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From med school to megastar, CimaFunk's Afro-Cuban rhythms go international

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Only a short time ago, Erik Iglesias Rodríguez was a medical school student living in his rural hometown of Pinar del Río, Cuba. Now he's an international music sensation, known as CimaFunk, touring the world with his new brand of Afro-Cuban Funk.

Named by Billboard as a "Top 10 Latin Artist to watch in 2019," CimaFunk made his U.S. debut in Austin, Texas in March at the 2019 South by Southwest Music Festival. Then he sold out venues in Washington, D.C. Miami, Chicago, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Mexico and Europe, before returning to the U.S. for a performance in New York's Central Park SummerStage on Sunday as well as performances at the city's legendary Blue Note Jazz Club August 26 and 27.

"It's just happiness and enjoying yourself," says CimaFunk, 30, about the message he wants to tell people through his music and lyrics. "It all depends on you what to do with your time. To me, the most important things in life are family, love, food and sex," said the musician, speaking to NBC News in New York City.

It was November of last year when crowds started forming to see him perform in Havana's prestigious Fábrica de Arte Cubano, where some of the most celebrated Cuban and international artists have performed, including U.S. musicians Dave Matthews and Esperanza Spalding. His song "Me Voy" won Cuba's Lucas Prize for most popular video.

He had been studying to be a doctor, which he said is the family tradition. Almost everyone in his family works in the healthcare field — including his mother, who always sang around the

house carrying a perfect tune, he said.

"I was in biochemistry class one day, and when I came out, that's when I knew," he said about making the switch to music. "I had just seen [Cuban musician] Ray Fernandez perform, and he impacted me so strongly. I felt I needed to give people this reaction. I took my radical decision because of this guy."

CimaFunk's only training in music came from singing in the choir at his Baptist Church when he was in his teens. He was influenced by the nueva trova movement, and about five years ago he got an eight-month gig on a cruise ship where he played the covers of musicians like Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye while also learning English.

"When I came back home from the ship, I started CimaFunk," he says.

The name "CimaFunk" refers to his heritage. A 'cimarrón' is a Cuban of African descent who resisted and escaped slavery. It also means "wild" or "untamed," which can also define his music, which innovates traditional Cuban rhythms with different styles from Africa and the U.S.

He named his first album "Terapia," which means therapy, because that's what music is to him. His favorite track is "Parar el tiempo" ("Stopping Time"), the album's only ballad; the rest of the songs are energetic and danceable. "I was inspired by a guy from my neighborhood, nicknamed 'Mr. Chords,' who came and started jamming at my house, and he left at 3 am. I wrote a song about it in 20 minutes."

CimaFunk doesn't write or read music, but composes all of his songs in his head and then sounds them out to his fellow musicians.

"I go like 'baram bam bam tika pom pom' like that, but of course if they have a better idea, we just go with it," said CimaFunk, in his demonstrative, yet relaxed way.

It was a group of Colombian tourists, he explains, who fell so in love with his sound, that they arranged his first concert abroad in Bogotá.

"Everything happened in a couple of months," says CimaFunk about what feels like his overnight success.

Though CimaFunk has no solid plans right now, he hinted at a new album next year which would be recorded in analog format to give the feeling that it's live. For now, he's basking in the moment.

"I'm going to play music and keep enjoying and having happiness," he said. "Being on the stage is my favorite part of my week and having people enjoy the show."

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