

Electrocumbé

Colombian blend

When **Kevin Conroy Scott** and his wife travelled to Bogotá, they were looking for the country beyond the clichés – and they found it in the form of a music collective called **Electrocumbé**. With a unique festival arriving in London this week, he explains why this radical and diverse South American sound is set to shake up the capital's music scene



'In Italy for 30 years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love; they had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock...'
Harry Lime, 'The Third Man' (1949)

Recently my wife, Landa Acevedo-Scott – a Colombia-born, British-based arts consultant – asked 100 friends in the UK what came into their minds when they thought of her native country. And what did she find? Number one on their list was cocaine. Number two? Kidnappings. And what was number three? I can see a mule and a man with a sombrero on the horizon now... coffee. We are all aware of these clichés about Colombia, but is this seriously as far as the information age has taken our intelligent friends? (Though, perhaps they were not as intelligent as I thought: many spelled Colombia with a 'u'. Colombia is a university, not a country.)

After living in Europe since the age of 12, my wife, now 31, decided to investigate this holy trilogy of cocaine, kidnappings and coffee. Upon boarding our flight to Bogotá I have to admit that, as an American, I was not immune to the stereotypes. I was nervous about travelling to Colombia, my own family expressed reservations about my safety, and I was starting to question my open mindedness. But we forged ahead with the trip. And, when we got there, we found a world that was not the one that we knew through the BBC and the American media. We saw a country that was packed with friendly faces, cities full of hip bars, and people living in a beautiful country with a flourishing cultural scene. We could have been in Madrid or Barcelona. It felt like we saw a country waking up from a slumber.

Colombia, after a long period of violence and civil war, has stabilised over the past five years through President Uribe's 'military solution'. Walking around downtown Bogotá it was hard not to notice the ubiquitous army officers, mingling with civilians and giving directions to tourists like me while holding their semi-automatic rifles. Things had normalised, albeit with a strong hand. But the only way for us to know for certain about the state of country was to investigate the arts scene and see what it was saying about the troubles Colombia had been through. And, once we started looking, we ►

Bogotá music, including *Sicotropico* (top right) and *Malalma* (bottom left), both in London this week



Bright lights and a thriving nightlife scene in Bogotá

noticed that the arts were thriving in a big way. No longer was Colombia about the legacy of Gabriel García Márquez and his 'One Hundred Years of Solitude', or Fernando Botero's oil paintings of pear-shaped lovers. Colombia was breeding new voices and a new way of expressing itself. My wife was captivated. On returning home, she left her job at the Barbican and set up Europe's first ever one-day festival dedicated to the Colombian arts: Colombiage.

Every once in a while, a rupture occurs in our collective culture and something new and important rises to the surface, ready for the world to take notice. In the late 1950s, it was the fresh-faced film critics turned directors of the French new wave. In the late 1960s, it was Brazil's turn, as Gilberto Gil and a handful of artists were responsible for *tropicália*. More recently, the Danish filmmaking collective, *Dogma 95*, proved that cinematic purity can be provocative and successful. And now, as we approach the second decade of a new millennium, I believe it is Colombia's turn to take centre-stage in world theatre with a movement we discovered called *Electrocumbé*.

When word got out that my wife was looking for talent to import to London, a local producer arranged for a private five-hour showcase in a trendy salsa bar that also doubled as a recording studio. The man putting on the show was none other than legendary musician Iván Benavides. After spending eight years in demand working as a producer in New York and touring America with his band *Bloque* to great critical acclaim, Benavides decided it was time to return to Bogotá to see what was happening in his native country. When he arrived, he saw that things had changed; the big-band sounds of *cumbia* (not far from salsa) and the traditional folk of the *gaiteros* (something akin to American folk music) were being fused

'Colours and cultures are mixing together to form a new look and sound with a powerful sense of optimism'

with electronic music. What's more, a new generation of musicians were emerging who had grown up with MTV, MySpace, house music and the stigma of Colombia's negative global image of cocaine and civil war. They were ready to do things differently; in fact they already were. Benavides gave this moment a name, *Electrocumbé*, and a collective was born.

'We are looking for a place with diversity around culture. A place in the world where we are normal,' he told me over hot chocolate and cheese in Bogotá. 'Not an exotic culture of the past or a vital culture of the periphery. *Electrocumbé* is not a political movement; it is a celebration of culture.' And what a culture it is: not only is Colombia arguably the most diverse country in the world in regards to climate and topography (a nation the size of France that sits on the equator, with the cool Pacific on the west coast, a gateway to North America through Panama, and the hot Caribbean on the north-east coast, Colombia also boasts snowy mountain ranges and a capital city that is cooler in the summer than London). Colombia is also diverse in its racial composition: descendants of the Spanish slave trade thrive on the coasts and, in some places, still speak their native African dialect while, in the big cities of the mountains, descendants of Indians mix with ancestors

of the Spanish colonists. Each culture has their own colour and their own sound, but now those colours and cultures are mixing together to form a new look and sound with a powerful feeling of optimism.

Among the leading lights of *Electrocumbé* are Benavides's *Bloque*, but also new bands like the *gaitero* and *cumbia*-inspired *Pernett*. There is also the British-invasion guitar sound of *Sicotropico*, a band from Baranquilla on the Caribbean coast that is keen to show that with guitar, bass and drums you can say as much about Colombia and the world as a 16-piece salsa ensemble. And there is the surreal sound of *Malalma*, space cowboys from Bucaramanga, Colombia's 'pretty city' in the Santander region. Watching them update Femi Kuti's 'Bang, Bang, Bang' at the showcase was like watching the Colombian footballer Carlos Valderrama and his big hair headbang with the back-up singers from George Clinton and the P-Funk All-Stars.

We were also in Bogotá during the book fair, one of the biggest in Latin America. Through the *Planeta* publishing group there is a whole new generation of authors being published in Colombia who are finding success in their home country and Spain. Writers like Jorge Franco, Mario Mendoza and Juan Gabriel Vásquez and ready to be discovered by the UK market. We also found that the country's film industry was thriving. Seven films from Colombia played out of competition at this year's Cannes Film Festival, a massive milestone in the history of Colombian cinema. From making one or two feature films a year throughout the 1990s, Colombia had almost 70 on recent release or in the pipeline in 2006. And a recent box-office success, *Satanás*, was based on a Mendoza novel about the true story of Latin America's only mass shooting. Pay TV network HBO has picked it up in the US.

Colombia, like all countries, still has its problems. But visit today and you'll realise through the music scene that the violence that held Colombia in its grip for so long is almost a thing of the past. There had been a history of musicians toiling away on their own, not working together as they looked for a record deal from America or Europe, trying to become the next Shakira or Juanes and make it big in America. Benavides argued that this was another case of Colombia giving away its riches. Now, the country that brought the world the recent global TV success of 'Ugly Betty' (the show was originally a Colombian *telenovela*), has the musical infrastructure to produce and export their own talent, and – for the first time in a long while – young musicians are working together. For a movement that claims to not be political, *Electrocumbé*'s togetherness and collective feeling of optimism is a good metaphor for where Colombia is at today. Or, as Benavides succinctly told me, 'Right now, we are ready.'

Colombiage is on Saturday, November 3 at the Riverside Studios, featuring Iván Benavides and musicians from the Electrocumbé collective along with writers and filmmakers showing and discussing their work. See www.colombiage.com