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As told to Camilo Garzón, 3293 words.

Tags: Music, Activism, Inspiration, Collaboration, Identity, Politics.

On reflecting your surroundings in your work

Musician Simón Mejía (Bomba Estéreo) discusses the connection between nature and art, the use of politics in music, why collaboration is essential, and how we're always learning.

You and I were both born in Bogotá, Colombia. What were some of the things that you were interested in when you were growing up? How did this upbringing influence your work?

I was born in Bogotá and have spent most of my life here. I went to live in Argentina with my mother and my sister for three or four years when I was a small kid, but all my life has mainly been here in Colombia. So I'm really a true, deep Bogotano. Bogotá is multicultural as people come from different regions and everyone meets here. So that's why here you see such interesting musical projects that make music from different parts of the country. And artistically it is a very interesting city because of that, but at the same time a little bit discouraging.

Colombia is a very centralist country as most things that happen politically, economically, and culturally mainly happen in Bogotá. Which is good, because it's a city full of people from all other places of the country. But at the same time it's a bit sad, because in terms of culture and economy the rest of the country lacks some development. Now with the pandemic happening, people are leaving Bogotá and are going back to their hometowns because the quality of life is better there and it's cheaper. Hopefully that's going to bring more development in those places now.

Anyone that has listened to your work in Bomba Estéreo or even listened to your newest solo work, can see that the influence of all the regions—from the jungle to the sea—is very present. If you listen to your work closely, you also hear the history, the social context of Colombia, and all of the conflicts that the country has had. Your music is eclectic, and mixes all of these influences that you just talked about. But how is it that you have chosen to transform these things that have happened in Colombia into your art? How are you channeling them?

I think, in general, art is a way of channeling information, energies, and concepts through expression.

And in the case of Colombia I have been channeling everyday life through this artistic expression. Colombia is a really strong country that has gone through very difficult stuff. We have had really awful and sad things here. We're still at war. The violence is very arraigada¹ in our culture.

Living here is a very specific experience and everyone that is from Colombia or has visited Colombia can tell you. We live all the time in that balance between negative and positive. And everyday you wake up you have death and violence, but at the same time, you have amazing music, amazing culture, amazing landscapes. We have the Amazon jungle, the two oceans, the Guajira desert, the foggy forests, los páramos, the glaciers, and the only country that has three ridges of the Andes. It's kind of an energetic Yin and Yang that you walk in everyday, through the positive and the negative.

Being an artist here is special because of the channeling that happens by living with that contrast of energies, it really inspires you to create art. Music in Colombia has been a way to overcome that negative energy, and it is so amazing because our everyday life is so difficult. Especially in the countryside where all this folk music and all these cultural traditions from centuries ago is still in the art, and continues as a way of overcoming violence. So it's really powerful. It's not fake culture, fake art, or fake entertainment. It is just a way to overcome the difficulties of everyday life. I find that to be beautiful.

I find it, too, and one of the important things that you mentioned is that direct contrast found in everyday life with this cultural and natural wealth mixed in. This contrast can also bring about the conditions for eventual harmony. This is a concept that you're very familiar with in terms of sound, but also in that balance and equilibrium that you can also find in nature and in life. Why is it that you chose art to exert an effort to protect this aforementioned wealth while also showing it to the world?

Music and visuals are my way of expression. When you have this ability to express feelings and ideas through different ways of communication like paintings, music, acting, writing, it's really powerful because it deals directly with the emotional and sensitive side of people. Music is a very direct way to do this. And this side, I think, is the one that has to be touched in order for us humans to reconnect with Mother Earth. Cuando los humanos nos hagamos conscientes otra vez de que la madre tierra es algo con lo cual debemos caminar de la mano y no estar encima de ella, cuando nos conectemos emocional y sensorialmente con la tierra, en ese momento volveremos a respetarla y a no hacerle daño.² And I think that music has this power to make us more sensitive and aware of this, even more than the word. That's why art becomes a powerful medium.

This emotional connection is something that is deeply tied with your artistic and activism work. Your most recent effort is a documentary titled Sonic Forest in which you're collaborating with the non-profit Stand for Trees and it's a co-presentation with Academy Award winner, Joaquin Phoenix. In it there's a pace, a natural rhythm that shows us these talents you also have for audiovisuals and to make us connect with the environmental and cultural subject matter. How do you think that your art has continued to gravitate to these subjects?

Yes, I recently realized that and continue to do so, for example, with Bomba Estéreo, my main musical project for the last 15 years. Recently, I got to understand more about the folk rhythms from Colombia and Latin America. I think that all folk and traditional ancestral music from around the world has a deep connection with nature because this music was trying to express natural sounds through music. When you talk with the indigenous peoples they tell you that the flute, which is one of the main instruments of the indigenous pre-Columbian cultures in Latin America, are a way to imitate birds. And cumbia is an homage to nature for me.

So unconsciously, when Bomba Estéreo started working with and getting inspired by cumbia, we were actually inspired by the sounds of nature. The connection and the power that folk and ancestral music has is that it's connected to nature and comes from nature. And that's how it's so powerful and has survived for centuries without the influence of any fashion or commercial success: it is music from the Earth. It comes from traditional Afro and indigenous cultures. And that's the artistic concept that brought me to the Monte project, my music that is inspired and comes del monte.³

Monte, that's such an important word. And you and I are from Bogotá, a city that is 2,600 meters above sea level, 8,600 feet. That's el monte also. We are people from el monte, if we want it or not.

Somos del monte.⁴ It's a very interesting word here in Colombia as it has this negative, pejorative connotation. Because of the war, people from the city would say: esos guerrilleros están allá en el monte, y el monte lo que hay es que tumbarlo, echarle machete para meter vacas o construir.⁵ It's something that is entrenched with colonialism, this notion of el monte like something that does not work, doesn't serve any purpose. El monte is the jungle. El monte is the Amazon. El monte is the densely packed forest. It's at the same time a wild place and a place that supposedly needs domestication.

Instead of taking care of it—cuidar del monte. Which is something I remember you said in the documentary: to take care of nature is also to take care of ourselves. And to me when you said that, it makes total sense. Because creating music is also a way of caring for something. Culture is also what matters to us. What we care about. And if you are creating music about nature or el monte, then people can also care more about this natural culture. The care of our natural world.

Yeah, totally. I think the main goal is to make people more aware of what's around them. What we have around ourselves today most likely is a city and some nature. A mix between both. And we've grown up taking care of our cities and our industrial development. But nature is key for that development. If we don't care about nature, our cities are going to end as well. We need to be taking care of it. We eat from nature, we breathe from nature, we take water from nature. Everything that's vital comes from nature. But people, everyone, even me, we forget this in our daily lives and our daily routines. We should be reminded every day that the more we care about nature, the more we'll be able to care about ourselves and our life on the planet.

When we look at news outlets from Colombia most days it is common to see "líderes sociales asesinados" as part of a headline. There is a disproportionate killing of environmental activists and leaders. Environmental justice is sorely lacking. These problems with resource and land distribution, they've become normalized, and shouldn't be. With this in mind, why is it that an activism done through music is a part of the solution for these larger environmental and social problems? Why is this an important step?

It's an important step as in music, cinema, and entertainment in general, you see more of a focus on the environment. You see more documentaries of famous movie stars doing environmental documentaries or narrating environmental docu-series. People in this crazy world that we live in sometimes believe more in entertainers or artists than in activists and social leaders. And entertainers have much more reach. So using that weapon as a tool to improve things is good.

And as I said before, if the information comes from the entertainment or the artistic industries then the information engages more than if it was coming, say, from politicians. We are totally disillusioned by politicians and we don't believe in what those people have to say. So we have to take politics in our hands to start bringing these messages ourselves and not wait for the fucking politicians to do it, as they're not doing what they're supposed to. We have to, it's the least we can do.

Sí, lo mínimo.⁶ It's a good technique because what you're saying is that what science and activism intends to do can also be done more effectively by knowing that art can connect, effect, and affect the individual and social spheres more deeply. Like what you were saying about music: you can harness an emotional connection with the person and the subject matter.

Yes. Another thing I've been realizing more and more is that these cultures can end: if the Amazon jungle dies or the Colombian Pacific forests are not there anymore, then the culture and music of those places will also die. So it's not only the end of nature, but the end of the enormous traditional music that comes from those places. So if we cut down the forest, we're also cutting down the music that came from those places.

This knowledge and wisdom that comes from the people that live there is a knowledge that is also part of who we are. Not only where we come from and what we've done, but also a way forward. Maybe the past and that ancestral knowledge can speak to the future we want. Without acknowledging this culture and this natural link, there's really no way forward in terms of climate change.

Now with everything that's happening regarding the pandemic, and our health, this is also deeply tied to

those places too. The origin and root of a lot of medicines come from nature, the jungle, the forests and rivers. That's what those social leaders are trying to get us behind: nuestro futuro.⁷.

Sí, yerbateros o curanderos⁸, those who can cure with nature are giving us a path forward. It's very worrisome because in Colombia, as you said, we have many of those problems and they are all interconnected. It's a hydra, when you cut one head, more of them come your way.

Sí, está demasiado tenaz⁹.

Agreed. Let's go in a different direction now, back to your musical work for a bit. Bomba Estéreo is, as you said earlier, the longest project you have been involved with. 15 years! And it's a band that is internationally recognized. You have collaborated with Li Saumet, Bomba's lead singer, since almost the beginning of the project. Bomba is also the reason Will Smith came out of musical retirement and was featured and collaborated with you in that Carnaval de Barranquilla inspired hit single, "Fiesta." Arcade Fire, too, has been associated with you. Collaboration is essential for you and your craft. Not only for Bomba Estéreo, but for any project you've been a part of. Why is collaboration such an important thing when creating something?

I think collaboration is important for all aspects of life and in art even more. This is what the world lacks. When humans collaborate, the most sublime aspects of human beings appear. We become aware of others and create from team efforts and that's beautiful. In music, for me, this is the basis.

I think there are no solo artists. The people that call themselves solo artists, that's a lie. You don't create a record just yourself. You are always on some level collaborating. And when you collaborate, it makes what you work on much better because it's many different energies adding themselves to create a finished product. When you see a live band that is playing, sharing that energy with the audience, that's very powerful and that's never going to die. Because this energy adds up and it's where ideas merge. I collaborate with many, many people. And it's like movies, movies are what they are because you see the credits of a movie and it's hundreds of people putting in the effort to create that beautiful stuff.

Same thing happens on records. If you look at a record from Bomba, you see not only a lot of producers, musicians, and engineers, but also the collaborators. Even now with Monte and *Sonic Forest* you have Nidia Góngora. You have so many varied and important contributions and it's that energy that really creates the experience for you and for the audience at the same time.

Yeah for the artists and for the art. And it makes the message to become something bigger because it's a message from many people and not from only one person. Music has always been algo comunitario, ha requerido de una experiencia comunal, de compartir.¹⁰

Something shared, co-created, and community-oriented, yes! One thing that I think is very important and that I don't think you get asked about is the creative act of being a dad. And that's a crucial creative project in and of itself. What have you learned from being a father that you have applied in your art? What from your art have you brought to being a dad?

The biggest teaching and the thing I'm still working on is that when you have kids you learn to forget about yourself. Your life is not only about yourself, your problems, and your ego. And that's for me the best thing you can learn about in life, to get rid of your ego, to let go of it. You become more aware of other people. And you want those people to live in a better future that maybe even if you won't live in it. It's about these people that you have as your responsibility. So you become more aware of the world, of the future, and you start thinking more about your kids and the world. Cuando uno tiene hijos los problemas de uno importan un culo.¹¹

There is something that in creative professions is hard to talk about often: the failures. There's very few awards, there's very few nominations you end up getting from the body of work that you produce. There's one thing especially that didn't work out as you intended, which was the time you were a finalist for the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative. It was going to be such a great experience and you were going to be directly learning from Brian Eno, which, in terms of scoring, is next level. You were very close but you didn't end up getting the opportunity. If you were to give advice to your children about

failure and about these experiences what would you tell them that you learned from it?

Well, I think that there's no failure. You're always in the path of learning things. Regarding that opportunity, for example, I didn't win, but I still went to London and met Brian! And that for me was like, wow, I met Brian Eno in his studio in London and we talked and shared and that for me is a big success.

Yes! These failures are many, varied, and even more important than the successes.

Y como dice Maturana: perder es ganar un poco.¹²

Hahaha!

That's the main teaching. The loser-winner thing is really just capitalist bullshit.

It's irrelevant.

Es irrelevante.¹³ You're always learning. The important thing about the process is to learn things and meet people and that's my mentality: siempre estás aprendiendo cosas, sea lo que sea.¹⁴

1. Rooted.
2. When we - as humans - become aware again that Mother Earth is something that we have to walk holding hands with, and not be trampling on; when we connect emotionally and sensorially with the Earth, that's when we'll get to respect it and not damage it anymore.
3. From the mountain, the forest, the wilderness.
4. We are from the mountain.
5. Those guerrillas are in the mountain, and what has to be done there is to tumble that mountain, to bring what's there and chop it with a machete and just get some cows in there or build something in it.
6. Yes, the bare minimum.
7. Our future.
8. Yes, a shaman or witch-doctor.
9. Yes, it's gotten to be pretty tough.
10. Something communitarian, has required a communal experience, a sharing.
11. When you have kids, your problems don't fucking matter.
12. As Pacho Maturana [the iconic Colombian football manager] says: to lose is to win a little.
13. It's irrelevant.
14. You're always learning things, whatever these may be.

Simón Mejía Recommends:

Any Caribbean rum is good for having a good time and to better understand Caribbean music!

Read the biography of Alexander Von Humboldt by Andrea Wulf

Explore any jungle of the world to see their greatness and fight for their protection

Listen to all of Brian Eno's albums

Visit any of the carnival celebrations (when the pandemic ends): New Orleans (Mardi Gras), Carnaval de Barranquilla or Carnaval do Rio!

Name

Simón Mejía

Vocation

Musician, producer, audiovisual artist, activist

Fact

Daniela Vesco

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