



BRAZILATINO

CARLINHOS

SIN CAMINO Y SIN DESTINO...
VENIA A LA CALLE COMO UN FANFARRÓN
TENIA UN SUEÑO EN SU CORACÓN...
CARLITO... CARLITO MARRÓN...

[WITHOUT A PATH AND WITHOUT A FUTURE...
HE CAME DOWN THE STREET LIKE A CLOWN
HE HAD A DREAM IN HIS HEART.]

Who is Carlito Marrón? Antonio Carlos Santos de Freitas, better known as Carlinhos Brown, is the creator of the Timbalada drum brigade and one-third of Tribalistas, the biggest recent success in MPB (*música popular brasileira*). So what's up with this Marrón thing?

This Spanish pseudonym is a code name created by Brown in the context of his vigorous new album, *Carlinhos Brown é Carlito Marrón* (BMG Spain). Made for the international market, already a success in Spain and France, the record has only just been issued in Brazil, and awaits a U.S. release.

After 20 years of a successful musical career, Brown is still an enigma waiting to be deciphered. His irreverence resurges in the street of every *carnaval* in Salvador, Bahia, the heart of AfroBrazilian culture. His creative hyperactivity always has him working on various projects simultaneously, ranging from recordings to social and community work.

The multitalented musician/composer/singer is extravagant with words on the most far-flung of topics, a carryover from his days as a popsicle vendor, as he likes to remember. The first time we interviewed him in 1994, we were fortunate enough to visit him in his home in the Candeal neighborhood of Salvador. The winding dirt paths, the tropical summer heat, the energy of *carnaval* still in the air, all contributed to the vibe; we got about three hours of interview on tape, which took about three weeks to transcribe and decipher. Each sentence seemed to have many meanings. Brown is a man of ideas. His glib verbosity runs circles around his favorite topics, with playfulness and humor ever present, but anchored to a bedrock of seriousness about his music. This time, Brown is in Europe, the contact is brief and technology-assisted.

Brown says that "Carlito"—the alter ego and the album—was born of a musical trip, a deeper examination of his Afro-Brazilian roots. "My Bahian origins are also Latino. This album is the chance to express this personality, a representation of my desire to explore new worlds," the composer declares. For Brown there is nothing strange about a Bahia-Cuba-Spain connection, and Hispanic influence is quite evident in Bahian music. "When I was learning percussion I traversed many Latin styles: salsa, rumba, calypso. In my family it was recognized: my father played maracas, a typical Latin instrument.

"This vision that we have of Latin and Cuban influence is better understood in light of the fact that Brazil sometimes doesn't perceive its own *Latinidade*. I think this is one of the most Brazilian albums I have ever done. It could almost be my first album, because it tells a different side of my origins. It has a Brazilian accent. And the Cuban-influenced parts really come from the Cubans themselves, not from me.

"Brazil does not consider itself a 'Latino' country. We think that being Latino means speaking Spanish, and in Brazil we tend to link that reality and that language to the stereotypes we have of Mexican soap operas. But we are all part of the same roots," says the musician.

Brown wants to re-Latinize Brazil, and recoup the prestige that Latin music—like rumba, bolero and salsa/*son*—once had. "Most Latin hits that we know in Brazil are from the '40s and '50s (with a few exceptions like Gloria Estefan and Celia Cruz)," says Brown. "To re-Latinize is to rediscover our North Africa, which is so close to Spain. And Spain, by the way, is where we Brazilians got the minor keys that we use in *chorinho* and *samba-canção*. What I wanted to bring out in this album is this deep well of rhythms from all over the world that are found here in Brazil... Brazil has made a huge rhythmic contribution to the world of music. Bahia and Cuba are like twins in many ways beyond the music, including religion and food. What joins us is our ancestral heritage."

Brown goes on to speak of his Berber ancestry, from North Africa, and make connections between *capoeira*, Algerian rai music, and the day-to-day life of his predecessors whom he observed in his childhood.

AKA CARLITO MARRÓN
BY MARA WEISS AND NEGRO BETO

BROWN

PHOTO BY DAVID GLAT

His effervescence materializes in the sonic ideas present in *Carlinhos Brown é Carlito Marrón*, sharing vocals with Bebel Gilberto in the samba "Ila de Copacabana," and remembering Santana in "Oye Como Va," where he creates a new refrain. In the false flamenco "I Wanna Lu" he comes out with surrealistic verses worthy of the Luis Buñuel film *O Cão Andaluz*. The polyrhythmic salad that makes up the album includes the ingredients of classic styles like rumba and cha-cha-cha and popular styles of cumbia and salsa/son, all tempered with Brown's imaginative production, captivating percussion arrangements and warm vocals.

When asked about the creative process behind the album, Brown is quick to credit the musicians who worked with him to make it happen. "Composing is something extremely natural in me, like with all songwriters. And when you have a good crop [of songs] it's wonderful to send them out into the world. So first thing I did was invite two producers, both of whom I had worked with in the past, Alê Siqueira and Andres Levin. The others I really wanted in the project were Angá Diaz and Papi Oviedo. Papi Oviedo plays the tres, a Cuban instrument that is similar to our *viola caipira* but with a slightly different accent. Angá Diaz plays with Irakere, and is one of the best *congeiros*... he appeared in Buena Vista Social Club and works with many of those artists. So this was the way of bringing together Bahia (which was born before Cuba), which had the same traffic of African slaves, of Yoruba and people of many other ethnicities. And we can understand this here in Brazil; perhaps we percussionists understand it better than anyone.

"So since this project was conceived in and for Spain, I also decided to firm up an invite I had made to Rosario Flores [popular Spanish singer who played the female bullfighter in the Almodovar film *Talk to Her*]. Now, there is a curious story. I had done the whole lyrics in Portuguese, and I didn't really know how to translate it to Spanish. So I asked this guy, a filmmaker called Angelo Dias, to help me translate it. Not exactly translate, but what I call *transcriação* [trans-creation]. I wanted it to be a version, with the same meaning and feeling as the Portuguese, and it came out great. It was wonderful to work with Bebel Gilberto... she is a great talent in her own right. I wrote music for this cd with Davi Moraes, and lyrics with Arnaldo Antunes. So this process I see as very healthy, and it has given me much pleasure."

Brown's exuberant musicality, as always, runs in many different directions, so many directions that he at times runs the risk of getting lost. "Carlitos is a wanderer," theorizes Brown. When he lets his legs and feet guide his intuition, it works, like with the opening rumba "Carlito Marrón," the tasty "Cumbia Moura" and "Clima Quente."

The irrepressible Brown seems to apply the practice of intuitive writing in his lyrics: *Nego do tato/ Nego do canto/ Nego do tantã/ Nego do tonto/ Nego do espaço/ Nego no banco/ Nego de plantão/ Nego do bardo/ Nego do Banto/ Nego do clã Fon/ Nego dos Santos/ Virgula/ Pele/ Virgula*. The truly amazing part is how he is able to make similar semantic contortions in English as well, rhyming "pés" with "sub-

way" and "darling" with "tamborim." This is the Brown of a thousand and one references and ideas.



Carlinhos Brown was raised in Salvador's periphery. He assumed his stage name after once being compared to James Brown while getting down on the dance floor. During the '80s his percussion skills made him one of Bahia's most sought-after players. In 1985, when Carlinhos was 23, he joined Caetano Veloso's band for the album *Estrangeiro*, and one of Brown's compositions "Meia Lua Inteira" became a big hit. Soon thereafter he accompanied João Gilberto, Djavan and João Bosco on world tours.

In the '90s he jumped into the national and international arena as founder and leader of the Timbalada group, made up of over 100 drummers and singers, mostly poor youths from his birthplace of Salvador's Candeal neighborhood. The heavy rhythms and lighthearted lyrics took Brazil by storm, and soon spinoff ensembles were operating under his tutelage—Lactomia (for very young kids), Boiacha Maria (all-female group) and Gang-Ogã. He also set up various projects to improve the quality of life in the Candeal, which have grown over the years and now include a state-of-the-art cultural center, Candyall Ghetto Square, hub of activity for the community.

He released his stunning debut solo album *Alphagamabetizado* in 1996 and *Omelete Man* three years later, showcasing his talents as singer, instrumentalist and producer. More than 200 of his compositions have been recorded by other singers, including Gal Costa, Marisa Monte, Sergio Mendes, Daniela Mercury, Cassia Eller and Daude, and the number of his session and guest recordings for Brazilian and international artists' albums is up around 500. He is happily married to Helena Buarque de Holanda, daughter of MPB legend Chico Buarque, and the father of two.

This international project came in a strange time in Brown's career. After a period of low popularity, where he was received with plastic bottles by the Rock in Rio III crowd, he had shows canceled and saw record sales slip. His head rolled in the mass firing at EMI Brasil last year, following the commercial failure of *Bahia do Mundo—Mito e Verdade* (2001). Brown was without a recording contract, until overtures came from BMG Spain. Meanwhile, the Tribalistas' album was taking off, selling nearly one million copies, topping the list of the most-played songs in Brazil—first with "Ja Sei Namorar" followed by "Velha Infancia"—and garnering fantastic press all over the world. Ironically it was released by the very EMI that had fired Brown only a couple of months earlier.

As a member of Tribalistas, together with Marisa Monte and Arnaldo Antunes, Brown experienced the highest level of popularity and success of his musical career. "The success [of Tribalistas] didn't affect my head," says Brown. "Selling records has always been the least of my worries. And *Carlito* is not a commercial project, never was," he affirms.

Released in Europe in April, *Carlinhos Brown é Carlito Marrón* charted well in Spain and France, rendering Brown a full agenda of shows during the European festival season, and an extension to New York. There has been no Brazilian tour planned, and home sales don't look overly promising. The album is being treated by BMG Brasil as more of a curiosity, a capricious release from an eccentric artist, and is not being taken very seriously. But Brown doesn't care. "It is very important to me that the album be released in Brazil. Even with all the European success, I have no plans to leave my country."

Brown's concrete plans in Brazil include an album and tour with bossa nova legend João Donato. He would also like to work with more Cuban artists and further develop the connection he explored in this album. We recall another Baiano with a high-profile Latin/Spanish-language album a few years back—Caetano Veloso and his *Fina Estampa*. The project had much greater repercussions internationally than in Brazil. Maybe Brazil never really will come to terms with its Latin heritage. Or will it? Could Carlito Marrón be the one to wake everybody up? The big difference, it seems, exists between how the world sees Brazil, and how Brazil sees itself. And Carlinhos Brown is there to help make the connection. ◆