

Why the world is catching on to cumbia

The infectious music of Colombia is spreading across the globe. **Gervase de Wilde** reports

Caribbean music is popular around the world: everyone has heard of reggae thanks to Bob Marley, and Cuban music became a truly international phenomenon thanks to the Buena Vista Social Club. But the traditional music of Colombia, cumbia (pronounced coom-bee-ah), has only recently started to emerge from the shadow of its Caribbean cousins, just as the country itself is recovering from decades of strife.

A percussion-based style which is characterised by a skanking off-beat rhythm (think of the jerky energy of Jamaican ska), cumbia relies on accordions, guitars, brass and singing for its infectious melodies. Sometimes slow and melancholic, sometimes robustly energetic, its origins lie in the folk traditions of coastal Colombia's mix of Hispanic, African and indigenous peoples.

But now cumbia and the closely related vallenato style are finding favour throughout the ever-expanding Latin diaspora, with bands such as Los Angeles-based Very Be Careful and a new generation of producers in Argentina, Mexico and elsewhere. They are adapting cumbia's distinctive rhythm to make it relevant to a new generation of Latin Americans with an international outlook.

Colombian music has grown in popularity thanks to singer-songwriter Juanes, whose single *Me Enamora* is released in the UK early next month. He makes a gentle, melodic brand of rock tinged with traditional sounds from his native land.

The world's biggest-selling Latin artist, Juanes has sold more than 10 million of his Spanish-language albums since his debut in 2000. Juanes is helping to shed new light on Colombian music. Articulate in English, he is an ambassador for the country's cultural traditions.



Energy: Los Angeles-based band Very Be Careful play the classic Colombian sounds of the '50s and '60s

CUMBIA HOTSPOTS

1 Los Angeles

Acclaimed band Very Be Careful play the classic cumbia and vallenato sounds of '50s and '60s Colombia in their native LA and have taken the music across the States and to Europe and Japan.

2 Mexico/Texas

Colombian migrants generated a strong cumbia scene in Mexico, and singer Celso Piña from Monterrey has become an



international star with his hit *Cumbia Sobre El Rio*, which featured in the film *Babel*. Across the border, cumbia has collided with hip-hop to create a Hispanic spin on the American sound.

3 Buenos Aires

Dj and producer Sonido Martines plays cumbias rebajadas - a style which involves slowing the pitch of old recordings to create a woozy, psychedelic sound.

4 Puerto Rico

Grammy-winning reggaeton duo Calle 13 have revolutionised the Puerto Rican genre, previously known for its fixation with one repetitive rhythm, by introducing salsa, cumbia, tango and other sounds. **GdW**

"Colombia is changing," he says. "It's not like the '80s with the narco-traffickers and [drug baron] Pablo Escobar." The increasing appeal of Colombia's musical heritage to the wider world is playing its part in changing people's perceptions.

He is keen to talk about the roots in traditional music that still inform his work today: "When I was a child I learned to play guitar and I learned traditional styles like cumbia. It wasn't particularly normal - a lot of the other children in school couldn't understand the music I was into."

Juanes abandoned these "folkloric" styles to form a

metal band, pursuing the genre of music beloved of Latino youth the world over. But the freedom of a solo career has allowed him to return to his roots.

"Working as a solo artist, I can include more elements of traditional styles in the music. The song *Tres* on my new album has a vallenato sound and I think that is my favourite style from Colombia. We have a lot of fantastic rhythms in Colombia, and cumbia is a groove, a rhythm that people can enjoy."

Renowned Colombian musician and producer Ivan Benavides, speaking just

before his group Bloque played an inspiring concert in London, agrees that cumbia is "the foundational Colombian rhythm" and explains its appeal to those beyond the country's borders.

Cumbia is a pan-Latin expression whose influence stretches from Argentina to Los Angeles," says Benavides. "It's also part of a wider movement which some refer to as 'cosmopolatino'." This global Latin culture of ideas allows sounds and styles to travel and evolve locally in exciting new forms.

As yet, it has not inspired

the kind of watery "fusion" sounds which often dilute traditional musical styles. Benavides suggests that the hybrid forms of the music which can be heard across the Hispanic world are still firmly rooted in Latin culture, which itself embraces a wide range of influences:

"The new interpretations of cumbia which you can hear in these places outside Colombia aren't based on something experimental. This mix is natural for us."

✦ Juanes's single, *Me Enamora*, is out on Feb 4. Very Be Careful will be appearing at La Linea festival in London in April.