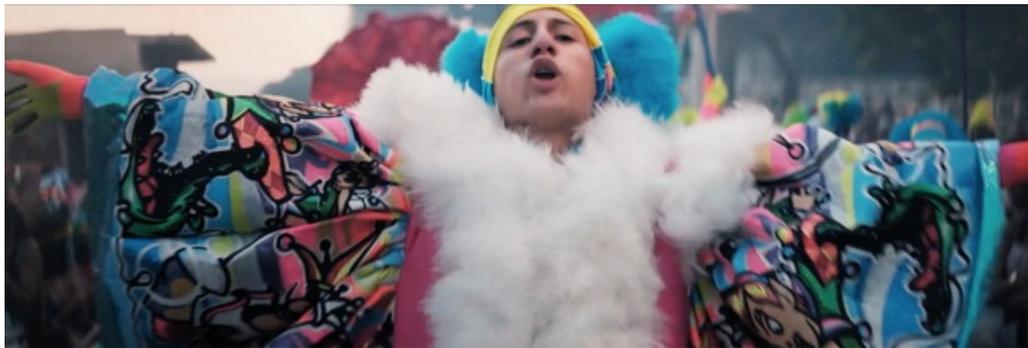


## Interview: Ben Holman

[Malu Rocha](#) interviews Ben Holman, director of the Brazilian short film documentary “This is Bate Bola”

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Beija Films

*This is Bate Bola* is a short documentary co-directed by Ben Holman and Neirin Jones, with an original soundtrack by Ben Lamar Gay. It was brilliantly made and beautifully captures the energy of this lesser-known part of Rio de Janeiro’s famous Carnival.

### **Q: Could you please introduce your film to our readers?**

A: Sure, this was a film I made with my friend Neirin Jones and it is about the famous Rio de Janeiro’s Carnival, but a part of the Carnival that very few people know about, even people that are from Rio. The film centres around people doing ‘Bate Bola’, which is a tradition that has its roots in African and Ancient European Carnival culture. Rio has between 300 and 500 ‘Bate Bola’ groups, or ‘clovis’ as they’re also known, mostly featured in the North and West favelas and suburbs of the city of Rio de Janeiro. It’s this beautiful and amazing culture that is relatively unknown. People tend to have a fear towards this tradition because it has a reputation for being violent, but I think a lot of that comes from people’s prejudices they have about people living in those communities. So, Neirin and I saw this as a beautiful culture that we wanted to share with as many people as possible.

### **Q: Did your idea come about when you were Brazil, or was it something you’ve always been passionate about?**

A: I lived in Brazil on and off for twelve years, so it was something that I had seen before. However, I had only seen little bits of it, because you don’t really see this culture properly unless you go out to the suburbs and look for it. But sometimes two or three people dress up as ‘Bate Bola’ and come to the main Carnival, and you see them and you wonder “who are those guys with masks on?!” They have an amazing energy and look absolutely incredible. This caught my eye and I heard more about it through friends, so this has been something I’ve wanted to do a film about for many years.

During my time in Brazil, I met another British filmmaker, Neirin Jones, who was also living in the country for a few years and as chances are, he was also fascinated by it. He had already dived deeper and had

gone a couple of times in previous years to take photos and so we decided a few weeks before Carnival that we were going to make a film about it. We had no money and no support at that point, but we just grabbed a couple of cameras and shot our film.



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**Q: Did you face any violence in Rio during the making of your film?**

A: There is violence in the city and I've encountered violence while living there at different times. I've spent a lot of time in favela communities where sometimes the violence can be more extreme, and sadly the people that live in those communities are very often caught in the crossfire of the different armed factions, whether they come from the state, militia, or drug factions. And this is a culture that has a reputation for violence, which is perhaps why very few people have made films about it up until now.

I think that people sometimes blow up the level of violence to do with this culture around those communities because of who they are and where it is, mostly because it's working class black men, and people unfortunately seem to be scared of large groups of young men. This is a very misunderstood culture and I think many of the same prejudices exist around Notting Hill Carnival in London, with its Caribbean origins. Rio is a violent city and violence happens in that city every day, sadly. But the vast majority of people involved in the Bate Bola culture are beautiful peace-loving people who just want to have a good time.

During the making of this film, I haven't encountered anything that I would classify as violence. The people we were with were wonderful and made us feel completely welcome, which made it was a massively positive experience.

**Q: As compared to filming a documentary in the UK, did you find that people approached you and interacted with your camera in a different way?**

A: Yes, definitely! I've been lucky enough to film documentaries all around the world and it's always fascinating to me how different countries and different cultures behave with a camera. English people tend to be more cynical and can be a little bit more shy, but when you finally get them to open up, they can be very sincere and you get some wonderful moments. In Lebanon, for example, people have a very cynical sense of humour, but in Japan you can walk around and be invisible; people are too shy to tell you not to film them so you can walk around like a ghost.

It's great filming in Brazil because in my experience people aren't so shy, there's a natural warmth in people, they enjoy the camera in a very non self-conscious way, and perform for the camera. Sometimes you bring out your camera and have a group of kids jump up in front of you straight away. It's one of the reasons I love filming in Brazil; that interaction between the people and the camera, it always genuinely feels like a very warm relationship and it makes filmmaking very much easier.



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**Q: Did you have any happy accidents while filming your documentary?**

A: Yes! Always with documentaries you have to look for those happy accidents, and I think that's particularly applicable in Brazil. I normally get half of what I planned, and then I get another 50 percent that is even better than I could have imagined. I think particularly with this film, which was filmed over the three days of Carnival (where everyone is so hyped up, going crazy, there is huge adrenaline) we had very little control of what was going on. There were a couple of shots in the film where we directed people a little bit, but honestly it was almost impossible for some of the scenes.

There is a key moment in the film where a kid throws a big box of fireworks that haven't gone off properly into the fire and it explodes. That was certainly something that no one planned, not even the kid himself. We didn't know whether to run or not at that point, but we stood our ground and got a nice shot, and that became a really key moment in the film. The whole film is one big happy accident.

**Q: Do you have anything planned for the future?**

A: Yes, I'm working on a few projects in development right now. I'm actually looking to go back to Rio because there is a lot of political turmoil going on in the country at the moment, and I want to tell Brazilian stories again. I feel like I'm always drawn to stories about people that are underrepresented in the media and marginalised. That is as important right now as it's ever been. I would like to make a feature film that contributes in a positive way to the struggles that are happening as people fight for their freedom, fight for their democracy, and fight for tolerance.



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