

ICWA LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

TRUSTEES

Bryn Barnard
Carole Beaulieu
Mary Lynne Bird
William F. Foote
Peter Geithner
Pramila Jayapal
Peter Bird Martin
Judith Mayer
Dorothy S. Patterson
Paul A. Rahe
Carol Rose
John Spencer
Edmund Sutton
Dirk J. Vandewalle
Sally Wiggins

HONORARY TRUSTEES

David Elliot
David Hapgood
Pat M. Holt
Edwin S. Munger
Richard H. Nolte
Albert Ravenholt
Phillips Talbot

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

TLT-5 THE AMERICAS

Tyrone Turner is a Fellow of the Institute writing about and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings.

"The *Roda* and Other Experiences"

RECIFE, Brazil

May 21, 1999

Mr. Peter Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH

Dear Peter,

I think what Einstein meant by the relativity of time is that when you need it, it's not there. Here, the Recife winter months of rainy nights and roasting-hot days have been flying by. I am probably not alone in being surprised that we are already halfway through the last year of this millennium. This is a roundabout way to explain that though I promised to send a newsletter about my experiences with street children, it is not ready. Instead I will recount a few other experiences that let me peek into a different side of Recife.

THE RODA

When my Recife freelance-sociologist friend Andre Vasconcellos asked me to go to the "Skay-chee Hockey Oohm" (Skate-Rock 1), I had to remember that he wasn't talking about ice or pucks. Rock is pronounced "Hockey" because of soft "r" and the beautiful way Brazilians love the sound "ee" anywhere in a word, especially at the end.

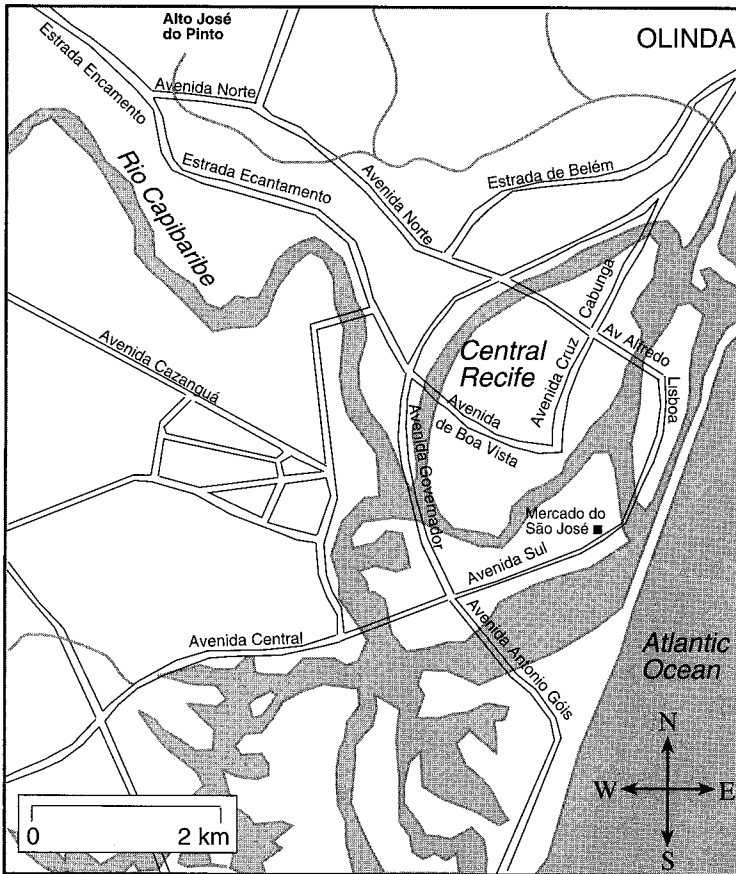
"*Imperdivel, rapaz!*" (Not to be missed, man!), he insisted as he explained about the hard-rock/rap, low-budget concert being held the next day in a nearby neighborhood. Five bands for only two *reias* (U.S.\$1.18) — hardly a sacrifice to experience some of the youth culture of Recife.

The next day, Andre's Fiat swung into the parking lot at McDonald's, our appointed rendezvous, about an hour later than we had agreed. Despite the time, we still stopped for a couple of beers — being late in Brazil is also relative.

We then swung by his home to pick up his partner, Lúcia Ramos, and we were on our way. Andre negotiated the labyrinth of Recife neighborhoods, and with traffic mercifully light on a Sunday afternoon, we crossed over *Avenida Norte* (North Avenue) in minutes. This street divides the "*nobre*" (noble) areas, with their 20-story, guarded apartment buildings, and the cinderblock landscape of "*popular*" (common, or poorer) neighborhoods.

Our destination was the *Alto José do Pinho* (the Summit of Joseph of the Pines) a nearby working-class section of town that spread up a *morro* (hill), revealing a marvelous view of downtown Recife. The namesake of the neighborhood, José Do Pinho, one of the first inhabitants of the hill in the 1940's, was a carpenter who made his own pinewood guitars. It is fitting that a half-

RECIFE



century later the Alto would still be continuing the musical tradition.

A decade ago, violence ravaged the Alto. Only one other neighborhood in the city, *Coque* (smelting coke), stood between Alto José Do Pinho and the distinction of being the "most homicidal neighborhood." The teens that formed the first bands did so as an alternative to getting into gangs and drugs. They even hand-made their first instruments, like José Do Pinho.

Imitating the hard rock styles of the U.S. and England, they mixed it with local sounds of the *Maracatu* (a marching percussive Carnival beat), *embolada* (improvised musical poetry using guitar and tambourine), *repente* (similar to *embolada*, but with two guitars), etc...

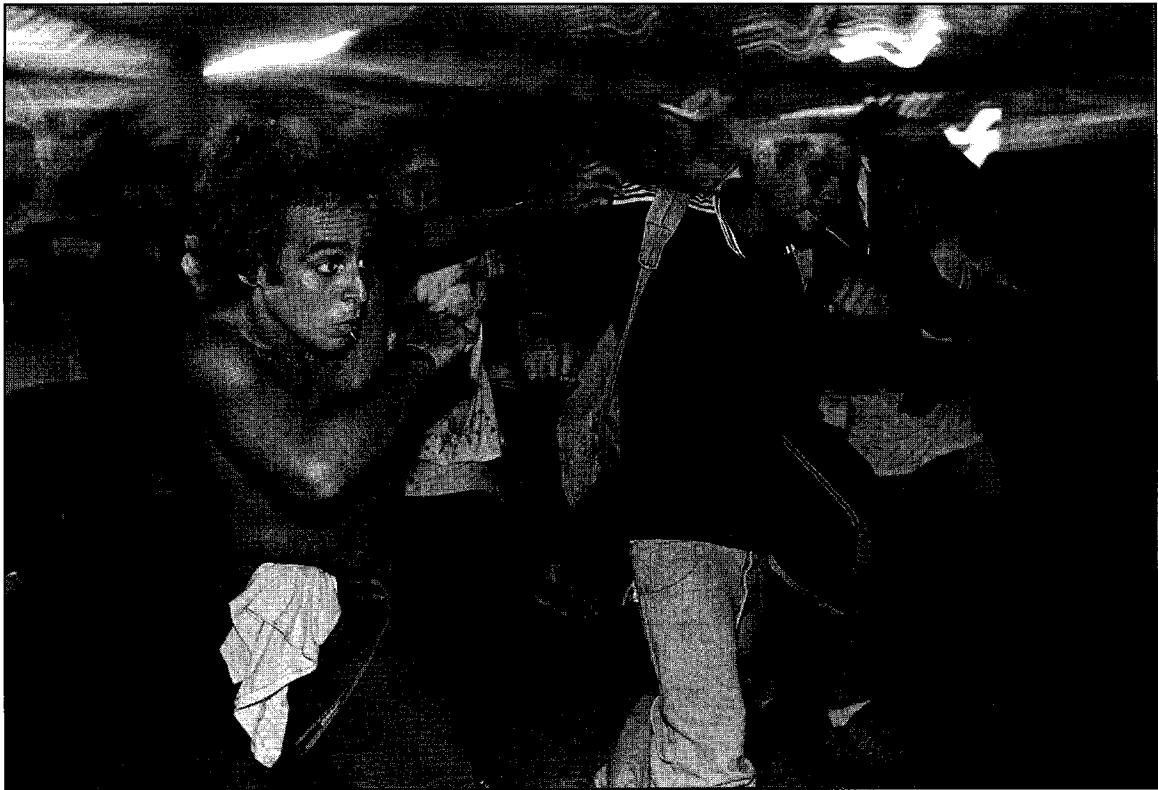
Since then, scores of "garage" bands have emerged. According to André, the "Musical Movement of the Alto José do Pinho," as the phenomenon was called, not only influenced the cultural scene, it gave new life to the neighborhood. Homicides and assaults have fallen considerably since then. Though still poor, the Alto became a model of cultural, social and economic rejuvenation for other parts of the city.

We ascended the lower part of the Alto along a twisting cobblestone street bordered by tightly packed brick homes in various stages of completion. It was a maze of cubic domiciles, the organic architecture of people who built in the space they had with the materials they could afford.

The nice afternoon weather brought families onto their stoops to visit and watch passers-by. Children kicked soccer balls through goal posts of sticks and rocks. Shirtless men with round stomachs occupied the stools of the small sidewalk bars serving large bottles of beer.

Near the top of the hill, a scar of up-turned red mud cut across the roadway where a broken sewerage line was being repaired, something I took as a good sign. On a later visit to the Alto, I would see the more recent settlements (20 years old) of the Alto, which lacked the modern innovation of sewer disposal. Only a short walk away from the more established area, human waste and detergents flowed in open





The crowd of young Brazilians make the rounds in the roda.

trenches in front of the dilapidated homes.

Finally we arrived at the site of the concert, a community center with high, thick, prison-style, whitewashed walls. In the surrounding streets flocked hundreds of teenagers practicing the studied nonchalance that enabled them to recognize fellow tribe members — and nearly all dressed in the U.S.-influenced skate/grunge/punk style.

From the ground up they sported dark tennis shoes with thick white soles, long baggy pants of denim, corduroy or camouflage just barely hanging on their hip bones. Black band-advertising t-shirts with logos from Metallica, Iron Maiden, Nirvana and Pearl Jam featured prominently.

Even the New York street-survivor look, complete with knit caps, had made it to the tropics. As sweat beaded on their faces, the kids seemed oblivious to the absurdity of their dress. They were absorbed in making their own MTV-style scene.

My particular favorite was a young man who had found his muse. His long hair was plastered into a single unicorn-style horn shooting out from his forehead. To add shock value, the horn was painted stop-sign red. The

finishing touch was his heavy-Gothic, Alice-Cooper-style eye makeup and a vintage striped suit coat.

Both Andre and Lucia work with youth programs on the Alto¹, so our walk through the young crowd caused a bit of a stir. The cool look was dropped as excited teens ran up to give bear hugs and one-two kisses. During introductions I remember being surprised at how many of the kids played in local bands. Finally we purchased tickets and pushed through the turnstile to go in. I took a cue from the guy in front of me and raised my arms to be frisked by security guards.

While the bands finished sound tests, canned music blasted out of the banks of speakers on either side of the stage. Immediately in front of each set of speakers, where the decibel-level must have equaled that of a Howitzer cannon, skateboarders had set up ramps. In a spontaneous choreography of supreme hipness they attempted various leaping and twisting tricks. Whether they plunged to the cement or not, the practiced, slack, indifferent look on their faces changed little — very important to impress the skateboard chicks nearby.

The first band started with a hard-driving punk

¹ André is a consultant for POMMAR, a local arm of the Partners of the Americas, which funds various projects in the Northeast of Brazil that help children and adolescents at risk. One of these programs is *Instituto Vida* (Life Institute), which was founded by Lúcia five years ago and which serves the teens of the Alto. However, according to André, he and Lúcia had been going to the Alto for events and shows for the past ten years.



As this particular animated teen shows, the only way to get through the roda is by matching aggression with aggression.

sound à la “The Sex Pistols.” While the rest of the head-bobbing crowd grooved on ear-splitting guitar riffs, I actually worried about my own ears splitting. Retreating to the bathrooms in the back of the center, I found no respite, just two skateboarders banking their turns off of the white-enamel urinals.

Wishing for earplugs, I ripped out a small piece of paper from my notebook and rolled it into a ball. Spitting on it, and working it with my thumb made the paper soften. I inserted the piece into my ear and...success! I repeated the process for the other ear and returned, slightly more comfortable, to the show.

I can’t claim to be an expert on rock music, heavy metal, punk, etc... My older brother Everett, with whom I shared a room when we were growing up, constantly blared 70’s rock to practice drumming. This drove me out of my mind and into the clutches of disco and funk (I admit this, as well as my devotion to “Earth, Wind and Fire” freely). Not until after college did I even start to like “classic” rock —the staple of oldies stations now.

The hard-core sound of the first band didn’t excite me as much as the audience reaction. I expected to see pogo-style punk dancing, bouncing up and down and thrashing about, and even some stage diving (where people leap from the stage supremely confident that the

others will catch them). What I saw instead looked more like a primal ritual.

The core audience, about 100 kids, moved in a circle around an imaginary center. From a distance it looked almost orderly. However, up close it was a violent melee of thrashing elbows, pushing and shoving, all the while rounding an imaginary May Pole. The pace was frenetic and dangerous. The flow was mesmerizing, at once individually anarchic and collectively unified. I removed the spitballs from my ears to hear Andre call this the “roda,” or wheel.

Standing near the edge of the *roda*, I tried to photograph without getting the flash ripped off the camera by flailing limbs. As I saw bodies flying at me in the viewfinder, I would turn and hunch over the equipment and take the impact with my back.

Finally I handed my cameras to Lucia so I could try the craziness. I grabbed Andre, felt him resist, but pulled him into the *roda* anyway. We had gone scarcely a quarter of the way when he retreated. I was on my own, in deep, and swept along. Frenzied teens punched me from all sides, and I countered with my own elbows and fists. The pace was dizzying, the free-for-all aggression addictive.

Although it felt longer, I am sure I was only in the *roda* for about a minute. To open an exit hole, I shoved a

guy out of the way and lunged for the periphery, coming to rest right near a laughing Andre. He pointed to the middle of the roda, the eye of the storm, and we scrambled there during a lull in the music. The beat picked up and the swirl surrounded us. We stayed there for one more song, then quit the *roda* for good.

As my heart slowed and we toasted our 30-some-

thing bravery, I asked why the *roda* didn't disintegrate into one big brawl. Andre claimed that though many members of Recife *galeras* (gangs) come to these concerts, real violence hardly ever erupted. When it did, the other kids pre-empted the police, and broke up the fights.

The last group, another strictly hardcore band, screamed lyrics that could have been in Russian for all I



The roda gets going, creating a swirl of bodies that lasts as long as the hard core music continues.



After fighting through security guards to get up on the stage, one youth makes his leap of faith.

knew. André explained that they were singing about the Pentecostals in the city. "We don't need you fascists, we don't need your tricks..."

We made our exit, and the pounding bass followed us to the car. As we drove away, ears ringing, I thought that there were certain things I had expected to encounter while in the Northeast of Brazil: folk music, traditional food, drought and huge inequalities of wealth. A punk band commenting on religion and the *roda* were not among them.

OTHER EXPERIENCES

Though Recife has its share of colonial architecture and urban beaches, it's not Rio de Janeiro, the "*cidade maravilhosa*," filled with charming cafes and a jet-setting night life. Recife is a working city and its charms are found below the surface of run-down buildings, arid landscapes and seemingly reserved residents. Recife reminds me more of Los Angeles (on a reduced scale) — not a pretty city as a whole, but richly fascinating in its parts. A myriad experiences like the one above have contributed to my feeling that the beauty of Recife is the *Recifenses* (residents of Recife) who wear their "*calor humano*" (human warmth) on their sleeve, and really mean it when they say "*aparece sempre*" ("come over any time").

Spontaneous, simple visits turn into adventures. One

night I accompanied Andre when he returned to the *Alto José do Pinho* to quickly chat with *Massacre* (just what it says), a bass-guitar player with the Alto band called "*Faces do Suburbio*" ("Faces of the Suburb"). A tall drink-of-water with an easy smile and gentle nature, Massacre was a versatile music lover, as excited about the Northeast's traditional *forró* music as the hardcore rap/rock that he played onstage.

We met at Massacre's house, perched over the main road close to the top of the Alto. From where we sat on his front steps, I could have touched the buses that zoomed past. Considering the blind curves of the roads, I thought about how local children must learn to listen well as a skill of survival.

From the sidewalk bar near the bottom of the steps we ordered *caldinho*, a light broth with beans, shrimp (or chicken) served in small plastic cups with an obligatory olive and quail egg. Slurping mine down quickly, I began to order another when the others interrupted. They insisted that if we were in the mood for more we had to get the best *caldinho* in the area, at *Biu's* bar.

We walked a slow, wandering pace to the top of the Alto, reaching the main plaza in a few minutes. Though close to 10 p.m., it was packed with families — kids playing on swing sets, older men at their dominos, women walk-



One of the bateristas of the "Preto Velho Escola de Samba" (literally, Old Black Samba School) and his son keep the rhythm going during the Sunday evening practice.

*A young girl in a traditional
Maracatu costume on the
streets of Olinda.*



ing arm in arm, military police hanging out at their post.

Biu's was no more than a shallow space open to the sidewalk. Behind the counter the *caldinho* artist was Biu's wife. Regulars bellied up, shouting out orders. The place had no tables or chairs in order to maximize the potential flow of soup-seeking patrons. We stood in a corner and spooned-up the concoctions of shrimp and crab, beans and beef tips. All for about 30 cents a cup.

From there, our movable feast ventured to a *barraca* (vendor's stand) on the edge of the plaza. We met up with *Peste* (PES-tee, Pest) a short, sinewy drummer from the "porno-punk rock" Alto band "*Matalanamao*" ("Mata ela na mao," or "kill her in your hand," a slang expression

for masturbation). Peste and Massacre talked about the upcoming school visits their bands had been invited to make to talk about the evils of drugs and violence. As the hour grew late, Andre had to coax beer out of a tired vendor who wanted to close for the night. We ordered "*saideras*" (farewells) at about 2 a.m.

As we talked about leaving, a taxi appeared out of nowhere, with the driver rubbing sleep from his eyes. Massacre had slipped away and called a nearby relative, a cab driver, and roused him for the job. After a vigorous round of goodbyes, including Brazilian male hugs (begin with the handshake, then move in for a slightly open embrace and lots of back-slapping) we jumped into the car and descended from the Alto.

* * *

Recifenses open their lives freely to us. Early one morning, I wandered for photos in Recife's downtown. Accustomed to the usual beehive-like activity of vendors crowding the sidewalks with wares, and people gathered at corners waiting for buses, I was surprised at the quiet of 6 a.m. Hardly anyone was out. Following the few souls that I did see led me to the one bustling place in the area — the *Mercado do Sao José* (Saint Joseph's Market).

Beneath the cover of an iron-beamed structure, butchers in individual stalls prepared meat to sell. I walked up and down the aisles talking and shooting pictures. One told me that they bought the large sides of beef and

pork from the municipal butchery in *Peixinhos* (little fish), and then cut them into smaller parts to sell.

As another vendor hacked at the hindquarters of some unfortunate animal, he complained that his business had been suffering greatly. In the universal lament of small merchants, he said that the new supermarkets had stolen his clientele with lower prices. Now, only a handful of local restaurants kept him in business.

As I started to walk away, I spotted an older man in a Fedora hat seemingly waiting to buy something. After snapping some frames I went to talk with him. Dijalma Francisco Silva told me that he was 86 years old, a Brazilian WWII veteran who had been held prisoner while fighting in Italy, and that he still butchered meat for a living. With that he excused himself. After his spiny hands secured the white apron strings around a thin waist, he picked up a large knife and started working.

From there I moved to the fish area, a series of marble-slab tables with mounds of iced-down fresh catches. Raising my camera among this group of fish sellers was not an anonymous action. They screamed at me to take their picture, and yelled at each other between snaps.

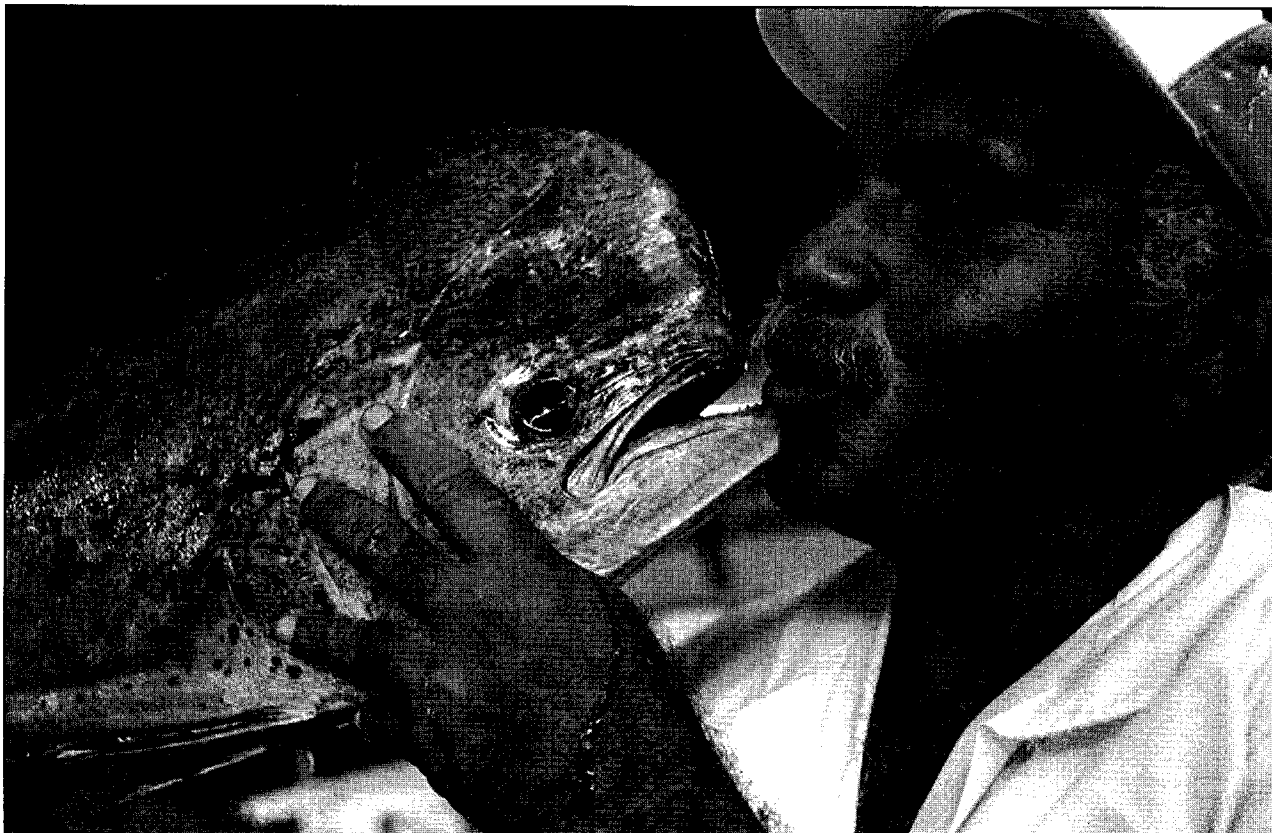
I quickly met three unforgettable characters. The first was Arlindo, who relied on complicated Brazilian hand gestures instead of words to poke fun at the other vendors. He looked like a baseball coach throwing signals to his batter. Another fish seller wore perfume because he couldn't stand the smell of his own product. The third, Fernando, put on a show for my pictures and let me crawl all over his stand to shoot. When I asked him to hold up a large fish for a portrait, the other vendors started yelling "*beijo, beijo*" (kiss, kiss). He promptly turned the kissing part to his own lips, gave it a peck, and set the market roaring with laughter.

* * *

On another occasion, Susan and I brought a visiting friend, Paul VanderVeen, to the *Alto da Sé* (the hill of the diocese) in the neighboring city of *Olinda*. With its cathedral and commanding view of the sur-



Dijalma Francisco Silva, 86, waits in the Sao José market to begin his work as a butcher.



Fernando, a fish vendor in the São José market, puckers up to a large catch to the amusement of fellow merchants and customers.

rounding colonial architecture and of the city of Recife, it was a must-see for locals and tourists alike. The plaza area in front of the cathedral was especially crowded this Sunday evening, as the hungry flocked to the numerous food stands to taste local delicacies. "Repentistas" (singers of improvised short poems set to music) with guitars wandered through the crowds offering on-the-spot ballads of love and adventure.

After satiating our bellies, we followed the percussive sounds in the distance and found the "Old Black Samba School" *bateria*, or drum corps, starting its weekly practices. A circle of about 20 men with various drums and *chocalhos* (sho-KA-leey-ohs, large tambourine-like rattles) enchanted the growing audience with a *carnavalesque* beat. The singer announced that anyone could join the school for two *reais* (U.S.\$1.18) a month. One man danced in flailing motion near the circle, his drunken body robbed of fluid rhythm.

Camera in hand, I approached during a break to ask if photos were allowed. "No problem," was the reply, and the music swelled again around me. They seemed pretty used to foreigners and cameras. No one paid much attention to the repeated flashes.

To return the favor of letting me photograph, I entered the bar behind the drummers and bought two large bottles of beer. As I handed the cups to those who gladly

accepted, one of the men shaking a *chocalho* urged me to take over in his place. Susan relieved me of my cameras and I took the heavy instrument with my right hand.

The man showed me the rhythm, a vigorous up and down motion following the drums. It looked so simple, and yet I felt like my rhythm matched that of the drunken dancer. Finally, success was mine, but for only a few short minutes. My arm tired quickly, giving me a newfound respect for not only the beauty of the musicians' art, but for their endurance.

* * *

As in any place, what you see depends on where you look. If you look in some places, Recife can be pretty depressing with its poverty and violence. However, this leaves aside all of the important ways that Recifenses not only survive but adore life. And as a visitor, one cannot help but be infected with their love of what can be enjoyed right here right now, and their sense of optimism about the future. This may not be the official "*cidade maravilhosa*" of Brazil, but it has proved itself beautiful in its own way.

Tyson