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In Brazil, performers embrace music pirates

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BELEM, Brazil — In this muggy city on the eastern edge of the Amazon rain forest, thousands of partygoers gather every weekend to revel to a frenetic dance music that's quickly become the soundtrack of the jungle.

Disc jockeys blast what's known as tecnobrega at parties filled with lasers and giant video screens, while tecnobrega singers belt out their latest hits backed up by legions of fans who've memorized every lyric.

It's a scene familiar to pop fans around the world, but what sets tecnobrega apart — and what's inspired many to call it the future of the global music industry — is that it's exploded in the absence of record companies, concert promoters or anything resembling a traditional music industry.

While media giants spend millions fighting a losing battle against music piracy, tecnobrega singers record their songs on home computers and send their music directly to bootleggers, who burn hundreds of copies and sell them at sidewalk stands next to illegal copies of the latest Hollywood blockbusters.

Fans, rather than being sued for sharing music with each other, are encouraged to copy the songs and post them on file-sharing Web sites, where millions around the world can download them.

In this free-for-all, musicians only make a buck from their elaborate live shows, which they promote by giving away records.

Singer Gabi Amarantos, one of the genre's top stars, said tecnobrega is a sign of things to come around the world. Along with Belem natives Banda Calypso, Amarantos' band Tecno Show has become nationally famous solely on the strength of bootleg sales.

"There's no way to stop piracy, so we're taking advantage of what's emerged in Belem, which is an extremely quick system for distributing music, through the pirates," Amarantos said.

"Here, we don't have record companies. Really, we don't have anything but jungle and piracy. What that meant is we musicians had to get creative."

Piracy, fueled by the quick, cheap copying of compact discs and online file-sharing, accounts for practically every music recording sold in countries such as Paraguay and Bolivia, according to the recording industry association IFPI, which has also listed Brazil as a priority country in its fight against piracy.

The trend is global; pirated CDs account for 37 percent of all music discs bought worldwide, according to IFPI. As a result, media giants have seen sales plummet, even in the United States.

As groundbreaking U.S. rocker David Byrne of the band the Talking Heads recently wrote on his Web site, "The 'industry' had a nice 50-year ride, but it's time to move on. Luckily, music remains more or less unaffected — there is a lot of great music out there. A new model will emerge that includes rather than sues its own customers."

The close partnership in Belem between musicians, bootleggers and disc jockeys could be a new model, said Ronaldo Lemos, a law professor at the business and law school the Getulio Vargas Foundation in Rio de Janeiro.

Lemos, who has studied the tecnobrega movement, found that its singers earn about \$850 per month — nearly five times Brazil's minimum wage — from their music, with 88 percent of them having had no contact with record labels.

Street vendors, musicians and DJ sound systems in Belem earn an estimated \$5 million a month selling tecnobrega CDs, DVDs and show tickets, Lemos found.

Such "open business" models also thrive in other developing countries, often involving music and film created by society's poorest, Lemos said.

For example, bootleggers are the key distributors of champeta, a street hybrid of Latin and African music, in Colombia, as well as of another hybrid music, kudo, in Angola, and gritty Brazilian funk in Rio de Janeiro.

Nigeria's film industry, known as "Nollywood," has become the world's third-largest based solely on the sale of cheap DVDs, officially priced at about \$3 per copy, and rampant piracy, Lemos said. Only the U.S. and Indian film industries are bigger and make more money annually.

"People often say that if there's no protection of intellectual property, there's no incentive for creativity," Lemos said. "But in the tecnobrega case, creativity has grown without any protections."

That doesn't mean everyone in Belem is happy with the new order.

Music producer Marcel Arede said he has begrudgingly learned to appreciate the tecnobrega phenomenon, even though it's sapped his profits. He works with a local rock band signed with a record label that plays a busy, virtuosic genre known regionally as "guitarred."

"It's great that whoever wants to listen to the music can access it and download it and do whatever they want with it," Arede said. "But what I'm against is someone else making money off something that I've created."

For tecnobrega fan Carla Pantoja, however, economics is the key. With legal compact discs selling in Brazil for about \$15 a copy, a day's wages for many in Belem, pirated music is the only affordable alternative for most people, she said. On the streets, compact discs can go for as little as 50 cents a copy.

She said piracy is also a quick way for fans like her to stay on top of tecnobrega's dizzyingly fleeting trends, where hit songs go the way of grunge rock and disco within a day or two.

"Sometimes, the music is being sold on the streets the same day it's recorded," the 26-year-old said. "Sometimes, by the time it's being sold on the streets, it's already gone out of fashion."

That brutal fickleness throws singers and disc jockey sound systems into a relentless chase to reinvent themselves and keep their audiences' attentions, a pursuit familiar to U.S. media companies trying to stay on top of the new, Internet-based times.

Singers have dreamed up a flurry of tecnobrega offshoots, with names such as cibertecnobrega and brega melody, to remain on the cutting edge. Tecnobrega itself is a more beat-heavy version of brega, a music form that began in Belem in the 1970s with U.S. rock music as an inspiration.

It's also been a huge push for the producers of the tecnobrega shows, who've had to stay fresh by buying tens of thousands of dollars in new lasers, speakers and video screens every few months and throwing huge parties to hype the new equipment.

Recordings of sound system parties, sold by bootleggers, have become the main way tecnobrega singers get heard.

Recently, disc jockeys have taken to blasting their music in enormous mock-ups of spaceships, complete with jet boosters spitting out steam and lasers shooting into the crowd.

Erick Santos, whose family owns a sound system called Powerful Rubi, the Spaceship of Sound, said he remembered simpler days more than five decades ago, when his father started the business with only a record player and a megaphone.

Now, although he's bought three truckfuls of video screens and lights, Santos is seeing his audience drift to other sound systems with flashier gear.

"Is this the future of music?" Santos asked on a recent night, as tecnobrega blasted at one of his parties. "I think so. And like it or not, no one will be able to stop it."