specific genre of music; [...] Scene can also refer to geographical location, including cities (for instance the "Boston scene", the "Salt Lake City scene", or the "Louisville scene"), states (California scene"), regions ("West Coast scene"), countries (U.S. scene), or the world (the worldwide punk scene)".

⁹⁵ Face-to-face interview held in 11 April, 2017.

⁹⁶ There is a wide bibliography available on the period of the military dictatorship in Brazil, including its main causes and consequences. As a historical contextualization, we chose to use as references for this paper Gaspari (2002) and Ventura (1988).

⁹⁷ This is a translation provided by the paper's authors from the original text written in Portuguese: *A tese é a de que o rock só conquistou cidadania brasileira nos anos 80, superando décadas de desconfiança ideológica graças à sua participação no movimento de redemocratização.*

⁹⁸ This is a translation provided by the paper's authors from the original text written in Portuguese: *do-it-yourself, ainda que não saiba tocar, ainda que não saiba cantar.*

cultures such as love, sex and urban life, but merged them with strong protest lyrics involving issues like ethics, politics and social justice that made sense in their local environment. Some of these bands and single artists also mixed their guitar chords with local rhythms and musical instruments. Dapieve named this movement as *BRock*. Along our face-to-face interview he stated:

When the punk movement, the do-it-yourself, is established in England along the seventies, it basically kicked off a new idea by saying 'look, we want to go back, we want to make a sound as visceral as it was at the beginning of rock. Because rock is becoming an establishment [...] and we do not want this bourgeois life. We do not want to musically evolve once we think the message is more important than the form'. So the hardcore bands from São Paulo in Brazil, for example, still nowadays have songs that are deliberately rough; the guys know how to make three chords and the whole work is done on three chords, because what matters is a lyrics that is also very simple, as a way to mark a position on an aspect of the reality, a social and a political critique. [...] So there was this influence in Brazilian music that in a certain way responds to something that happened in the world music (Dapieve, 2015).

According to Dapieve, punk and its DIY attitude had influenced *BRock* as a whole but the way it was decoded could vary among its various bands. It is also worth to mention that, despite a few exceptions, white middle-class young males led the creation of “*BRock*”. Some of them even had relatives in the military. These young guys were considered part of a tiny group that was “Well-informed about the direction of rock and roll out there and was not satisfied with the misconceptions of the music in here”⁹⁹ (Dapieve, 2015, p.199-200). But this news about the international punk movement ended up circulating in apparently incompatible places in Brazil such as the youngsters of the poor outskirts around São Paulo city and the ones that belonged to high and middle classes of Brasília, the capital of the country, most of whom where the kids of politicians and public employers that had the chance to travel abroad and be aware of what was going on in the international music scene. They were all caught by that idea of “we do not have to play well, what we need is a powerful message”.

BRock was born in the major urban centers of Brazil, such as Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Brasília and Porto Alegre, but it spread all over the country and inspired the emergence of countless bands. Many would not compose more than a couple of songs but they were played on local radios and performed on small town's stages; that helped providing the feeling that something really new was going on in the Brazilian music scene. It is worth to remind that the political opening Brazil was going through had a major role in the creation of this local rock style. It would not be possible to conceive it under the strong censorship imposed by the military government.

It was in this context, meaning the end of a twenty-year period of military dictatorship, and the emergence of a new Brazilian rock style created and

⁹⁹ This is a translation provided by the paper's authors from the original text written in Portuguese: *Bem-informada sobre os rumos do rock lá fora e inconformada com os des-caminhos da música aqui dentro.*

attested by the local youth, that in January of 1985 Rock in Rio¹⁰⁰ music festival was held for the first time in Rio de Janeiro; and was immediately considered one of the world's largest music festivals by gathering together more than one million and three hundred thousand people along ten days of music concerts. It was pioneer to bring to South America some of the most acknowledged international artists of the music scene at that time and, most important of all, in what regards to the scope of this paper, gave room for some of these recent emerged BRock bands to play on the same stage, for an audience of that size.

Along three decades, meaning 1985 to 2018, Rock in Rio became international and had seventeen editions taking place among Brazil, Portugal, Spain and the United States. In Rio de Janeiro, where the latest edition was held in September of last year, the festival in fact attracted current young people together with members of its first audience of 1985. Many of them are parents in the forties, fifties and sixties that attend the festival in the company of their own daughters and sons – and even grandsons. Some of the bands they enjoy are the ones that made part of BRock and still find their place in the local music scene. This might illustrate the argument that Bennett (2013) states “for many aging followers of rock, punk, dance and other contemporary popular music genres, the cultural sensibilities they acquire as members of music-driven youth cultures have reminded with them, shaping their life courses and becoming ingrained in their biographical trajectories and associated lifestyle sensibilities”. (Bennett, 2013, p.2).

One of this paper's authors had the chance to attest that through a two-year research focused on mapping the reasons why, in the Brazilian context, *Rock in Rio* music festival has been capable of keeping itself relevant among individuals of diverse generations along more than thirty years (1985-2018). Finally, Dapieve makes it clear that the influence of punk music and its D.I.Y attitude has not been strict to the 1980s Brazilian music scene; it still resonates nowadays, and in a way that goes beyond BRock. Said he along our interview:

When you say ‘you do not have to be [musically] virtuous, what you need to have is a clear and relevant message’, you kind of open the door, for example, to a very particular kind of funk and rap that is made in Brazil, even to local electronic pop music, that all together represent a relevant portion of what many Brazilians of all ages listen to. These genres can be simple in lyrics but carry on a very strong and expressive message in social terms. This idea is still fundamental nowadays in order to shake the establishment and bring some type of freedom to the Brazilian music scene.

Dapieve considers it a further mark of that do-it-yourself punk philosophy, besides being a reflection of the “naturalization” of rock as considered a sample of authentic Brazilian music. As a relevant Brazilian musical movement in the 1980s, BRock was inspired by music styles and attitudes that came from abroad but were changed into something new and local, created and generally attested by Brazilian youth cultures. It somehow materialized the feeling of freedom brought by a new political context, by a new future that was just about to be started. In this sense, we believe BRock is in fact an

¹⁰⁰ A summary of the festival's history is available in the English idiom at: <http://rockinrio.com/rio/en/history>. Accessed on 12/10/2018.

empirical example of what Grossberg (1983, p.104) emphasizes as an effective “affective alliance” created by music that is “locally produced” (Grossberg, 1983, p.111): the affective power of the music will vary with the context into which it is inscribed, potentially effecting specific reorganizations [...] The cultural politics of any moment in the history of rock and roll is a function, then, of the affective relations existing between the music and other social, cultural, and institutional facts (Grossberg, 1983, p.104). Then, we also believe BRock can be considered as a symbolic representation of protest and disruption of previously established local standards; as a way found by Brazilian youth to manifest its will to change the world or, at least, the local world around them.

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