



10/6/09

# Citizenship through Afro-Brazilian Arts

Rhythmic Uprising is a documentary that shows how the transformative powers of Afro-Brazilian performing arts are used to fight racism and inequality in Bahia, Brazil. Around the world, the celebrated Afro-Brazilian region of Bahia is known for its vibrant dance and music manifestations. This film takes a look behind the scenes of those grandiose carnival spectacles to see how local cultural leaders utilize these arts to change lives.

Bahia boasts the largest concentration of african descendants outside of Africa. As shown in Rhythmic Uprising, Brazil's blacks have used Afro-Brazilian cultural conventions to maintain their African heritage and wage war on poverty, racism, and oppression over the last four centuries. As freed slave communities called 'quilombos' did during the time of slavery, cultural leaders featured in the film are dismissing the racist, unbalanced power structures of modern Brazilian society by organizing their own microcosms. They cultivate social institutions based on equality and African heritage that function as refuge for at-risk black youth. In contrast to larger Brazilian society, these groups empower and encourage their youth to pursue brighter futures.

Rhythmic Uprising is a Brazil-USA coproduction. Cultural projects featured in the film include an all-women drum corps named Didá, a circus group heavily rooted in Afro-Brazilian expressions named Circo Picolino, a theater group that portrays African myths named Bejé Eró and a Capoeira Angola association named ACANNE. Historical Afro-Brazilian cultural conventions featured in the film include capoeira, candomblé, quilombos, and blocos afros.

## The Media Project

**THE VOICE:** Our team of Bahian and US media professionals have spent the last five years producing this film as a voice for these groups and the movement as a whole. This film is primed to generate local and international support for these organizations by promoting their activities in theaters and homes. It's a voice that can carry the fruits of their successful models to other areas of the world struggling with similar issues. It bares witness to constructive social engagement, cross-cultural understanding and peace-building ideology. Our hope is that this story inspires others to act locally in similar ways.

**SUSTAINING THE VOICE:** So that the organizations featured in the film can continue to create their own media products for advocacy, promotion, and education, we've armed them with digital video filmmaking equipment and computers capable of editing video. Volunteers have enhanced the project by helping to train these groups in the use of the tools they've been given.

Find out more at [www.rhythmicuprising.org](http://www.rhythmicuprising.org)

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## Social Programs featured in the Film:

### **DiDá School of Music and Dance**

In most African musical traditions, women have historically been honored as dancers and vocalists while drumming has largely been dominated by men. As a project devoted to the personal development of adolescent women through drum performance, DiDá challenges this idea directly. The project was founded by Neginho do Samba (former master of afro-bloco Olodum) and encompasses both a professional group of female musicians, Banda Feminina, DiDá, and a school for at-risk teenagers named DiDá Escola de Música e Dança.

DiDá means “the power of creation” in Yoruba - referring to its female participants’ power to give birth to children. In their short history, the women of DiDá have shown the world that they also possess the power to give birth to exceptional music, dance and inspiration.

### **Bejé Eró**

Bando de Teatro Olodum is a 15 year old theater group notorious in Salvador for their heavily political and Afro-centric performances. Bejé Eró was founded by a member of the Bando who wanted to bring the positive values and perspectives she gained through theater to her own low-income city project. The city project’s name is called Vilha Viver Melhor (Live Better Villa) - ironically named since it’s one of the worst slums in Salvador. The social entrepreneurs are picking up where the government left off by creating a world for children where they can indeed “Live better.” Through Art-Education, they strive to teach children theater as a way to express their Afro-Brazilian culture proudly and loudly. By engaging them in theater, they catch their attention and get them more involved in other aspects of education as well.

### **Circo Picolino**

As the pioneer of a movement that is now nation-wide, Circo Picolino began as a simple tuition-based children’s circus over 15 years ago. Today, it’s a multi-tiered circus organization which boasts over 400 students in weekly attendance. These students are primarily at-risk children who come to Picolino through public and private institutions focused on getting kids off the streets. At Picolino, children gain self-esteem and learn valuable lessons about co-operation and social interaction through a circus style that focuses on acrobatics as a performing art.

### **ACANNE (Associação de Capoeira Angola Navio Negreiro = “Slave Ship Capoeira Angola Association”)**

Capoeira Angola is a dance and martial art concerned with the religious, physical, and social development of the individual. ACANNE works with children in Bahia - focussing on local community building. They organize courses, lectures, debates and expositions around Afro-Brazilian cultural expression. They work through the play of Capoeira Angola as a means to educate the community about their rich and diverse culture and the necessity to protect it and practice it.



## Statement from the Director:

This is the story of how the largest population of African descendants outside of Africa go about spurring positive change amidst daunting circumstances. It's about a movement that inspired me deeply enough to commit my energy, heart, soul and last dollar to bringing its beauty to the rest of the world.

Since studying world music in West Africa as an undergraduate, I've been continually drawn toward African descendant cultures throughout the world. If you ask most foreigners who are studying about or living in Brazil what first attracted them to the place, they'll almost unanimously say "the music." That's what first attracted myself and my colleagues there on a scouting trip in 2004.

Anyone who visits the region can testify that Bahian culture is rich and that its people's spirits are aflame with vibrancy just as the postcards promise. If they wander outside tourist areas, however, a more tragic reality becomes evident. Although tourism has helped Salvador recover from an enduring recession, the quality of life for most Afro-Brazilians has not increased. Even after centuries of freedom, racial discrimination and social exclusion continue to paralyze social and economic advancement for the black population which makes up more than 80%. Faced with these factors of social stagnation and heavy unemployment, misguided youth are often led away from more constructive paths by the seduction of quick financial gains found in drug trafficking and prostitution.

Seeing an incredible number of grassroots social projects in the city of Salvador taking these challenges upon themselves inspired me deeply. By leveraging the strengths of time-tested Afro-Brazilian resistance institutions such as Candomblê, Capoeira, Afoxês, and Blocos Afros, community leaders were steering their newest generation away from the damaging lifestyles that poverty, exclusion and desperation exacerbate. Their organizations demonstrate how arts involving these cultural elements build self-confidence, cultural pride and citizenship. This film is my contribution to their efforts.

While the aforementioned movement is rich with inspiration, determination and hard-working people, I found that when visiting with these groups for the first time in 2004, few of them had much of a voice. They were struggling to maintain websites if they had them at all and I hadn't seen a single documentary made about any of them. I felt inspired by them and wanted to contribute. Falling back on what I know and plugging it into the movement, I put together the Rhythmic Uprising Media Project and have been pushing it forward with all my heart and money for the last four plus years.

Self-motivated creative community leaders like those showcased in this film are the people who are creating positive change in our world. These people aren't just making life better for the kids they're working with, but for everyone who enjoys a peaceful, civil world full of knowledge, story tellers, dances, drum beats, and circus tricks. These are the shepherds of the juice that is true life.

I grew up near Akron, Ohio. For me, showing this film to folks in the US, means bringing the power of colorful Bahian traditions back to my people. I'm hoping for a powerful exchange of perspectives and a reevaluation of art, dance, and music in our society.

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## Bios of Filmmakers

### **Benjamin Watkins - Director (US)**

Benjamin is a broadcast and internet media producer living between the US and Brazil. He has 12 years of experience studying African influenced music and society in a variety of countries including Ghana, Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil. He's an experienced multimedia professional who has been working in both commercial and non-profit media initiatives for over 15 years. As an activist for human rights and social equality, he has devoted his time, energy, money, and skills to promote positive change for marginalized populations. Almost every penny spent on this film has come from his own freelance activities in the world of commercial media. Merging his finances and production skills together with his sensitivity and cultural curiosity, he has committed the last five plus years of his life to completing this documentary as his contribution to fight for racial equality in Brazil while bringing light to the transformative powers of African cultures around the world.

### **Eliciana Nascimento - Co-Producer (BRASIL)**

Eliciana Nascimento is currently president and founder of Candace Cine Video ([www.candacecine.com](http://www.candacecine.com)), an independent production company in Salvador, Brazil. She's an experienced director and documentary filmmaker having worked in a number of productions in Salvador for both local and international media companies. Being born into daunting circumstances of poverty and exclusion, she has courageously pushed forth through social barriers all her life to achieve her roll as an author in the international digital media landscape. She currently holds an undergraduate degree in social communications and is working towards her masters. Today, as a filmmaker and media activist, she bridges social gaps between local media production entities and marginalized communities like the one she's from. She's currently directing a new documentary about Hip Hop in the Northeastern region of Brazil.

### **Paulo Rogério Nunes - Production Coordinator and Community Liason (Brazil)**

Paulo is a media professional and Afro-Brazilian activist in Bahia. He serves as Executive Director of the Institute for Ethnic Media ([blog.midiaetnica.org](http://blog.midiaetnica.org)) and is currently coordinating a national campaign in Brazil called "Our media is our voice: Black media in Brasil." He was recently awarded a grant from the Palmares Foundation to produce a documentary series entitled "Makota Valdina: A black skill of being and life" for which he is the Executive Producer. He is currently scouting video production talents in Bahia who have both the technical skills and the humanitarian interest to make Rhythmic Uprising a powerful reality.

### **Keiko Tamura - Production Coordinator (US)**

Keiko Tamura, born in Japan, has been living in the US since the late 1990's. She first encountered media activism personally in 2000 while working at Paper Tiger Television in NYC, on 'Access Orbit', a 5-hour youth created/produced/curated satellite series. Ever since, she's been devoted to social causes - such as prisoners' rights, former prisoners' re-entry to society, and youth empowerment through the arts. This last element brought her to Rhythmic Uprising in 2004, when she visited Salvador, Brazil to volunteer at Circo Picolino, where less fortunate children learn how to develop sustainable skills and independent lives through circus arts. Based in NYC, Keiko has been the US outreach coordinator, and organized multiple screenings in Chicago and NYC.