



# THE MOTHER LAMB MARANHÃO VERSION

RADIOLAS AND FLYING PEDRAS IN  
BRAZIL'S JURASSIC PARK OF REGGAE

BY MICHAEL TURNER AND OTÁVIO RODRIGUES

PHOTOS BY KIRSTEN GANTZEL





***"Without leaving my own country, I was absorbed by something idyllic, mystic, living a perennial summer in a sweet, sweet island, listening to several artists that I loved and also many others that I never heard of before. It was the same as to discover the Jurassic Park."***

**—Otávio Rodrigues**

***To get a flavor of the atmosphere of the city [São Luís] there's no substitute for staying in the historic center, but you should be aware that there are sometimes extremely loud reggae nights which might keep you awake.***

**—The Rough Guide to Brazil**

"Yes. We must go there," agreed my friend Nelson Meirelles. I was visiting Rio de Janeiro in March 2006 and as we were walking around the Feira de São Cristóvão we chanced upon a small dancehall, actually just a shadowy space between the back of a restaurant and a concrete wall where a bunch of boozed-up rustics from the North were aggressively skanking to a very unusual sort of reggae. The music was punchy and fast, a sort of lovers rock sung in incomprehensible English by vocalists who sounded a lot like Eric Donaldson. On the wall there was a large black-lit mural depicting various Jamaican landmarks like the Black Ark Studio with "Lee Pery" underwritten. I was bewildered. Nelson explained that this music was from the northern state of Maranhão, which was commonly referred to as Brazil's "Reggae Capital," 2,000 miles north of Rio. I thought I knew lots about reggae, but I'd never heard of the place. Later Nelson contacted Otávio Rodrigues, a friend who had lived in São Luís, Maranhão's capital city, where he had hosted one of its first reggae radio shows. Over the next few months Nelson and Otávio organized a detailed itinerary and, since Maranhão is a great vacation spot, our trip expanded into a four-family adventure comprising 14 people.

Driving in from the modern airport, the suburbs of São Luís look a lot like Kingston, Jamaica: the same cinder block buildings, knots of people waiting for a minibus, tethered animals, and the same little boy flying a kite on a red dirt *futebol* field. But the remarkable architecture of the old city is far superior to that of Kingston. Located on an airy bluff, its massive tile-faced colonial buildings and cobblestone streets look down towards the site where two huge rivers (the Pindaré and Itapecuru) meet and empty into the Atlantic. Like every coastal city I've visited in Brazil, São Luís has nice weather, friendly streets and comfortable lodgings. For three weeks our families enjoyed the beaches, seafood restaurants, *festas*, big hikes on the dunes of Barreirinhas, art galleries and street stalls. And of course shopping, particularly on the busy high street where in the open-fronted department stores there usually sat older men talking into microphones, extolling sales items to the passing crowd.

Choperia Internacional was the first dancehall we visited. As we crossed the street I was surprised to hear Junior Byles' "Auntie Lulu" vaulting over the tall cinderblock walls. It was an auspicious moment for me, to hear a great Lee Perry production shaking the dance the way it must have rocked similar Jamaican venues 30 years ago. The interior was a big concrete yard filled with couples dancing closely. Grouped around the perimeter were 10 stacks of speakers, each stack consisting of 24 boxes. The sound was so loud that I felt a tickle deep in my skull which I soon

identified as the vibrating ossicles of my middle ear. We found a safe zone behind the speakers and danced. The sound system (*radiola*) was playing homemade Maranhão hits. Everything sounded vaguely like something played in Jamaica long ago: One tune owed something to Peter Tosh's "Haffi Get A Beating," another to Derrick Morgan's "Father Killam." Again, all the singers sounded like Eric Donaldson and every song ran extremely fast.

We shouted and drank for a few hours and then moved downtown to join the crowd at a big room called the Roots Bar, where selector Jorge Black was closing down the evening with Bunny Wailer's "Black Heart Man." And then a short walk to the more crowded Crioula's Bar, where selector Ademar Davila was playing a hyper mix of reggae, samba, zouk and even calypso. The best moment was when he spun Ronnie Davis' 1975 version of the Burning Spear classic "Tradition" and everyone sang along.

Early morning found us in a small outdoor bar eating *bolinhos* (fritters) and drinking one last *chopp* (draft beer). From a speaker high on the plaza wall came Niney the Observer's "Blood and Fire." Otávio explained to me that the key to understanding Maranhão's reggae lay in the term *pedra*: "Pedra is the name that the Maranhense people give to special tunes. Literally a *pedra* is a rock or a stone, but in the sense of a stone flying away to hit someone, referring to the impact of a big tune on a big sound system. A similar widely used term is *pedrada*: which means the hit, the very moment when the stone reaches everyone in the dancehall. Often *radiola* djs tell the audience to wear a helmet in preparation for the *pedras* that will be flying. Some other similar *radiola* terms: *tijolo* (brick) or *tijolada* (boom!), *cacete* (cudgel), or *cacetada* (kabong!)."

It all reminded me of the Wailers' lyric about "the stone that the builder refused, becomes the head cornerstone." The great Jamaican music of the '70s, which everywhere else in the world has been superseded, co-opted, dismissed or filed away, had become the cornerstone of the culture here. Somehow, in an outlying city 3,000 kilometers north of Rio de Janeiro, I had come back full circle to the beginnings of my obsession with Jamaican music. My love for the music began in Los Angeles in the early '80s, listening to the "Reggae Beat" radio show hosted by Roger Steffens and Hank Holmes—especially Hank's long sets of 7" singles which allowed me for the first time to experience the freshness of the music as it had been played in Jamaica. Hank's show was where I first heard Cornell Campbell, Larry Marshall, the Ethiopians, Junior Byles and scores of other great artists who still remain largely unknown outside of Jamaica. And now, here they were again: At a little beach kiosk I heard "Give Me Power" by the Stingers. On the bus, "Country Living" by the Eagles. On a narrow side street the slow approach of a car from behind me was heralded by Max Romeo's "Chase the Devil." Walking through the town I heard Larry Marshall's "Can't You

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PHOTO: SPEAKER BOXES AT CHOPERIA INTERNACIONAL



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Understand," Hugh Mundell's "My Mind," Ken Parker's "Sad Mood," Culture's "The Rasta Man," along with countless local imitations.

Jamaican music is ubiquitous in Maranhão, but it was not adapted uncritically, in fact quite the opposite. A popular song, a *pedra*, is something very specific, chosen from a relatively narrow band on the reggae dial. It's a carefree, "country" type of sound, the sort of thing that would have been recorded at Randy's or Dynamics in the mid-'70s by artists like Eric Donaldson, Keith Poppin or Jackie Brown. Almost every other type of Jamaican music is excluded. For example, in my three weeks there I did not hear a single tune from Studio One. No dancehall. No dub. Very little dj music. No ska. No rocksteady. Very few "dread" tunes or minor-key melodies.

I found all this out for myself the night Nelson and I were invited to spin records at Junior Black's club, the Kingston 777. It's up a flight of steps to an outdoor terrace full of people dancing, and then through a corridor into a large dark room crowded with spinning couples, mostly working-class people ramming the dance hard. Junior played a smooth mix from his large record collection and then turned over the single turntable to us. While the dancers never slackened, it was difficult at first to find our way and some of our early selections were wide off the mark. Things improved when Junior helpfully pushed the pitch control up to +8 and mixed in a few of his own records, lighthearted tracks like Levi Williams' "Big Fat Wife" and Wong Ping's "Chiney Brush." And then we played our first real *pedra* of the night: "Murmuring" by the Willows, a sweet GG's production from 1973. People had been dancing all along, but now the place got hot. And hotter still when we flipped the record over to Tommy McCook's blazing horn instrumental, and then Barrington Spence's "Getty Getty" followed by the U Roy version, then Eric Donaldson's "Lonely Nights" and on and on. Someone in the crowd shouted that "finally the gringo's coin dropped!" (a *ficha caiu*—a Brazilian pay-phone analogy that refers to the moment when a musical connection is made).

Otávio is one of the few people who have written about this place, and halfway through our trip as I sat with him and recorded some of its history:

"I was so impressed the first time I was here, in 1988. Because even in Brazil no one knows what's going on here. I was the editor at a music magazine called *Somtrês* and I also had a column where I wrote about reggae and related music. So Ademar Davila, a radio presenter in São Luís, called me saying, 'Man, you must come to São Luís, here is the right place.' So later I came to do a report and I saw with my own eyes. I was so impressed, they were very tuned in to the Jamaican stuff: Gregory Isaacs, Max Romeo, Jacob Miller, Owen Gray, etc. You can imagine what kind of feeling I had, considering at

## Maranhão is in many ways like Jamaica in the '60s, an undiscovered place of similar size and demographics, an overlapping culture and history, and an equal if not greater enthusiasm for reggae music.

that time in Brazil people had no idea what Jamaican music was all about. So, throughout a week, without leaving my own country, I was absorbed by something idyllic, mystic, living a perennial summer in a sweet, sweet island, listening to several artists that I loved and also many others that I never heard of before. It was the same as to discover the Jurassic Park.

"Radiolas [sound systems] are not new. They are everywhere in Northeast Brazil since the first half of 20th century, playing anything that can move a dancehall—salsa, merengue, bolero and also *brega*. There are a lot of stories about how reggae got started here, but really, Riba Macedo [José Ribamar da Conceição Macedo] was the first to play it. He was a radiola operator who brought back the first reggae records from Belém. It reminded him of the old boleros. It has a good riddim, you can dance together, it's enough."

Earlier, Otávio had taken us to meet Riba, who keeps his original sound system in his front room, and his phonograph records in an unplugged refrigerator. He let us look through his boxes and showed us the first reggae record he bought for his radiola: "Monkey Man" by the Maytals.

Otávio continues, "And still today, the reggae phenomenon in Maranhão is very focused on cheap and nice fun; music for dance, to be together, to drink your beer, meet someone, maybe your future wife or husband. It clearly has a social role among the poorest." As Nelson wrote me later: "Sometimes I have the feeling they use reggae there as a *forró* or any other popular rhythm, not caring exactly about what is being sung or said. Is not everyone that knows about the reggae official culture."

"In the beginning, the radiola operators would buy their records in Belém. Why Belém? Because it has a port connected to the Guianas, and to the Caribbean. [Note: In the late '60s West Indies Recording Company (WIRL) and others pressed and distributed Jamaican music in Guiana.] Soon after the sound system operators went to São Paulo, and to Rio, shops that used to import reggae. Then they began importing direct from London distributors, like Jet Star, and also would get records from Brazilians traveling to Europe to work, especially Maranhão's soccer players. They were very eager to find *pedras*. Because not all reggae music is a *pedra*, good for dancehalls. It must be something specific, with a kind of rhythm, a kind of groove, a kind of melody.

"So then they start to go to Jamaica, to England, sometimes the USA too. And some guys attracted attention doing it, standing out as specialists. I call them the *traficantes de reggae*. In general, they learned maybe 100 English words: 'good morning, good night, where I can buy some reggae records' or something like that, just enough to survive and get the music they want. Like a guy called Dread Sandro, who used to go to Jamaica every month, sometimes every week, four or five times a month! Who pay him? The owners of the radiolas or dancehall clubs, who have far enough money to pay the air tickets, the hotel, and maybe something more to compensate him. There is a man named Serralheiro (it means the Locksmith). He is almost illiterate, a simple man, but above all things he is a reggae expert. I had problems with him before in telling this story, but I will do it again, because it demonstrates how acute and practical he is, and how much he loves reggae. Some years ago he flew to London carrying a cassette tape with prerecorded phrases, since he can't speak English. 'Good morning. I want to buy reggae records.' Incredible. I admire Serralheiro pretty much.

"So, there are two men who help make reggae as important as it is here: Ademar Davila and Fauzi Beydoun. They are friends. They had an important radio show together, and they used to tell what reggae is: 'Reggae music is a music that comes from the ghetto. Bob Marley came from there, and the Rasta thing is blah blah blah.' They used to translate the music simultaneously. This helped to keep the music cultural. [And continue to do so today. In addition to his club and radio work, Ademar hosts a nightly prime-time television show devoted strictly to reggae.]

"Fauzi is also a singer and composer, and he has a band called Tribo De Jah. That band is all blind guys. An interesting story. Because Fauzi bought a sound system and the man who sell the sound system told Fauzi: 'If you buy the sound system you must bring with you these blind guys.' So that was the beginning of Tribo De Jah, they were one of the first groups here which focus on reggae. Not in a Brazilian way. Usually here they put some Brazilian rhythms here and there, but Tribo De Jah played Jamaican music. And still now one of the most famous reggae bands in Brazil. So Fauzi and Ademar were the two that helped to make the thing more strong.

"And it is still very strong. You can count thousands of radiolas, professional sound systems. And some of the guys who own the sound systems are very rich and powerful. The radiola we heard last night [Radiola Itamaraty at a club called Choperia Internacional]: the







THE DANCE FLOOR OF SÃO LUÍS' KINGSTON 777. ABOVE: GUEST DJs NELSON MEIRELLES AND MICHAEL TURNER AT THE TURNTABLES.



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owner is a big political guy and a state deputy now, voted for sure by the reggae people—they call them *massa regueira* [something like “the reggae mass”]. And if you are against the massa regueira, you can be nothing, and you cannot get elected.

And there has also been the direct influence of Jamaican producers and artists, like Joe Gibbs [who even maintained an office in São Luís for a period], Honey Boy [not to be confused with Honey Boy Martin], Norris Cole [who once sang with the Pioneers] and Eric Donaldson. Now today's hit parade is entirely produced in São Luís. Because Maranhenses have always been very worried about the end of the pedras, the reggae that they loved. They used to ask me what I thought, if the pedras would end up. So about six or some years ago, local studios began to make some versions. First, they'd take an excerpt [of a Jamaican song] and make a loop, and then put some different voices over. Now it's gotten to the level that almost 100 percent of the music in the dancehalls is local.”

This new Maranhão version is produced in matchbox studios similar to those of Jamaica. The sound is unremarkable, simple keyboard melodies and bass loops, automated one drops and fills; no live horns, no live percussion. Tons of the stuff is sold in street stalls and by higglers on the beach. It's snappy music made strictly for the young dancers that pack the gigantic outdoor dances. I brought back some cds that sound pretty good to me, but haven't impressed my friends back home who complain about the cheap sound. The thing I like most about this

homegrown music is its cheerfulness, it completely lacks the bile and negativity that flavor today's Jamaican dancehall. Leonard Dillon said of Jamaica in the '60s that its music was sweet because the people were sweet, and this seems true of the people and music of Maranhão.

Another thing I enjoy about the Maranhão version is listening for its influences. Many melodies are lifted from Jamaican sources, for example, on *Hot Star Reggae Collection Vol. I*, you can hear echoes of obscure classics like the Blue Bells' “Call Me Teacher,” the Pioneers' “Blues Dance,” the Upsetters' “Dirty Dozen.” It's also interesting to me that almost everything is sung in borrowed English. Maranhense artists obviously love the cadence of English, but since few actually speak it, they sing in a kind of English gloss that doesn't literally make much sense. The effect can be charming, as in Rosemary's “Cool Running”:

*Good runnings is just good runnings,  
Runny every way and I want it every day*

Or, in the case of Dobby Jones' “No Cowboy,” mysterious :  
*I saw that car, a biggest car, surprise  
I had no gun and no cowboy  
And I lost in a far land*

Mostly though the songs have simple lyrics borrowed from the Jamaican songbook, typically sufferer lyrics and reality tunes. Such complaints about life “down here in Babylon” are unfortunately quite apt in a place that bears the worst of Brazil's social problems. Maranhão is the poorest state in Brazil, with a per capita income of \$960 U.S. per year, and has the country's highest infant mortality rate:

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## REGGAE UPDATE

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interpretation as to what dancehall's roots might be. A better title for this one might have been roots music from the early '80s as Wailing Souls, Mighty Diamonds, Earl Sixteen, Cornell Campbell, Don Carlos, Israel Vibration and Anthony Johnson contribute to what is essentially a pretty good latter-day roots anthology here—in fact, there are only about five dj cuts on the whole disc and those are from Charlie Chaplin and Prince Far I and thematically (“Walk With Jah,” “What You Gonna Do on the Judgement Day”) more roots than dancehall. Whatever you call it, this too is a nice selection available at a bargain price.

Professor Skank continues to provide some international musical insight with *Crucial Reggae From Outside Jamaica Vol. Three* (Skank). The new roots movement from the Virgin Islands is represented by the likes of “Praises Due” from Batch and “No Limitation” from Pressure. Also on board are Soldiers of Jah Army (“Open My Eyes”), Ras Attitude (“War to Win”), Groundation (“Young Tree”) and Maimon and the Mongoose Band (“1945”). Nasio Fontaine (“Prophet”) is joined by Inner Visions (“Can You Feel It”), Prophet Benjamin (“Pretty Boy”), Ossie Dellimore (“Scandal Mongerer”), Jah Roots and Khari Kill. A nice roundup of contemporary roots music from around the world. [[www.skankproductions.com](http://www.skankproductions.com)]

Chuck Foster hosts “Reggae Central” on KPFF-FM Los Angeles which can now be accessed in every way imaginable—broadcast on the strongest signal west of the Mississippi on 90.7 FM Sundays from 3-5 p.m. Pacific Time, Webcast and archived for listening or downloads and also podcast via [kpff.org](http://kpff.org). Check it out!

## HEY MR. MUSIC

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Basse effortly fuses the rhythms with the Wolof vocals on “Dieguema” and particularly “Fata-likou” which is a real slow guajira burner giving out showers of sparks. Basse's vocals give it a real edge: sublime like the swish of a well-honed saw cutting through wood. A prime example of how to mix rough-sounding Wolof language and Afro-Latin, in this case with touches of charanga. The cut-and-paste Africando way of doing things means each release usually always brings some innovative music as well as the more trodden trails. *Ketukuba* is no exception. The Africando family has moved on like all families do.

The latest from Papa Noel and Bana Congo, *Café Noir* (Tumi) is a star-studded excursion to the heart of rumba, Afro salsa and soukous son in the presence of Manu Dibango, Rey Crespo, Palma and Coto from Los Jovenes Clasicos del Son. Along with assorted other bods like female vocalists Abby Surya and Stella-liv Makasso. Papa Noel's modern version of the traditional West African-Latin mixup recorded in Havana, Paris, London and Congo is a mainly a total success. The slinky songs drip with sparkling guitar, even introducing me to a musical style I've never heard

of: *merengue zoukous*. *Café Noir* is a fine follow up to *Bana Congo*.

Her Majesty's Customs and Excise keeps an eye on me, trying to extort money from me to give to the government to waste on stupid ideas and wars. Packages to me have been opened and rummaged through in the hope of levying import duty and Value Added Tax at 17.5 percent, then a £10 charge from the Royal Mail to collect any money owed. (There actually is no duty on unsolicited promos or samples).

The latest victim was the very subversive *Crucial Reggae From Outside Jamaica Vol. 3* (Skank). The good professor has recruited some new artists—Prophet Benjamin and Khari Kill from Trinidad alongside the old faves like Dominica's Nasio Fontaine. This latest edition shows that the standard of small-island reggae has not diminished—in fact it keeps getting better. Another superb compilation.

[Dave “El Manicero” Hucker plays the music of two continents and assorted islands at several very hip London dance clubs. Contact him at [huckero@btinternet.com](mailto:huckero@btinternet.com) and visit his home pages at [www.technobeat.com](http://www.technobeat.com).]

## ALL OVER THE MAP

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on back in the '70s when he waxed these two cds—worth of “polit-pop.” Triumphant over polio and politics, he became a star, at least for a time it seems. And here is the evidence. So far as I can tell, it's prog-rock from a different time and place.

*The Fountain* (Nonesuch): Have not seen the well-received film, but this soundtrack, by leading progressive string ensemble the Kronos Quartet and leading progressive rockers Mogwai is evocative of something very, very spooky. Lovely, too, at least as much as a song titled “Death Is the Road to Awe” can be. ★

## THE MARANHÃO VERSION

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Whoy, whoy, what a situation  
The people have the suffering  
Down here in Babylon.  
It's starvation and misery  
Children dying from poverty  
And no one can do something to change  
Every day is the same old song  
I don't know what is right or wrong  
But Jah can change this place.

—Peter Toty, “Sufferation”

And I really like Maranhão's young singers. As with all Brazilian *cantores*, they sing with economy and ease and perfect pitch, with that special knack for expressing sadness and happiness simultaneously. One especially impressive artist was Dub Brown, a guitar-toting guy I met at Hot Star Studios who sounds a lot like a young Leo Graham. There are probably dozens of art-

ists like him with equal potential. Maranhão is in many ways like Jamaica in the '60s, an undiscovered place of similar size and demographics, an overlapping culture and history, and an equal if not greater enthusiasm for reggae music.

Reggae is a living thing, the hardy flower that emerged after centuries of cultural cross-pollination. When it spread abroad it hybridized with other genres: in the U.K., with soul and punk; in the U.S., with rock and hip-hop; and with local musics in almost every poor country in the world. But in Maranhão it was not a hybrid, it was a clone, and it is still flourishing after 30 years in near total isolation. Otavio describes his earliest visits as a Jurassic Park experience, and you can still feel some of this excitement 20 years later. It's a long trip, but sure to be rewarding for music lovers. You can go to the annual reggae festival that happens in São Luis every July, but at all times of the year there are dozens of great clubs like Kingston 777. Just don't forget to bring your hardhat.



**Feira de São Cristóvão (San Cristoban Fair):** “A bit of Brazilian Northeast in Rio. About 700 permanent tents offer a sample of Brazilian Northeast culture, such as typical food, hand-crafts, forró players, dance, singers and popular poets and also folk literature. Every month about 450 thousand tourists and local people visit it. (from <http://www.rio.rj.gov.br/riotur/pt/atracao/?CodAtr=3904>)

**Nelson Meirelles** is a musician and producer, has been involved with the Brazilian reggae scene for the last 20 years. In 1985 he started the first reggae radio program in Rio de Janeiro. He eventually produced the first records of Cidade Negra, and later formed and played bass with O Rappa; both are today among the biggest bands in Brazil. In 2002 he started working with Digitaldubs Sound System, a collective formed by musicians, producers and djs who are trying to deal with reggae in a wide-range approach: roots, ragga and dub. Their first cd (*Digitaldubs presentes: Brazil Riddims Vol. 1*) has just been released. <http://www.esquemageral.com.br/digitaldubs>

**Otavio Rodrigues** (AKA Doc Reggae) is a radio presenter, writer and sound system operator, he did the first reggae program on Brazilian radio, founded the Project Jamaica-Brazil (a pioneering effort to promote the two countries' relationship), and has since had popular shows in São Luis and in São Paulo, besides his work as editor and music columnist for Brazilian magazines *Somtrês*, *Trip*, *Bizz* and *Vida Simples*. Now he manages a communication office, working in editorial projects, custom publishing and magazine startups, and also leads a music/poetry combo called Bumba Beat, in search for the perfect blend between Jamaican and Brazilian musical traditions.

**Michael Turner** is co-editor of *Roots Natty Roots: The Discography of Jamaican Music* (Nighthawk, 2002), and a frequent contributor to *The Beat*.

