

Getting into the *Batida*. Book review of *DJs do Guetto Vol. 1*¹

Book review

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An object without an object

Elliot begins his book with the story of a memory recovery, or ‘history lesson’ (2022, p. 3) by Príncipe Discos [Prince Records]³, a Lisbon music label. In 2012, the label re-released, digitally and free of charge, the album *DJs do Guetto Vol. 1*, originally released in 2006 by the band of the same name. It was the trigger for the musical genre that came to be called *batida* [beat] and that launched (at least outside the borders of Quinta do Mocho, where they were already known)⁴ names such as DJ Nervoso, N. K. Marfox, Fofuxo, Jesse and Pausas. *Batida* is a musical genre that combines house and techno with African styles such as *kuduro*, *tarraxinha*, *funaná* and *quizomba*. In mid-2010, *batida* became the great cultural export of Lisbon and Portugal, making Lisbon a trendy city and the ‘gateway’ to the latest trends in African music. However, for Elliot, ‘genre’ is not the best term to describe the *batida*: he understands it as a network of artists, sounds and methodologies, a music simultaneously directed inward (‘in-this-world’) and outward (‘signaling beyond’) that is linked to, but at the same time removed from, a local context. The re-edition was an unintentional history lesson, as in 2006 the young DJs had no plan to release the record, let alone to see it re-edited after six years by a relatively prestigious label, despite its youth; for this reason, some of the tracks had relatively poor sound quality, and others had been lost forever. Although *Príncipe* had only been in existence for a year, this re-edition was already winking at foreign audiences, edited in a bilingual format: in Portuguese and English. In the first section, Elliot problematizes the question of the object. How can one study an ‘object’ such as a digital record? Hence the concept of object that the author uses refers more to a process than a thing – something closer to the concept of ‘musicking’ postulated by Small (2005), but one that is developed by the author: the beat, and all music, is transcontextual and builds bridges: music is what DJs do while playing music; music is the dances of those who hear the beat; music is all the work behind an album, digital or physical; everything is music and each dimension needs different spaces of production, consumption and reflection. According to the author, it is not easy but it is possible to dance and make music (or write about it) at the same time (Elliot, 2022, p. 13). This is a pertinent decision, especially if we consider genres such as EDM, based on bodies dancing in communities. But even a genre as digital and danceable as EDM needs objects. Thus, the ‘object’, the album *DJs do Guetto Vol. 1* serves as a means by which the author can analyse a series of discussions and encounters, whether between countries, different communities in Lisbon, mainstream and underground, colonial history and the present (and future), and a range of global styles. It is the author’s way of achieving his work in the line of studies on diaspora, hybridity, post-colonialism and cultural globalization – to which he pays special attention.

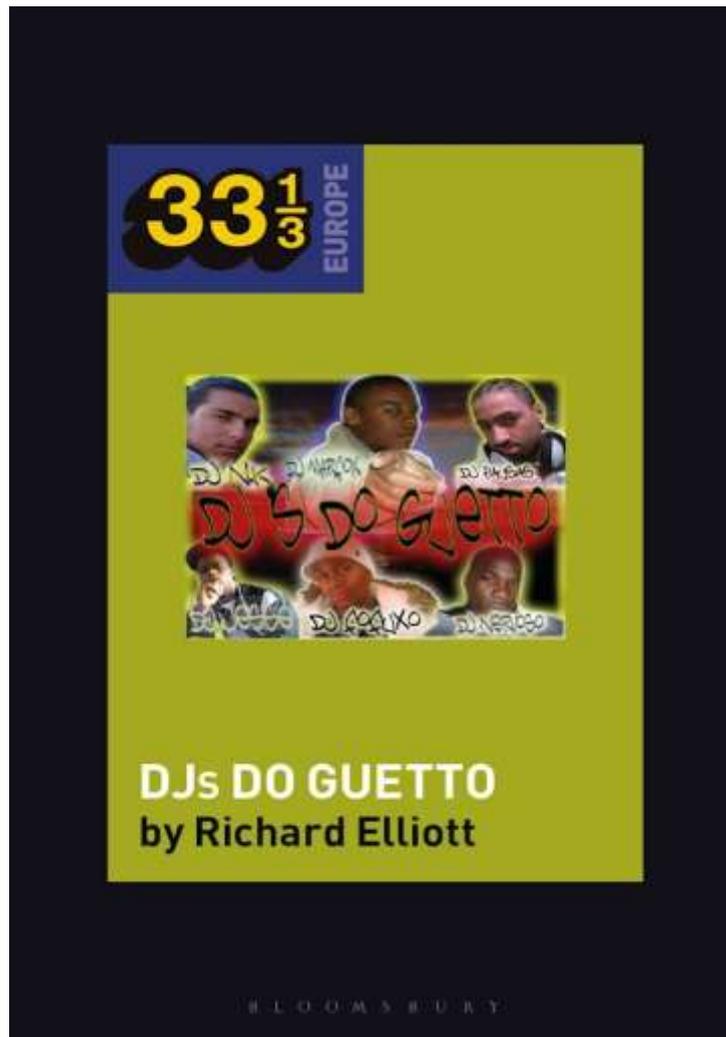
¹ Elliot, R. (2022). *DJs do Guetto Vol. 1*. London: Bloomsbury.

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³ A Lisbon-based publishing house, founded in 2012, renowned for publishing and disseminating African music.

⁴ A social neighbourhood located in Sacavém (near Lisbon) and inhabited mostly by afro-descendants.

Figure 1. Book cover



Source: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/various-artists-djs-do-guetto-9781501357848>

The construction of a sonic fiction

In Chapter 2, Elliot seeks to establish the genesis of the beat, addressing some of the references that influenced this musical genre. The first, *kuduro*, is defined as a genre of EDM music that emerged in Angola in the 1990s, through the fusion of house and techno with rhythms and instruments of African musical styles (Pereira, 2020). Kuduro, according to Moorman (2014), has a particularity that distinguishes it from other Angolan music genres, such as *semba* or *quizomba*: it is directed not to couples, but to the individual, to challenges between individuals that occur between dances. At an early stage the music was mostly instrumental, largely due to the lack of recording resources, but the situation started to change in the mid-2000s, and recording resources and other technologies began to spread, making it easier to record vocals. *Kuduro* expanded to Portugal at the beginning of the twenty-first century, through the immigration of thousands of Angolans to Portugal and through the cassettes and CDs that could be bought in Lisbon markets, especially in Praça de Espanha (Tomás, 2014). Initially, *kuduro* was relegated to the outskirts of Lisbon, where the majority of the Afro-descendant population lived (and still lives).

This does not mean there was no African music in the discos in the centre of the capital, but more traditional genres dominated, such as *quizomba* and a *kuduro* diluted with western house, as a way of making it more cosmopolitan (Elliot, 2022, p. 22). Authors like Eshun rejected the association of African music, such as *batida* or *kuduro*, with an alleged African tradition; Elliot considers that it is important to find a middle ground: to analyse the Lisbon

batida in relation to its Angolan historical roots, the influence of *quizomba* and *kuduro*. However, it is also important to look at this genre as a sonic fiction rather than a historical moment – that is, how the sounds of *batida* allow people to step back from a historical moment. A ‘sonic delinking’ is therefore necessary to make each of us ‘rather one that listens for what is being sounded in this place at this time, in these contexts and not those’ (Elliot, 2022, p. 32). This ‘sonic delinking’, however, enables the population that consumes the beat – usually the Afro-descendant population – to forget the conditions, the slums, in which they live. As Marfox says in an interview, ‘It seemed that for those 30 or 40 minutes they were in paradise’ (Elliot, 2022, p. 32). The *batida*, the *kuduro* and other musical genres, offer temporary oblivion, an escape from the historical conditions faced by those who listen and dance.

Praise for the place of the *batida*

In Chapter 4, the author pays a visit to the Quinta do Mocho neighbourhood, inhabited mostly by immigrants from the former Portuguese colonies and often associated in the media with crime and gang news. A situation that has been changing due to cultural and artistic programmes, often related to urban art and music, and it is in this context that the chapter begins with a tour of the neighbourhood. The artists of the neighbourhood manifest their need to be seen in context, and it is not by chance that Marfox seeks to situate his interviews with journalists and directors in the neighbourhood, as a way of seeing and being seen, to dispel the moral panic about the area and to show all its social life: the rooms that are also studios, the cafés that are contact points for the music scene – in short, an entire Black presence in Lisbon that the artists want to show (Belanciano, 2020; Elliot, 2022, pp. 54–55). It is no accident that Pardue (2019) mentions that presence, although contested, is a fundamental dimension in cities, and it is also no accident that arts and music are expressive ways of displaying this presence, of thinking about Blackness and Black Lisbon. As such, and picking up again on Eshun’s (1998) option of removing the music from the place, removing the *batida* of this neighbourhood, Elliot wonders whether this is not a losing battle, since journalists and academics are not the only ones making this connection; it is the musicians themselves who carry the music with the history of the place where they live, even if this is not understood by those listening (Elliot, 2022, pp. 57–59).

This connection is omnipresent in the life trajectory of DJ Marfox, a cross between his given name Marlon Silva and a video game called *Star Fox*: in 2014, when he already had media recognition in Portugal and abroad, he gave an interview with a brick from the house where he had grown up and which had been knocked down during the demolition of the Quinta da Vitória neighbourhood; it was a brick where, as a young artist, he had decided to write his stage name. Another remarkable dimension of Marfox’s artistic trajectory is the do-it-yourself (DIY) experimentation he does with various recording and editing programmes, such as FruityLoops or Atomix, with the software installed on the computers in the school library, since he did not have a computer at home. This personal phase coincided with the first explosion of *African Nights*, which, for a young man like him, was a way of getting to know music better and experimenting (Elliot, 2022, pp.74–77).

DJs do Guetto, on the other hand, had its genesis in an early self-promotion strategy by Marfox: on one of his trips to his girlfriend’s house, he wore a t-shirt with his stage name on it and was spotted by Armandão, who recognized the stage name and told him that he had been dancing to one of Marfox’s beats. After the conversation, and after Armandão talked about his group *Máquinas do Kuduro* [Kuduro Machines], Marfox eventually joined the group. It was during one of these stints with the group, in Quinta do Mocho, that he met DJ Nervoso, who would become his mentor for new sonic possibilities. With Marfox, Pausas, Fofuxo, DJ Nervoso, Jesse and N.K. (Pedro Cardoso),⁵ *DJs do Guetto* emerged, with a very simple working logic: they would make something and share it in zipped files with the other members of the group to be worked on later. A short time later, in 2005, with the pace of work they were sustaining, a whole album was ready; however, it was only released online on 18 September 2006, at the beginning of the school year, and promoted by MSN Messenger. It was a collection that was quickly recognized and valued, with feedback from England and France. As Marfox acknowledged, while the album was

⁵ Portuguese musician and producer, he has been one of the main promoters of Portuguese African music in recent years. <https://www.instagram.com/djn.k>

recorded just for fun, after the recognition it received, they were no longer just kids but DJs, which transformed how they saw themselves and how others evaluated them (Elliot, 2022, pp. 82–83). This sudden fame also brought its issues, especially around the money they earned from performances, along with parallel artistic careers (as well as other jobs and family life), which meant not everyone could devote much time to the project; this resulted in the rapid end of the project. For Marfox, this was not just due to the diverse responsibilities of each member, but rather to a lack of confidence that it was possible to make a living from this type of music (Elliot 2022, pp. 83–85).

Lisbon is also here!

Soon afterwards, in a 2007 collaboration with Kotalume, Marfox was approached by the cultural association *Filho Único* [Only Child], from Nelson Gomes and Pedro Gomes, who were known for promoting underground Portuguese artists. The first reaction was simply one of mutual knowledge, and the relationship was built little by little between then and 2011, guided by knowledge on both sides: Marfox wanted to overcome suspicions of this interest from people outside the Afro-descendant communities; Nelson Gomes and Pedro Gomes wanted to know about the extent to which Marfox was prepared for and interested in pursuing an artistic career (Elliot, 2022, 8 pp.8–90). In 2011, Márcio Matos, the owner of Flur José Moura,⁶ Nelson Gomes and Pedro Gomes founded Príncipe publishing house; the same year they launched their first book, *Eu sei quem sou* [I know who I am'] by Marfox. The Príncipe Discos label was founded by a group of individuals with strong knowledge of Lisbon's musical culture: Nelson Gomes and Pedro Gomes had great experience in organizing live concerts through the association *Filho Único* and they had both already pursued a musical career; Márcio Matos, besides his work at Flur, was also a reputed artist; José Moura, in addition to being Flur's owner, had a career as a DJ and was part of a collective called Zonk, which, together with *Filho Único*, had experience in organizing performances at *Galeria Zé dos Bois*. It is no coincidence that in an interview José Moura declared that the publishing house functioned as a cooperative and was based on values such as local, tradition and a vision of the future far removed from the dictates of the market. It was, as they said, time for the music of the peripheries to be heard in the city centre, and all that was needed was a structure that would enable that to happen (Elliot, 2022, pp.92–93). This experiment worked rapidly, particularly at the international level, and by January 2012 reviews began to appear in foreign newspapers about Marfox's 'Eu sei quem sou' ['I know who I am']. (Elliot, 2022, pp.104–107). In the book's final chapter, Elliot addresses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on his research and briefly refers to a kind of return to origins for many of the beat musicians: the bedroom had gone back to being the recording and music production studio. Basically, DIY strategies that have always been at the genesis of underground scenes such as the beat, given the scarcity of supply and demand for cultural goods in Portugal and the inability of the vast majority of these artists to make a living from their music. The pandemic worsened this situation, creating a kind of 'Netflix effect' in the music world, where every musician – known or unknown – sought to attract the attention of existing or new fans through livestreams, publications and uploads of songs. The big question, which the author does not address, is how artists in musical genres such as the beat, which are so danceable and where the translation takes place only on the dance floor, can cohere with what Frenneaux and Bennett (2021) call the 'socially distanced artist'.

Considerations on the value of sonic passions

This book is indeed a breathtaking work on the reality of Lisbon's underground music scene, particularly the *batida* and all adjacent genres. Through the re-release of the album *DJ's do Guetto Vol. 1* by Príncipe Discos, Elliot gives a breathless analysis of the genesis of the beat, its influences, especially on *kuduro*, the way it was received and how it was (and still is) reinterpreted internationally, through a complex cosmopolitan translation work. This is an approach that concerned the author throughout a good part of the book: how is it possible to interpret these new

⁶ An independent record shop located in Lisbon, founded in 2001. It is also home to two record labels, Príncipe, founded in 2011, and Holuzam, established in 2018. See <https://www.flur.pt>

sounds, use neologisms or look for analogies, to use an approach we could call ‘insider’, or bet on a ‘naïve’ perspective, as if listening to the music for the first time? In the end, how is it possible to find a vocabulary to describe a sonic strangeness? This question is particularly useful, as it allows us to abandon the rigid models of cultural imperialism or of a (sometimes unconscious) appropriation of new sounds, to the detriment of a cosmopolitan aesthetic approach that can only fully work if the interlocutors establish points of contact that facilitate a dialogue and future discoveries, as authors such as Appiah (2006) or Lobley (2018) suggest.

The DIY dimension is the only issue the author could have developed in more detail, especially when analysing the trajectory of DJ Marfox and later Prince Publishing. The use of DIY is prevalent throughout the description of Marfox’s musical trajectory, whether in his self-taught learning to use the various recording and music editing software, the self-publishing of the record *DJs do Guetto Vol. 1* in 2006 or the dissemination by MSN Messenger: all these practices are not unique to Marfox or the collective *DJs do Guetto Vol. 1*, but rather a central feature of the whole Portuguese underground movement. This is an ethos and praxis of producing, editing and disseminating their musical works (Guerra, 2017, 2018; Bennett and Guerra, 2019) that, at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, was essential to keep many artists and bands afloat, since many had experience producing and editing music from their bedrooms, which gave them an advantage in the extremely competitive pandemic context.

Elliot’s work is extremely innovative: not just a narrative description of the history of the *batida*, but a real methodological journey, crossing theory and empirics. His methodological and ethical doubts throughout the book, that in several sections resemble the most recent methodological work, approach new ethnographic practices based on sensorial experiences, such as soundwalks (Butler, 2006) and auto-ethnographies, which fill space, since to know a music scene, or a city, or a neighbourhood, is to be immersed in all kinds of sensorial *stimuli* – not merely sight, but touch, hearing, smell and taste (Low, 2015). We can add a clear language to this, which makes the reading of this book particularly interesting. Basically, it is essential reading for anyone who wants to study and understand this dimension of the Lisbon underground movement in general, and the *batida* in particular.

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