

## When Latin rhythms met funk, Cuban breakout music star CimaFunk emerged

BY MIMI WHITEFIELD

FEBRUARY 28, 2019 07:00 AM, UPDATED MARCH 01, 2019 07:18 PM



Erik Iglesias Rodriguez, aka CimaFunk, is a former Cuban medical student from Pinar del Río who has created his own unique sound by mixing his love of funk with Latin beats. The singer, producer and composer is on an international tour.

BY CIMAFUNK

The Fabrica del Arte, a private art gallery and performance space in an old cooking oil factory in Havana, has seen its share of big stars. Esperanza Spalding, Usher, Dave Matthews and a parade of stellar Cuban performers have all graced its stages.

But the crowds snaked around the block in November and filled the streets of the surrounding neighborhood when CimaFunk, who has created his own genre of Afro-Cuban soul, came to perform. His stage name was inspired by the Cimarrones, freedom-loving slaves who escaped from plantations and formed their own settlements, and his love of American funk music.

His own music knows no bounds. There's a lot of *son* in it, he says, a little bit of *rhumba*, *bolero*, some *changüí* — a style of Cuban music that originated in the Baracoa area, and danceable *Pilón* — all run through the prism of funk.

Early on he was attracted to the *trova* movement. “I have a lot of influence of *trova* because that’s how I began in Pinar del Río,” said CimaFunk in a recent phone interview from Bogotá, where he was on tour. Another early musical influence came when he sang in the choir at his local Baptist Church.

Then there is American music artist Lionel Richie. Growing up in a small town in Pinar del Río, the 29-year-old singer, composer and producer had a single Lionel Richie cassette. “I listened to it over and over and over again,” he said.

There was always a lot of music in his house, CimaFunk said. One uncle was a salsa dancer; another uncle fought in Angola and introduced the family to African music.

Los Van Van, Bola de Nieve, and the legendary Cuban singer and composer Benny Moré, who also melded genres, were big influences too, he said, as were a *montón* (a ton) of American artists — from the 1970s band Funkadelic to James Brown, Prince, Sam and Dave, and blues singer Sonny Boy Williamson. “Above all, I really like the old music, the retro music,” said the singer.

Mix it all together and you get CimaFunk, who has been called the James Brown of Cuba and “Cuba’s 2018 revelation of the year.” He was named one of Billboard’s 10 Latin Artists to Watch in 2019.

While CimaFunk considers James Brown one of the greats, he thinks the comparison is a “little bit much.” Besides he says he has his own personality.

“At vertigo speed he has become one of the most brilliant representatives” of Cuba’s contemporary music scene, writes music blogger Michel Hernández. “The musician opens a new cycle in the musical present of the country with a fusion that flirts with nearly all the rhythms and achieves a unique style in current sound.”

CimaFunk’s danceable breakout hit “*Me Voy*” can be heard everywhere from Miami bars to European dance clubs and he’s picked up a slew of Cuban music awards. The video for “*Me Voy*” won the most popular award at Cuba’s Lucas Prizes.



Cuba musician CimaFunk was named to Billboard’s 10 Latin Artists to Watch in 2019 list. He’ll perform in Miami Beach on March 30. May Reguera COURTESY

But now the world is getting to know Erik Iglesias Rodríguez, aka CimaFunk, personally. He's on an international tour that will bring him to the North Beach Bandshell on Miami Beach for the [Global Cuba Festival](#) on March 30.

"I'm very excited. I have friends in Miami and I know I have fans there," he said. Tampa, Washington, D.C., Boston, Hartford, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, San Diego, Oakland, and San Francisco are also on his U.S. itinerary, which includes public and private performances, workshops, visits to schools and neighborhood programs.

After a stop in Trinidad and Tobago, CimaFunk will make his U.S. debut March 13 at the [South by Southwest](#) music festival in Austin, Texas. He'll be in the United States through April before heading home and traveling to Europe in July to promote his first independently produced album "*Terapia*."

CimaFunk recorded "*Terapia*" in a small studio in his home and is planning a second album with new songs. "So far it doesn't have a name or a theme," he said. "I want to see what makes people happy on this tour."

Some music critics have called him the alternative to Cuba's *reggaeton* scene.

"CimaFunk's Afro-Cuban soul has brought a new groove to a Havana music scene whose needle has been stuck on unremarkable reggaeton," said Billboard in naming him to its list. "Bringing the funk to Cuban rhythms (and vice versa), CimaFunk embraces the piquant playfulness of timeless Cuban music with 21st-century style, referencing *timba* as well as *trova*, and continuing where '90s cult band Yerba Buena left off."

CimaFunk doesn't see it quite that way. "I don't think I'm an alternative. My music is my music. There's no reason to punish a genre. Everything has its moment, its place."

Eight years ago it didn't seem like music would be CimaFunk's place. He was studying medicine in Pinar del Río.

But a move to Havana changed everything. "It was like a school for me," he said. CimaFunk heard new music, met new artists, learned what it was like to have the public react to his music.

He got his start with the Hoyo Colorao group and also worked as a chorus member for Cuban alternative music stars. In 2014, he joined Interactivo, a group that fused jazz, *timba* and funk as a singer and composer, before helping found Los Boys, a group that soon made a mark on Havana nightlife.

In the fall of 2016, he began his solo career, emerging as CimaFunk and attracting fans across Cuba.

Follow Mimi Whitefield on Twitter: [@HeraldMimi](#)



Cuban singer, composer and producer Erik Iglesias Rodríguez is known as CimaFunk. May Reguera