

Sometimes, when he needs a break from the killing, Speed rides his motorcycle to the top of the hill to smoke a joint and enjoy the view of the ocean. This view might be the one reason to envy the residents of the Rocinha favela in Rio de Janeiro. It is magnificent. From high up on the hillside they can see the Sugar Loaf, with the sunbathing tourists at Copacabana beach right below.

Speed has never been to Copacabana. For him it is another world, light-years away. It is dangerous down there, he says. The police have photographs of him; they know his face. 'If they see me, they shoot me.' Speed is a lord of the hill – and its captive. A broad-chested black Latino in his mid-twenties, with a cautious but candid look in his eyes, he is a senior member of the gang that controls Rocinha. Like all gangsters around here, he uses a *nom de guerre*.

In Rocinha, as in most of the 700 favelas that house half of all Rio, there is war. A war about money, drug money. A new generation of young and brutal drug lords fight for rule of the hills, virtually holding hostage their hundreds of thousands of residents. Rocinha is the most coveted piece of turf in this gang war. Many of the war's victims are little more than children. So are most of the killers.

To set up a meeting with Speed was not easy, but after many phone calls and a few beers it was done. Speed greets me in the manner of the 'boys': a handshake, followed by a brief touch of clenched fists and a thumbs-up to say '*Tudo bem* – all good!' At his waist the butt of a revolver bulges out from under his T-shirt. He pulls a Nextel two-way radio from his belt to talk to several men. Much palaver, back and forth, then he nods to me. '*Vamos!*' We mount his Kawasaki motorcycle and ride down the curvy main road, Speed trying hard to live up to his nickname.

Somewhere between 150,000 and 250,000 people are estimated to live in Rocinha, though no one really knows how many. Their homes are a chaotic jumble of ramshackle brown huts and concrete blocks clinging precariously to the steep slope. It is overshadowed by a giant cliff of gloomy granite rock which now, with dusk advancing, reflects the deep red light of the setting sun, while the strip of tropical forest beneath it already lies in the dark, looking like giant broccoli heads. It smells of the day's rain, the smoke of meat being fried, and cheap fuel.

Favelas have been described as tumours, disfiguring blemishes on a city where the wealthy live



Many of the victims in the favela's gang war are little more than children. So are most of the killers



by the beach and the poor hang on to the hills above. But Rocinha is more like a glacier, sliding slowly but relentlessly downwards to the main road. Often the armed gangs have taken their battles down to the city below. Tourists have been caught in the line of fire. Recently, the highway to the airport had to be closed as gangs waged shoot-outs right across it. This evokes memories of 1994 when, in broad daylight, several gangs stormed into the elegant streets of Ipanema and

Copacabana, fighting house-to-house and robbing tourists. Only now the violence is worse.

Riding on the back of Speed's motorcycle, we pass through several security cordons invisible to the uninitiated. Once I notice Speed give a reassuring nod to two boys at a street corner who have been looking at me. Without his presence and the permission from his boss, I would be unlikely to get very far inside Rocinha. In June 2002 Tim Lopes, a well-known reporter for the Brazilian television channel Globo, was caught in one of the favelas filming drug dealers with a hidden camera. First they beat him in the street. Then he was stripped naked, handcuffed, tortured and finally shoved into a small cave in the granite rock. With tyres on his left and right, he was burned alive. They call this the 'microwave' in gang slang.

At first sight Rocinha does not seem like a dangerous, drug-infested slum. There are buildings made of concrete and red brick. For years there has been running water and electricity. Residents wear new jeans and clean shirts; flashy mobiles are clipped to their belts. There are shops and restaurants, several gyms, a bank, a post office – and even two police stations. Much worse slums exist in Rio, like the favela Cidade de Deus, which gained worldwide notoriety in 2002 through the film of the same name (translated into English as *City of God*).

Rocinha is older and more established than most favelas: as early as the mid-1950s impoverished rural migrants set up their huts here. Though tens of thousands soon followed, the city government ignored their existence for decades. If nobody was officially living there, there was no need to build schools and hospitals. They spent the money on beach promenades for tourists. But in 1992 Rocinha received the official status of a neighbourhood. Today even municipal buses come here.

We stop and park the motorcycle outside a bar named Garota da Via Apia – 'the girl of the Via Apia'. Above the wooden chairs and tables covered with red-and-white chequered plastic, several fans hum at the ceiling. Lined up above the long zinc bar is a battalion of bottles containing any liquor that tastes good and hits hard: a lot of gin, whisky and, of course, rum. The waitresses are dressed in tight black skirts and red T-shirts with GAROTA written on them. Pop music blares from a television on the wall. The bar has no windows, just an elevated terrace, fenced in by a wooden balustrade. We choose a table with a good view on to the street, bustling with people chatting, bargaining, buying, laughing and



STREET-FIGHTING BOYS

Overshadowing the glamour of Copacabana beach, the favelas represent the dark side of Rio – ramshackle shanty towns where the rule of law has been replaced by armed bandits and cocaine barons barely out of their teens. **Lutz Kleveman** meets the gang members of Rocinha, a place of danger, drugs and golden guns

Top Speed, a member of the gang that controls Rocinha, displays his 9mm pistol.

Above the favela clings to a steep slope above a strip of tropical forest.

Opposite the *gerente general*, the gang leader's right-hand man, hides his face to avoid identification as he poses with a comrade. **Photographs by Lutz Kleveman**

walking on. There are very few white people, not surprisingly, and notably few old people.

Amid all this stand the dealers. Leaned against an electricity pole directly opposite the Garota, there are four or five boys in bermuda shorts and flippin' q's, all of them sporting gold chains and tattoos. Each boy holds two plastic bags in his hands, one apparently filled with banknotes, the other filled with cocaine rolled into small pieces of plastic. One of the boys, obviously fed up of rummaging through his plastic bag, has stuffed 10 coke portions into the corner of his mouth for easier access. 'Drugs here, drugs!' shouts another one, rather unnecessarily, like a bazaar vendor.

A deal is done fast. The customer arrives, hands over a 10-reais note, receives a little bag and walks on. Ten reais – just over £2 – for a gram of coke, sufficient for about 10 lines, is no crippling price. In London, a gram costs 20 times as much.

Sometimes the dealers shake hands with a customer, followed by the touch of fists. There is not much talk and no bargaining. Secretive behaviour is unnecessary; the dealers are like drug dispensers, coke machines on the side of the street.

Speed rarely peddles drugs these days. He is now a *soldado*, a soldier, after spending years moving up the strictly hierarchical gang career ladder. 'You start out, when you are still very young, as a *fogueteiro*, which is harmless,' he tells me. 'You play with other kids on the edge of the favela, flying kites and stuff.' Indeed, children playing with kites are a common sight in all favelas. When the *fogueteiros* see something suspicious, strangers or policemen, they dash off to inform the *foguetes*, the rockets. 'They are older and their job is to set off firecrackers to warn the guards.' The guards then take over. Equipped with Nextel radios, they describe the situation to the soldiers who, in turn, consult with the *gerentes*, the administrators, about their tactics. The worst-case scenario is a *razzia* by the military police forces, known to shoot first and ask questions later. In that case the gang usually withdraws up the hill. 'From up there it is a lot easier to aim at enemies below,' Speed explains. 'Orders to shoot are given only by the *chefe* or, in an emergency, by his right-hand man. All that needs to happen very fast, within a few minutes.'

Suddenly, a lanky boy shows up at our table, holding a big black M16, the automatic rifle of choice. The barrel sweeps above the table and kicks over the napkin box. The rifle's butt is adorned with a sticker of Che Guevara in his famous pose, gazing into the revolutionary future. The presence of a gringo in their favourite bar, observing the dealers in a conspicuously inconspicuous way, has not gone unnoticed. 'What is this guy doing here?' the lanky boy asks in a gruff voice, now using the rifle to shove the napkins to the edge of the table. Speed calms him down, calling me an amigo. Leaning the M16 against the table, the boy, who introduces himself as Angel, sits down and pours some Skol beer into his glass.

Why did they choose a career, I ask them, that limits their life expectancy? The boys grin derisively. 'Our life is never boring, and we get a regular salary,' Speed replies, placing his silver-coloured 9mm pistol on the table. 'Only the stupid and reckless die early. I have been in this for 10 years, you see.' Indeed, once past their teens, Rio gangsters are considered veterans.

Talking about their job, Speed and Angel attempt to portray themselves as private cops who merely replace ordinary police. 'We protect



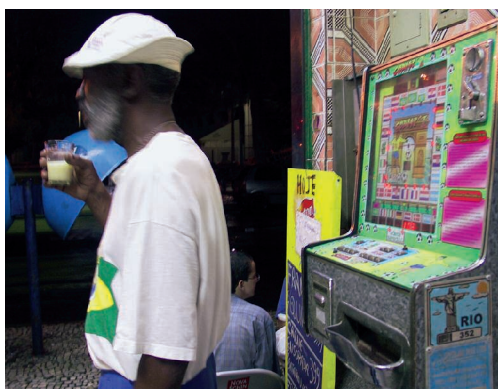
'We have our own laws. No thieves, no pimping, and rapists get the death penalty, immediately'

the community and provide security for everybody,' Speed affirms. 'We have our own laws and they are tough. There is no crime here,' he adds without a hint of irony. 'No thieves, no pimping. And rapists get the death penalty, immediately.' Including gang members, Speed emphasises.

This might not sound credible, but most experts confirm the absence of drug-unrelated crime in favelas. You're more likely to get robbed at the Copacabana than in Rocinha. In the favela's long history of social self-organisation, vigilante groups have always played a role. While the gang puts itself and the drug business first, it also, in its own way, provides a certain order in the favela. The underlying logic is that the gang leaders seek to avoid police attention at all cost. Peace is good for business, trouble is not. But of course Speed and Angel do not carry their weapons to scare off petty thieves. 'We have enemies,' says Speed. 'They are the police and other gangs.'

The Rocinha gang's current main enemy is the gang that runs the neighbouring favela Vidigal, on the other side of the granite rock. Some 20,000

Top a gang member shows off the picture of Che Guevara on his rifle while a woman looks on in admiration. **Below** a football-themed fruit machine on the streets of Rocinha



people live there, above the jet-set beach of Leblon. In the past, there were few problems with Vidigal – until Dudu returned from jail. Whenever this name is mentioned, the people of Rocinha, gangsters as well as normal residents, react with a mixture of disgust and fear.

Dudu grew up in Rocinha and in the late 1990s became second-in-command under Lulu, the favela's long-time drug lord. 'Lulu was a good *chefe* who looked after his men and the community,' Speed recalls. 'But Dudu was an arsehole. He was brutal, and when he drank rum with speed pills he became unpredictable and started shooting around.' In 1997 Dudu was arrested in a police raid and put in jail. He was sentenced to 30 years' imprisonment but was released after three – for good conduct. 'He bribed the right people in the system to let him out,' Speed says. The following day, Dudu showed up in Rocinha and demanded his old position back, but Lulu told him to go to hell. Furious, Dudu teamed up with the gangsters in Vidigal and talked them into invading Rocinha. At dawn on Good Friday 2004 about 60 men from Vidigal, all dressed in black, stormed the neighbouring favela. After hours of fierce gunfights, the invaders controlled all important *bocas de fumo* (drug-selling sites). Nearly 20 people lay dead in the street. Crucially, Lulu was shot and killed – by police who had been tipped off and who used the invasion to settle scores. Speed believes they were paid by Dudu.

But Dudu made a mistake: while hijacking several cars on the beach road before the attack he shot two women dead, including the daughter of an influential Brazilian diplomat. On Easter Monday, no fewer than 1,200 elite fighters of the military police moved into Rocinha. After a long game of hide-and-seek with several shoot-outs, Dudu handed himself in on New Year's Eve and went back to prison, where his life is safest.

The news of the arrest was greeted ecstatically by the people of Rocinha. 'All night long we celebrated and shot our guns and fireworks into the air,' Speed remembers. 'With those arseholes from Vidigal, however, we still have scores to settle.'

Ever more customers walk up to the cocaine dealers outside the Garota bar. Many do not look like they live in Rocinha. 'They are from Ipanema,' Speed says. 'They are probably going to a party later and want to get high.' The middle-class customers often park their cars down at the main road, less than 300 yards below us, and walk up. Others send one of the *motortaxistas* to get the drugs for them. The volume of business is despite the heavily-armed police standing outside a station two blocks up the road. Ah, they are cool,' Speed says nonchalantly. 'The cops know that we all need to make some money. It is also healthier for them not to look too closely.' And more profitable as naturally they get paid for turning a blind eye. It is an open secret that most of the bribes are passed on to their equally corrupt commanders who in turn move the money further upstairs and so on.

Rocinha is regarded as a slightly safer place than other favelas such as Cidade de Deus, where few outsiders dare to venture. That is why Speed's gang has a much higher turnover than the competition – \$3-5 million a week, press reports say – which makes Rocinha's *bocas de fumo* the most coveted booty in the favela turf war. Whoever controls Rocinha gets rich.

Three big drug syndicates control the narco-business in Rio. The oldest of them is Comando

Vermelho (CV), 'the red command'. Its origins go back to the 1970s, when the first professional drug dealers were jailed. Under the right-wing military dictatorship ruling Brazil at that time many dealers shared their cells with political prisoners, mainly members of communist parties. It was they who first taught the dealers how to set up and run efficiently organised clandestine groups. On their release the drug dealers used their newly acquired knowledge to found the first syndicate, naming it in homage to their mentors. Later, a rival mafia appeared on the scene, the Terceiro Comando (TC), 'the third command'. In the late 1990s, a group of discontented mid-level drug lords from both organisations teamed up into a third big player, Amigos dos Amigos (ADA). These 'friends of friends' have been controlling Rocinha and other favelas for a few years.

Using their allegedly excellent contacts in politics and business, the godfathers of all three syndicates are able to move massive amounts of cocaine from Colombia. The first Brazilian to travel to the Medellin cartel in the 1980s and order plane loads of cocaine was the businessman and subsequent CV boss Luiz Fernando da Costa. In April 2001 he was arrested in Colombia and has since been in jail in Rio. His incarceration, however, has in no way ended Da Costa's wheeling and dealing. He continues to conduct his drug business by way of mobile-phone calls. When in February 2003 the government tried to tighten the prison rules for Da Costa, he decided briefly to demonstrate the extent of his power outside the prison walls. A few days later, CV gangsters blew up 20 public buses within a few hours, and Da Costa's mobile phone was swiftly returned to him.

Together, the gangs of Rio and other cities have turned Brazil into a top customer in the global cocaine business. No other country in the world except the United States consumes as much cocaine. The facts are disturbing: in 2003 the police confiscated more than five tons of cocaine in the region around Rio, three times more than in 2000. According to a recent study, about 10,000 people, mostly minors, work in the drug business in Rio alone. Homicides in the city have increased threefold in the last decade, to more than 50 per 100,000 inhabitants annually. (In London the figure is about 2.5 per 100,000.) There are also about 2,000 cases per year of people reported missing, many of whom are believed to have disappeared into the favela gangs' secret cemeteries. About 6,000 firearms were confiscated in 2003 – 10 times more than 10 years ago. Every year, more youths get shot and killed in Rio than in the war zones of Colombia and Sierra Leone.

Meanwhile, in the Garota bar more gang members have shown up. Aged between 13 and 25, their outfits resemble that of so many child soldiers in the tropics: flip-flops, bermuda shorts and oversized Nike or Adidas T-shirts, gold chains, bleached hair and tattoos. Higher-ranking soldiers own several mobile phones and Nextel radios, used to communicate constantly with other comrades on the hill.

Their arsenal of weapons is eclectic: Remington revolvers, the inevitable Kalashnikovs (complete with extra magazines taped together), two Israeli Uzi machine pistols, and weird shotguns with short, thick barrels which could easily spread a load of bullets throughout the entire bar. One of the gangsters has three old hand grenades



Speed's gang has a much higher turnover than the competition – \$3-5 million a week, press reports say

dangling from his belt. In other favelas police have found landmines, and a few months ago a gang attempted to shoot down a police helicopter with air-defence missiles.

The boys are remarkably relaxed about their weapons, in the same way an Englishman would handle his umbrella. Besides the ever-popular Che Guevara, the stickers adorning their rifle butts show Bob Marley, various female beauties, and Osama bin Laden, complete with beard and turban. Why him? 'Don't know,' the rifle's owner says with a shrug. 'He is a rebel like us, my friends tell me.' The boys burst out laughing.

Some girls join the group. They were at the beach all day, thin white lines tracing the exact course of their bikini strings down from the shoulders, which is currently a popular fashion statement in Rio. The sight of the weapons does not appear to trouble them either. 'What a fine, long gun you have here,' one girl jokes, stroking the barrel of Angel's M16.

They all drink beer and smoke joints, massive trumpets of joints, albeit only on the street. 'Not in the bar, that is not good manners,' Speed says.

Top a girl displays the tattoo of an amazonian fighter on her stomach. **Below** children play table football in the streets. Rocinha is regarded as a slightly safer place than other favelas, such as Cidade de Deus



'The smoke would bother other people eating.' Equally, nobody drinks beer from the bottle. 'That has no style.' And the gangsters never fail to pay their beer tab. What about the cocaine, where is that being consumed?

Speed's look clearly brands my question as very silly. 'None of us takes cocaine.' He is serious. 'Coke f**** you up. It is unprofessional to take it and it just causes trouble. The *chefe* does not allow it.' The ban is a security measure: as coke-heads become aggressive and their egos inflated, they might suddenly consider it a splendid idea to shoot at comrades or even the boss. Not all gangs are that disciplined. Many fighters in other favelas are feared especially because they snort away all inhibitions before going into battle. The sale of crack, however, has been banned by all gangster bosses. It is as hard to come by in Rio as heroin.

Suddenly, the boys grow quieter. Not silent, just quieter. Those who still laugh or talk loudly are given a little kick against the leg. Looks turn to a tall man in his twenties walking towards the bar. 'He is the *gerente general*, the *chefe*'s right-hand man,' Speed whispers. Exchanging somewhat humourless nods with his men, the *gerente* sits down on a bar stool, the *boca de fuma* in full view. Nothing underlines the *gerente*'s power more clearly than the rifle placed in his lap – it is made of gold plate. Not the mechanical parts, but the entire barrel and the trigger. Of course, it belongs not to him but to his boss.

The *chefe*'s name is Bill, pronounced as Bui, and he succeeded Lulu. He features prominently on the police's most-wanted list, which in Rio is tantamount to a blacklist for liquidation on sight. That is why Bill shuns the open street and is said to change houses in Rocinha every night. Rumour has it that Bill also owns a pistol made of white gold which he uses solely to execute people – with appropriately gilded bullets, that a surgically trained member of the gang subsequently extracts from the corpses for recycling.

It is past midnight. Most of the gangsters are now very drunk. Their conversations spin around rap music, sex and their rivals from Vidigal who have it coming. The boys are joined by some Rocinha residents who do not belong to the gang. Among them are a painter who enquires about galleries in New York; a (self-published) novelist who wants to write a play for children; and a hip-hop MC known all over Brazil who emphatically states that, despite his success and new wealth, he would never move out of Rocinha.

A news clip on the television above the bar shows Diego Maradona, obese like a hippo. 'That guy takes too much cocaine,' one of the dealers comments, shaking his head. 'That is not healthy.' The others nod in agreement, without a trace of irony, suddenly showing a vivid interest in health issues. Speed pours a spoonful of olive oil into his beer. 'The oil will purify the veins in your body, the whole system.' Angel recommends a piece of garlic every morning. 'Since I have been doing that, I have not had a single cold or sore throat,' says a gangster whose life will almost certainly be ended by a bullet, perhaps as early as next week.

The alcohol whittling away their initial mistrust, the boys allow themselves to be photographed. With improbable vanity, they strike poses for the camera, proudly holding their weapons. After each picture, they stare excitedly at the display on the digital screen and crack up laughing, like little children. Even the *gerente* agrees to

pose for a portrait, though he pulls a baseball cap down over his face to remain unrecognisable.

But within a second the general hilarity implodes when a man unzips his trousers in front of the camera for a strip. I noticed him earlier: older than most, dressed in dirty clothes, and evidently not a gang member, he behaved obsequiously with the boys, getting them beer and sandwiches. He was drunk and often stumbled. The *gerente* swiftly orders several boys to take care of the problem. Confused but not resisting, the poor man is taken away into a side street.

'That guy is an idiot,' Speed says laconically. 'Taking off your trousers in public and in front of a visitor is just not acceptable. He has disgraced the community.' What is going to happen to him now? Speed looks out on the street, remaining silent. Are they going to beat him up? Speed shakes his head. 'No, he will die.' For a small incident like that? 'It was a serious breach of the rules, and not for the first time. He drinks too much and he pisses in the street. He deserves it.'

Few people in Rocinha are willing to talk about the life under the state of siege by which the gang keeps the majority of the population hostage. One who does speak out is Paulo Amendoim. A short, wiry man, he grew up in Rocinha in the 1950s, the son of dirt-poor alcoholics, and he has spent all his life here. Yet he also got to know the world 'out there' as one of Brazil's best athletes in the 1970s. Holding several South American running records for years, he came seventh in the 1500 metres at the Olympic Games in Montreal in 1976. As a reward, the government sent him on a two-year scholarship to a university in Germany to study languages.

For the past 10 years, Amendoim has been running a sports-and-education project to get the children off the street, away from the gangs. 'Up to 500 kids come here every other day,' he says as we enter the sports club he has rented, with money from the city council, on the other side of the Rocinha hill. The club, complete with a large pool, used to belong to the wealthy families who live further down in the valley. When the favela came creeping over the hill, they decided to go swimming elsewhere. 'Before, we were not even allowed to come close to the gate and now we have basically occupied the club,' Amendoim remarks with a laugh.

Aged between five and 17, dozens of boys and girls cheerfully splash around in the pool while others play volleyball and basketball. Meanwhile, the other half of the group sits in class. 'Nearly 20 teachers instruct the kids in all elementary subjects,' Amendoim explains on a tour through the clubhouse. 'Few attend a regular school.' In classrooms with such a spectacular panorama – overlooking the Sugar Loaf, the lagoon and the statue of Christ the Redeemer on the Corcovado hill – the studying must not come easy.

Amendoim talks to the children about drugs and the dealers. 'Not even the parents dare to do this, for fear of angering the gang.' Of course, the gang leaders know about his work, he continues, but have never given him any problems. 'They respect me. I don't mess with their business and they leave me alone. Anyway, they know that there will always be enough kids willing to buy drugs or work for the gang.' Only when his oldest son became friends with the gang did Amendoim feel that enough was enough. 'He told me over dinner that he wanted to be a dealer. I was speechless.



Paulo Amendoim talks to children about drugs – not even parents do this, for fear of angering the gangs

Then I got a bottle of rum, poured it over him, and set him on fire.' The method worked. Today his son has an honest job and a wife, with a baby on the way. But Amendoim and his nearly 50 co-workers, most of them volunteers, cannot save every child. 'I had a boy here for years, a nice quiet one, who was artistically inclined,' he remembers. 'One day the police caught him spraying graffiti downtown, and he was put in jail for two years.' Inevitably, the boy came into contact with real criminals, and when he was released he joined the Rocinha gang. 'I implored him to go home to his family but he only shrugged his shoulders. Three weeks later they shot him dead.'

In the 30 years that drug gangs have been active in Rocinha, the situation has never been as bad as today, Amendoim claims. 'In the old days, they did their work discreetly and all was quiet and peaceful. They only killed behind closed doors. Today we have an open war going on.' Amendoim and other observers are in no doubt about the reason for this: since the old drug lords exited, young hotbloods have usurped the business and are engaged in ruthless power struggles.

Top Paulo Amendoim (left) with youths from his programme of sports and education designed to keep them away from the gangs. **Below** the gold-plated gun belonging to Bill, *chefe* of the gang



'The old guard had grown up with us and they knew everyone in the favela,' Amendoim says. 'They were godfathers who had, however strange it may sound, a certain kind of social responsibility. They knew they needed a degree of sympathy from the community to do their business without being denounced to the police.' By contrast, the new bosses pursue quick profits, with unbridled brutality and disregard for the community. 'They know they are going to die young and that is how they behave. It is sheer terror.'

Amendoim introduces me to his friend André, a former gang member. Of slender stature and quiet manners, André recalls his first cocaine hit. 'I was 16. Until then I had never had a girlfriend and that night I had two at a time.' The job in the gang provided the regular salary he needed to pay for his increasing addiction. 'I dealt, I was a *soldado*, I did basically everything one does – except I never killed anyone.' After his father kicked him out, the gang became his surrogate family. André lived in the street. One day, about two years ago, he was approached by a minister of the New Baptist Church, which has built several places of worship in Rocinha. '“Do you want to die like a dog, or come with me?” he asked me.' André did a six-month rehab in a Baptist-run clinic in the countryside. 'God has saved me. Today I am once again a respected man. I can leave Rocinha, go to the beach, whenever I want. I am free.'

The Baptists and, with a smaller presence, the Roman Catholic Church are the only true opponents of the favela gangs. Every Sunday courageous preachers rail against 'the wrong path', the violence, the drugs and the state of siege which the gang has practically imposed on Rocinha. None would go as far as calling on the community to engage in civic resistance against the gang, qualifies André, who now works for the New Baptist Church. 'That would be suicide. Instead, we are committed to peaceful co-existence and passive resistance by pointing out the right way – and the right way out.'

'Several boys from the gang have come to me in secret, asking me for help and advice with getting out,' André says. Do the gang leaders simply accept desertions? 'They never gave me any trouble, but then I was such a wreck that I was of no further use to them. Rather, they would have killed me if I had stayed in the gang.' Surely, however, they cannot be pleased with the work he is doing now? 'Well, you know, if you don't betray anyone or join another gang, you can get out any time.' After a brief pause, however, he adds: 'unless you know too much.'

The next day I meet up with Speed and his gangster friends and they take me to a *baile funk*, a funk concert. We race up the hill on motorcycles. Outside the hangar-like music hall there are hundreds of teenagers; another thousand are inside. It is hot and it smells of beer, sweat and sex. Dancing girls are everywhere, dressed in hot-pants and miniskirts. Suggestively, they gyrate their hips, some sucking their fingers, eyes fixed on some boy. 'Deliver me from evil!' reads a tattoo on one girl's back.

On the stage two MCs roar into their microphones. One has a black revolver tucked inside his shorts. Their lyrics are about violence, cocaine and other drugs, and sex, often brutal. Favela funk originated in the Miami Bass of the late 1980s but today's funk DJs also use hard basses and techno rhythms, laced with aggressive raps



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in Portuguese. Most concerts are organised by the gangs, to entertain the youth – and to drive up drug sales. It is a world away from the samba and carnival, for which Rio is world-famous.

Across one wall is written ‘I love life but the one who is in love with me is death.’ Next to it someone else has written, ‘It is better to lose a minute of my life than to lose my life in a minute.’ This can easily happen at a *baile funk*. Rival gangs often clash at concerts. As in a ritual, they gather on both sides of the concert hall and form a so-called ‘corridor of death’ in the middle. Then the fighters go at each other, provoked by the MCs and cheered on by the girls. Though the use of firearms is usually banned, there have been numerous deaths over the past years. The gang which eliminates most enemy soldiers, called ‘Germans’ in favela slang, is declared the winner.

Speed wants to step out for a minute to get some fresh air. Outside the exit he stops. ‘There is Bill, *el chefe*,’ he whispers to me. Leaning against a car, and surrounded by *soldados*, is a white man with short blond hair. Low forehead, alert eyes, narrow eyebrows and somewhat chubby cheeks. A bulldog. He wears white beach trousers and a blue sleeveless shirt, with an enormous amulet and thick chains hanging from his neck, all made of gold. Surprisingly, he is not visibly armed. But perhaps he is being cautious after rumours of his golden gun have caused the press and politicians to put increasing pressure on the police to liquidate him. And you do not need to read the newspapers to realise that this man is a killer.

After Lulu’s death during the Dudu invasion in May 2004 it was not clear who would succeed him. Initially, Bill was merely *primus inter pares*, one of four of Lulu’s lieutenants. A cat-and-mouse game began between the rivals and their followers. Bill eliminated all of them, one by one, with golden shots. For a few weeks he has been the sole ruler over Rocinha. Just for how long his rule will last is anyone’s guess.

Back in the Garota da Via Apia, two nights later, Speed sucks nervously on his cigarette. ‘There could be trouble tonight’ – this is all he is willing to say. Again, many boys have gathered in and around the bar, drinking beer, but the mood is tense. They talk in low voices; the joints are passed around hectically. Even the dealers, usually the epitome of relaxation, walk up and down restlessly.

Suddenly, there is a loud bang. And another one. Bang! Everyone is looking up to the sky. Up on the rock, someone is launching rockets



**‘God has saved me.
Today I am free;
I can leave Rocinha
whenever I want’**

André, a former gang member and drug addict, in his Baptist church

that explode into glittery gold rain and red and green luminescent balls. To my surprise, the boys look relieved; some of them are laughing. The boss’s right hand jumps up from his bar stool to order a round of beer for everyone. ‘There is reason to celebrate,’ says Speed with a grin.

A group of *soldados* arrive at the Garota. They strut up to the bar and lean their rifles against it. First they play it cool and let everyone wait for answers. Then the story emerges: just one hour earlier, they attacked Vidigal, with a dozen men. They climbed over the rock, sneaked into the streets and opened fire. ‘We took them by total surprise,’ one of the fighters reports, out of breath. His face is distorted by a broad, decidedly insane grin; his thick caterpillar eyebrows keep twitching. (Is it the adrenaline or cocaine after all?) ‘Some of them did not even have time to reach for their guns. We got four of their guys. One of them was squealing and begging but bang bang and that was it for him.’

The attack on Vidigal does, of course, have a sequel. The following night, worried that Bill could bring the neighbouring favela under his control (which might cause bribes to flow into different pockets), the military police raid Rocinha. Several dozen men, flanked by arm o u d j e e p s t m r the Via Apia at dawn. Bill’s men, of course, were tipped off and have long withdrawn to a hide-out up the hill. Witnesses will later describe how the frustrated police arbitrarily snatch young men from the streets and their homes and beat them up. People hear gunshots.

At sunrise all is quiet again. Police cars patrol the Via Apia, no dealer and no *soldado* to be seen. For one day, just for one short moment, Rocinha is just a normal neighbourhood in Rio, not far from the beach.