

# The New Cumbia

## The Women Drummers of Colombia

By Don Skoog

**R**oberta Leono pulls an *alegre* drum toward her, picks up a hammer, and tightens the head by hitting the side wedges one by one as she rotates the shell. Every stroke produces a satisfying thwack. As she prepares the drum, she explains that the larger strokes are made on the wedges, but that the smaller, fine-tuning taps are done on the rim.

As a member of La Perla, a trio of women from Bogotá, Leono is one of a new generation of female drummers who are not only preserving the original Afro-Colombian musical traditions, but who are also re-conceiving them for a new era and for a larger audience of both Colombians and foreigners. Her students today are a group of Americans who have come to Bogotá to study cumbia with them, but La Perla also has a large following inside Colombia. And they are not alone.

The emergence of women musicians as soloists and in ensem-

bles is creating a wave that is flowing throughout Colombian society. They represent both a new generation and a fundamental transformation of traditions from the marginalized population of the coasts and forests to a genre of music that is being embraced throughout the country. Based in folkloric rhythms and songs, this new cumbia also embraces funk, hip-hop, rap, samba, and electronica in a sonic alchemy that is revolutionizing the music, representing both a new direction and a continuation of the rich legacy that was handed down to them. While many men are involved in this music as well, women are defining its impact on the country.

This new wave directly confronts issues of feminism, as women move to take their places in society; identity, as queer and gender-fluid people declare their presence and legitimacy; and social consciousness, as Colombia comes to grips with the violence





of its past and the destruction of its environment. This cumbia glows with tattoos, nose rings, statement clothing, dyed hair, and a distinctive culture that directly challenges staid traditions and stereotypes. These artists are determined to be part of the larger cultural and artistic wave that seeks to create a new path for the country and the world. Their goal is to maintain continuity with a past whose musical forms must also continue to evolve if they are to survive.

Colombia is a large and diverse country. Many cultural and artistic traditions, musical and otherwise, form a complex legacy that acts as the foundation for the creation of new art. Cumbia is one of many musical forms that sit near the center of the country's artistic heart. This music reflects its African, indigenous, and Spanish roots, so it is embraced by many as a symbol of Colombia's collective cultural mosaic. It is also a symbol of a new generation's determination to overcome the conflicts that came with such diversity's competing needs.

## THE MUSIC

Cumbia is a term for a musical tradition that umbrellas a complex of interrelated musical genres whose roots can be traced back to the indigenous peoples of the mountains, as well as to the African populations from the coast. There are so many different genres and sub-styles that it would require a separate article to simply outline them, and more than one in-depth book to do them social and musical justice. Cumbia is drum, dance, and song that has evolved from African roots while absorbing indigenous, Spanish, and Caribbean influences into its spirit. It has its past in ancient Africa, Native America, and Spain, but its future is in the contemporary world.

The songs are about everyday life, love, work, and pain, but these themes have become metaphors — code first for the lived experience of the freed slaves, then for the sufferings and joys of all the people in the country.

The various dances can be flirtatious, with a nod to fertility, often performed in pairs with would-be suitors being intercepted and banished from the floor as new ones take their place. It's great fun. Professional dancers can wear colorful costumes that reflect their heritage and place in society, so the dance floor can be a blur of color and motion, but cumbia dancers are just as likely to show up for the party (called a *rueda*) in street clothes.

There are two main genres: *Gaita* refers to both the native flute and the drums of the ensemble built around it. The genre has indigenous roots, but *gaita* ensembles now perform music from other regions as well. Traditionally, they perform in four rhythmic modes: *gaita corrida*, *puya*, *porro*, and *merengue de gaita*.

*Bullerengue* refers to music that evolved from more African roots of the people from the coast. While these genres are interrelated, this is the music most commonly thought of as cumbia. There are four basic rhythmic modes in this genre: *cumbia*, *bullerengue sentao*, *chalupa*, and *fandango de lengua*.

There are other folkloric musical genres, ensembles, and in-

struments in Colombia — *marimba de chonta*, *mapalé*, *chandé*, *chirimía*, *pechiche*, and *currulao*, to name just a few — that are beyond the scope of this article.

## THE INSTRUMENTS

There are many different drums in Colombian music, but the main ones for cumbia and its relatives are the *alegre*, a single-headed drum that is tuned by wedges driven into a rope net on its sides; the *tambora*, a two-headed cylindrical drum played with sticks on both heads, similar to a small bass drum; the *lla-*

*Alegre, llamador, and tambora drums made by Eduardo Garzón.*



*Maracas made by Orito Cantora*



*mador*, a smaller drum similar to the *alegre*, that drives the music from the off-beat; and the ever-important *maracas*, which are played with intricate and astonishing facility. There are other instruments as well, such as the *quijada*, or donkey's jaw; the *guache*, a type of shaker; and the *totumo*, a large, hollowed-out gourd half-shell in which small pieces of ceramic are bounced to mark the beat. All these percussion instruments can be found in both traditional and contemporary groups that can also include bass, piano, horns, electronics, and guitar, as well as other Colombian woodwind and string instruments.

These are the instruments that cumbia musicians play to create the music. How they do it depends on who they are and what influences they bring to the composition process. They come from different backgrounds and places, so their contributions, and the resulting music, presents in a range of styles. It is in this range of knowledge that these musicians bring to new forms, in a new paradigm for society, and in a verdant philosophy for living a more meaningful life, that we find the true spirit of this spiritual and artistic wave. Their histories of struggle and personal pain are journeys that lead to wellsprings of defiance and ultimately hope.

After you read their profiles, scan or click on each QR code and listen to their music. This is essential to understanding who they are. Watch their faces and hear their voices as you absorb their tales. Also, I ask readers to bear with some duplication between profiles that help keep the various narratives intact. Here are their words.

## THE ARTISTS

### La Perla

La Perla comprises three women from Bogotá: Diana Sanmiguel, Karen Nerak, and Roberta Leono. The present group evolved from a six-member collective that came together in 2014 to participate in the Ovejas Gaita Festival in Sucre. This festival is one of the most important for gaita music, and in 2015 La Perla won first prize, becoming the only group from Bogotá to do so in its 38-year history.

*Roberta Leono, Diana Sanmiguel, and Karen Nerak of La Perla*



The present, smaller group sings and plays cumbia drums as well as a voice octave pedal and a foot pedal. Their main musical influences are the *gaita* and *bullerengue* that originally brought them together, but as Roberta Leono says, "Being from Bogotá, we want our music to have a city feel, reflecting the influences we grew up with, such as rock, punk, hip-hop, salsa, and Dominican *merengue* — music we danced to at teenage parties, and that remains a part of our lives today."

She continues, "Drum music generally speaks of the environment in which it originates; that is, it speaks of the countryside, of farming, fishing, the sea, the river — the daily life of its practitioners and those who know and create it. In Bogotá, our reality is being surrounded by concrete and buses. It's a hard city that requires strength to live in. Therefore, one of our aims is to capture that everyday landscape and the reality of Colombia, which, sadly, is a harsh one. We have a geographically privileged country, which gives us a great wealth of flora and fauna, but these flora and fauna are also over-exploited. We share the rain forest with Brazil and Peru, but mining has gained a significant position in international business, so our global lung is being devastated and destroyed every day.

"We continue to see farmers displaced from their lands, in the streets, losing what they know and ending up begging in the city. The role of farmers in our daily lives is not recognized as important, even though it is thanks to them that we have food on our tables every day.

"We live in a country where being a social, environmental, and/or community leader can cost you your life, and this is the story of many who fight to defend collective ideals. We recognize diversity and the importance of collective work and unity among peers. We do not accept racism, homophobia, or transphobia. We want to feel safe and recognized within our diversity."

These three musicians are friends of mine, and as I have gotten to know them in the last few years I have been awed by their talent, scope of work, creative vision, and above all, their determination, personally and professionally, to be the change they want to see in the world.

La Perla: "Bruja"



The following video is an example of La Perla performing the traditional *gaita* music that was so dominated by men in the past, as opposed to the contemporary music created by women in all the other videos in this article. In the past, they would not have been allowed to play this music. Their performance completes



the circle, showing the relationship between the roots of the tradition and the new sounds being brought to it by women today. It demonstrates the depth of knowledge of yesterday's music — knowledge that they bring to expanding the scope of tomorrow's music.

*La Perla: "Porro"*



### Orito Cantora y Jenn del Tambó

Orito Cantora y Jenn del Tambó (Grace Lascano Garrido and Jennifer Meza Mayorga) are a song-and-drum duo from the city of Barranquilla in the North. With over two decades of experience in Afro-Colombian traditional music, they are researchers, producers, feminists, and workshop facilitators who, along with their band, fuse ancestral songs with original compositions. They integrate gaitas, maracas, flutes, percussion, and bass into an experimental and immersive music that celebrates identity, resistance, and social transformation. The project consists of them and a core band of four male musicians who bring strength and a rich timbre to the performance.

Jenn del Tambó describes their style: "Our sound is based on in-depth research and study of traditional Afro-Caribbean percussion instruments from the Colombian Caribbean, which are

*Orito Cantora and Jenn del Tambó*



combined with ancestral chants and original compositions by Orito. Using indigenous instruments such as gaitas, maracas, flutes, and a powerful foundation of traditional percussion — including the alegre drum, gaita and *milllo* call drums, tamboras of varying sizes, the *Pechiche* drum, among others, combined with electric bass — we construct an experimental, powerful, and immersive sound. This combination expands upon our roots without losing their essence, becoming a musical language that symbolizes resistance, identity, and social transformation.

"Our influences come from the rituals, festivals, and musical traditions of the Caribbean, the songs of women who carry wisdom, the drums of Afro-Colombian communities, as well as from experiences working with teachers in community, educational, and research processes. We are also inspired by feminist movements and the struggles for the rights of women, LBT women, and gender non-conforming people, which permeate our aesthetics and musical narrative."

They are also the founders and leaders of the Colombian Women Drummers Network, an organization that, under the motto "The only skin that should be beaten is the skin of the drum" promotes gender equality and the rights of women, LGBTQ+ women, and gender dissidents. Since 2016, they have conducted workshops, exchanges, collaborations, and international tours that amplify the cultural impact of their music.

She continues: "We envision music that continues to evolve without losing its roots: new productions, intercultural collaborations, global tours, research into Afro-diasporic sounds, and the strengthening of educational work through the *Red de Tamboreras* [Colombian Women Drummers' Network]. We seek to continue bringing this collective voice to international stages, creating a musical language that remains alive, transformative, and deeply connected to Caribbean and Afro-descendant identity."

Their social and political objectives are rooted in the work they do. Music and community action are not separate endeavors: they are on a single path, each reinforcing the other.

Within the band, every composition, every arrangement, and every performance becomes a space where they reclaim the voices of women and gender non-conforming people within musical traditions that have historically been dominated by men. By proposing a sound built from Afro-Caribbean percussion instruments, gaitas, ancestral chants, and contemporary production, they open artistic possibilities so that new generations of women can see music as a possible, free, and personal territory. Their

*Orito Cantora and Jenn del Tambó: "He Venido"*



work on stage symbolizes resistance, identity, and the political power of bodies that play, sing, and transform.

At the same time, through the Colombian Women Drummers Network, they develop direct actions with social impact: workshops, training programs, support networks, leadership spaces, and accompaniment for women, LBT women, and gender non-conforming people. Their stance against gender violence reaffirms that the drum is an instrument of life, autonomy, and community healing.

Jenn del Tambó was recognized as Best Drummer at the 2025 National Gaita Festival in Ovejas, Sucre, becoming the first and only woman to receive this award in a space historically dominated by men. This achievement not only marks a personal milestone but also paves the way for new generations of female artists and percussionists to find a leading role in the traditions of the Colombian Caribbean.

Orito Cantora, for her part, is a researcher, composer, member of SAYCO [the Colombian Society of Authors and Composers], a key figure in the world of maracas in the Colombian Caribbean, and a maraca maker, fusing ancestral knowledge with contemporary creation.

Both artists have taken their work to major stages in Colombia and around the world, participating in international festivals, residencies, tours, and cultural exchange programs that strengthen the impact of their efforts. Their global presence has allowed Afro-Caribbean music, drums, maracas, and the voices of women creators to gain global recognition.

## Tambor Hembra

"Tambor Hembra" means "female drum," referring to the alegre drum, which is also called *tambor hembra*, which they have repurposed to represent themselves as well.

According to singer María José Gallego, Tambor Hembra was created in 2016 by its director, Juan Manuel Ocampo, an ethnomusicologist and percussionist who has done fieldwork in various areas of Colombia. Ocampo wished to use his knowledge to create and train a group of young women to learn the musical skills needed to play and sing traditional music, but he wanted to create opportunities for its members to study in other disciplines such as biology, social science, and anthropology as well.

The program was created at and is supported by *La Universidad de Caldas* in the city of Manizales, in the mountainous, indigenous, Andean region of Colombia. All the members are Andean as well, but since much of the music comes from various coastal areas, it is through their studies that they have come to learn, love, and respect the power of this Afro-Colombian music. Besides Ocampo and Gallego, the current members of the group are Alejandra Ocampo, Juliana Zuluaga, Paola Quintero, Alejandra Castrillón, Lorena Uzuriaga, and Natalia Osorio.

While Tambor Hembra is based in Manizales, they have performed in many parts of Colombia, as well as in Mexico and Ecuador. Their plans are to continue creating music that not only represents the cumbia tradition, but also manifests their ideas, thoughts, desires, and ideas, while bringing this music to the rest of the world.

*Tambor Hembra*





Gallego says, “Tambor Hembra is a group that focuses on Colombian Caribbean rhythms that are also sung and danced, like bullerengue sentao, chalupa, fandango de lengua, tambora, cumbia, the music of gaita, and mapalé. All these rhythms originated in Afro-Colombian culture. This music is very beautiful and very deep, containing a worldview filled with symbols and codes that represent identities of and in traditional cultures, so in the songs we encounter life, death, the processes of fertility, the passage from girl to woman (like the arrival of menstruation), love, and the experiences of daily life.”

Gallego says that the beauty of the music is that it permits the musicians to explore and fuse the experiences they encounter, or that have that influenced them, and that these fusions allow them to arrive, as human beings, at the true meaning of their folklore.

To learn this music, they started at the beginning, in the traditional rhythms with only the drums, but as they developed more expertise, Tambor Hembra began to add vocal harmonies, because they love to sing, then later piano and bass that create other sonorities while preserving those of the drums.

Gallego continues, “Across the years this music has been a refuge and a place of liberation, an expression of social justice, a way of change and transformation, constructing different realities in how we relate to the world, and with each other with love, respect, and liberty.

“For us, music is a means of expression and communication to manifest our thoughts, emotions, what hurts or affects us, what is important, what passes through us in the processes of our daily lives, and also to celebrate life — everything we are capable of feeling. We are made of many things. We are made of life, but also of death. We are made of the land, lakes, mountains, love, our internal processes, our individual and collective battles, and for us music is, above all, a form of resistance.”

The members of Tambor Hembra are concerned about social justice. They strive to create a world where everyone can live in peace, where people do not lose their lands or lives, and where the earth and animals, and the environment, which supports all of us, and of which we are all a part, are protected. Their way of contributing to the struggle is by preserving and nourishing the traditional music and folklore because, as Gallego says, we are all losing our ancestral identities and our origins.

*Tambor Hembra “Tu Abrazo”*



## María José Salgado

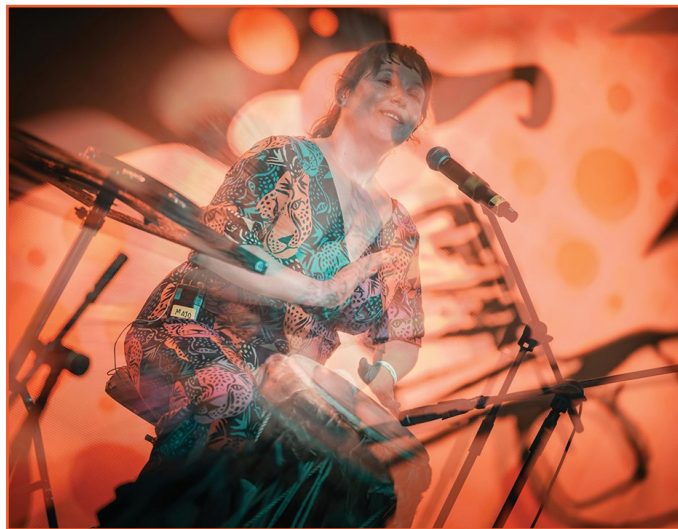
María José Salgado has been practicing, learning, researching, teaching, and creating diverse musical styles for 26 years. Her focus of practice and research has been the music of the Colombian Caribbean and the urban musical hybridizations that engage with it, as well as simultaneous projects combining traditional and experimental music. Her training has come from travel, ethnomusicology, musicology, collective practices, performing on stage, and university teaching since 2009.

She is best known for her work with Curupira, a group founded in 1999 that released seven albums and a book, participated in seminars, programs, and collaborations with local and international musicians, and undertook various national and international tours. The group disbanded in 2023. She now performs with 1280 Almas, a Bogotá-based rock band that she joined at the end of 2021, and she directs a musical space called El Fogón, for the practice, learning, and creation of bullerengue and other orally transmitted music from the Colombian Caribbean.

Salgado is scheduled to do a bullerengue tour in October of 2026 with Emilsen Pacheco, and will continue performing concerts with 1280 Almas, while working on ensembles and research for her master’s degree in Colombian Music. Her plans include creating and producing academically, learning, traveling, researching and collaborating, and continuing to develop her musical language on the alegre drum.

As she explains, her style is based on the practice she has developed through listening to and learning from various teachers of orally transmitted music, as well as from the creative workshops she has participated in. For Salgado, the future potential unfolds in the multiple creative possibilities offered by the infinite universe of Colombian percussion, in her own creativity and expression surrounding these developments and languages, in the constant depth, development and productivity of ethnomusicological research, and in active participation as a teacher, manager, and performer.

*María José Salgado (photo by Juan Diego Gil)*



Her sense of social responsibility is very personal. “I am the daughter of educators and human rights defenders,” she writes. “My father was disappeared by the Colombian state in 1992, and my family, primarily women, and I have been searching for him and fighting against impunity for 33 years.

“My social objectives as an artist are to express myself and transform realities. I extend my focus to community practices that are technologies of survival in the face of violence. I seek to contribute to social causes through music, transform the context of violence in which I grew up and live, and strengthen my presence as an artist in the world through research, creation, constant practice, and active participation in music through my drums.

“My political objectives are more aligned with progressivism. I work in the field of education, and I am critical and question the methods of conducting research and collaborations related to orally transmitted music. I believe that conceptually, Colombia is still behind, and academia still revolves around Eurocentric models. I participate as a musician, creator, researcher, community mediator, manager, and teacher — multiple roles that allow me to convey these questions and prototype respectful ways of conducting intercultural exchanges, producing knowledge about our own histories, and about ethical and reciprocal ways of working with communities. I contribute to the development of the enormous work that needs to be done in Colombia regarding the diversity of expressions that characterize us, and through my work, I have opened spaces for women drummers.”

In 2017, she completed a master’s degree in Musicology at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, and in 2020, she won the Latin Grammy Foundation’s Research and Preservation Award, for which she post-produced seven videos from internships conducted by students researching in the field.

Curupira: “La Gaita Fantástica”



### Efi Lambuley

Efi Lambuley (Estefanía Lambuley Murcia) plays *alegre* drum in several groups, but since 2014 her main project is called Efilá, an ensemble that fuses Colombian music from the Atlantic and Pacific coasts with other, more-urban genres like rock and pop using loopers and voice processors. This group includes guitarist and composer Andrés Corredor, and bassist and composer Francisco Álvarez. Lambuley also plays in several salsa groups.

She says, “My parents, along with other members of their group, Nueva Cultura, founded a music school that met on Satur-

days. I started there when I was very young, since they were the teachers and took me even before I was old enough to formally attend. There I learned to sing and play string and percussion instruments. When I finished high school, I decided to pursue percussion, and that’s what I studied at the Universidad Distrital in the ASAB Faculty of Arts.”

Her groups have performed at festivals and have won several grants that have allowed them to continue touring. They have recorded an album, an EP, and several singles. Although she has taken a break recently, the next step is to record an album with new compositions. During this break time, she completed a master’s degree in composition.

She plays the alegre, congas, cajón, cununos, bongos, and timbales, and uses multi-percussion, electronic percussion pads, looped tracks, and vocal percussion.

Her work has become focused on women’s issues. One of the main themes in her master’s program was precisely womanhood, viewed from different perspectives: the ideal, femicide, the role of mother, and the role of friend.

Lambuley continues, “I’ve become increasingly involved as a percussionist, composer, and teacher. This work requires a bit of education about customs, about ‘innocent jokes,’ and so on. I’ve also tried, through example, to raise awareness among other women on my social media and in my circles, hoping that more of us will want to support each other. Sometimes, I also stop short when I hear people say, ‘What an exaggeration,’ about several of these topics. I continue to compose for women, to talk about what we experience, to speak from our lived experiences, and how we experience them. I’m also at a point where I’m trying not only to speak from the perspective of pain, but also from the perspective of being a mother, friend, sister, colleague, student, and so on...”

“I experienced abuse as a teenager and didn’t talk to anyone about it until a few years ago. My songs address how we are taught to be silent, to even respect our abuser, especially if they are someone close to us. Since I couldn’t speak out at the time, I

Efi Lambuley



have written about the longing for that sense of freedom which would allow me to speak.”

Lambuley enjoys being a teacher and is moved by seeing how music has also allowed her to become part of other spaces that are understood primarily as male spaces. It is a way of proving to others that it can be done, but she feels that this paves the way so that perhaps the next woman, or the one after her, will not be judged by gender, but by abilities or musical pursuits, which is how it should be. To sow the seeds of change.

Lambuley creatively combines feminine with feminist to shape a powerful, yet intimate body of work. Her command of technique, technology, and vision point her compositions in a direction well worth following.

Eflá: “Latido”

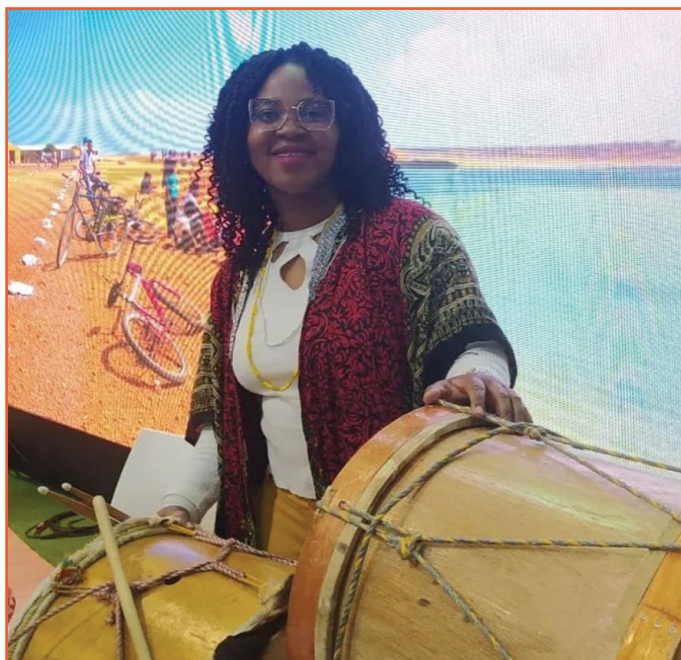


### María Pacífico

María Pacífico (María Luzmila Barreiro) is a self-taught percussionist. She has been playing the traditional rhythms of the Colombian Pacific coast: *bambuco viejo*, *currulao*, *juga*, *bunde*, *rum-ba*, *patacoré*, and *negritos*, among others, since she was 10 years old.

She plays cununos, guasá, congas, tambor alegre, llamador, tambora, djembe, and batá, among others, but she is currently focusing her artistic and professional career on cultural management. Her current musical ensemble is called ACHÉMÍ.

María Pacífico



Pacífico writes, “ACHEMÍ is a musical and artistic project born from a deep desire to honor, preserve, and promote the rich cultural heritage of Afro-Colombian communities in the Colombian Pacific and the Greater Caribbean. Under my artistic direction and with musical direction by Jhon Arrechea Mina, ACHÉMÍ has established itself as a high-level aesthetic and conceptual project that integrates ancestral knowledge, empirical practices, academic training, and contemporary exploration.

“ACHEMÍ has both traditional and Afro-Latino components: ACHÉMÍ Traditional is focused on the visibility, revitalization, and dissemination of traditional music from the Colombian South Pacific, with an emphasis on the rhythms, songs, and musical forms of the Nariño coast. This work stems from a deep respect for the legacy passed down by grandmothers, grandfathers, teachers, and other tradition bearers. It is composed of Afro-descendant artists — many from displaced communities — who, through living memory, embody the knowledge of their territories. ACHÉMÍ Traditional is also a laboratory for dialogue between empirical experience and academic knowledge, allowing for the strengthening of musical practice and its presentation on diverse stages without losing its roots.

“ACHEMÍ Afro-Latino is a creative exploration that bridges the gap between traditional and urban music of the Pacific coast with genres such as salsa, timba, funk, rap, and batá drums. With points of connection in Tumaco, Bogotá, Cartagena, Costa Rica, Cuba, and Africa, this line develops a sonic identity that draws from the African diaspora and projects itself as a cutting-edge proposal for Afro-Latin American fusion. ACHÉMÍ Afro-Latino’s compositions are centered on percussion, evoking the mystique of bodily movement and the spiritual connection with the drum, while also engaging with contemporary urban aesthetics.

“Both approaches coexist under a single purpose: to make music a tool for memory, identity, resistance, and social transformation. ACHÉMÍ is not just a group, but a platform for collective creation that champions the power of diversity as an artistic and community driving force, carrying its message to national and international stages with a powerful, authentic, and essential voice.”

During the last few years, she has been part of many different music and dance groups and schools. She has also worked as a music and dance teacher in various educational and folkloric institutions in the cities of Tumaco, Nariño, and in Bogotá, and has toured nationally and internationally, participating in festivals in Mexico, New York, Austria, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Vietnam. She has just finished a degree in Administrative Management Technology and is currently a teacher at a kindergarten called El Mundo de los Oroxás in Bogotá.

I have had the privilege of playing both cumbia and batá with María Pacífico, and in my opinion, she embodies both the accumulation and dissemination of knowledge from many Caribbean drumming traditions, and her work shows that she applies this knowledge in the creation of new forms, in order to keep



these traditional rhythms alive and relevant. She is also a great storyteller.

ACHEMÍ “El Yerberito”



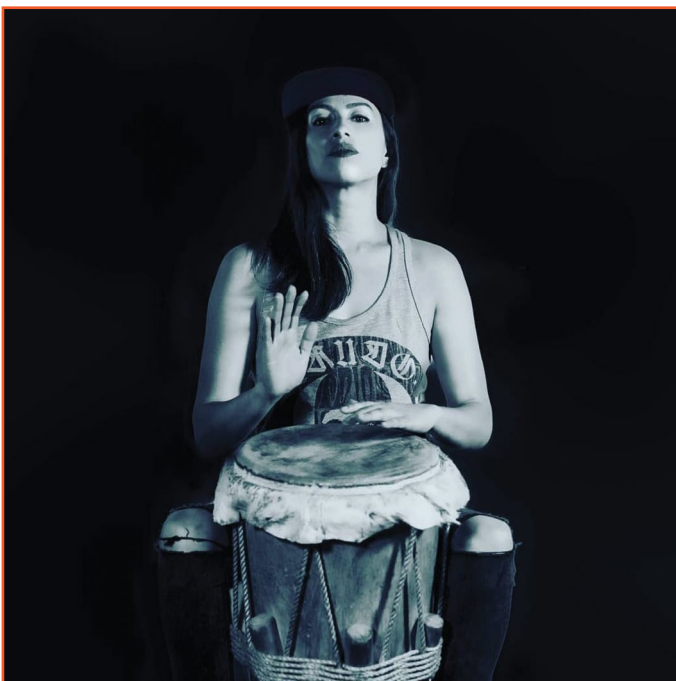
### Rocío Medina

Rocío Medina (María del Rocío Medina) has been a percussionist for 20 years, and her career has been deeply influenced by traditional Colombian music, bullerengue, tambora, currulao, salsa, jazz improvisation, and experimental music. Throughout these years, she has focused on researching the memories and sonic heritage of the African diaspora, a universe that has guided much of her artistic exploration.

“Drums have been my voice,” she says. “Through them, I have been able to express my inner world and build creative bridges with different communities, with nature, and with diverse artistic expressions.

“For the past five years, I have been developing my solo project, based on the exploration of traditional music and world sounds through live looping. I integrate jungle and aquatic soundscapes with urban and digital elements, creating a dialogue between the ancestral and the contemporary. This project was born with the intention of highlighting the role of women who not only play instruments but also compose and sing.”

Rocío Medina



Her musical style has been deeply influenced by Caribbean sounds, electronic and experimental music, and her experience as a symphonic percussionist. Her classical conservatory training has left a significant mark on how she listens, performs, and creates, and today she seeks to articulate that journey through her roots in traditional Afro-Colombian music.

Her aesthetic is guided by the search for freedom, community, and cultural belonging that Afro-Colombian music embodies. And, as an independent female artist, she also recognizes that the challenges of balancing a creative life with a professional life is a constant struggle, because sustaining an independent artistic project means navigating spaces and industries that are not always open to women. Music made by women remains an act of resistance and persistence, and her vision for the future is to continue creating from that strength, keeping her voice and sonic explorations alive.

Medina writes, “From there arises my commitment to community justice. Much of the music I perform and in which I have trained belongs to historically excluded and vulnerable communities. This music is imbued with memory, struggle, and resistance, and playing it demands profound sensitivity and a conscious respect for the territories and histories it represents. For me, performing it is a way to honor those voices, support their struggles, and contribute to keeping their cultural heritage alive.”

Rocío Medina: “Rayo de Sol”



### CONCLUSION

There are many more women drummers active now, as well as earlier musicians, who have laid the foundations for today’s players. I could not include more of them for various reasons, but here are a few names for those who want to do further research: Daniela Serna, Bertha Quintero, Anyul Arévalo, and Milenia Blanco. There are many more. You can search for them on YouTube and Facebook, and they are worth the effort.

Also, this article contains the names of musical genres and percussion instruments that may be unfamiliar to many, so it can serve as an introduction to the field for those who wish to know more, but there is simply too much information about the music, its history, and the artists who play it than can be included here. Use it as a point of departure on a long, but fascinating journey through this music and the people who play it.

In closing, I must also mention that there are many male drummers and other musicians (as you can see from the videos) who

are involved in the New Cumbia as well. They are as committed to the development and future of the cumbia, and to the sense of cultural commitment and social consciousness that drives it, as their female counterparts are, but that is a story for another article.

My own journey down the cumbia rabbit hole started after the end of the COVID lock-down. Musicians from all over the world were reaching out, looking for support, ideas, and an alternative sense of community. I was obsessively watching YouTube, and when I found musicians whose work resonated with me, I reached out to them. I came to cumbia through the videos of the great Totó La Momposina, and that led me to La Perla. I contacted Roberta Leono, and we set up last year's cumbia program in Bogotá. This year's program continued its development, growing to include other Colombian musicians, as well as a cultural track for non-musicians who want to know more about the country today. We will continue to expand the program's scope beyond Bogotá by developing new musical trips to more Colombian destinations, so if anyone is interested in these programs, or has more questions about the music and musicians, please feel free to contact me at [dskoog@mac.com](mailto:dskoog@mac.com).

*While the artist quotes in this article are from interviews and personal correspondence with me, the translations (and errors) are mine alone.*

## FURTHER READING

To the best of my knowledge there are no books devoted to Colombian women drummers — yet. While we are waiting, here are some other, less well-known resources that will serve as guides to the larger field, with context about the musicians, artistic movements, and social history of the country. There are also many articles in English online, but in my opinion, most are basic, outdated, or inaccurate. Read with caution.

Estrada Ramírez, Hortensia. *Tradición Oral del Sur del Tolima; Sabedores Indígenas Pijao del Sur del Tolima*. Consejo Regional Indígena del Tolima. This volume is a treasury of information on the music and folklore of Colombia. 2020.

Fernández L'Hoeste, Héctor, and Pablo Vila. Ed. *Cumbia! Scenes of a Migrant Latin American Music Genre*. Duke University Press. Durham. 2013.

Monsalve Buriticá, Jaime Andrés. *En Surcos de Colores; Una Historia de la Música Colombiana en 150 Discos*. Rey Naranjo Editores. Colombia. 2024. This is a fine introduction to the musicians of Colombia, both folkloric and popular, and to their recordings.

Salgado Jiménez, María José. *Cancionero poético-musical de Urabá-Chocó de fray Severino de Santa Teresa (O.C.D) 1930-1939, juegos y alabados para velorio de angelito*. Master's thesis. Universidad Nacional de Colombia. 2017. This paper has a wealth of information for scholars looking to learn more about Afro-Colombian history and tradition.

Triana, Gloria. *Memoria Popular; Un Reconocimiento a las Culturas Populares Colombianas*. Bogotá. Editorial Planeta Colombiana. 2022. This autobiography of the anthropologist contains detailed information and context for both the history and traditions of Colombian folkloric music.

Wade, Peter. *Música, Raza y Nación; Música Tropical en Colombia*. 2nd edition. Bogotá. Tandem Coediciones. 2023. This classic is the introduction to Colombian culture, anthropology, and history as seen through the lens of its traditional music. Also, published in English as *Music, Race and Nation*. 2000. Chicago. The University of Chicago Press.

**Don Skoog** is an independent composer, writer, speaker, percussionist, and multimedia artist who performs on Latin-American and Arabic percussion instruments, marimba, vibraphone, drumset, and flamenco cajón. He is Executive Director of The Dickinson Ensemble, a chamber group that creates and performs music based on the poetry of Emily Dickinson. His compositions include *Emily Sings*, a chamber suite for soprano, flute, cello, and piano; three of his marimba trio works, "Attendance to Ritual," "Art Song," and "Mozambique" have been republished in 2023 by Mostly Marimba, Inc.; "La Cantilena de las Luces" for percussion ensemble, published by CMP Press; and his composition "Water and Fire" for solo marimba, also published by Mostly Marimba, Inc.

He has written books and magazine articles in English and Arabic, authoring *Batá Drumming; The Instruments, the Rhythms, and the People Who Play Them*, published by CMP Press. He has given talks, demonstrations, and clinics at many colleges and universities, as well as hundreds of presentations in grade schools and high schools through Classical Music Chicago, and has led many library shows on jazz, flamenco, Latin, and Arabic music. He was lead artist for the Gallery 37 Latin Big Band from 1993 to 2002. He has taught percussion at the American Conservatory of Music, Sherwood Music School, and the Contemporary Music Project, which he founded in 1982, and has conducted many educational tours to Cuba, Puerto Rico, Morocco, Mexico, and Colombia. **PN**