

Jane Cornwell catches up with Cimafunk, the Cuban sensation taking the world by storm

Cimafunk wasn't born with the funk. For the longest time a career in music wasn't even on his mind. But his family home on Luis Lazo street in the suburbs of Pinar del Rio, the centre of tobacco production in western Cuba, pulsed with the sounds of the area. There was traditional *son*, *danzón* and rumba rhythms on the radio; Afro-American soul records that his uncle, a neighbour, loved to play and there was reggaeton, of course. If you were a kid in Cuba in the 90s and 2000s, there had to be reggaeton. Then there were songs sung at the local *nueva trova* club by such esteemed troubadours as Pablo Milanés and Ray Fernandez, whose stuff he adored.

"Every single day there was music coming from somewhere," says Cimafunk (aka the 33-year-old Erik Alejandro Iglesias Rodríguez). "My mum sang Michael Jackson songs around the house in perfect tune. On Sundays I was always singing and dancing with my sister and my cousins. I had this weird little trumpet someone gave me, and I grew up singing in the choir at my grandma's Baptist church."

"I knew I had a pretty good voice," he adds, "and I always had some sort of melody in my head. Now I cannot stop. But all this?" In a hotel room in New York, midway through an American tour, he pauses to flash a grin. "It's crazy, right? Totally *loco!*"

Cimafunk's delirious blend of Afro-Cuban rhythms and US-spawned rock, hip-hop and funk has hit a sweet spot internationally, and no wonder. His current album *El Alimento* (The Nutrition) is a dynamic collection of blues ballads, Spanish-guitar-tinged anthems and freewheeling dance tunes that mines the gold at the intersection of different genres, with the whole thing buoyed by Cimafunk's fluid tenor voice, recalling everyone from James Brown to Benny Moré.

The album also boasts features from a *mélange* of A-list international collaborators: US hip-hop legends CeeLo Green and Lupe Fiasco and the funk godfather himself, George Clinton. Afro-Colombian hip-hop crew ChocQuibTown are here, along with Jamaican dancehall star Stylo G. From Cuba come the Afro-Cuban *reggaetonero* El Micha, evergreen Cuban rumba outfit Los Papines and iconic pianist Chucho Valdés, founder of seminal 1970s jazz/funk/*timba* group Irakere. "What Erik has done is unite the two tendencies, Afro-Cuban and African-American," Valdés has been quoted as saying. "He has converted this into a new school that until now I haven't heard done." Cimafunk lets out a low whistle, "Chucho Valdés, man. He invented a whole new genre [timba]. Who can say that?"

It's not like Cuban music has never had a thing with African-American rhythms. There has been plenty of crossover. In 1947 the young Cuban conga virtuoso Chano Pozo joined Dizzy Gillespie's band onstage at Carnegie Hall in the first attempt to fuse syncopated Cuban rhythms with jazz at a professional



Emmy Park

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level, opening the way for the likes of Ray Barretto and Mongo Santamaría and others up to today. In the 1960s Cuban *son* famously went to New York and returned to the island as salsa, and down on the military base in Guantanamo province in the 70s and 80s, the African American variety show *Soul Train* reigned supreme.

Cimafunk, however, has lassoed the zeitgeist with his slick showmanship and natural musical ability. Everyone, it seems, wants a piece of this former medical student with the smooth moves and a hype man's

zeal. Having set out his stall in 2017 with his self-released debut album *Terapia* (Therapy), he became a household name in Cuba after his Afrobeat-flavoured single 'Mi Voy' went gangbusters. Visit Havana in 2018 and there, all along the Malecón, hanging out at contemporary art space Fabrica del Arté, were millennials decked out *à la* Cimafunk in flares, fake fur and oversized shades.

In 2019 he made his first foray into the US market at South by Southwest (SXSW) music festival. Backed by a sprawling all-Cuban band on guitars, keys, drums, percussion, trombone and saxophone, buoyed by an aesthetic variously involving fly away collars, bell bottoms, bare male chests with bow ties and some serious Afro-topiary, his effect was immediate. *Billboard* breathlessly named him as a 'Top 10 Latin Artist to Watch.'

Rolling Stone waxed educational: 'An electrifying combination of funk and soul, layered over the five-beat clavé, or the heartbeat of Cuban music, brought to Cuba by enslaved people from West Africa.' Which is fitting, given that the name Cimafunk is a *nom de plume* chosen for its associations with *cimarrón*, which speaks to Cubans of African descent who resisted and escaped slavery, creating walled *palenque* communities by way of protection, as well as to Cimafunk's self-styled status as a pilgrim in search of a new musical hybrid. ▶