

# Living the funk

His fans include the biggest names in music and entertainment. Now the king of Afro-Latin music CimaFunk has his sights set on conquering Australia, writes  
**JANE CORNWELL**

**T**here's a party waiting for me when I get back to Cuba," says CimaFunk, sitting outside a cafe in New Orleans wearing denim flares and vintage shades, a patterned bandana around his geometric Afro. "People in my hometown are super excited. But yo, they already knew that I cook the funk really tight."

It's a few days before the 2023 Grammy Awards, where CimaFunk's second album *El Alimento* ("The Nourishment") is up for Best Latin Rock or Alternative Album alongside recordings by artists including Spanish pop superstar Rosalia. Win or lose, he's still winning. *El Alimento*'s blend of Afro-Cuban rhythms and African-American funk has the world double-taking, not the least for its starry cast of collaborators: Cuban jazz icon Chucho Valdes, rapper Lupe Fiasco, Parliament-Funkadelic chief George Clinton.

Wherever CimaFunk plays – be it festivals including Glastonbury, Roskilde and next month, WOMADelaide, or venues such as the Hollywood Bowl, London's Village Underground and Tipitina's here in New Orleans, the centre of funk and jazz and CimaFunk's home away from home — he packs a joy-filled wallop. His celebrity fanbase is growing: Susan Sarandon is a groupie. Owen Wilson and will.i.am have taken selfies. A pinned tweet on CimaFunk's Twitter page shows Paul McCartney sidestage at a gig, his hand on his heart in gratitude.

"My mission is to bring people happiness," says CimaFunk, 33, who was born Erik Alejandro Iglesias Rodriguez in Pinar del Rio in rural western Cuba. "I want them to release emotional baggage, and to love themselves and others. To dance so hard they feel sorry for the dance-floor."

Blessed with natural musical ability and the slick showmanship of a Prince or James Brown, CimaFunk leads his nine-piece all-Cuban band El Tribu ("The Tribe") with a verve as cathartic as it is infectious: gyrating, hip-swivelling, shoulder-shaking. Delivering his Spanish-language lyrics in a wide-ranging tenor. Grinning at the roars of recognition that meet *Mi Voy*, a tune that went gangbusters in Cuba on its release in 2017, blaring from cars, shops, ringtones, making him a household name across his sunny, beleaguered island.

He'll dial it down for dramatic ballad, *Salvaje*. Simmer the tension with the hip-hop-fuelled *Rompelo*. Unleash a full-wattage mix of funk grooves and tumbao riffs on *Funk Aspirin*, a track he recorded with Clinton in a Florida recording studio ("What's a booty and how will I know if I'm shaking it?" ad libs the funk pioneer, 81) and wields like a cultural weapon. Vital to CimaFunk's remit – as vital as spreading the love – is re-establishing ancestral connections between Afro-Cuban music and African-American funk, rap and soul.

"What Cima is doing is a brand new funk," Clinton told the *New York Times*. "(Legendary Nuyorican percussionist) Tito Puente and that kind of stuff. (Nuyorican bandleader) Tito Rodriguez. All of that was my favourite music back in New York. The mambo and the cha-cha was the same as disco in the '70s."

An Africanist who often begins his concerts with an a cappella take on *Faustino Congo*, a poem about a runaway slave, CimaFunk is to Afro-Latin power what James Brown was to the