

So I Say Thank You for the Music

I had been shot. At least, I thought so. I gasped in air as I scrambled out of the fug of sleep, my body responding to the echoing cracks whilst my mind played catch up. Four quavers, a pause, then a crotchet. Twice. A musical death. Then the creeping realisation that I was being brought very much to life by the dawn fire crackers across the square. My alarm clock, Salvador style.

In the reception of the hotel, we peered intently at the hastily drawn isosceles triangle on the map of Pelourinho, Salvador's historic heart. "You must stay within this triangle at all times," declared the owner. My mental Rolodex pulled up images of the tourist police I had seen stationed around the square, and the word 'edgy' that invariably seemed to be linked to the city. Our geometry lesson over, I threw a reassuring smile in the direction of our children and off we headed into the cobbled streets and the crushing embrace of the Brazilian heat.

Pelourinho, or 'Pelo' as it is known locally, does not reveal its stories coyly. It shouts and spits in your face. It grasps you by the shoulders and shakes you. Look at me. Hear me. Feel me. An abundance of churches, like doormen guarding the squares boasting to each other of their gold and treasures, spoils of their colonial past. Brightly coloured buildings competing with the cerulean sky, their beauty at odds with the slave trade they had borne witness to. People calling to each other down the street to share jokes or news. And the music.

Near one of the churches an old woman sat in the shade of a doorway, a large basket filled with popcorn by her side. Another woman walked by, dropped some coins into the basket, scooped up a handful of popcorn and brushed it over her shoulders as though she were taking a shower. This was an offering to Omolu, the god of infectious diseases worshipped as part of the African-Brazilian religion of Candomblé. Across the road, a youth was searched by police and cuffed around the head on suspicion of mobile phone theft. Ancient and modern happily coexisting.

The unrelenting heat and thought of dry popcorn pushed us through the orchestra of voices in the nearby market in search of a drink. An elderly man standing by a small cart pressed into our hands cups filled with an opaque milky liquid. We took a tentative sip followed by gulps as we poured the nectar of coconut milk, lime and sugar down our throats, and then it happened. Two thunderous drum beats. Pause. Two more. A summons.

I ran further into the square to the source of the sound. The single drum beat had multiplied. The samba rhythm of around twenty young Bahian drummers ricocheted off the surrounding buildings, through the ground and into my body. In perfect synchronicity, clad in white vests and trousers, they swayed along requiring only the faintest hand gesture from their leader to switch rhythm and continue their incantation. Spectators local and foreign were drawn in like magnets. Smiles were exchanged and inhibitions lost. They bloomed under the beat.

Like a lit fuse, the rhythm sizzled through my body causing neurons and synapses to flare. Having quenched my thirst earlier, my throat was dry and constricted with emotion. "Can we leave now?" my impatient son implored. "No. I just can't," I asserted. I needed to fill every cell with this. The city had thrown its primal punch. Hear me. It turned out that the confines of our small triangle offered so much more than we had envisaged.

Brushing my teeth in the bathroom one evening, my ears pricked and I paused mid-brush, convinced I could hear drumming in the street outside. It was the bathroom fan. I knew then that Salvador had taken root in me. Feel me.

The next time I was awoken by my early morning fire cracker alarm, I slowly stretched and a smile of recognition broke across my face. I tapped out the rhythm on the bed: four quavers, a pause and a crotchet. Salvador, thank you for the music.