

### Rio Hip Hop On The Edge: Brazil's A Filial Links Beats And Rhymes With The Jungle, The Streets, And The People

In a room on the edge of a tropical forest in Rio de Janeiro, five friends lay down tracks on hacked software, coordinating their takes with the purring of fist-size cicadas and the occasional cry of a monkey. The sounds of this global city bleed through every beat on Rio hip hop crew A Filial's \$1,99, out December 2, 2008 on Verge Records, an independent label dedicated to supporting both innovative global artists and music education projects in underserved communities. Having kicked off Verge's much-lauded debut compilation, *The Inspiring New Sounds of Rio de Janeiro*, A Filial returns with their first U.S. album presenting their distinctive hip hop style.

Unlike the harder-edged sound of Brazilian rap crews from São Paulo, Rio's bohemian scene has sparked hip hop that is perhaps more Brazilian and more cosmopolitan. A Filial's distinct vibe is reflected on their home turf, the neighborhood of Santa Teresa where most of the crew, including founding MC Edu Lopes, grew up. Here, up on a mountain overlooking the rest of the city, sunny exuberance melds with dire poverty. Artists live next to favela dwellers, and a democratic spirit of the neighborhood underpins the music on \$1,99. The album title refers to Brazil's equivalent of the American ninety-nine cent store, where you can get almost anything you need and which is accessible to anyone.

A Filial came out of Rio's skateboarding scene and a hip hop circle known as the Hemp Family. "Our first tape was made using a Playstation, a karaoke set, a \$10 mic, a toy that made music, and a used cassette," Lopes recalls. "We wanted to develop a hip hop sound that was more regionally based." The following year a track was licensed to the skateboard brand Agacê for their "Todos Ouvidos" or "All Heard" compilation. The group's sound emerged in these early years, which are documented with various music videos found on YouTube.

Fifties bossa nova mixed samba with jazz, sixties tropicália mixed samba with rock, and A Filial mixes Brazilian roots music and other world influences in the envelope of rap and hip hop culture. On \$1,99, with the group's percussionist Rodrigo Pacato, A Filial explores the unmistakable rhythms and harmonies of Northeastern Brazil and the new spirit of Rio's old samba spots in notorious neighborhoods like Lapa, where racy nightlife meets crumbling colonial facades. While trumpeter and MC Ben Lamar, who grew up in Chicago listening to his dad's extensive Brazilian record collection, shares the group's love of classic Brazilian popular music, Lopez and the other Brazilian members share Lamar's passion for classic rap from NWA

to the Beastie Boys. The musicians take turns writing songs that reflect the band's multifaceted cultural reality.

The album's very structure is a nod to the roda, the symbolic circle in which many dances of Brazil take place. "A Ciranda Continua" gives listeners a taste of what's to come, echoing the hip hop mantra "It don't stop!" and calling out the names of the group members over a maracatu rhythm and leading into "Calma Pedro," another maracatu. The ciranda, a Northeastern Brazilian dance circle, runs through interludes interspersed with the album's tracks and is a metaphor for the cycles and rotations of the planet.

Things get serious on "Baiao One Two," whose name refers to both a forró dance beat from Northeastern Brazil and a favorite Brazilian dish. Lamar's lyrics come from his first-hand experience with economic hardship in Brazil, where many lack the luxury of easy access to food. He raps, "Pass the peas like we used to say, but this time across the ocean, to the world they rank as third, but I am thinking first how to get this plan in motion."

"I think back to my time in Alabama, where my mother's family is from," Lamar explains. "My grandma there taught me that our dinner table extends beyond our family. You have to share your nourishment. This song calls for that sharing on a global scale."

Though the band's politics may be global, there's a special local vibe on "Aqui Se Faz Aqui Nao Paga," which features the vocals and cavaquinho of band member and sambista Flávio 52. The track is like a night out at a Rio institution, the samba de boteco, a hole-in-the-wall bar where samba musicians sit not on stage but at a table full of beers with a couple of mics in front of them.

While Rio has its traditional side, it's full of characters, people doing their own thing. On "Judy does Judo," A Filial uses a classic Partido Alto-style samba rhythm to give a shout out to quirky folks who break the mold; like the song's heroine Judy, who jumps into a capoeira circle karate chops blazing, sporting metallic tube socks that would make Klaus Nomi green with envy.

The light-hearted humor continues on "Brown Sueter," an homage to old school hip hop. "In old hip hop they might be rapping about their Adidas, about material objects," says Lamar. "One day Edu and I were both rocking these ugly brown sweaters. And we were wearing them with

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pride. It doesn't need to be a million-dollar thing." The track's big band horn sample simulates the traffic and clamor of city life.

While Brazilian beats and Rio life are at the heart of \$1,99, A Filial also has a long-standing electronic fascination. "Vira Lata," which translates as "mutt," is an anthem of mixing up musical styles. A Filial does not claim to have any technical pedigrees, but they're proud of their voracious musical palette. Here the typical boom-bap of hip hop merges with samba played on a drum machine and layered with the old-school scratches by the group's DJ Castro. "Like a Baby's Kiss" mixes the march-like frevo style of Pernambuco with Chicago-style house music.

A Filial's home-brewed blend of old and new, organic and electronic, North and South, is as natural as the wild soundscape of Rio itself or the unexpected offerings at the dollar store. "But being in a band is not always easy," says Lopes. "It's like a marriage, but without the sex, and without the money...if I had to describe our style of music, it's music made with love [laughter]."

For more information visit <http://www.vergerecords.org>

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