



**LA CAÑA DE MILLO:**

**VOZ HISTÓRICA Y SILENCIADA DE LA CUMBIA**

[THE MILLO FLUTE: THE HISTORICAL AND SILENCED VOICE OF CUMBIA]

LA CAÑA DE MILLO: VOZ HISTÓRICA Y SILENCIADA DE LA CUMBIA  
*[THE MILLO FLUTE: THE HISTORICAL AND SILENCED VOICE OF CUMBIA]*  
LA CUMBIA 20 DE ENERO + LEYENDAS CAÑAMILLERAS DEL CARIBE

PRODUCED BY MANUEL GARCÍA-OROZCO AND FEDERICO OCHOA ESCOBAR  
GRAPHIC DESIGN: SOFÍA PÁRAMO RANGEL

INFO: [WWW.CHACOWORLDMUSIC.COM](http://WWW.CHACOWORLDMUSIC.COM) © © CHACO WORLD MUSIC, 2021.

## **INDEX**

The Millo Flute: The Historical and Silenced Voice of Cumbia, **6**

    Between presence and absence: The caña de millo and cumbia, **10**

Once lost to history: Field recordings and tapes in oblivion, **19**

Caña de millo: the ensemble, the music, and its circulation, **25**

The cañamilleros in their own words, **28**

The Repertoire, **45**

Album Credits, **52**

Sources, **54**

**THE MILLO FLUTE: THE HISTORICAL AND SILENCED  
VOICE OF CUMBIA**

*“Esse est percipi”.*  
*[“To be is to be perceived”]*

SAMUEL BECKET

*With no people, there is no music;*  
*With no territories, there is no people.*

MARÍA EUGENIA LONDOÑO

June 26, 1978.

A commission of the Interamerican Institute of Ethnomusicology travels from Venezuela to the village of San Pelayo in the Colombian Caribbean region equipped with an unwieldy Nagra IV magnetic tape recorder. The eager researchers are intent on interviewing and recording the locally fabled *caña de millo*<sup>1</sup> performer, Marcelino Bertel (1924-1996).

Born and raised in the hamlet of El Cocuelo, situated in Montería, Córdoba, a place known for its cattle ranching and *planchones*, covered river rafts, Bertel shares that he learned how to play the instrument from his father —a *cumbiambero*<sup>2</sup> peasant— and has been playing it since he was, as he put it, “in his mother’s womb.” Out of Bertel’s *mochila* finally arrives the *caña de millo*, an artisan flute Bertel furnished himself earlier in the Sinú valleys that the researchers had likely never seen before. The millo drives Bertel to enthusiastically perform “El Pájaro Lindo,” that is, “The Beautiful Bird”

(CD2, Track 18). When queried in front of the recorder, Bertel classifies the piece as *cumbia*, though it differs significantly from the notions of *cumbia* as popularized by the music industry in Colombia and Latin America. With impressive technique, Bertel emits tones of deep complexity and sonic richness, playing just as described by his peers, as if “bewitched.” Daring and playful, Bertel’s *millo* modulates short patterns of apparently random order, reflecting more the sonorities of a bird than the arrangement of a popular song. Birds sing to exist: their melodies, chirps, and cries delimit and defend territories, express yearning and courtship, warn of dangers, summon flocks to meet and assemble vast migrations. By imitating birds’ sonorities, Bertel conveys sensibilities as a listener and performer that demonstrate how the *millo*’s voice can intertwine cosmogonies and ancestral values, modes of perceiving and inhabiting the world intrinsically connected to the Caribbean environment. As such, the *millo* flute serves as a vessel integrating the voice of territories and subaltern histories, a voice articulating Afro-descendant and Indigenous legacies —Colombian traditions that rarely occupy the center of national or Latin American narratives— a determining voice in the origin and language of *cumbia*.

10

Across two CDs and a booklet, *La Caña De Millo: Voz Histórica y Silenciada de la Cumbia* aims to document, evidence, and disseminate the historical and cultural value of the *millo* flute and its traditional performers. In other words, to revert the historical invisibility of a vital instrument in the origin and organology of *cumbia* yet absent

---

<sup>1</sup> In this booklet it can be found *n. “Caña de millo” /’ka.ɲa ðe ‘mi.ʝo/* and its possible variations such as: *n. “millo” /’mi.ʝo/, n. flauta de millo /’flau.ta ðe ‘mi.ʝo/* and on a few occasions *n. pito atravésao /’pito atraβe’sao/*. The *caña de millo* is a traditional wind instrument in some villages of the Colombian Caribbean. It consists of a small wooden tube, open at both ends, with four fingering holes, and a reed obtained from the tube itself—a free-reed aerophone in the Sachs-Hornbostel organological system (Bermúdez 1985, 86), 422.31. Performers play it by exhaling and inhaling through the reed. The *millo* is mainly made from a grass called *carrizo* (*Phragmites australis*), common in the region.

<sup>2</sup> *n. Cumbiambero /kumβiam’βero/*: Person who enjoys and/or is involved professionally in playing *cumbia*.

from the whitened sound popularized by the recording industry in Colombia and Latin America since the mid-20th century. Through its material voice, the millo articulates ancestral languages: sounds of affective and material transcendence that overcome the marginal reality of the Colombian Caribbean populations to cement histories of resistance, lead the Barranquilla Carnival, permeate the recording industry, contribute to the Caribbean identity, and insert the instrument into discourses regarding multiculturalism, Colombia, and Latin America.

This double album takes the listener from the present to the past: CD1 documents field recordings of La Cumbia 20 de Enero, a traditional ensemble existing since the 19th century and integrated by different generations of the same two families in Evitar, Mahates, Bolívar, which is currently undergoing a generational change with sexagenarians such as Ascanio Pimentel (*tambor alegre*<sup>3</sup>) and twenty-somethings such as Hernando Hernández (millo) playing alongside one another. CD2 restores from ethnomusicological archives various unreleased tape recordings of six millo legends of the Caribbean —three deceased: Santiago Ospino (1937–2017), Marcelino Bertel (1924–1996), and Mane Arrieta (1911–1998); and three surviving elders: Pedro “Ramayá” Beltrán (b.1930), Aurelio Fernández (b.1935), and El Niño Ramos (b.1957). Beyond their performances, the album document these performers’ life testimonials as collected in field interviews by Federico Ochoa or rescued from ethnomusicological archives.

To understand the historical significance of this phonogram, the caña de millo instrument itself, and its performers and practitioners, requires exploring an anonymous and resilient history which remains absent from official historiographies of Colombia, the Caribbean, and their recording industries. With some excitement, trepidation, and the inevitability of overly simplifying a complex dialogue between official historiographies and

---

<sup>3</sup> The *tambor alegre* /tan'βor a'legre/ has been rarely translated as “merry drum” or “happy drum.” It is a typical Caribbean coast percussion drum present in music genres like cumbia.

subaltern histories, these liner notes attempt to summarize the historical processes which have silenced the historical voice of the millo flute.

### **Between presence and absence: the *caña de millo* and *cumbia***

The term *cumbia* encompasses a variety of music genres which assume prominence in Latin America<sup>4</sup>. Although these many music genres differ<sup>5</sup>, they share a migrant background originating in the Colombian Caribbean that traveled to different geographies via the music industry and found a home among the working classes. Musically speaking, these genres feature moderate tempo, binary division, off-beat accentuation, privilege Western tonality and tempered tuning. However, the Latin American imaginary tends to consider as “original *cumbia*” the commercial sound of Western instrumentation led, among others, by Lucho Bermúdez and spread by the industry since the mid-20th century. In Colombia, the imaginary favors the *gaita*<sup>6</sup> ensemble as the model for “original *cumbia*,” even though this ensemble does not traditionally perform any music called *cumbia* —but rather, *gaita*, *porro*, *merengue*, or *puya*<sup>7</sup> (F. Ochoa Escobar 2013, 165). By contrast, the *cumbia* genre is prominent in the *caña de millo* repertoire.

12

The stalks of cereal grasses<sup>8</sup> common to the Caribbean are what materialize into the *caña de millo*. By articulating its voice and music, the millo gives posthumous

---

<sup>4</sup> To understand the term *cumbia*'s polysemy and the problematics behind its myths in Colombia, see J.S. Ochoa Escobar (2016).

<sup>5</sup> The term *cumbia* is popularly ascribed to music genres in almost every Latin American country including Colombia, Argentina, Peru, Mexico, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Bolivia, among others.

<sup>6</sup> The Colombian *gaita* /'gaita/ must not be confused with the Irish bagpipes, which is also translated into Spanish as *gaita*. Rather, *gaita* is an Indigenous flute.

<sup>7</sup> Typical music genres.

life to a dried and dead stem open on both sides and fit with a reed and four circular holes. The instrument's origin has dissipated over time, its ancestry still debated as either Afro-descendent (Civallero 2015; List 1994; M. Zapata Olivella 1961) or Indigenous (Abadía Morales 1981; Bermúdez 1985). Narrowly similar flutes exist on at least three continents (Ochoa 2012), but no hard evidence confirms the millo's origin. Comparative organology studies (Civallero 2015) imply that its same playing techniques —stimulating the reed by blowing, inhaling, and throating— can be found on African aerophones, but not on Indigenous instruments. So, it remains possible that the caña de millo is a Colombian instrument performed using Afro-descendant ancestral techniques. However, since the flute it is not essentialized as Indigenous or Afro, it does not easily fit into discourses or publications on ethnic cultures. The truth is that the millo has been largely invisible, so unnoticed that it does not appear in reputable collections such as Smithsonian Folkways or Ocora.

13 The voice is both a material and acoustic phenomenon, and a metaphor for power, individuality, and personality (Weidman 2015). As an acoustic phenomenon, the voice of the millo is strong, penetrating, lucid, far-reaching; and therefore, soars over the drum ensemble, perceived as if descending and ascending from afar. As a metaphor for personality, the millo's voice can be playful, agile, sharp, unruly, joyful, and in the words of millo icon Pedro Ramayá, “the one [voice] that cures all sorrows.”

As a metaphor of power, from a music industrial perspective, the millo's voice was silenced, deemed as having no place in the commercial sounds of the mid-20th century (an aspect we will delve into later on). Yet, the millo practice in towns of maroon heritage, its dissemination throughout the Colombian Caribbean, and its preponderant role in the Barranquilla Carnival validate its political voice's importance in the epistemes and discourses of ancestry and resistance among marginalized peoples.

---

<sup>9</sup> From the family of the Gramineae.

Federico Ochoa (2012) traces the earliest written records of the millo to 1879, by Juan Crisóstomo Osorio, who is often regarded as a Colombian musicology pioneer. By 1936, the elitist composer from Bogota, Daniel Zamudio (1885-1952) caustically described the millo as “terribly irritating,” surmising the Afro-descendant musical influence as “detrimental” (F. Ochoa Escobar 2012, 163-64). Zamudio’s opinion was not an isolated case of racism: the colonial heritage and its racial hierarchies have been instrumental in rendering millo’s Afro-descendant legacy invisible.

The structural racism of Latin American republics on a socioeconomic, political and cultural context is a result of the nation-state’s founding ideology of “*mestizaje*,” that is, miscegenation (Curiel 2007, 98). The 19th century saw Creole elites institutionalize Colombia under the idiosyncrasy they regarded themselves as being ontologically and ideologically akin to the colonizers, that is, of Eurocentric thinking. Hailing from the Andean region, these elites (re)adapted the colonial racial hierarchies into constitutional law under conservative ideologies. The 1886 Colombian Constitution excluded Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations from political participation through the *mestizaje* ideology. By idealizing racial mixing as a civilizing model, *mestizaje* rendered invisible multiculturalism and the cultural alterity of Afro-descendant and Indigenous populations. By stark principle, rural genres and artisan instruments had neither representation nor place in the nascent mixed-race nation. However, Afro-descendant intellectuals such as Jorge Artel (1909-1994) and the novelist and anthropologist Manuel Zapata Olivella (1920-2004) sought to reverse such erasures by questioning the *mestizaje* ideology altogether, as Artel did, or attempting to include the African legacy in the discourse, as Zapata Olivella did.

Similar to her brother Manuel, Delia Zapata Olivella (1926-2001) —a choreographer, writer, and folklorist— also endorsed cumbia as a paragon of *mestizaje*, deploying the metaphor, “synthesis of the Colombian nation” with tri-ethnic elements, whose dance symbolizes the union of African men with Indigenous women (D. Zapata Olivella 1962). Insofar as the Zapata Olivella siblings delivered Caribbean genres to the inner cities in an attempt to build out a folklorist ideological project, it

became necessary to credit contributions and representative elements to the Spanish, the Indigenous, and the African in the grander mestizaje discourse. If historically the cumbia-dance-costumes are understood as Spanish, the drums as African, and the gaitas as Indigenous, the latter fits cumbia's folklorist discourse better than the caña de millo, as one problem of folklorist ideology is its standardization and conception of cultural manifestations as museum pieces static in time (Miñana 2000). Thus, the search for tri-ethnic elements to standardize cumbia confused and redefined gaita music as cumbia, rendering the caña de millo invisible amid the folklorist discourse.

15

The 20th century brought significant changes. Radio and the recording industry emerged in the Caribbean, rather than in Colombia's Andean region—which has historically carried most of the political and economic national power. Barranquilla became the cultural city of entertainment, with its elitist clubs blaring big band sounds imported from jazz and Afro-Cuban taking on a cosmopolitan, modern, and much-longed-for character (González Henríquez 2003; Hernández Salgar 2016). As a result of Colombia's liberal government (1930–1946), Colombian society underwent fundamental changes that reorganized the national social forces while industrial capitalism imposed the paradigms of modernization and consumerism (Hernández Salgar 2016). Lucho Bermúdez (1912–1994) and his generation were essential in the Caribbeanization of the national musical imaginary and the internationalization of Colombian music (Wade 2002). Bermúdez and his peers imitated the big band sound to create complete repertoires for the recording industry, which according to the myth, were inspired by rural music from the Colombian Caribbean.

In a national TV interview, Bermúdez argued that rural instruments “did not produce a perfect sound”; therefore, he applied the big band instrumentation to “give” this music “a more Colombian and international color” (Barón s. f.). In the mentioned interview, Bermudez referenced the gaitas but did not even mention the millo. His words attest to his Eurocentric belief that only tempered instruments are worth of representing Colombia nationally and abroad. The credit given to Bermúdez for “rescuing,” “modernizing,” and “dressing up” rural musics is a widespread myth

in cumbia's history. Still, there exists no direct correspondence of repertoires or melodic materials between rural genres (millo's cumbia and gaita music) and the commercial sound created by Bermudez's generation even though the cumbia term is broadly applied to both classifications. The millo cumbia acquires vast polyrhythmic richness, untempered tuning, and free forms without using harmonic instruments; the industrial cumbia is rhythmically uniform, with tempered tuning, conventional song forms, tonal harmony, and electric bass delineating the pulse. This makes the notion of cumbia neither identical in between rural and industrial practices, nor affirmable as a music transferred from one format to another. Lyrically, the commercial songs by Bermudez and his peers tend to evoke and exoticize the Caribbean and the Afro-descendant race; despite their instruments or Afro-musical languages lack of a place in such a commercial sound (J. S. Ochoa Escobar 2016; Wade 2002). This is exclusion by way of inclusion within the discourse of mestizaje.

The racialization of cumbia as mestizaje within the national discourse remains ideologically and historically problematic. As summarized by researcher Juan Sebastián Ochoa (2016), the myth of cumbia considers as its origin the caña de millo ensemble, of uncertain African or Indigenous ancestry, and the gaitas ensemble, of Indigenous heritage—although the latter did not play any music called cumbia in the beginning. Cumbia is assumed as a mixed-race cultural byproduct that travels towards “modernity” with the industrial and whitened sound of the mid-20th century, which catapults it to the status of a national symbol. The anthropologist Elizabeth Cunin understands mestizaje not as a mixing of races, homogeneity or overcoming differences in social and racial hierarchies, but as “exchange and confrontation,” as “an organization of otherness in which the Other is attributed a changing and multiple status” (Cunin 2002, 280-81). Hence, the discourse of cumbia as a harmonious encounter and historical development of three races obscures the current and historical differences and discriminations, while placing the African and Indigenous heritage in a problematic position. In so doing, the genre purifications carried out by folklorists and the music industry assume an evolutionary posture in the mestizaje of cumbia that jettisons Colombia from the rural-traditional to the urban-modern.

Colombia's "homogeneous society" considers Afro-descendant and Indigenous traditions its "past" to move "towards the *mestizo*<sup>9</sup> or mixed-race future, as a joyful melting pot in which all Colombians coexist and feel represented" (J. S. Ochoa Escobar 2016, 47).

As a discursive field, cumbia is a "mutant category" in permanent elaboration through various practices, discourses, and interests (J. S. Ochoa Escobar 2016, 31). The success of the form's dissemination for commercial purposes is due to an ambivalence of distinctive and contradictory cultural interpretations: "for being black, white and mestizo; for being traditional and modern; for being regional and national" (Wade 2002, 137). However, for the performers of caña de millo, representatives of the more traditional and marginal side of cumbia, these cultural practices assume very different positions, positions that have not been heard in the hegemonic history of cumbia.

In oral history, the millo appears chronologically earlier than in the written archive. The cumbia groups Cumbia Soledaña, from Soledad, Atlántico, and Evitar's La Cumbia 20 de Enero, have existed since the second half of the 19th century. The former's discography lists an 1877 founding (F. Ochoa Escobar 2019, 89). The latter, according to an interview with the cañamillero<sup>10</sup> Santiago Ospino Caraballo (1900–1999) conducted by ethnomusicologist George List (1965), reveals the millo as exclusive to the Ospino family in Evitar. Ospino Caraballo learned it from his father – an active millo performer in the 19th century– and transmitted it to his son, Santiago Ospino Santana (1937–2017). The latter can be heard as an extraordinary performer in life (CD2, Tracks 6–9) and posthumously as a relevant composer for newer generations of La Cumbia 20 de Enero ensemble (CD1, Tracks 2, 6, 9). The Ospino's confided that generational replacements were necessary to fill the void left by their progenitors, who had to cease performing due to old age, failing health, or death. The history of

---

<sup>9</sup> The racial classification that grounds *mestizaje*. Spaniards applied it to designate the racial mixture between white and indigenous peoples in the 16th century.

<sup>10</sup> Cañamillero /kaɲami'jero/: Person who performs caña de millo.

invisibility of the Cumbia 20 de Enero in Colombia's national musical panorama has much in common with the millo's in its periphery. For despite its antiquity and several generations, and unlike Cumbia Soledaña, La Cumbia 20 de Enero never published a full-length album until *La Caña De Millo: Voz Histórica Y Silenciada De La Cumbia*.

Within the regional coastal market, the importance of millo and its invaluable contribution to its social constructions ground a semiotics of carnival. The cañamillero Pedro Ramayá Beltrán (b.1930), of virtuosic skills (CD2, Tracks 15-17), has produced a wide and emblematic discography for the Barranquilla Carnival –some 50 LPs– with his interpretative style adapting millo to tonal languages and commercial song structures. Ramayá, as he is commonly known, began his career with Cumbia Soledaña and later flourished as a solo artist. However, along with other figures of the regional coastal market –say, Los Soneros de Gamero and La Niña Emilia– he did not transcend to national and international levels of acceptance as Lucho Bermúdez did.

Another point of breaking geographical and cultural boundaries comes with the entry of millo into the European World Music market boom of the 1980s and 1990s. The cañamillero who achieved entrance into such a market was Aurelio Fernández (b.1935), although his participation was circumstantial. In 1984, Fernández contributed to the first LP by Totó la Momposina y sus Tambores, produced in Europe. Allotted only three songs, Fernández's outstanding performance seemed too abbreviated within the wider repertoire compiled and sung by the renowned Momposina. However, Fernández's unique style displays such a rich vocabulary of melodic units that, as he demonstrates in the two versions of "Son de Farotas" (CD2, Tracks 11 and 12), he is capable of developing thematic materials widely to the point that each take becomes almost a completely different song.

A political shift from the paradigm of mestizaje to multiculturalism since the Colombian Constitution of 1991 has brought renewed notions and valuations of historically marginalized music and communities. Recent decades have heard the millo contributing to the commercial and international appeal of artists such as Bomba

Estéreo, Joe Arroyo, and Carlos Vives, the latter included the millo in his performances with the LA Philharmonic in 2021. But, while millo's acoustic voice and its vivid timbral color palette rooted in maroon peoples has been by now circulated from around Colombia into the world, its political voice—its deserved iconicity—has been silenced and rendered invisible without due recognition. Therefore, the millo voice coalesces in the face of contradictions: present but absent, ubiquitous but marginalized, popular but unknown, politically silenced but acoustically vigorous.

The millo has been at the center of the Colombian Caribbean's daily sociability and, according to subaltern histories, been essential to rural social rituals for generations. Long denied its rightful place in Colombia's recording industry or national identity, the voice of millo remains anything but of secondary importance for local communities in the rural Caribbean. On the contrary, via the millo, these communities' oral histories reinforce the idea of resistance and perseverance, illustrating how Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities have embraced the instrument as cultural tradition—their essential voice in resisting social oppressions ranging from historical marginality, nation-state neglect, the ignominy of the mass media, among others. Its value to deep Colombia, independent of the industry, is what this album seeks to exalt in its summarized historical journey and listening experience.

To the memory of Santiago Ospino, Marcelino Bertel, Mane Arrieta, the generations of La Cumbia 20 de Enero, and the living legends Pedro Ramayá Beltrán, Aurelio Fernández, and Niño Ramos, we give our deepest appreciations for preserving and articulating their ancestral knowledge and contributions to elevating the sounds of caña de millo, the historical and silenced voice of cumbia.

MANUEL GARCÍA-OROZCO  
FEDERICO OCHOA ESCOBAR

**THE MILLO FLUTE: THE HISTORICAL AND SILENCED  
VOICE OF CUMBIA**

## **ONCE LOST TO HISTORY: FIELD RECORDINGS AND TAPES IN OBLIVION**

Technologies and techniques of sound inscription have been varied in different cultures and histories. As Ochoa Gautier (2014) summarizes, such technologies do not confine only to sound inscriptions on humanly manufactured materials —paper, cylinders, discs, tapes, digital bits on hard drives— through conventional methods/systems in western capitalism such as handwriting, printing, musical notation, music boxes, player pianos, audio recording, MIDI, and samplers. Sound has also been encrypted and archived on nature objects —such as stones, skins, and waterfalls— and thought under different ontologies that challenge the prevalent idea that nonwestern cultures lacked music theory and recording (Feld 1996; Seeger 1987).

With this panorama, cañamilleros consider the millo flute as a sound technology that (re)produces sound inscriptions by coalescing its materiality, languages, and oral memory with the aural environment of the rural Caribbean. As such, the millo records ancestral languages that are constantly transmitted by orality (oral transmission) and aurality (listening techniques). In that regard, we can trace the styles of certain cañamilleros to particular ancestors and histories of resistance. The recordings of millo music included in this double album come from a diversity of processes and materials.

### **GD1 - *La Cumbia 20 de Enero***

According to archival materials and oral histories, the ensemble La Cumbia 20 de Enero exists since the second half of the 19th century. The Ospino and Pimentel families have led and preserved this group in Evitar, Mahates, a rural town populated by Afro-descendants in the Colombian Caribbean. Its validity and continuity in the 21st century attest to the millo ensemble's importance as a local ancestral practice. George List, a seminal figure in ethnomusicology, made the Cumbia 20 de Enero's first recordings in 1965.

In such recordings, the cañamillero Santiago Ospino Caraballo (1900-1999) and the drummer José del Carmen Pimentel attribute the group's origins to the generation that preceded them. They disintegrated around 1952 due to the death of some members, but Santiago Ospino Caraballo remade the group before long. Later, Ospino Caraballo passed his torch to his son Santiago Ospino Santana (1937-2017), of whom this album includes his only published recordings (CD 2, Tracks 6-9). At present, singer Rafael Ospino (b.1965) leads the multigenerational ensemble. The siblings Ascanio and Guidobal Pimentel, sons of José del Carmen, are in charge of percussion instruments. Also, musicians in their twenties recently joined the group, such as Marco Rodríguez, Salvador Sánchez, and brothers Hernando and Juan Carlos Hernández, all with some degree of kinship.

The song “Santiago Moreno” states: “the Evitar cumbia is called 20 de Enero [January 20<sup>th</sup>]”. This date alludes to Saint Sebastian’s day, the village’s patron in the

22



PHOTO: MANUEL GARCÍA-OROZCO. EVITAR, 2019

catholic faith. La Cumbia 20 de Enero has performed such a song for generations, and the present album comprises two versions: the current performance by millo player Hernando Hernández and Rafael Ospino on lead vocals (CD 1, Track 2), and as the late Santiago Ospino Santana performed and sang it (CD2, Track 7). Although nearly 20 years apart, both recordings share Ascanio Pimentel's vivid lead-drumming. Born in 1960, Ascanio comes from the primary ancestry of drummers and luthiers in Evitar.

CD1 presents field recordings made on August 12 and 13, 2019 at Rafael Ospino's patio. The ensemble's recording sessions caused a spontaneous *parranda*<sup>11</sup> with children, youth, and elders of the village community, including Isabel Julio Pimentel (b.1933), aunt of drummer Ascanio, and the eldest bullerengue<sup>12</sup> performer in town. These recordings are a posthumous tribute to the preceding generations of Cumbia 20 de Enero and the recently deceased Santiago Ospino Santana (1937-2017). His *millo* flute was replaced by that of the young Hernando Hernández (b.1996). Ospino Santana's oral memory is present in the current group's practice. On the one hand, his presence as a composer is significant in their repertoire; on the other hand, his pedagogical influence is still present every time Hernando and other youngsters (re)produce his playing techniques. For example, his signature moves to obtain the low register by covering the millo with the shoulder.

Most of the Cumbia 20 de Enero's repertoire intersperses millo passages with sung verses and antiphonal chorus sections. In this volume, the group preserves songs from the Evitar oral tradition —such as “Santiago Moreno”<sup>13</sup>—, compositions by the current members, and a song by Petrona Martínez —an octogenarian bullerengue singer and national icon who is related to the Pimentel family. Such a repertoire stands out for its

---

<sup>11</sup> Colloquial term for a party with music and dancing, often an improvised event.

<sup>12</sup> Bullerengue is a traditional genre led and preserved mainly by elderly women in Maroon communities.

<sup>13</sup> Although this song is currently attributed to Santiago Ospino Santana, his father also recorded it under the name “Veinte de Enero” in 1965 (List 1965).

catchy and cheerful tunes. For example, Rafael Ospino's songs reflect on jocular local subjects, which musically imprint the characteristic joyfulness of Evitar (Tracks 1,3,5,11). The group's vitality as a preserver, originator, and performer of repertoire proves the impetus of the millo's oral tradition and transmission in approximately one century and a half of unstoppable cumbia practice.

## **CD 2- *Leyendas Cañamilleras del Caribe* [Caribbean Millo Legends]**

The archival recordings of *Leyendas Cañamilleras del Caribe* come from three sources:

1. Digital audio tapes (DAT) that music producer Rafael Ramos made in the early 21st century.
2. Analog reel-to-reel tapes made by ethnomusicologists Max Brandt and Fidelina Herrera as part of an expedition organized by the Inter-American Institute of Ethnomusicology (Inidef) in 1978<sup>14</sup>.
3. A probably home-recorded cassette taped in the 1990s, which owned Ubaldo Mendoza, a cultural manager in Barranquilla.

24

The following is a summary behind these materials' origin.

In 2001, music producer Rafael Ramos wanted to revert the invisibility of millo music. He had previously met remarkable cañamilleros who intrigued him for their vast musicality and diversity of styles: Aurelio Fernández, for his recordings with Totó la Momposina;

---

<sup>14</sup> Entitled Misión Colombia - 1978, as part of the "Álvaro Feraud Palarea" project.

Ramayá, through his research on orality in the Colombian Caribbean; Niño Ramos, for being his cousin and witnessing his performance in countless celebrations; and Santiago Ospino, who enjoyed legendary status in the Evitar village. To gain recognition to millo music and share it with audiences, Rafael Ramos brought together these four legends of the Caribbean and planned a tour, initially in Bogota and France.<sup>15</sup>

To materialize the tour, Ramos needed an audio demo, and at the time, there were no similar millo recordings. To produce the tape, he called for accompanying musicians and gathered the aforementioned cañamilleros in the Bellavista Hotel, in Cartagena. The recording and tour took place, but the production of an album never materialized. The original tapes, as well as some video recordings of their performances in Bogotá were misplaced in the drawer of oblivion. Today, more than 16 years later, with one of the cañamilleros already deceased and two in their twilight years, we achieved to recover, restore, and publish the original tapes accompanied by our musicological research to contextualize the performers' lives and works.

25

We add recordings by Marcelino Bertel and Mane Arrieta to the mentioned materials, two millo legends with scant recording history besides their vital influence in cumbia history. The archive recorded by Max Brandt and Fidelina Herrera in 1978 preserves the caña de millo, voice, and oral memory of Marcelino Bertel (1924-1996), a legend of great relevance for his impressive virtuosity. His technical language – apparently grounded on an acoustic ontology connected to Caribbean nature – displays melodic turns and articulations that have disappeared from the millo practice today. On the other hand, Mane Arrieta (1911-1998) appears as an obligatory reference among the ancient cañamilleros. Arrieta owned a very particular millo language that, for decades, he taught his disciples and disseminated it as an accompanist of cumbiambas at the Barranquilla Carnival. Extensive archival research implies that Arrieta never recorded

---

<sup>15</sup> Some videos of this tour can be found at Rodríguez (2003).

professionally. Consequently, homemade archives of parrandas constitute, despite their low fidelity, the only recordings to preserve the techniques and sensibilities of such a historical figure. We include these archival materials to open up a vein of stories and repertoires that we hope more researchers will further explore.

The repertoires of Leyendas Cañamilleras del Caribe travel through the sounds of each cañamillero, from the youngest to the eldest: five songs by El Niño Ramos, four by Santiago Ospino, four by Aurelio Fernández, three by Pedro Ramayá Beltrán, two by Marcelino Bertel, and two by Mane Arrieta. The youngest and the eldest millo performers on this album are interestingly connected. El Niño Ramos, the youngest, learned to play the flute in Cartagena directly from Roque Arrieta, a relative and disciple of Mane Arrieta, the eldest. Ramos owns a musical language that differs from the techniques, styles, and repertoires of the Barranquilla Carnival, epicenter of the manifestation.

Together, these cañamilleros display a broad panorama of styles and millo performance techniques. Pedro “Ramayá” Beltrán’s style has been predominant in the recording industry. Therefore, his style is akin to the logics and aesthetics of western musical languages such as tempered tuning, popular forms, song themes, among other aspects. In contrast, this album exemplifies different practices, languages, and musical logics closer to the oralities, listening techniques, soundscapes, and acoustic qualities of the rural Caribbean, largely absent from the recording industry. In complement to the musical performances of these Caribbean millo legends, we present their testimonies, biographies, and portraits on the following pages.

## CAÑA DE MILLO: THE ENSEMBLE, THE MUSIC, AND ITS CIRCULATION

The caña de millo, also called *flauta de millo*, *millo*, *pito atravesao* or *pito*, is a traditional wind instrument in some villages of the Colombian Caribbean. Due to its names' diversity, its performers are called *cañamilleros*, *milleros*, *piteros* or *flauteros*. The millo consists of a small wooden tube, open at both ends, four finger holes, and a reed obtained from the tube itself—it is a free-reed aerophone, 422.31 in the Sachs-Hornbostel organological system (Bermúdez 1985, 86). Performers play it by exhaling and inhaling through the reed.

Today, the caña de millo is made mainly from the *carrizo* grass (*Phragmites australis*), which is abundant in the region. Other grasses used to be common materials for its manufacture: corozo cane (*Bactris guineensis*), bamboo (*Bambusoideae*), and millet cane (*Zea mays*). Besides the latter providing the flute's most common name, caña de millo, few luthiers use this material for its construction.

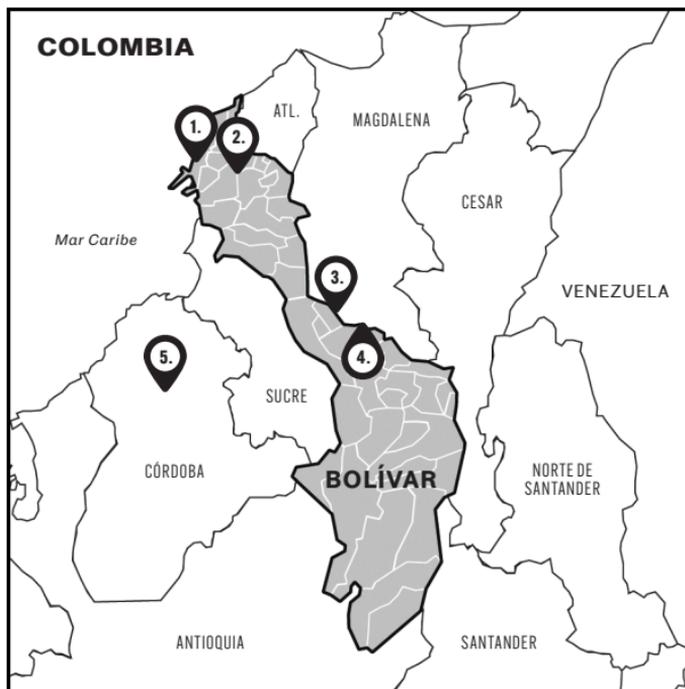
The millo ensemble's traditional instrumentation consists of the flute and four accompanying percussions: *tambor alegre* (merry drum), *tambora* (bass drum), *tambor llamador* (calling drum), and either a *guache* or two *maracas* (seeds idiophones). Therefore, the term millo music refers to both the musical repertoires and languages performed by the flute itself and by the ensemble.

The Barranquilla Carnival deems the millo ensemble as a typical tradition and the iconic sound of cumbia: which in the local context is a vital dance for the Shrovetide's festivities and that most Barranquilla citizens practice. The artistic expression of more significant presence within the official Carnival events is the *cumbiambas*<sup>16</sup>—that is, dancing groups in pairs (usually between 10 and 50 couples) that dance to the millo ensemble. In addition to cumbia, the repertoires include two subgenres: *jalaíto* or *son corrido* and *puya*.

---

<sup>16</sup> A popular celebration with cumbia and other rural dances.

CAÑAMILLEROS' BIRTHPLACE IN CARIBBEAN COLOMBIA  
CARTOGRAPHER: SOFÍA PÁRAMO RANGEL



1. CARTAGENA: EL NIÑO RAMOS 2. MAHATES: MANE ARRIETA, SANTIAGO OSPINO 3. PATICO (TALAIQUA): PEDRO "RAMAYÁ"  
4. BOTÓN DE LEYVA (MARGARITA): AURELIO FERNÁNDEZ 5. MONTERÍA: MARCELINO BERTEL

The millo's repertoire is essential to the Carnival. It grounds official events such as the parade, called *Gran Parada de Tradición*. The millo ensemble's sound, and in particular the flute, floods public and private spaces: "it sounds in cell-phone-ringtones, in the music on hold of answering machines, in commercial radio stations, in nightclubs, in bars, in chain stores, in small shops" (F. Ochoa Escobar 2014, 79). Therefore, the millo voice plus its ensemble and repertoires constitute the sonic icon of the Barranquilla Carnival. As such, the millo voice is a critical identity reference for inhabitants of the Colombian Caribbean region.

The millo ensemble's percussion section is pretty much akin to other traditional ensembles of the region, such as *gaita*, *bullerengue*, *tambora*<sup>17</sup>, and *son de negro*, which feature the same drums and idiophones. Therefore, the millo flute as the lead melodic instrument is the ensemble's distinctive element, which occasionally features solo and backing vocals.

29

Currently, as stated earlier, the Atlántico state and Barranquilla as its capital city are the epicenters of this cultural manifestation. Their socio-temporal space par excellence is the Barranquilla Carnival. These festivities, which yearly take place in February, are the main stage for the exhibition and practice of millo ensembles, as they accompany dozens of cumbiambas and dance groups. Such activities involve more than 100 millo performers. However, this proliferation of millo musicians in the state is a recent phenomenon, and responds to the establishment of Community Cultural Centers in Barranquilla since the early 1990s. Through teaching traditional music, these centers sought to open a door for young people and implement the multiculturalism policies of the 1991 Political Constitution. Such an ideological shift considered culture as an economic and political resource. All this aligned with the exponential growth of the Barranquilla Carnival, the quest for identity symbols, and

---

<sup>17</sup> Not the instrument, but the namesake musical genre and dance.

the boom of performing troupes in the carnival (F. Ochoa Escobar 2014). However, before the mentioned processes, neither the instrument nor the ensemble had a strong presence in the state of Atlántico. From such a scenario emerges inquiries as to who, how, and when did the millo instructors learn before joining these Community Cultural Centers?

The millo pedagogy and its dissemination processes started thanks to enthusiastic young people, such as Carlos Insignares and Jorge Jimeno, both disciples of the renowned cañamillero Pedro “Ramayá” Beltrán. With dozens of compositions and hundreds of songs recorded from the early 1960s to the present, Ramayá is a prominent figure in disseminating millo music through the Barranquilla Carnival. Ramayá’s extensive legacy and influence grounds the millo pedagogy in Community Cultural Centers regarding style, techniques, and repertoire. Ramayá began his career as a flute player in *Cumbia Soledaña* in the early 1960s. By the end of the decade, he split and formed his group *Cumbia Moderna de Soledad*. Both groups are the flagship ensembles of this music.

30

## THE CAÑAMILLEROS IN THEIR OWN WORDS

### El Niño Ramos

Already a sexagenarian, El Niño Ramos is perhaps the only millo musician hailing from Cartagena. His repertoire, style, and playing technique continue the legacies of the legendary cañamillero Mane Arrieta, also included in this album. Despite these two facts, Ramos is practically unknown in the cultural world of Cartagena. This city built its traditional cultural identity around the gaita tradition, champeta, and other Caribbean popular genres in more recent decades.

Here is El Niño Ramos' testimony:

*My name is Victor Ramos Navarro, but everyone calls me El Niño Ramos. I was born in Cartagena on November 6, 1957. My father was from Mahates, a town of musicians and cañamilleros, such as Mane Arrieta, Erasmo Arrieta, and my teacher Roque Arrieta, among others. They formed a group here: Roque on millo, my dad, Victor Ramos Villarreal sang and played maracas, and other neighbors. My dad worked as a butcher, but he always made music.*

*At first, I learned percussion and later turned to the millo flute as Roque taught me how to play it. He made millo flutes out of corozo. I would go to Roque's place and listen to the music they made in the parrandas. They*

31



PHOTO: NATHALY GÓMEZ. CARTAGENA, 2017.

would wake up at dawn partying, playing, and making sancocho<sup>18</sup> under an almond tree. That was here in the house, and I would stay there with them. So, when the drummer got drunk, they would say: "kid, play the drum". My father was one of those who had more tolerance for liquor. He would tell me: "play!", and I'd immediately start playing, while paying close attention to Roque's millo performance. However, vallenato was the music I heard the most, the likes of Luis Enrique Martínez, Alejo Durán, Enrique Díaz. I loved the accordion cumbias by Andrés Landero, and Calixto Ochoa, and modern music by Ángel Vásquez, Rafael Cabezas, Anibal Velásquez, the boleros of Daniel Santos, Bienvenido Granda, Alberto Beltrán, Celio González. Our parents used to party with that music. But we had no jukebox, no radio, although there was a picó<sup>19</sup> here in the neighborhood.

In 1968, my dad and Roque formed the group Mayombé, of which I was a member. We rehearsed a lot and performed in various festivals in several cities.

Since my early days, I worked performing live music. However, in 2012, I told myself: what am I doing [with my life]? Because I was a partygoer. I said: I'm going to stop drinking alcohol and start studying. I had studied up to primary school. So, I went to Liceo Bolívar, and I finished high school in 2014. Then I studied occupational health, longing to study business administration, which I couldn't because I lacked a bachelor's degree. At that time, the nightclub La Piragua was at its peak. There were a few bars in downtown and I spent my time performing with a vallenato group, on the beach. In that group, I played congas, caja, and guacharaca. I even played accordion as a child. I learned the accordion by myself. I bought a gaita and then a clarinet, and I also self-

---

<sup>18</sup> A traditional and slow cooking soup. It is usually made over an open fire to liven up parties or gatherings.

<sup>19</sup> Spanish onomatopoeia for a "pick up", a local term for a large, portable sound system.

*taught me. Then, I received a scholarship at Bellas Artes where I studied musical grammar, and I recently finished my studies.*

*Today, I am a security guard, and the legal representative of the San Francisco de Asis Foundation. With this foundation we conduct several projects to teach children the native genres of our region. Oh, and I have my group, formed with my children: El Niño Ramos and his group.*

## **Santiago Ospino**

33 Santiago Ospino Santana was born on November 25, 1937 in Evitar, township of Mahates, Bolivar, and died on March 12, 2017 in Venezuela. Maestro Santiago, as his friends and acquaintances called him, performed the millo with a very distinctive style and particular techniques that made him memorable. Instead of using the entire hand fingers to cover the digital holes, Santiago used two fingers of each hand: the index and the middle finger, and covered the top tube-opening near the reed with his shoulder. Such techniques, somehow less logical than the common ones, projected on him an aura of ancestry and authenticity among millo players. His place of birth reinforced such an aura as Evitar is an emblematic town for (ethno)music(ological) studies of the Colombian Caribbean since the pioneering efforts of George List in the 1960s. His group La Cumbia 20 de Enero is also a longstanding cultural reference for the millo tradition. This is his testimony:

*I was born, raised, and lived all my life in Evitar. My father's name was also Santiago Ospino, and my mother was Erminia Santana. We were eight siblings. I was the third. At that time, because there was so much respect, we did as my dad said, and everything was fine. We were raised with respect and obedience. We lived off the fields, from agriculture, from the brush, corn, yucca, plantains, and yams. We also fished in the swamp with bow and arrow.*

*I studied up to third grade. I started to work with a machete in the fields, and then I started cattle raising. At that time there was no electricity, but we had lots of fun. My father, who was also from Evitar, played the flute, which he learned from his father. That is a tradition passed down from generation to generation. My dad had a cumbia group that also included his brothers. I started playing when I was about seven, and since the flute was too big for me, I picked it up with both hands. I used to make millo flutes with corozo, but I switched to the carrizo material about ten years ago, which is softer.*

*Whenever they realized my dad could not play, they would take me and say: “when the old rooster gets drunk, we count on the chicken.” People would get drunk partying, and I would play cumbia with passion all night long. I was about 17 then.*



*My father was also an accordionist, and by taking the accordion from him on the sly, I also learned. I abandoned the millo, left home, and went to Cúcuta and Venezuela with my accordion. I had a band with saxophone, electric guitar, violin, snare drum, timbales, cowbell. Our performance was of high quality, but the nightlife and parrandas affected my health. In Cúcuta, I married Ana Raquel, who wanted us to move to my town. Since then, I live here in Evitar, and I have not left. I lived with Ana all my life until she passed away in 2002. When she died, I had to sell our land to cover her funeral expenses. It was three hectares, which I now really need. We had no children, but we adopted a girl, Darlis María Ospino, who lives in Venezuela.*

*When we returned to Evitar, everybody knew me and invited me to play accordion here and there, but nobody wanted to pay. Therefore, I abandoned the accordion little by little until I sold it. I have never bought another one (laughs). That was when my father encouraged me to pick up the millo again. Since then, I have not let go of it. Now I live alone, although sometimes a grandson comes to visit. I farm less because my eyesight is blurry, and I'm afraid of running into a snake. I get up, sometimes I make coffee and wait for the sun to rise. I cook whatever I can get: meat, fish, chicken, rice, plantain, or yucca.*

*I rarely play the millo nowadays, except in public performances. I only play my songs. I rarely play other people's music. I have more than 40 compositions in my memory.*

## Aurelio Fernández

Of the origin of cumbia myths, one states that it hails from the Momposina Depression. The tale upholds that Indigenous groups initially performed cumbia on caña de millo.<sup>20</sup> Disregarding younger cañamilleros such as Marlon de la Peña, Aurelio Fernández has been the only millo representative of the Momposina Depression zone for several decades. He performs both with his group and musically accompanying La Danza de las Farotas, a traditional dance in Talaigua.

In 1984, the most recognized artist of Colombian traditional music recorded her international debut album *Totó la Momposina y sus Tambores* (A.S.P.I.C. France). It included three millo ensemble pieces “Mañanitas de Diciembre,” “Puya Puyará,” and “Son de Farotas.” These are perhaps the only millo tunes that transcended the local market of Barranquilla in the 20th century. Aurelio is the cañamillero of this recording. However, despite his local and regional recognition (he won first place several times in the National Pito Atravesao Festival held in Morroa, Sucre), and his assiduous presence in cultural events such as the Barranquilla Carnival, his music has been virtually absent from the recording industry.

In January 2018, in his lifelong home, sitting in his backyard with background sounds coming from roosters, bicycle arrangements, and millo flutes tested by his son, Aurelio talked about his life and music.

*My full name is Aurelio Fernández Guerrero. On December 20, 1935, I was born here in Botón de Leyva (Mompox), in this same land of indigenous ancestors and amphibious culture. Do you see those courtyards? One belonged to my*

---

<sup>20</sup> This myth was widely disseminated by José Barros, a famous composer from the Colombian Caribbean and founder of the Cumbia Festival in the municipality of El Banco, Magdalena.

*paternal grandfather and the other to my maternal grandfather when my parents Santiago Fernández and María Guerrero, got together. I have seven siblings and two half-siblings, so in total, we are ten. I am the eldest.*

*I went to primary school for three years, but I didn't finish it. I had to help in the house's mill.*

37



PHOTO: LUCÍA IBÁÑEZ. BOTÓN DE LEYVA, 2015.

*When I was 20 years old, I left to seek adventures. I worked in several things: cattle ranching, picking cotton, planting, and sawing wood.*

*There was a man here who played the millo flute, Andrés Amador. He lived over there where you can see that house. He played the flute, but he didn't have*

*much of a repertoire. He played a son de farotas, a perillero, and about four or five other songs. He was an already sick 80-year-old. I would go there and watch him. I would listen to his playing. He taught me how to make flutes.*

*Then, there was a teacher with a good and extensive repertoire, José Eustacio Meza, in the town of Margarita. He finished teaching me.*

*When I was little, there was no radio nor electricity. In the village, there was a power plant and light for a few hours. We listened to gramophone records of rancheras and vallenatos. We only had live music. The bands from Murillo, a town two leagues away on the Magdalena side of the river, came to play here for the October 19 festivities. There was also bullerengue, zambapalo, and tambora.*

*My family was not musical. I was the only one who learned the millo, but one of my brothers plays maracas, and another one plays tambora. I knew a gaita player named Horacio Fernández.*

*18 de Mayo is how I called my first group. I was well into my thirties, had children, and never recorded anything with them. My first recordings were for the album Cartagena Mía, a recording we made in Medellín under the Sonolux label with the group Malibú de Talaigua Nuevo. After that, I joined the Farotas de Talaigua for 22 years. I stopped doing it because we'd do very long tours in the parades, and I am no longer fit for that. However, but if they play locally, they still call me. Then I was part of Totó la Momposina's ensemble with whom I traveled to several places, nationally and internationally. And then I have been performing with various groups that accompany me, with which I have participated in festivals and meetings.*

*Back then, I used to sing, and now I can't. I suffered; I have been suffering. I got the flu, and the doctor has been relieving me. Today I live on what my children give me. I have twelve, all of them were born here, and I live here with my wife, a son, and four grandchildren. I raised them all. I continue playing my millo and giving interviews. Do you have any other questions?*

## Pedro “Ramayá” Beltrán

Pedro Ramayá Beltrán is undoubtedly the most-recorded composer and performer of millo music, evidenced by some 50 full-length albums to his name and countless collaborations. His musical production is closer to popular music's aesthetics and musical language than to the rural repertoires of caña de millo. In this sense, his recordings usually feature electric bass and tempered instruments accompanying his millo flute. His songs tend to feature humorous lyrics with catchy choruses. Somehow Ramayá chose, on purpose or to satisfy the industry, not to reproduce the traditional caña de millo music, but to adapt the instrument to popular repertoires and forms outlined by the cultural industries. His works included in this phonogram seek to document his playing with the

39



PHOTO: LAURA MENDOZA. CARTAGENA, 2017

traditional ensemble and the rural context he learned as a cañamillero.

Ramayá, as he is usually known, is a caña de millo symbol. Although he plays several instruments, his style and compositions as a cañamillero constitute the backbone of millo practice today with numerous awards and tributes. Several of his songs have canonic status within the Barranquilla Carnival and the collective memory of the Barranquilla populations.

Today's hundreds of millo performers in Barranquilla receive an education under the (in)direct influence of Ramayá. Some, directly influenced by Ramayá's records and performances. Others, indirectly affected by him through his disciples, primarily Jorge Jimeno, who is in charge of teaching millo since the 1990s through the Community Cultural Centers (F. Ochoa Escobar, 2017). Ramayá took the millo technique to high levels of difficulty, precision, and standardization. He tuned the instrument to the Western tempered system and homogenized its timbre, all of which facilitated dialogues with other instrumentations, repertoires, artists, and audiences. From Malambo, his home for decades in a municipality bordering Barranquilla, always with joy, mischievousness, and humor, surrounded by his family, and greeted by every casual passerby, he summarized his life as the following:

40

*My name is Pedro Agustín Beltrán Castro. I was born on February 15, 1930, in Patico, a small town in today's Talaigua Nuevo, in the Momposina Depression.*

*When I was 5 or 6, I played the danzas del coyongo and the farotas on the dulzaina. Later, I picked up the millo around the age of eight or nine. I started making millo flutes with ayama leaves. I cut it from the top and made a knot, and made a slit downwards. When I blew, it produced sounds, and I made four holes below and started playing. That was a daily task because that leaf dried quickly, in hours or a day, so the next day, I would do the same process again until I finally had the opportunity to take a flauta de millo that my brother kept on top of the thatched roof of the house.*

*I learned by watching Gregorio Polo, or Goyo Polo as we called him, father of Néstor Julio Polo, also a cañamillero. He played in the “ruedas de cumbia”<sup>21</sup>, and I used to stand on a stool to watch him play.*

*In my desire to imitate Gregorio, at the age of 13, I organized a group playing band music with the millo and cumbia songs. That group had a millo, snare drum, bass drum, and maraca. We performed in nearby villages. They called us Banda Patiquera, and later Banda la Bombo Asao. I started drinking lots of rum and started to lose face. My mother suffered a lot because of me. So I decided to join the army. There, I always carried my millo, and I learned accordion, guitar, and different things.*

*By the Rojas Pinilla government, public order was spoiled. Then for one year of service, they granted you another one. So, I got out as if I had served 18 years, four months, and seven days, which I did in 10 years. And I left with a pension of 600 Colombian pesos per month. Then I went to Patico, worked in different things, and followed a love; I ended up in Barranquilla in 1961.*

41

*I arrived and asked if there was any millo ensemble around here. I heard about a radio station called La Voz de Barranquilla, where they presented ensembles. There I met Cumbia Soledaña and joined them formally after a parranda. To join them, I got their records and learned their repertoire. At the time, there were few milleros in Barranquilla.*

*I was with Cumbia Soledaña until 1969. We recorded four albums: Pa Gozá el Carnaval, volume 1 to 4. Efraín Mejía, the director of Cumbia Soledaña, did not want to leave the tradition. He wanted to play only cumbia while I wished to play other rhythms and stuff, so I went to form my group: Cumbia Moderna de Soledad.*

---

<sup>21</sup> Informal cumbia parties in the streets or people's private patios.

*The 1980s was a busy time. At that time, I got up to three contracts per week. Different towns and carnivals hired me. Today, I still get hired a lot because of my three modalities: banda, cumbia, and vallenato—the corralero style, which features saxophone, trombone, and trumpet with the accordion. I make a living with music and also have a pension. I also made ends meet through different activities. In the '60s, I sold slabs in the market and sold cheese in wheelbarrows and all that, and sometimes I went to whatever came my way to sell tickets for clubs and raffles because the music was not enough to make a living.*

*I already have about 30 grandchildren. Ramiro has 16 children himself. Of my children, the only one who plays millo is Ramiro; the others are percussionists or accordion performers.*

*I graduated from high school in December 2012. Then I wanted to go to law school, but what the hell, why would I study more?*

*I learned accordion, guitar, and other stuff. I play percussion: tambor alegre, tambor llamador and tambora. I don't play guitar well, but I use it to write arrangements. Same with the accordion and a little with the piano. I am multifaceted in music. I used to sing boleros. I liked the music by Bienvenido Granda, Tito Cortez, Daniel Santos, Olimpo Cárdenas whom I imitated and played guitar. I learned guitar by playing the music of Guillermo Buitrago: "Dame tu Mujer José," and all that, and the pieces of Bovea and his Vallenatos.*

*Now I have a small studio around here. I have a microphone, a small console and a computer, two speakers, and we record by tracks, one by one, because my goal is to reach 100 years of age performing. I'm still young because I do not admit old age (laughs). I've stayed young with my eighty-something years, and I'm not going to get old because I don't feel like it. In life, the reality is what one proposes: if one offers not to die, one does not die (laughs). What remains is the memory. My memory will remain everlasting.*

## Marcelino Bertel

As far as is known, Marcelino Bertel Macea is the only millo performer in the Córdoba state. This fact added to his glee, vitality, and versatility in performance, made him a widely recognized character in the cultural sectors of the state. He was a frequent participant, contestant, or guest in multiple municipal and local festivals. Therefore, some of his songs were recorded on discs for educational purposes by regional, departmental, and even national cultural entities. His few recordings evidence an impressive mastery of the millo flute and extraordinarily danceable and joyful music. Despite this, his music does not adapt to commercial languages of mediatized music. Therefore, it was folklorized, in other words, used as an image of the past to feed discourses yet, rendered invisible in the mass media and the recording industry.

43



PHOTO: FIDELINA HERRERA. SAN PELAYO, 1978.

On March 19, 1924, Marcelino was born in the village of El Cocuelo, in Montería (Córdoba) and died in Montería on August 9, 1996. He learned from his father, a farmer from the savannahs of Sincelejo, who taught him to make flutes with reeds, which he collected from the banks of the Sinú River. He never set foot in a recording studio. However, his millo appears in the scarce regional discography of cultural character in the late 20th-century. These albums are compilations of different Caribbean cultural expressions with short circulation and are challenging to find. Such records include “Los Sabores del Porro”, from the collection *Música Tradicional y Popular Colombiana*, Vol. 7 (Procultura, 1986); “Juglares de la Sabana” (FIDES, 1986); and “*Cantos de Tierra y Magia*” (*Gobernación de Bolívar*, 2003).

Marcelino is a singular character within the cañamilleros universe for two reasons: first, he is the only millero from Córdoba; and second, his virtuosity and originality earned him a mythical reputation.

His style features a vertiginous speed and constant and creative use of the low register, which is why his peers named him “El Rey del bajoneo” [the king of bass tones].

44

This is how he described himself:

*I do everything: I work with the machete, I saw, I'm a sawyer, I'm a farmer, I catch fish, I catch bearded fish, I catch everything. They call me the witch doctor because I have been playing the millo since I was six months old in my mother's belly. I am the only one of five siblings who followed my father's profession. I have four children, all raised, two men and two women. They all grew up and made their families, so I live alone with my wife and a granddaughter in Montería. Whoever likes a business likes it, and millo flute is my business. Is there a porro festival in San Pelayo? Marcelino goes there. Is there is a chicha festival in any place? Marcelino goes there. And if there is liquor, so much better.*

## Mane Arrieta

Manuel Arrieta Iriarte, was born in Mahates (Bolívar) on November 7, 1911<sup>22</sup>, and died in Plato (Magdalena) on February 6, 1998. Mane comes from an important family of musicians and millo performers<sup>23</sup>.

He made his millo flutes from corozo, a more rigid material that makes the flute more challenging to play than today's carrizo standard. This difficulty produces and implies that some melodic turns are easier than others, a determining factor in the constructions and melodic variations that breed a unique style among corozo-made flute performers.

In 1954, he moved to the municipality of Plato (Magdalena), where he alternated farming with his millo music work. Over the years, he was considered a son of Plato and one of its central cultural values.

45

Around the same time, while he was working in the cotton harvest, one of the most prominent cumbiambas of the Barranquilla Carnival called him to perform with his group (Unión Colombia). After several years with this cumbiamba, he accompanied other relevant cumbiambas such as Sin Fin, Barrio Abajo, El Cañonazo, and El Cumbión de Oro, the latter widely recognized and with which he spent several seasons.

Due to his constant presence in the Carnival as the musical leader of important cumbiambas, he is popularly regarded as one of the great millo exponents, even

---

<sup>22</sup> Available records evidence a birth date discrepancy. According to the archives at the Mahates Church, Arrieta was born on 11-07-1911, as local researcher Francisco Sarabia informed. However, Arrieta's tombstone in Plato states his birthday as November 12, 1912.

<sup>23</sup> His cousins Erasmo and Roque Arrieta are recognized among scholars of Colombian traditional music for having participated in the emblematic two-year tour (1956-1958) to socialist Europe, Russia and China of a delegation of musicians and dancers led by anthropologist, physician and writer Manuel Zapata Olivella and his choreographer sister Delia (M. Zapata Olivella, 2020). However, El Niño Ramos affirms that it was Mane who best mastered the *pito atravesao* music and who taught his cousins to play it.

though he never ventured into the recording industry. After his death, some family members, led by his sons Jerónimo and Severino Arrieta —on the flute and maracas, respectively— continued the group. Today, Mane Arrieta’s musical legacy is a vital identity reference for the Afro-Colombian population of Plato and a cultural reference for the entire municipality. Two prominent institutions were named after Mane Arrieta: The Community Council of Black and Afro-descendant Communities and the Town Hall (Alcaldía de Plato 2016, 108).

Mane was one of the most legendary cañamilleros in the Barranquilla Carnival. However, the tenet of using music as mere accompaniment for dance groups in parades relegated Mane to being a “folkloric” musician, employed only during the Carnival season, while forgotten for most of the year. He worked the land in the countryside. These contradictions between his fame as a Carnival musician and his null recording production evidence the caña de millo’s place as a historical and silenced voice of cumbia.



PHOTO: ANDRÉS JOTA. S.F.

## THE REPERTOIRE

### CD1 La Cumbia 20 de Enero

1. El hipo  
(Rafaél Ospino)
2. Santiago Moreno  
(Santiago Ospino)
3. El amor entra de pronto  
(Rafaél Ospino)
4. Pensando en amores  
(Hernando Hernández)
5. Yoana  
(Rafaél Ospino)
6. Adiós morenita  
(Santiago Ospino)
7. Rama del tamarindo evitalero  
(Traditional lyrics)
8. Qué le pasa a Pepe  
(Domingo Pimentel)
9. Pobre Niño  
(Santiago Ospino)
10. El demonio  
(Rafaél Ospino)
11. La efaratá  
(Rafaél Ospino)
12. El parrandón (Bonus Track)  
(Petrona Martínez)

## CD2 LEYENDAS CAÑAMILLERAS DEL CARIBE

### El Niño Ramos

1. Subiendo una loma  
(Víctor Ramos Villarreal)  
In the Atlantic, locals call this groove porro, jalaito or son corrido.  
*This song belongs to my dad, he's the one who sings. I think it's a cumbia.*
2. El Callejero (Cumbia)  
(El Niño Ramos)  
*An instrumental cumbia like those typically performed in villages for hours and hours, as Roque Arrieta did while people danced with candles in their hands. Pedro Ricardo Monterrosa, my brother-in-law, plays the maracas. The other musicians are my children.*
3. La Platanera (Cumbia)  
(Mane Arrieta)
4. Con la Punta 'el pie (Cumbia)  
(El Niño Ramos)
5. El caramba  
(Víctor Ramos)

This rhythmic pattern is usually called porro, jalaito or son corrido. However, El Niño refers to this song in the following terms: "It's a puya rhythm. I called it 'El Caramba' because people would tell me: "*Caramba*<sup>24</sup>, why don't you play that song I love!". I answered: "caramba, I already played it", so I said: "Let's call it 'El caramba.'"

## Santiago Ospino

6. Sueños de Santiago (Porro, jalaíto or son corrido)  
(Santiago Ospino)
7. Santiago Moreno (Cumbia rápida or cumbión)  
(Santiago Ospino)
8. La rasquiñita (Puya)  
(Santiago Ospino)
9. Son del diablo (Cumbia)  
(Santiago Ospino). Published in 2012 in the album *Magín y Santiago* under the name "Sentimiento"<sup>25</sup>.

49

## Aurelio Fernández

10. El millo se modernizó (cumbia)  
(Aurelio Fernández)

Aurelio Fernández recorded this song on the album *Cartagena Mía* by Grupo Malibú de Talaigua Nuevo (which features an electric bass).<sup>26</sup> Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto covered it for their seminal album *Un Fuego de Sangre*

---

<sup>24</sup> Caramba /ka.'rãm.ba/ is discourse marker widely spread in the Caribbean. It is an expression to indicate admiration, surprise or anger, or to call somebody's attention.

<sup>25</sup> Páginas de Cultura. 2012, Cali, Colombia (limited edition).

<sup>26</sup> Sonolux - 01 (0130)01409, de 1985, Colombia.

*Pura*.<sup>27</sup> Santiago Ospino also recorded an instrumental version on the rare album *Magín y Santiago*<sup>28</sup>. However, the present recording is the only known register in which Aurelio performs his composition with the traditional millo ensemble. For that reason, this version probably constitutes his original intent as composer and performer.

11. Son de Farotas  
(Traditional song)

*I learned that music from Andrés Amador. It was one of the few pieces he knew, as well as perillero and lavada. All these tunes accompany the dance group called Farotas de Talaigua Nuevo.*

12. Son de Farotas (alternative version) [Guacherna]  
(Traditional song)

For Aurelio, this is another way of performing the same tune. The album *Totó la Momposina y sus tambores* (1984 A.S.P.I.C. France) features another version of this theme, as well as the two following tracks were featured on a single track.

13. Perillero (Perillero)  
(Traditional song)

14. La lavada (Jalaíto)  
(Traditional song)

## Pedro “Ramayá” Beltrán

15. La cocinera (cumbia)

(Pedro Beltrán).

Originally recorded on the album “*La Cumbia Moderna de Soledad de Pedro Ramayá Beltrán*”, 1993, Discos Victoria. This is an instrumental version)

16. Niña Mode

(Pedro Beltrán) Ramayá classifies this piece as puya. He recorded it on three different LPs: *Pa Gozá el Carnavá* (1964), *La Tropa Loca* (1986) y *La Leyenda Viva de la Cumbia* (200?).

51

In *Pa gozá el Carnavá*, Cumbia Soledaña’s first LP, it was recorded with the traditional instrumentation. The version on *La Tropa Loca* features arrangements for orchestra and fellow singer Noel Petro. As such, it evidences Ramayá’s ability to insert the millo in western temperament settings. For the album *La Leyenda Viva de la Cumbia*, Ramayá recorded it with his group and included bass. The former versions acquire binary rhythmic subdivisions. However, the version included in this volume acquires ambiguous rhythmic subdivisions which oscillate between binary and ternary meters. This recording feature many of his sons on percussion instruments.

*Where does the name La Niña Mode come from?*

*As a musician, one commits into music everything that comes to mind. Musicians invent so many things that they end up believing what they say. That is one of my dad’s lyrics, he played it with gaita*

*corta. Several of his compositions were [lost] and I transcribed and registered them because who's going to take them away from me? Nobody (laughs).*

17. Sentimiento navideño  
(Pedro Beltrán)

*The performance here is somewhat a porro, or an uplifting cumbia. Someone told me that this was a farotas or guacherna groove. I made it up, I had a tape recorder taped it to remember. I added the title and that was it.*

## **Marcelino Bertel**

Marcelino passed away decades before this research. Therefore, we did not inquire him about his repertoire. In contrast to the other millo performers, his songs do not respond to the western and commercial logics of Latin American popular music. His technical language –apparently grounded on an acoustic ontology connected to Caribbean nature– displays melodic turns and articulations that have disappeared from the millo practice today.

18. El pájaro lindo  
(attributed to Marcelino Bertel)
19. La espabilá  
(attributed to Marcelino Bertel)

## **Mane Arrieta**

We did not have the luck of meeting Mane Arrieta in person. Like Marcelino, his songs are inspired on the animal kingdom. The rhythmic patterns of *La Zorra* [the fox] are unusual for millo music, which acquire an ambivalence between 6/8 and binary subdivisions.

20. La zorra  
(attributed to Mane Arrieta)
21. El pase del grillo  
(attributed to Mane Arrieta)

## **ALBUM CREDITS**

Produced by Manuel García-Orozco and Federico Ochoa-Escobar

### **CD1- La Cumbia 20 de Enero**

Rafael Ospino, lead vocals and guacho (seeds idiophone)

Hernando Hernandez, millo flute and backing vocals

Ascanio Pimentel, alegre drum

Marco Rodríguez, llamador

Juan Carlos Hernandez, tambora

Salvador Sánchez, guacho

Guidobal Pimentel, maracas and backing vocals

Guest backing vocals: Aida Bossa, Solange Prat, Gregorio Uribe.

Recorded at Evitar (Mahates, Bolivar) on August 12 and 13, 2019. It features spontaneous shouts and laughs from the town's inhabitants as the recording sessions became a casual celebration.

Engineered and mastered by Manuel García-Orozco. Assistants: Gregorio Uribe, Solange Prat, Guillermo Valencia, Janer Amaris. Mixed by Gabriel Gutiérrez Arellano, Manuel García-Orozco.

## **GD2- Leyendas cañamilleras del Caribe**

El Niño Ramos, Santiago Ospino, Aurelio Fernández, Pedro “Ramayá” Beltrán, Marcelino Bertel, Mane Arrieta.

1-17: Recorded at Cartagena with a multitrack field recorder between 2001 and 2003. Original tapes recorded and produced by Rafael Ramos Caraballo. Mixed by Omar Romero. Tapes´ transfer: Luis Jaime Ángel. Repertoire curated by Federico Ochoa Escobar. Research assistant: Marlon de la Peña.

Artisan drums (alegre, llamador, tambora): Álvaro Llerena, Jhonny Ramos, Ascanio Pimentel, Yair Beltrán, Wilmer Ramos, Álvaro Enrique Rojas, Luis Ramos. Seed-idiophones (maracas, guacho): Pedro Ricardo Monterroso, Víctor Manuel Ramos, Álvaro Enrique Mancera. Lead vocals (1) and (4): Víctor Ramos Villarreal (father), El Niño Ramos (son). Backing vocals: Ela Agresot, Javier Ramírez..

18-19: Recorded at San Pelayo on June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1978 by Fidelina Herrera and Max Brandt.

20-21: Collected by Ubaldo Mendoza; unknown recording place, date, and method.

Research and liner notes by Federico Ochoa Escobar and Manuel García-Orozco. Liner Notes Editor: Paul Assimacopoulos. Draft Translations: Christian Arango.

Digital restauration and mastering: Manuel García-Orozco.

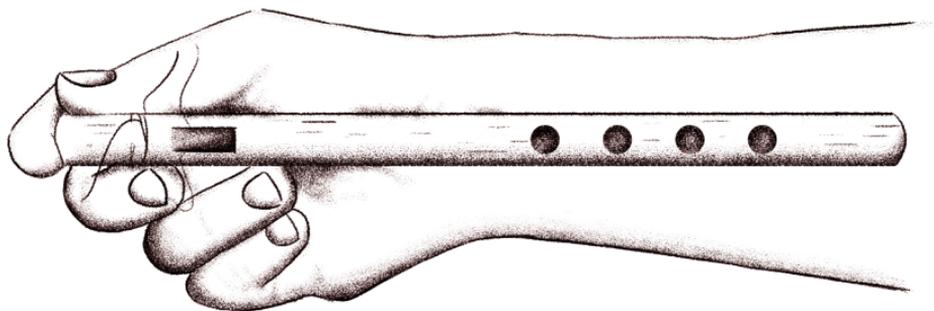
Graphic Design: Sofía Páramo Rangel.

## SOURCES

- Abadía Morales, Guillermo. 1981. *Instrumentos de la música folklórica de Colombia*. Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura.
- Alcaldía de Plato. 2016. «Plato. Departamento de Magdalena. Plan de Desarrollo Municipal 2016-2019».
- Barón, Jorge. s. f. «Show del recuerdo con Lucho Bermúdez, parte II». *El show del recuerdo*. Bogotá: Jorge Barón Televisión. Consultado 10 de octubre de 2020. <https://youtu.be/83l-qENKeVE>.
- Bermúdez, Egberto. 1985. *Los instrumentos musicales en Colombia*. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia.
- Civallero, Edgardo. 2015. *Las raíces africanas de la caña de millo colombiana*. Madrid.
- Cumin, Elizabeth. 2002. «Asimilación, multiculturalismo y mestizaje: formas y transformaciones de la relación con el otro en Cartagena». En *Afrodscendientes en las Américas: trayectorias sociales e identitarias*, editado por Claudia Mosquera, Mauricio Pardo, y Odile Hoffmann, 181-94. Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Icanh, Ird, Ilsa.
- Curriel, Ochy. 2007. «Crítica poscolonial desde las prácticas políticas del feminismo antirracista». *Nómadas*, n.o 26: 92-101.
- Feld, Steven. 1996. «Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavia, Papua New Guinea». En *Senses of Place*, editado por Steven Feld y Keith H. Basso, 91-136. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.
- González Henríquez, Adolfo. 2003. «Música popular e identidad en Barranquilla, 1940-2000. De la cultura tropical a la identidad global». En *Música y sociedad en Colombia: traslaciones, legitimaciones e identificaciones*, 114-31. Bogotá: Universidad del Rosario.
- Hernández Salgar, Oscar. 2016. *Los mitos de la música nacional. Poder y emoción en las músicas populares colombianas 1930-1960*. Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana.
- List, George. 1965. Fragmentos de interpretación de ritmos por el conjunto de caña de millo de Evitar. Entrevistas con los integrantes de la agrupación. [https://catalogoenlinea.bibliotecanacional.gov.co/client/es\\_ES/bd/search/detailnonmodal/ent:\\$002f\\$002fSD\\_ASSET\\$002f\\$002fSD\\_ASSET:58099/ada?qu=millo&te=ASSET&dt=list](https://catalogoenlinea.bibliotecanacional.gov.co/client/es_ES/bd/search/detailnonmodal/ent:$002f$002fSD_ASSET$002f$002fSD_ASSET:58099/ada?qu=millo&te=ASSET&dt=list).
- — —. 1994. *Música y poesía en un pueblo colombiano: una herencia tri-cultural*. Bogotá: Patronato Colombiano de Artes y Ciencias.
- Miñana, Carlos. 2000. «Entre el folklore y la etnomusicología: 60 años de estudios sobre la música popular tradicional en Colombia». *A contratiempo. Revista de música en la cultura* 11 (1): 37-49.

- Ochoa Escobar, Federico. 2012. «Las investigaciones sobre la caña de millo o pito atravesao». *Cuadernos de música, artes visuales y artes escénicas* 7 (2): 159-78.
- . 2013. *El libro de las gaitas largas. Tradición de los Montes de María*. Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana.
- . 2014. «Construcción, usos y sentidos de una tradición: La cumbia en caña de millo como símbolo sonoro del Carnaval de Barranquilla». Maestría en Antropología, Medellín: Universidad de Antioquia.
- . 2019. «La cumbia folclórica colombiana». En *El libro de la cumbia: resonancias, transferencias y trasplantes de las cumbias latinoamericanas*, 60-103. Medellín: Instituto Tecnológico Metropolitano ITM.
- Ochoa Escobar, Juan Sebastián. 2016. «La cumbia en Colombia: Invención de una Tradición». *Revista Musical Chilena Año LXX* (226): 31-52.
- Ochoa Gautier, Ana María. 2014. *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Rodríguez, Manuel Antonio. 2003. *Cumbia y puya, cañamilleros ancestrales: I parte*. Bogotá. <https://youtu.be/zeKT6CpLnlw>.
- Seeger, Anthony. 1987. *Why Suyá sing: a musical anthropology of an Amazonian people*. University of Illinois Press.
- Wade, Peter. 2002. *Música, raza y nación. Música tropical en Colombia*. Bogotá: Vicepresidencia de la República. <https://personalpages.manchester.ac.uk/staff/peter.wade/articles/Wade%20Musica%20raza%20y%20nacion.PDF>.
- Weidman, Amanda. 2015. «Voice». En *Keywords in Sound*, editado por David Novak y Matt Sakakeeny, 232-46. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Zapata Olivella, Delia. 1962. «La cumbia: síntesis musical de la nación colombiana». *Revista colombiana de folklor* 3 (7): 187-204.
- Zapata Olivella, Manuel. 1961. «Caña de millo, variedades y ejecución». *Revista colombiana de folklor* 2 (6): 155-59.





# LA CAÑA DE MILLO: VOZ HISTÓRICA Y SILENCIADA DE LA CUMBIA

*[The Millo Flute: The Historical and Silenced Voice of Cumbia]*

Double album + research booklet

Two hours of roots cumbia music, 33 musical pieces, oral testimonies, and musicological research that chronicle, evidence, and disseminate the historical and cultural value of the millo flute and its traditional performers in the Colombian Caribbean.

The album features unreleased field recordings made between 1978-2019, which preserve vivid oral memories of a century and a half of cumbia tradition.

**CHAGO**  
— WORLD MUSIC —

ratio:atelier



La cultura  
es de todos

Mincultura



Instituto Universitario  
BELLAS ARTES Y  
CIENCIAS DE BOLÍVAR  
CREAMOS FUTURO