



"Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud!" rallying cry. His nom de plume is associated with the word cimarron, which speaks to Cubans of African descent who resisted and escaped slavery and lived self-sustaining lives inside walled palenque communities (the similarly defiant maroons of Jamaica and mawons of Haiti dwelled deep inside their countries' respective mountain ranges).

"Those communities were a mix of different tribes. They made a new language, built a new society. They lifted each other up," says Cimafunk, whose song *Esto Es Cuba* ("This Is Cuba") namechecks the island's Indigenous Arawak people, who were virtually wiped out within 100 years of Columbus's landfall in 1492 – and brings up Cuba's hidden history. Including the fact residents of eastern Cuba's Guantanamo province got the funk in the '70s by watching American TV variety show *Soul Train*, thanks to the antenna of the nearby US military base.

Cimafunk wasn't born with the funk. For the longest time a career in music wasn't on his mind. Sure, the family home on Luis Lazo street – located down the end of a dirt road next to the tobacco fields typical of the region – pulsed with local rhythms. Traditional stuff like danzon, rumba and son, the languid mix of African rhythms and Spanish melodies famously sung by the great sonero Beny More. Government radio broadcast concerts by bands such as Los Van Van, Charanga Habanera and Latin jazz heroes Irakere – whose leader, pianist Chucho Valdes, invented the popular salsa-dance genre known as timba.

Their uncle and next-door neighbour had a Russian Moskvitch car with a cassette player, and connections: "He'd leave the car doors open and play tapes of Stevie Wonder, Madonna and Michael Jackson's album *Invincible*. I'd dance in the street with my sister and cousins. My mother would sing along in perfect tune."

The young Erik grew up singing in the choir in his grandmother's Baptist church, and later spat verse in a reggaeton crew. But it was the songs of freedom and possibility sung by Cuba's nueva trova folk troubadours that got him. He'd walk barefoot to

the local trova club to catch up-and-coming singer songwriters and big-name touring acts such as Pablo Milanés and Silvio Rodríguez. Inspired, he started writing his own ballads, using metaphor and double meanings as they did.

He enrolled to study medicine, which was expected. His parents worked as health professionals. His grandmother is a herbalist and healer ("She's 102. She's a phenomenon"). He was in his third-year biochemistry class in 2014 when he realised with a jolt that the thought bubble above his head was full of melodies, not formulas. He dropped out of college and moved to Havana to pursue music, couch surfing for a year as he sang, jammed, soaked up information. For a while he worked as a mechanic.

Cimafunk's singing voice marked him out: sonorous, sweetly nasal, not unlike that of his hero Beny More. He landed a gig singing with Interactivo, the renowned leftfield jazz collective led by pianist Roberto Carcasses and featuring a fluid line-up of crack musicians and singers. But his stagecraft was rudimentary; a YouTube video of an Interactivo gig captures Erik Rodríguez's awkwardness in front of a crowd and a mic.

"Jejeje." He laughs, remembering. "I was super shy, man! I used to perform with my eyes closed. I mean I was surrounded by conservatoire-trained musicians and I'd never studied music! The beginning was hard but I learned how to develop the groove and release myself to say whatever I feel in the moment."

He wasn't afraid to hustle. One day he knocked on the door of Raul Paz, a bandleader from Pinar del Rio who was doing very nicely in Havana: "I said, 'I'm from your hometown'. I played him some of my songs on guitar and said he needed someone to be part of this big concert he was doing at the Karl Marx Theatre in two weeks' time. The show was all black people. Everyone was in suits, dressed super elegant, but I had no clothes. I was wearing torn, too-tight white jeans my sister gave me, white shoes and big white glasses.

"Latin pimp clothes." He laughs again. "They put that show on

live TV for the whole country so everyone saw me. Everyone remembered my funky vibe. After that opportunity, everything started to happen."

He got an eight-month gig on a cruise ship, ostensibly to sing the old-style standards made popular in the west by the Buena Vista Social Club. But once he touched down in Panama, where the ship was docked, he'd gorged himself on YouTube videos of American soul singers and funksters from the Ohio Players and Sly and the Family Stone, to Funkadelic and Earth, Wind and Fire. The groove called. "Even now, each time as I hear that aggressive hit on the one (in funk music the emphasis is on the first beat), I get crazy."

His hair got higher. His hems got wider. His English became fluent. "It was a big training. I was mixing tunes by Beny More and (mambo king) Perez Prado alongside songs by James Brown, Marvin Gaye. The more I listened to the (African American) funk the more I could hear the Afro-Cuban influence in the percussion. I mean James Brown's conga guy plays open, not closed" – he slaps his hand down, flat, on the table – "which is Afro-Cuban, 100 per cent."

On his return to Havana he founded Cimafunk: a multidimensional project in which musicians, designers, photographers, producers, managers and stylists were crucial to the brand.

In 2017, he self-released his debut album *Terapia* (Therapy), which won a slew of national awards and had the millennials hanging out on Havana's Malecon boulevard decked out Cimafunk-style in flares, fake fur and oversized shades.

In 2019, he made his first foray into the US market at the industry-heavy South by South West (SXSW) music festival, part of a Stateside tour done in partnership with Cuban Educational Travel's US Cultural Exchange.

Named a "Top 10 Latin Artist to Watch" by Billboard magazine he went on to sell out venues including Drom in New York and Tipitina's in New Orleans; in Cuba he hosted a clutch of New Orleans acts – Trombone Shorty, the Soul Rebels, Tank & the Bangas – there for a project titled *Getting Funky* in Havana.

"I learned a lot about the history and struggles of the African descendants in New Orleans and their strong connection with Cuba," says Cimafunk, who refuses to comment on the sociopolitical complexities of his homeland, where a party in Pinar del Rio awaits, despite entreaties from Cuban fans on social media.

Locked down by the pandemic for much of 2020, he released an EP called *Cun Cun Pra* and several singles including *Beat Con Flow*, a bouncy good-time jam he recorded for Australian producer Jake "Mista" Savona for the latter's 2021 *Havana Meets Kingston Part 2* project.

Then, having secured the services of musician/Grammy winning producer Jack Splash (Kendrick Lamar, John Legend) for *El Alimento*, he was away. "Me and my manager dreamed big. We were like, 'Call Chucho! Call Lupe! Yo, call George Clinton!'"

There's a new album in the works, which he hopes to produce himself. But first, there's his Australian live debut at WOMADelaide ("To see those acts from all over the world is so much musical nutrition"); in April he's presenting the first annual CimaFest as part of the New Orleans Jazz Festival, with a program of friends including Interactivo singer Brenda Navarrete and his fellow Grammy nominee Tarriona "Tank" Ball.

Cimafunk's Grammy runnings fill his social media. There he is, jamming with nominees in Los Angeles. There, retro-styled and carpet-ready. And there, stepping out of a shiny black Cadillac. He didn't win in the end (Rosalia did). But hey, he's still winning.

"I'm living the dream, man." He flashes a grin. "Living the dream, and living the funk."

Cimafunk plays at WOMADelaide, March 10-13.



Cimafunk, main; and, from above left, performing at Teatro Nacional in January 2020 in Havana, Cuba; at WOMAD in July 2022 in Malmesbury, UK; and during the 2022 New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival in May