



Damien Diaz

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His message, he says, “is all about happiness and enjoying yourself. It all depends on what you want to do with your time. To me, the most important things in life are family, love, food and sex.” And of course, community: “From living in Pinar del Río I know the importance of being together, laughing together, living together. I want people at a CimaFunk show to feel that sort of communion.”

CimaFunk was expected to work in the health profession, like his parents, and more obliquely, his grandmother, a herbalist and healer. “She’s 100-years-old this year. She’s always been the one that cures the kids, gives people natural medicine from plants, who knows about the good foods. From her I get my health and energy.”

He was in his third year studying medicine at university, with side hustles in a reggaeton crew and a stint singing trova songs he’d written himself (“the lyrics are about social issues and super important; I used a lot of metaphor”), when he caught a show by Ray Fernandez that was so full of life and possibility and freedom, that in 2014 he dropped out and moved to Havana to be a musician.

As the Cuban catchphrase goes, *no es fácil*. Is not easy. “In Pinar del Río it was always so chilled. You could walk barefoot to see a gig! In Havana, I had nowhere to live so I spent one

year staying on different couches. But I was receiving so much musical information, doing so much writing and recording. *Terapia* came out two years later.”

One of its tracks, ‘Alabeo’, features singer Brenda Navarrete, a mainstay of Interactivo, the renowned jazz collective led by acclaimed pianist, singer and composer Roberto Carcassés and featuring the likes of rapper Telmary Díaz and trumpeter Julito Padrón. CimaFunk sang lead vocals with Interactivo for two years, in between guesting with bands such as Hoyo Colorao and doing backing vocals for David Torrens and Raúl Paz.

Along the way he got an eight-month gig on a cruise ship, covering tunes from the funk and soul songbook. His hair got higher. His hems got wider. His English became fluent. “It was a big training. I was mixing in Afro-Cuban acts like Benny Moré alongside songs by James Brown, Bill Withers, Earth, Wind & Fire and Sly and the Family Stone. My voice was so ready, singing for five hours every day. I recommend that everyone goes on a cruise,” he continues, happily. “It is like

“You must never forget where you come from”

being in a lovely safe country in the middle of the ocean where everything's okay. You can just lie down in the sun.”

On his return, he founded CimaFunk: a multidimensional project greater than the sum of its parts, where musicians, designers, photographers, producers, managers and stylists were vital cogs in the wheel. After *Terapia* came the single ‘El Potaje’ (The Stew), a rollicking, passing-of-the-baton tune featuring Cuban musical royalty Orquesta Aragón, tres master Pancho Amat, Chucho Valdés and the diva Omara Portuondo. The accompanying video was part of the quality package.

He'd stormed the US and Europe and performed his only gig in London when the pandemic hit, stalling his career. Locked down in 2020, he released the EP *Cun Cun Prá* and reconfigured his plans for world domination. Once he'd secured the services of musician/Grammy-winning producer Jack Splash (Alicia Keys, Kendrick Lamar, John Legend) for the boundary-breaking *El Alimento*, he was away.

“Jack Splash and I talked a lot about the sound I wanted, how to develop the group, and he started sending me a lot of music to listen to. Marvin Gaye. Fania All-Stars. Parliament. I passed through a whole nutritional process and then I started to dream,” says CimaFunk, who splits his time between the south of France and Miami (where he has family among the Cuban diaspora), and whose fan-boy gratitude is palpable. “I was like, ‘Yo, bro, how about we get George Clinton?’ My manager called around and then there we were at George's studio in Florida, jamming like we were sitting on the Malecón, drinking rum and talking about life. He threw in classic George lines like ‘What's a booty? How will I know if I'm shaking it?’”

He's proud to have included Los Papines, the exceptional five-piece Afro-Cuban rumba group founded in 1963 and featuring descendants of the original members. “They made some of the most original music in Cuba, I swear. When I was a kid, everyone knew them and their percussion harmonies. It's been a difficult time for the living legends of Cuban music. But they are helping me.”

He can't wait to play the UK: Glastonbury, London, WOMAD. “To see all those acts from all over the world in one place is so much musical nutrition,” he says of the latter, “and to be there with my team, my tribe, my family, makes me so grateful.”

But for all his funky crossovers, his reinforcing of the cultural bridge between the long-estranged Cuba and US, Cuba is where his heart is. More specifically, Pinar del Río, where, as he sings in Spanish on the resistance anthem-come-travelogue ‘Eso Es Cuba’, ‘en mi barrio Pinar del Río, en la calle de Luis Lazo, hay que jugarla, pa andar en talla’ – you gotta have your head in the game to keep up. “You must never forget where you come from,” he says, smiling. “It's like a year since I've had my hands on my hometown. When I go back, I'll be taking the funk.” ♦

WIN

We have three copies of *El Alimento* to give away. To enter, answer: What is the name of CimaFunk's hometown in Cuba? See p19 for competition rules

- + **DATES** CimaFunk plays London's Village Underground July 28 and WOMAD UK on July 29
- + **LISTEN** Hear ‘Sal de Lo Malo’ from the album *El Alimento* on this issue's covermount CD, track 12