

The Creeping Emancipation of Forró

by Fabian Kern

Unnoticed by a broader public a new dance established itself in Europe in the course of the last ten years. Off the beaten track of dance schools primarily young people in university cities dance a dance which originally derives from the northeast of Brazil and spread across all of Brazil in the 1950s.

In this culture clash patriarchic role models of traditional Forró meet seemingly emancipated students and conflicts resulting thereof are being carried out on the dance floor or in broad discussions on a daily basis.

The History of Forró

In the second half of the 20th century millions of people migrated within Brazil from the dry northeast towards the metropolises Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. One of those migrants was Luiz Gonzaga, who came to Rio de Janeiro in the end of the 1940s and who together with Humberto Teixeira played the first Baião pieces in the streets. Forró actually is the name for a kind of a folk festival in the rural regions of the Brazilian Northeast. However, it later also became a collective term for the various rhythms from the northeast.

Classic Forró lyrics are written by artists in urban areas and their lyrics mainly refer to the living conditions in the rural Northeast. Hence the term Forró „pé-de-serra“ (from “the foot of the mountains”). The early authors succeeded in making the subjects of the rural northeast accessible for an urban audience in the metropolises yet at the same time satisfying the longing of the perpetually arriving migrants for the homeland they had left behind.

The rural northeast and the urban southwest shared their predominantly patriarchic roles within society they ascribed to man and woman. The accepted role of a woman was that of a housewife who subordinates to her husband, who is being prepared for marriage from childhood on and who does not revolt against the man in the house. The roles of women displayed in the lyrics of forró songs correlate with this social context. It was not until the 1960s that a slow emancipation of the role of the woman within Forró began. Symptomatic of it is the Rainha do Xaxado (Queen of Xaxado) Marinês. She began her career in the late 1950s at the side of her husband Abidas as part of “Patrulha de Choque do Rei do Baião” who went on tour with Luiz Gonzaga.

The emergence of Bossa Nova in the 1950s and of the Tropicalismo in the 1960s put great pressure on Forró artists and made it more and more difficult for them to produce successful disc records and to fill concert halls.

In the 1970s, the so-called Porno-Forró tried to regain audience with ambiguous sexual innuendos. In lyrics women outside traditional female images were being extolled. Those characters were however discussed quite controversially as for example Genival Lacerda’s „Severina Xique Xique“ (1975). On the one hand, women were assigned a distinctly more active role in society, on the other hand this extension of the scope of action was rejected by conservative forces as morally objectionable. Female musicians like Clemilda, Maria Alcina and Marinês achieved success by means of the ambiguous Porno Forró. Nevertheless,

Marinês sold the song „Gosto de tudo grande“ („I like everything big“, 1980) written by her to another artist as she was ashamed to put her name underneath it.

Despite Porno-Forró the descent of Forró continued until in the 1990s radio stations virtually no longer played Forró. The hidden references to sexuality altered around the turn of the millennium and nowadays they are the main subject of many popular songs of “Forró Eletrônico“. Emblematic of this style of music is the stage show of the very successful group „Aviões Do Forró“. It virtually consists solely of singer Solange Almeida who plays his show with the help of an exchangeable band in the background and eight half naked female dancers.

Forró Universitário

In the beginning of the 1990s a group of students of the USP (Universidade de São Paulo) began to stop the downfall of „Forró pé-de-serra“. They organised parties to which they invited traditional Forró bands as for example Trio Virgulino. In this the music of „Forró Universitário“ explicitly distinguishes itself from the popular „Forró Eletrônico“. In „Forró Universitário“ the students expanded the rudimentary dance of the Forró parties of the northeast by elements from many popular dances such as „Samba de Gafiera“ (Salonsamba), „Coco“ or „Rockabilly“.

The return to „Forró pé-de-serra“ and the diversification of the dance generated many new bands such as Falamansa, Circuladô de Fulô, Rastapé, Estakazero or Bicho de Pé. Since that time a vivid community each year pilgrimages to festivals like the “Festival Nacional Forró de Itaunas” by the coast of Espírito Santo or the Rootstock Festival in the state of São Paulo.

Despite the „Forró Universitário“ community making a fair effort to distance itself from „Forró Eletrônico“ there is for example still the prejudice in Rio de Janeiro that Forró parties are visited only by men to get off with women. This idea then unfortunately leads to certain events being frequented by men on the lookout for an affair.

Forró in Europe

„Forró Universitário“ mainly reached Europe by means of already existing Capoeira networks. Here young Ex-Brazilians teamed up with Capoeira enthusiastic Europeans and danced Forró at their evening events. Even when in October of 2006 the first Brazil party took place in Stuttgart many of the organisers came from the environment of a Capoeira group. At these Brazil Parties other popular music styles in addition to Forró such as Axé and Funk were also being played. There was however a Forró trial class at each party. This was how the foundation was laid for the Forró de Domingo parties, which still take place in Stuttgart each Sunday to date.

From the Sunday evening parties soon the need for more profound dance lessons emerged, which took place on additional dates during the week. As a consequence, in April 2008 the first Forró festival in Stuttgart has been organised, which was the first of its kind in Germany and probably in Europe as well. By now there is a festival in Europe at almost every weekend. At these festivals there always are live music and dance workshops - often

accompanied by lectures, music workshops or the screening of films. The larger festivals bring together almost thousand participants from all of Europe.

Today's Forró community in Europe is - from dance instructors over DJs through to musicians - male-dominated. In the production of Forró-events there are by now a few female producers and there also is slow progress regarding the female dancing instructors.

Until now, except for the dance luminary Juliana Braga, who has already been teaching Forró and Samba de Gafiera in Amsterdam for decades, almost only male dancing instructors are giving lessons. Women usually only teach together with a man. For many Fornozeirs this is a logical consequence of the fact that it usually is the man who leads the dance and he thus is apparently better suited for giving classes. Workshops are therefore often addressed at leading dancers only and by large ignore the needs of female dancers or followers respectively. Female dance instructors as Camila Alves regularly brings this shortcoming to charges so that the Forró community slowly starts rethinking its internal gender roles tries to also invite female dancing instructors to festivals.

A much discussed topic within Forró also is the role allocation in dancing itself. Some groups deliberately emphasise the roles as leaders and followers and avoid the explicit assignment of biological genders. At parties and festivals it often happens that more women than men attend. To shorten the waiting time or to even out the imbalance in the traditional role allocation, women not seldom dance with women. A few take pleasure in the role of the leader and stay with it for the majority of their dances.

In classes, too, women more and more take the role of the leader. In doing so misunderstandings are still happening, in which women are forced into the role of a follower as men think that women only dance as leaders to help out. They do not immediately understand that it sometimes is a deliberate decision of women to dance as leaders. The existing dominance ratios within the group often lead to the women not being able to articulate their needs and thus comply to the role of the follower.

In the beginning of March a post by Enrique Matos provoked a discussion in social media. He quoted lyrics by Luiz Gonzaga: „Morro dizendo que não quero não aceito e não tolero dança de homem com homem...” (“I die with the opinion that I don't want to accept and that I don't tolerate men dancing with men...”).

Despite most comments not supporting the statement given in the lyrics, this debate shows that it is far less accepted when men dance with men than when women dance with women. A further expression of latent homophobia even in the on first sight very liberal Forró community of Europe.

As opposed to standard dances there are no consistent names for figures or movements in Forró. Depending on which region dancers come from and from whom they have learned motion sequences, styles and names differ. This sometimes leads to discussions within the community about the identity of the dance and the type of music which is allowed to be played. Terra Pasqualini, one of the founders of Forró de Domingo, describes his personal approach as follows:

In the beginning, I was always concerned: what movements are they doing there or what music are they playing? This is not the real thing... Today I think to myself: I don't mind - the

main thing is that people have fun! I teach what I regard as sensible when being asked - if people want to do something else, they are welcome to do so.