

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Cesar

Stories from the Heart of Colombia
A podcast by Procolombia

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Hello, and welcome to Stories from the Heart of Colombia, a podcast by Procolombia.

I'm Nick Perkins and I've been living in Colombia since 1999.

I love cycling, hiking and traveling to unusual places. For a long time, I'd been dreaming of visiting every Department in Colombia on one round trip, but I hadn't been able to do it until this year, when I was finally able to plan the trip of my dreams. A trip that would take me to each of Colombia's 32 Departments, plus its capital, Bogotá, to spend a day or two, exploring the magical geographies, witnessing their immense biodiversity and soaking up the majestic vistas, all while enveloping myself in the warmth of their peoples.

In each episode of the podcast, I explore emblematic places in one Department. On my journey, I learn about the customs and cultures of the people I meet, and I record a travel diary of their experiences, stories and legends. The diary becomes an intimate and very personal record of the flavors, colors and sounds I discover in this land of infinite horizons.

Colombia has something for everyone.

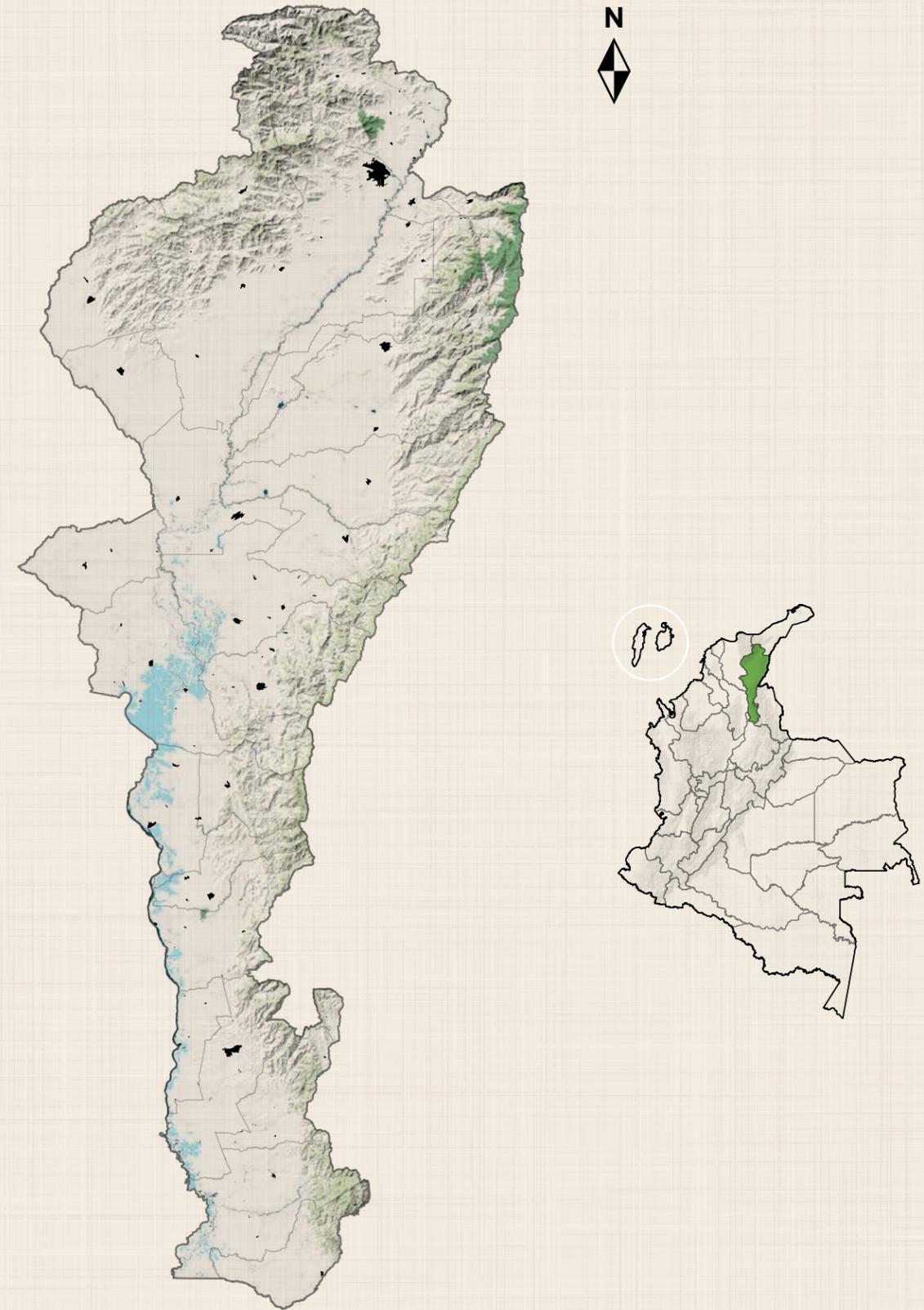
Join me on this unprecedented, sonic journey around one of the most diverse and fascinating countries on earth.

I'm Nick Perkins, and this is Stories from the Heart of Colombia.

Cesar

In this episode of Stories from the Heart of Colombia I find myself in Valledupar, in the Department of Cesar, in northern Colombia. Cesar is considered a Colombian coastal Department, although it's not actually on the coast; it's on the river. And I had the privilege of being with Beto Murga. Beto has been working in and around Vallenato and especially focused on the history of the accordion, which is the

central element of the musical style today known as Vallenato. Beto runs the accordion Museum here in Valledupar, and he's kindly agreed to be with me today.



Beto Murga: Yo nací en Villanueva, La Guajira, que hoy se conoce como Cuna de Acordeones.

So Beto is telling me that he was born in a place called Villanueva, in La Guajira. He moved in to Valledupar in 1972 and he's always been interested in music. He's a composer. He's a composer of a number of Vallenato songs. In fact, he sang one of them to us.

Beto Murga: Se me ocurre a mí comprarle a mi hijo Beto un acordeón cuando él tenía 5 años. Un acordeón de dos hileras.

And, his interest in the accordion really began with his son, who shares his name; he's also called Beto. He bought his son a small accordion, he says, it's a small two-road accordion. The problem was that his son, who was then about five years old, he says, looked at the accordion and he said "dad, what is this?" Because by then the typical accordion being used in Vallenato music was a larger accordion, a three-row accordion. And so his son looked at this little accordion and he says "dad, what is that? Doesn't look like the one I'm seeing on the covers of my favorite records", and he just sort of left it in the corner to gather dust. Until one day turns out one of Beto's neighbors was Emiliano Zuleta, who is one of Vallenato's most famous and most successful protagonists, comes around to Beto's house and he sees this little accordion and he says "Beto, what's that accordion doing here?" And Beto says "I bought it for my son years ago but, you know, he never wanted to play;



he says it doesn't look like the accordions you guys play." Then Emiliano Zuleta, one of Vallenato's greatest stars, picks up the accordion and said "if only your son knew my song 'La Gota Fría'" -which is one of the most emblematic songs of all Vallenato music-, he says "if only your son knew I composed 'La Gota Fría' on an accordion just like this." And he picks it up and he starts to play. What a fantastic story, Beto.

—¡Qué historia tan fantástica!

Beto Murga: El instrumento definitivamente nos llega por donde hubo puerto. Pero, ya hoy tenemos unos conceptos oficiales...

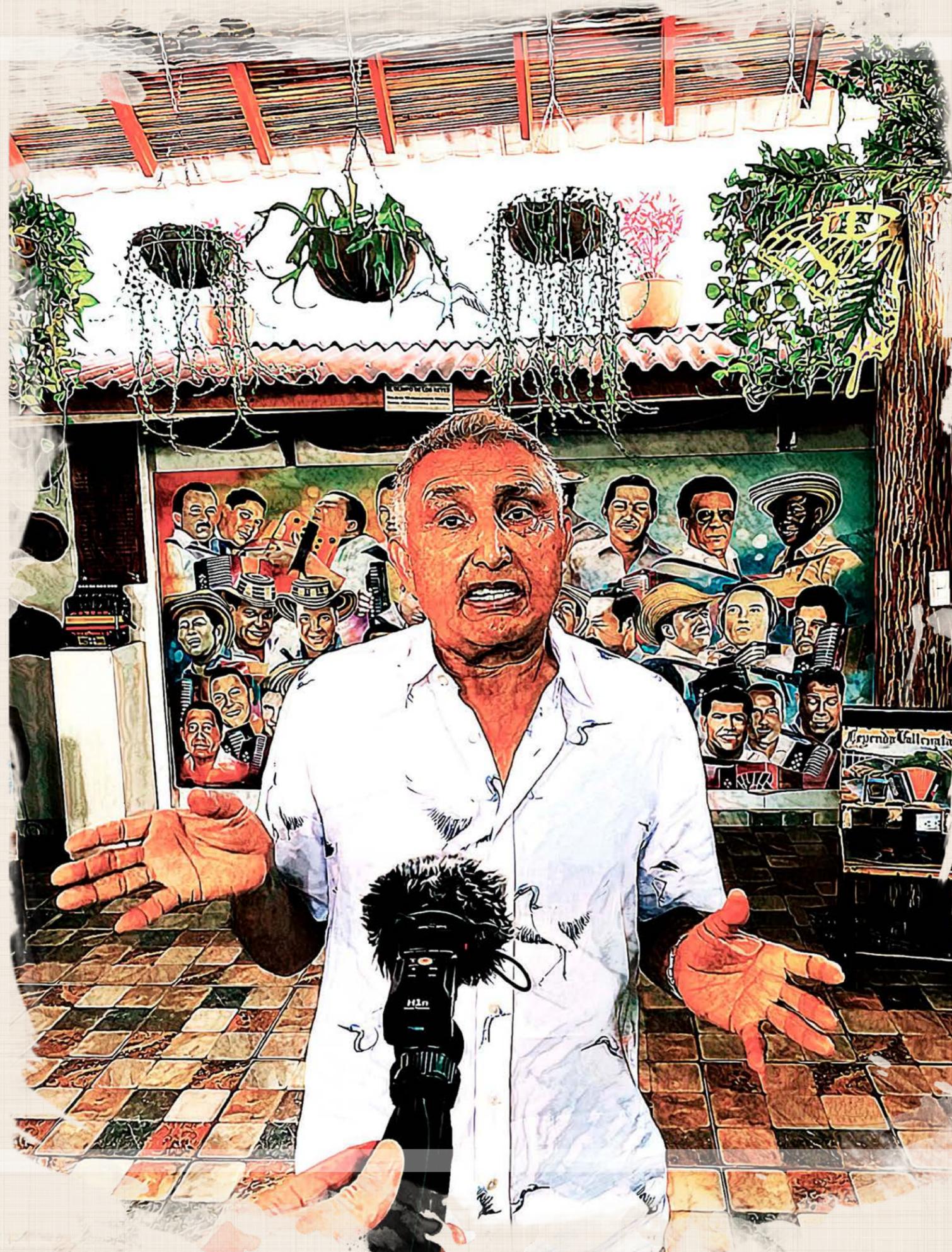
So, I asked Beto, obviously, a curiosity that many of us have, which is how this sort of Central European instrument came to be so popular in this part of Colombia. And I think the story of exactly why and how it arrived is kind of lost in time, but there've been a number of studies done recently into old import records that have been done by the local tax office. Actually, you've got access to all of the old records, and there are a number of records of importations in the middle of the nineteenth century that talk about a certain number of kilograms of accordions having been imported to Colombia. These records from La Guajira, from Barranquilla and from Cartagena, have a certain number of kilograms and Beto has done his own investigations; he's weighed a number of his' and he's got an average weight of about 3kg per accordion, so he's worked out that these records are referring to importations of between three and eleven



accordions. We don't know who purchased them, we don't know where they ended up, but we do know that accordions were being imported to Colombia legally, declared on customs declarations in the middle of the nineteenth century. And he says that at first the accordion wasn't an instrument that was particularly popular. It was an instrument which was used mainly by country farmers. It was very much stigmatized by the urban elites. So, the use of the accordion was very much from country farmers, from people very much in the working classes of Colombia. And gradually its sounds became, because of its broad similarity in sound to some of the traditional Colombian instruments, there were fusions and incorporations began. Beto mentions especially the gaita, which is a form of ancient indigenous instrument relatively similar in appearance and roughly similar in sound to an oboe.

Beto Murga: Inicialmente, y a finales del siglo XIX, aparecieron muchos protagonistas del acordeón, pero se tocaba cualquier clase de música; inclusive, música europea con el acordeón primero.

When I asked Beto for really how this usage of the accordion became what today is known as Vallenato, the first person he mentioned was a figure called “Francisco El Hombre,” who was a famous accordion player, who was one of the troubadours, one of the ‘Juglares’, as they call them here, going from town to town playing his accordion. As well as that, what we have is people like Francisco El Hombre, and other accordion players – he includes himself as well. They have this, he said it’s a chip, I guess because of the *mestizaje*, the mix of indigenous peoples, immigrants, the original slaves coming over from Africa, people began to mix and the genetic lineage began to mix. And he said “he had like a chip and it was just natural to us to progress from the sound of the gaita to the sound that the accordion makes, and to incorporate into the accordion playing the musical patterns of the gaita.” And this gradually started to come together, but he said it’s important to remember that the first accordion players, the first troubadours were not playing anything like today’s Vallenato, he said they were playing traditional European music: Polkas and so, on their accordions as they went from village to village. But what really brought things together, what really consolidated the style, was the introduction into Colombia of phonographic recording technology in the 1930s, which basically brought people into studios to begin recording their music in a re-playable format, and then it was, he didn’t use the word, but I guess in a way formalized into a certain style. And we’re gonna move on now to the Festival del Vallenato and to get to that point of talking



about the festival he mentioned that in the sixties, we now have the situation where there are popular musicians, there’s a style which is consolidated, which is recognizable, and very specific to this region. And a number of people, including one of Colombia’s most well-known presidents, López Michelsen, in 1968 came together and they decided to bring together all of the popular musicians of the time in a celebration, he says, of our music, and that was 1968, the first Vallenato Festival, and we’re about to reach the 54th Vallenato Festival.

Beto Murga: Teníamos un mar de acordeoneros en esta región, en todos los pueblos había músicos, y bueno, ya con el tiempo ya ven ustedes lo que hoy es la música, cómo ha trascendido, ¿no?

And he said, a really important thing to remember is that the Festival does keep its popular roots, its street roots, and it’s very important to the organizers of the Festival and people like Beto and his friends and colleagues to maintain that characteristic, because Vallenato came up from the streets. As he explained to us, earlier Vallenato, the accordion, the central element of Vallenato music, was first played by country farmers, by working class people, and it’s very, very important to Beto and his colleagues that the Festival itself maintains its working-class popular roots because –he said– if it doesn’t, we’ll lose our traditions.

So, after a fascinating morning talking to Beto about the history of the accordion in this part of the world, the history of Vallenato, the way that the music and the accordion itself is a reflection of some of the ancient indigenous sounds and instruments from this region, as well as talking about the significance of the Vallenato Festival, I'm waiting now for Hugo Granados, the illustrious Hugo Granados, five times winner of the 'Rey del Vallenato' title. He was Rey Infantil, so, 'The Young King'; he was 'Rey Aficionado', 'Amateur King'; 'Rey de Reyes Aficionados', so he was 'The King of Kings' in the amateur section; and then he became 'Rey del Vallenato', 'The King of Vallenato' in 1999 and in 2007 he was crowned 'King of Kings'. I'm really looking forward to meeting Hugo and talking to him about his journey through Vallenato, what it means to him, how it's changed his life.

Hugo Granados: Somos una dinastía en la cual podemos hablar de 100 años de historia de música, y...

So I asked Hugo how his journey with the accordion began. He said "the accordion came to me." His dad was an accordion player, his dad actually also taught accordion and repaired accordions, so he said there were always accordions all over the house. And in fact his father won second place in the first Vallenato Festival, where -as Beto was telling me this morning- Alejo Durán won first place. So, his dad was a very respected, very talented accordion player. But he said he didn't make him play the accordion, there were just accordions all over the house. And it wasn't until one day that he started to look at the accordion and he was taking an interest in the accordion, and he was walking around and he said that he just kept on looking at it. And then his dad said: "Okay, now, Hugo is taking an interest in the accordion." Hugo





says that the accordion took an interest in him and his dad said "Ok, son, it's time!" He was 5 years old, his dad put the accordion on his lap and he said "Play!" And he said it was a very organic process: he would just pick up the accordion and start just pulling it apart and pushing it together to just make the sounds that it made without being played, and gradually he began to learn how to play it more effectively. And he said he would just sit in his dad's studio, his dad would be fixing the accordions on one side and he would be playing them on the other side.

Hugo Granados: El visitante viene a ver nuestra música vallenata porque la quiere, porque la vive, porque la siente, y eso es lo que hay que mostrarle.

So I asked Hugo just to explain to us a little bit about what one will find coming to the Festival de Vallenato, and especially the difference between the formal side of the Festival, the sort of paid-tickets side of the Festival, and the more informal side of people just having fun in the way in which Vallenato grew from the streets. And he said "Yeah, you'll find everything. I mean, obviously, if you go to the Parque de la Leyenda Vallenata" which is the stadium where the King and King of Kings competition is held, "Yeah, you buy a ticket, you go in, you sit down, it's very regimented and it's a much more formalized version of the Festival," he said. But there's also... he has a charity with his wife and sons, and they have a private event for about four hundred people in the Festival where people can come and meet Kings, and Kings of Kings and take

selfies with them and all sorts of other things that generate funds for his charity. But he said, "you just walk around the streets; you'll find people." They call them 'parrandas'. It's like an informal party, like a gathering I guess and, he said, "you'll find parrandas all over the place. You'll find a troubadour amid a parranda in his house and you'll just like wander in and there'll be a troubadour." And, he said, "you might even find a King of Vallenato there" and I think that's also something really important to understand about Vallenato and the *vallenateros*, the artists. It's generally a very down-to-earth style of music. The artists, you'll find them out in the streets, they'll be literally out in the streets with you at the Vallenato Festival and he said there's all sorts of activities, there's all sorts of levels of activities. So you can either buy yourself a ticket and just go to the formal events, or you can just wander the streets of Valledupar and you will find parties everywhere, you'll find different interpretations of all of the different styles of Vallenato. You will also find the troubadours, he said, you'll find storytellers and, also interestingly, recently it's become more of an explosion of cultures, so he said you'll also find all sorts of other styles of music occurring in and around the time of the Vallenato Festival. So, definitely, definitely something to put in your calendar; definitely worth coming to Cesar, with the excuse of going to the Vallenato Festival and to get to know this very interesting part of Colombia.

Hugo Granados: Qué privilegio tan inmenso oír esa canción tocada así delante mío en un concierto privado...



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