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Samba Beyond the Parade: An Interview with Paulinho da Viola

Tamara Courage and Albert Elduque

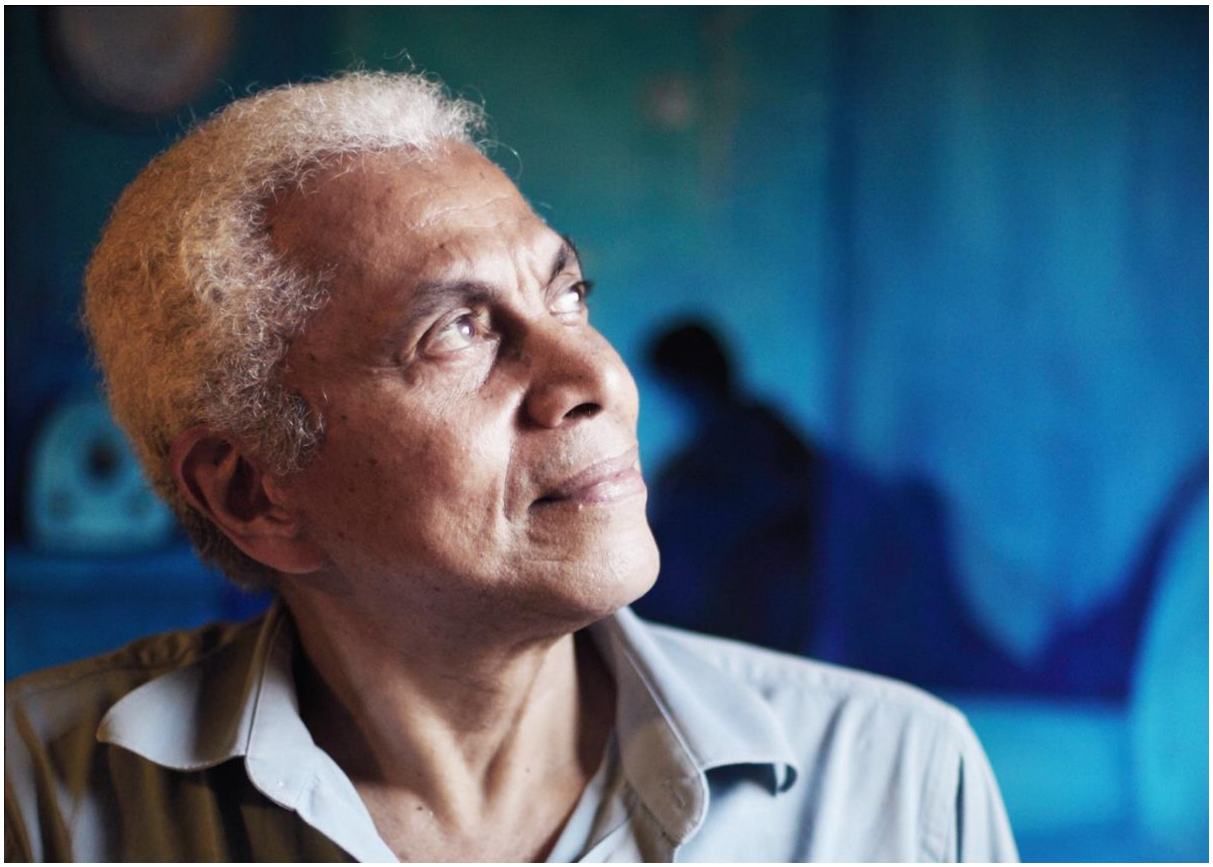

Figure 1: Paulinho da Viola. Image: Dorian.

In this interview, singer and songwriter Paulinho da Viola comments on the documentary Partido alto *(1976–1982) and his friendship with director Leon Hirszman. He also describes the origins of* partido-alto *as a variety of samba, the transformations of samba schools in the 1960s and 70s and his relationship with audiovisual media during this time period, including the music documentary* Saravah *(Pierre Barouh, 1972) and televised music festivals.*

A crucial figure in the history of samba, Paulinho da Viola was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1942. As a son of a middle-class choro *guitar player, he soon became interested in the samba that was played in the slums, most notably Samba School Portela in the Rio de Janeiro neighbourhood of Oswaldo Cruz. Paulinho's career, which started in the 1960s and continues today, combines a plethora of vital song releases such as "Foi um rio que passou em minha vida" ("A River Broke into My Life", 1970) and "Dança da solidão" ("The Dance of Loneliness", 1972) that helped rejuvenate samba, with a political stance that vindicates the roots of this music genre as a popular community practice. In line with his political beliefs, in 1970 Paulinho used his popularity to endorse the first album by Velha Guarda da Portela, a band of senior singer-songwriters who had been marginalised by the music industry.*

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In the mid-1970s, Paulinho became increasingly critical with the gradual commodification of samba and Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, to the point of breaking up with Portela Samba School when traditional composers, such as those from Velha Guarda, were ignored by the directorship. His involvement with Hirszman's Partido alto *was strongly attuned with that moment in his career, because* partido-alto *contains a variety of archaic, improvised samba that contrasts with commercial, commodified practices. He worked as a consultant, interviewer and narrator for that film, as well as a performer, alongside his admired colleagues from Velha Guarda da Portela.*

This interview was held telephonically on 21 May 2020.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: Samba has always been an important component of Brazilian cinema. Perhaps the first relevant moment was the 1930s, 40s and 50s era of *chanchadas*.

PAULINHO DA VIOLA: Based on archival resources, many samba songwriters and singers, most notably those dedicated to Carnival samba songs, reached large audiences for the first time thanks to *chanchadas*. Apart from that, some filmmakers, such as Nelson Pereira dos Santos, directed films that included samba. For example, in *Rio Zona Norte* (*Rio, Northern Zone*, 1957) the great comedy actor Grande Otelo sings samba songs composed by Zé Kéti, who originates from the slum world of samba schools.[1] One of the first Zé Kéti's sambas which became famous, "A voz do morro" ("The Voice from the Slums"), had already been included in Nelson's *Rio 40 graus* (*Rio, 40 Degrees*, 1955). It goes "Eu sou o samba. / A voz do morro sou eu mesmo sim senhor" ("I am the samba / I am the voice from the slums, yes sir!"). When Zé Kéti died, Nelson Pereira dos Santos paid homage to him with a *roda de samba* which he recorded in a documentary film. I was invited to participate, but, unfortunately, on that particular day I was unavailable.[2] Throughout history, filmmakers, particularly here in Rio de Janeiro, have had a longstanding interest in samba schools and *samba de morro*.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: You played a key role in Leon Hirszman's film *Partido alto*. How did you get involved in that project?

PAULINHO DA VIOLA: I first met Leon in the 1960s. After the 1964 military coup there were a lot of gatherings that brought film professionals close to people working in the popular music scene. That relationship had always existed in Rio de Janeiro, but it became stronger during this time, with samba meetings in Teatro Jovem, Teatro Opinião and the restaurant Zicartola. We could say that I started my career in Zicartola, where I met important songwriters such as Zé Kéti, Cartola and Elton Medeiros, who was my partner for many years and recently died. We used to talk about politics, about the music which was emerging in festivals, and all that was considered a resistance facing the political situation in the country. I met Leon in that context, and we became close friends. Together with Nelson Pereira dos Santos, he was the filmmaker from the Cinema Novo movement with a greater interest in samba. He directed a beautiful short film about Nelson Cavaquinho, for example, and one day he told me that he wanted to make a film about *partido-alto*.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: What does *partido-alto* consist of?

PAULINHO DA VIOLA: First, I should say that there are a lot of samba varieties. Samba is not only *samba batucado*, in which percussion is prominent; we also have *samba-choro*, *samba-canção*, *samba de breque*… *Partido-alto* is an archaic form of samba that originates in the enslaved black population of Bahia, in North East Brazil. Once slavery was abolished, these communities brought *partido-alto* to Rio de Janeiro, where they gathered for parties, for example in a place called "a balança" ("the scales"), in Praça Onze.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: This place was also known as Pequena África (Little Africa), wasn't it?

PAULINHO DA VIOLA: Exactly. Praça Onze became famous as the birthplace of Rio de Janeiro Carnival. But the parties at that time weren't organised at all. People coming from different places used to meet there, they would do a *roda de samba*, and sometimes it ended with violence. One might kick another while dancing, and then the other might react… That was called *samba duro* (hard samba). Apart from dancing, in *samba duro* there was a lot of improvisation: somebody would sing a short chorus, and then the participants improvised verses in a kind of verbal duel. They were called *versadores*. In this sense, *samba duro* is related to *chula-raiada*, an improvisation-based genre that former slaves brought with them from Recôncavo Bahiano, a region in Bahia. These are the oldest forms of samba in Rio de Janeiro. In fact, the music by samba pioneers such as Donga, João da Baiana, Pixinguinha and Almirante is very similar to *chula-raiada*.[3] The first samba song which was recorded and released as an album in 1917, "Pelo telefone" ("By Telephone"), by Donga, gives you a flavour of how *chula-raiada* used to be played in Rio at the beginning of the twentieth century.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: Indeed, it is said that "Pelo telefone" was created through improvisation with a large variety of participants.

PAULINHO DA VIOLA: Exactly. *Partido-alto*, which was Leon's main interest, has its origins in *chula-raiada* and somehow preserves the memory of the oldest samba practices within the black communities in Rio de Janeiro. The Carnival samba was something that eventually arrived in the late 1920s, when samba schools were created, and the first parades and contests were organised. Ismael Silva was the founder of the first samba school, Deixa Falar ("Let Them Talk") in the Estácio neighbourhood, as well as the composer of the first Carnival samba song, "Se você jurar" ("If You Swear"). It goes: "Se você jurar / que me tem amor / posso me regenerar…" ("If you swear / that you love me / I can reform myself…"). If you listen to it, you will realise that the pace of this song is completely different from the rhythms of "Pelo telefone". The new samba songs required new pacing because their main purpose was to accompany Carnival parades, and archaic forms such as *chula-raiada*, which was the basis of "Pelo telefone", weren't composed with that purpose in mind. Carnival samba had to allow people to parade. The popularisation of parades made this kind of samba highly successful but the archaic tradition of improvising survived, and still occurs today when sambists meet. One of the greatest *versadores* today is singer Zeca Pagodinho. It is said that duelling with him is really a challenge. This is a special skill. Many times, a great *versador* is not a great samba songwriter, and vice versa. For example, I am a samba songwriter, but I am not a *versador*, I cannot improvise verses.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: Leon's *Partido alto* is concerned with vindicating that archaic form of samba, and sambists such as Candeia and members of Velha Guarda da Portela are interviewed and then perform. You provide the link between the film crew and those artists. How did these artists react to Leon's intention to make a documentary film about them?

PAULINHO DA VIOLA: They loved it and were very relaxed because everything happened in a very informal environment. The crew was quite reduced: camera in the hands of the cinematographer, Leon directing and allowing people to be on their own. Unfortunately, at that time, Leon didn't have many economical resources to film, so the documentary was made in a relatively precarious situation. I recall a moment when he was editing the film and he called to show me a montage rough cut. There was an important statement by Candeia, in which he

provided information on the history of *partido-alto* and how that particular way of improvising verses had been created. I told Leon that such a statement should be included in the film, but he was sceptical because the shot was not technically well-filmed, and in the end, he discarded it. I don't know whether or not it has been preserved. Apart from that, there might have been time restrictions that didn't allow for a longer film running time, and he prioritised other interviews.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: In Leon Hirszman's personal archive, which is preserved in the Arquivo Edgard Leuenroth at the University of Campinas, there is a typescript with Leon's original project for the film. In that document he states that he aimed to meet many old samba singers, including Xangô da Mangueira and Clementina de Jesus. However, in the end those artists weren't interviewed.

PAULINHO DA VIOLA: It is a pity Leon didn't have more funding, because that would have allowed him to do more in-depth research and invite *partideiros* from other samba schools such as Mangueira, Salgueiro and Império Serrano. There were a lot of talented *partideiros* in those places. For example, in Mangueira you had Xangô and Padeirinho. Those people deserved to be in the film as well.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: In Leon's archive there is also a drafted, handwritten version of the text that you provide in a voiceover at the end of the film, in which you state that samba's commercial obligations are a menace to *partido-alto* tradition. Was that text written by you or by Leon?

PAULINHO DA VIOLA: I think it was Leon, who wrote it for me to read. But we had already talked about it because it presented our ideas about the evolution of samba schools in the 1970s. At that time samba schools had grown bigger and had increased in number as well, to the point that parades were forced to become more organised. Today you have an exact time frame to parade, and if you exceed it you lose points. In the past, samba schools were at ease and paraded for as much time as they wanted. The parade may start on Sunday at 9 or 10 p.m. and finished on Monday at 2 or 3 p.m.! Also, there were *sambas de quadra* which were improvised by the songwriters in samba schools during the Carnival rehearsals. Unfortunately, that tradition was gradually marginalised.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: Why was it marginalised?

PAULINHO DA VIOLA: Because samba schools started to be concerned with the main parade only. The improvisational *sambas de quadra* performed alongside *samba de enredo*, which was the main tune that each school selected for the official parade. In the old days *samba de enredo* used to be chosen prior to Carnival. However, as the commercial interest in samba schools grew, record companies decided to release the *sambas de enredo* during the Christmas Holiday period so that they could maximise their profits. For this reason, pressure was placed on samba schools to choose the *sambas de enredo* earlier so they could be recorded, which meant that *sambas de quadra* became a secondary practice. It was a shame, because in *sambas de quadra* there was a rich musical variety which was disregarded when all of the focus shifted to *sambas de enredo*, the main parade and their commercial benefits. At that time, Leon and I were very critical of that evolution of samba schools.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: In fact, the shooting of *Partido alto* took place during a crucial moment within that samba school controversy. Soon after the shooting, you left Portela Samba

School as a response to the School's adoption of commercial strategies and Candeia created Quilombo Samba School to campaign against the commodification of samba. What was the reaction of sambists from Portela when they watched the film? Did they feel that they had been exploited, as if the film crew were taking advantage by filming their community practices?

PAULINHO DA VIOLA: They watched the film and they loved it. They didn't feel they were being exploited at all, and they acknowledged the importance of that record of *partido-alto*, which didn't exist prior to that moment. Indeed, the film holds historical importance because it includes images of artists such as Manacéa and Armando Santos, who up to that point hadn't been given the opportunity to appear in a film. Now, what comes to mind is a striking episode which shows Leon's passion for samba schools. Let me explain it to you. I used to go with him to samba school parades, which used to take place where the large *sambódromo* is set today. At that time, the *sambódromo* consisted of a grandstand which could be assembled before the parade and disassembled afterwards. The big parade used to be on Sunday, and then the following Tuesday some of the samba schools which had paraded would parade again, but in a more informal way, with no costumes.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: Was this more of a party that everybody could join?

PAULINHO DA VIOLA: No, it was another parade, because a lot of people attended as spectators. I remember being in the grandstand during the Tuesday parade of Mangueira Samba School. And then, suddenly, the school stopped. Juvenal Lopes, who was Mangueira's president, grabbed the microphone and explained that a *baiana* from the samba school, who was not feeling very well that day, had left the parade and had died. He explained that she was an important member of Mangueira because she was part of the school's foundation and announced that the parade would halt as a symbol of mourning. Then the Culture Secretary took the microphone, praised both Mangueira and the *baiana*, and pleaded for them to keep going. What happened then? They did so but by playing a single drum only. The members of the School removed their hats and walked without dancing, following the rhythm of the grieving drum. I had never seen that. Leon got excited, and he regretted not having a camera at that moment to record that!

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: Most likely, you are familiar with Hermano Vianna's book *O mistério do samba* (*The Mystery of Samba*). In this book, he talks about the mediator as a crucial figure in the history of samba, because he/she establishes a link between traditional community music practices, on the one hand, and the recording industry, on the other. Do you consider yourself to be a mediator between samba practised in the slums, such as Velha Guarda da Portela, and the media?

PAULINHO DA VIOLA: I have read that book, but I have never thought about my role in those terms. My involvement with music started with my father, a guitar player, who accompanied many different singers throughout the years. He used to play with Jacob do Bandolim, who was a great bandolin player. So, from an early age I was involved in the Brazilian music scene in Rio de Janeiro, most notably in the *choro* and samba. I was always part of that world, first as an amateur, then as a professional, and recording my music was the natural progression of that interest. The first recording I did was together with Zé Kéti, during the Zicartola period, in 1964, when he created a band called A voz do morro.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: In the 1960s you also took part in TV festivals. I presume it wasn't an easy decision for you because you were interested in the kind of samba that was closely rooted to the community and bringing it to television may have been viewed as a contradiction.

PAULINHO DA VIOLA: [*Laughs.*] More or less. All that happened between 1965 and 1970. The I Festival of Brazilian Popular Music took place in TV Excelsior in 1965 and the winning song was "Arrastão" ("Dragnet"), by Edu Lobo and Vinicius de Moraes, which was performed by Elis Regina. The following year, the festival moved to TV Record and this had a greater impact. A lot of people from my generation, such as Chico Buarque, Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil emerged. I signed up for it with a song I had written with a poet from Bahia called José Carlos Capinam, who was a close friend of mine and would be crucial for the Tropicália movement. Our song "Canção para Maria" ("Song for Maria") was performed by Jair Rodrigues and it was awarded third place. There were a lot of collaborations between singers at that time, and TV festivals were an important window for us, who were experiencing our first steps in our musical careers. Everybody presented songs in festivals because it was a way to showcase our work. Traditional samba didn't have a strong presence in that festival because that same year, 1966, TV Record also hosted the Biennale of Samba, in which my samba called "Coisas do mundo minha nega" ("World Things, My Darling") was sung by Jair Rodrigues.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: During this period, you also contributed to the film *Saravah*, by French singer and filmmaker Pierre Barouh. The film is a bit naïve but is important in terms of recording people such as João da Baiana in colour film…

PAULINHO DA VIOLA: It was also the late 1960s. Pierre Barouh loved Brazilian music and samba, and he wanted to tell that story. For this reason, he also included João da Baiana, Baden Powell and so on in the film. He invited both Bethânia and myself. He rented Rancho das Fantas, a quite simple place in Barra da Tijuca where there was nothing about and asked us to talk and sing something. As you said, there is a certain naivety, but, for example, Bethânia's performance is beautiful.

COURAGE & ELDUQUE: Finally, if we move forward some decades, we find a documentary which is devoted to you, Izabel Jaguaribe's *Paulinho da Viola: Meu tempo é hoje* (*Paulinho da Viola: My Time Is Today*, 2003). It is focused on your life and work and you perform a lot of songs. How do you feel when you are playing while being filmed?

PAULINHO DA VIOLA: In my early career I used to be a shy, even self-conscious person, but I overcame it. Just think that in the beginning of the Zicartola period, I used to work in a bank. It was common for musicians to have non music-related jobs because it was difficult to live on recordings and gigs. My father, for example, was a public servant in the Justice Department. But I experienced both in my life! Eventually, I could live on my music alone, to the point that some people made a documentary about me! It was wonderful to be in Izabel's film, it was a big pleasure for me to tell that story surrounded by musicians from my own universe. I enjoyed it, and I think the audience enjoyed it as well.

Acknowledgment

We are indebted to Izabel Jaguaribe and Lila Rabello for their help in making this interview possible.

Notes

[1] Grande Otelo sings Zé Kéti's "Mexi com ela" ("I Got Involved with Her"), "Foi ela" ("It Was Her", also known as "Mágua de sambista" ["Pain of Sambist"]), "Malvadeza Durão" ("Tough Venom", also known as "Fechou o paletó" ["He Closed the Jacket"]), and "O samba não morreu" ("The Samba Didn't Die", by Zé Kéti and Urgel de Castro).

[2] The film is a short documentary called *Meu compadre, Zé Keti* (*My Buddy, Zé Keti*, 2003).

[3] More detail on terminology related to these genres can be found in Lopes 17–27.

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Tamara Courage recently completed a postdoc at the University of Reading for the project *Towards an Intermedial History of Brazilian Cinema: Exploring Intermediality as a Historiographic Method*. Here, she expanded on the notion of intermediality in world cinema by investigating how it is used as a strategic tool in contemporary Chinese independent cinema to highlight issues regarding marginalised citizens who have been impacted by major socioeconomic transformations since the death of Communist leader Mao Zedong. Her current research interests examine the filmmaker’s role in imagining and representing realities for the historically peripheral subject through diverse and original modes of interventions that include performance, self-portraits, re-enactment and participatory methods.

Albert Elduque has recently completed a postdoc at the University of Reading, where he was part of the project *Towards an Intermedial History of Brazilian Cinema: Exploring Intermediality as a Historiographic Method*. His PhD dissertation, presented in Pompeu Fabra University (Barcelona) in 2014, dealt with the concepts of hunger, consumption and vomit in modern political cinema. His current research is on contemporary Brazilian films on music, focusing on the representation of the musical traditions of the country in recent fictions and documentaries. He is coeditor of the journal *Comparative Cinema*, published by Pompeu Fabra University.