

Blood

Eblis Álvarez (centre) with Meridian Brothers in Bogotá, July 2017



Relatives

Rural styles of vallenato and salsa get rebooted in the music of Eblis Álvarez's

Meridian Brothers

whose sarcastic, surreal lyrics seek to overturn the hierarchies of Colombian music. By **Russ Slater**.
Photography by **Mateo Gomez Garcia**

In 2011 Meridian Brothers were invited to perform at Jazz Al Parque in Colombia's capital city Bogotá. Due to its name, the festival – as well as siblings like Rock Al Parque and Hip Hop Al Parque – always generates plenty of debate. What is jazz? What is rock? In the case of Meridian Brothers, a small cache of purists raged against them on social media. How could their abstract take on Colombian folk rhythms possibly be deemed pure enough for the jazz canon?

The group responded by writing “El Jazz Del Chupasangres” (“Bloodsucker’s Jazz”). Imitating a 1950s jazz trio, with an additional B movie horror guitar riff and a keyboard line that chatters gloriously throughout, the song goes, “*Vengo, vengo, chupar la sangre del pueblo*” (“*I come, I come, to drink the blood of the people*”). The word pueblo significantly means the masses or working class. In Colombia, the institutions always favoured jazz and classical over folk and popular music, seeing the latter as impure, untranscribable and ultimately inferior.

That hegemony and the need to overcome it is at the heart of the music of Eblis Álvarez, the Colombian musician who embodies Meridian Brothers, their live incarnation notwithstanding. With similar genre-warping projects like Los Pirañas, Chupame El Dedo and Frente Cumbiero, Álvarez is at the heart of a music scene in Bogotá which is finally addressing the notion of the country's musical identity. In his essay about Colombian music, “Between Folklore And Ethnomusicology”, Carlos Miñana Blasco noted: “Professional musicians with formed schooling have shown relatively little interest regarding folk and vernacular music and research.” That's something Álvarez and his cohorts are seeking to put right.

For urban Colombians like Álvarez growing up in the 1990s, tropical music (a catch-all term for danceable music popular on the country's Caribbean coast, such as cumbia, porro and salsa) was out of fashion, reserved for Christmas parties and ageing festivals. “At this time in Bogotá society there was a lot of prejudice, a lot of classicism,” he remembers. “I was really ashamed of my costeño [coastal] father, from the Caribbean, listening to vallenato.” Though originally from the Caribbean coast, vallenato took over Colombia's airwaves in the 90s, growing ever more commercialised and sentimental in the process. It even became the favoured music of the narcotraficantes (drug dealers).

Vallenato represented everything students back then rebelled against. Their music was rock – Guns N' Roses, Rage Against The Machine, The Clash. “British music was the cool one,” notes Álvarez. With little access to traditional Colombian music, he and his friends followed this path in their teens, forming bands influenced by rock en español, British prog and punk (especially the Medellín punk scene immortalised in the film *Rodrigo D: No Futuro*).

But after Álvarez enrolled at the Javeriana University to study music, focusing on classical guitar, tropical music and vallenato became the perfect platform for a new project. Javier Morales was the first to moot the idea. He had already collaborated with Álvarez in Duo Latin Lover, a brief home recording project dedicated to tropical music pastiches. When he saw the university was offering concert space for new groups he put forth the idea of a vallenato ensemble. “The main appeal was the humour in it

and the fact that this music was rejected among our friends,” recalls Álvarez. Mario Galeano, who joined them on bass, adds: “We used to live very far away from the university and we always had to take a one hour ride in the morning, and then a one hour ride in the afternoon... the kind of vallenato that you heard on public buses was a very cheesy 90s type that was the origins of vallenato romántico, so we decided to do our take on that cliché sound, of this mainstream sound on the radio, and do our own noisy, atonal version.”

With Álvarez on electric guitar and vocals, Morales on accordion, María Angélica Valencia on saxophone and Galeano on bass, plus various percussionists, Ensamble Polifónico De Vallenato (Polyphonic Vallenato Ensemble) played their first concert in 1999. After a handful of shows at the university – where barely any of their jazz and classical snob lecturers supported them – the group became more and more interested in Colombia's musical history. “We began to see an identity in it,” declares Álvarez. “At this time most Colombian artists had a lack of identity or self-assurance. The artists were looking outside, looking abroad, to external movements like house music, electronic music, jazz, the New York scene, the Berlin scene, the London scene, but nobody was thinking that something was happening in Bogotá or Medellín or Barranquilla. We realised that we had some sources and material that could give us an identity.”

Ensamble Polifónico De Vallenato morphed into Sexteto La Constelación De Colombia (Colombian Constellation Sextet) as the members outgrew the vallenato concept, with Álvarez switching to drums. They also introduced more traditional instruments such as gaitas and caña de millo – flutes used in traditional countryside campesino cumbia repertoires. The two groups only ever played around a dozen shows and didn't release any material – though some recordings were belatedly released in 2014 – but they made a ripple that turned into a wave.

Initially, many of the members took leave in order to pursue their musical education – for instance, Álvarez headed to Copenhagen and Galeano to Rotterdam. “Everyone wanted to leave the country in a way,” recalls Álvarez. “It was the ideology of the time, leave the country and go to another place, there's nothing to do here. This mentality of our generation – not any more is it like that, fortunately.”

Around this time, Meridian Brothers began as a studio project allowing Álvarez to experiment with techniques and instrumentation. His early recordings used simple cassette-to-cassette dubbing of himself playing guitar, cello, clarinet, toy keyboards and various other instruments. Needing a name for the project, he settled on Meridian Brothers, partly inspired by the Meridian Hotel where he played in a classical guitar quartet, and partly by tropical music combos like The Lebron Brothers and Latin Brothers. “I didn't think that this project would have a public image,” he reflects now. “I thought it was just something I would give to my friends... [The name] was a thing of one second.”

The first official Meridian Brothers album *El Advenimiento Del Castillo Mujer* (*The Advent Of The Castle Woman*), arrived in 2006, while Álvarez was still in Denmark studying classical and electronic music. It featured many elements that would be deemed characteristically Meridian Brothers on

future releases: staccato phrasing, dry treatment of instrumentation, and Álvarez's enquiring vocals, whose sarcastic, surreal lyrics were inspired by those written by Morales in their earlier groups.

The most distinctive stylistic trait of Meridian Brothers is their use of heterogeneous sounds in multilayered compositions that are dense in detail even as they feel fragile, like a domino circuit where no one knows the end. All of these characteristics can be heard on the track "Canción De Invierno" from their debut. Featuring a danceable cumbia rhythm, the track sees Álvarez sneer "Feliz navidad" ("Merry christmas") to "los banqueros, ministros, alcaldes, rateros" ("the bankers, ministers, mayors, thieves") as clarinet and guitar create the carnivalesque polyrhythm that gives the song its push and pull. You can never truly nail where one passage ends and another begins; the use of overlapping rhythms and changes in time signature are a constant motif for Álvarez. The song's interrupted by sour applause and cartoonish vocal whoops as it builds to a coda where Álvarez evokes a mock sense of Colombian pride: "Tenemos pescado frito, camarones con limón, tenemos mujeres exóticas, música y diversión" ("We have fried fish, shrimp with lemon, we have exotic women, music and fun"). No doubt writing it in Denmark helped the song become one of his most detached and unsettling portraits of his Colombia home.

Álvarez collaborated with the Danish trio Sonora3 on two albums before he returned to Bogotá in 2008, where he discovered that the music scene had transformed. María Angélica Valencia and Javier Morales had remained in the city after the dissolution of Sexteto and become involved with La Distritofónica, a new musical collective set up by Alejandro Forero, who, along with Valencia, later became one of the live members of Meridian Brothers.

Inspired by New York City's Bang On A Can, Forero says he set up La Distritofónica in 2004 as "a space that would allow us to collect and share the musical work we were doing". In many ways La Distritofónica – who went on to release all the early Meridian Brothers albums – carried on the work of Ensamble and Sexteto. Forero certainly sees this in the way those groups addressed "the fusion of traditional and popular music" with an attitude "far from being purists or searching for a 'correct' academic way to mix these styles with new musical languages". La Distritofónica has since evolved into a record label and festival, whose line-up has included Marc Ribot, John Medeski and Metá-Metá. The label has released work by Curupira, another important group of musicians researching Colombian music, alongside releases fusing free jazz with traditional rhythms and instrumentation.

"Everyone was set up," says Álvarez of his return home. "There was a scene, there were concerts, there was a lot of stuff happening". Back in Bogotá he was joined by Galeano. The latter had returned from Holland invigorated by developments in electronic cumbia. Dick El Demasiado's Festicumex festivals in Honduras, Argentina and Eindhoven, the last of which Galeano had performed at, provided the launchpad for the cumbia digital movement that began in Buenos Aires in the early 2000s. Another returnee was Pedro Ojeda, who had left Bogotá before the formations of Ensamble and Sexteto, spending time in

Toronto and Havana, where he studied Cuban music. Their respective experiences, travels and musical educations fed into each other as the Colombians began to gain notice for their varied projects.

Meridian Brothers released *Este Es El Corcel Heroico Que Nos Salvará De La Hambruna Y Corrupción* (*This Is The Heroic Steed Who Will Save Us From Famine And Corruption*) in 2009 and *VII* in 2011 – both of which built on the work of their debut, with postmodern tales of Colombian folklore fortified by rhythmic and stylistic experimentations. Their first international release was 2012's *Desesperanza*.

"I got engaged with pure salsa, as almost an object, like Andy Warhol with Marilyn Monroe or Marcel Duchamp, *Mona Lisa* with a moustache," declares Álvarez. *Desesperanza* was inspired by the melodies of African salsa and the recording techniques of salsa in Cali, Colombia, which often sped up the music to get people dancing and sometimes increase the vocal pitch. Lyrically, the images of salsa gods and happy vultures, along with the act of listing his favourite types of Colombian women, all rounded out this concept. It might have deviated from salsa on some tracks, but it offered a danceable sound akin to the tropical music he had been researching, and some songs even attracted the attention of global DJs.

The success of *Desesperanza* coincided with several of Álvarez's projects gaining international exposure. Álvarez featured on two albums with Galeano, who had been working on his Frente Cumbiero project since returning to Bogotá, utilising computer technology alongside varied instrumentation to offer a modern take on the costeño brass bands of the 1960s and 70s, and the traditional campesino cumbia of Andrés Landero. The sound was captured on their 2010 debut *Frente Cumbiero Meets Mad Professor*, which featured dub versions of the tracks by Mad Professor alongside the originals. In 2012 Galeano joined forces with British producer Will 'Quantic' Holland to record an album of tropical music in the legendary Discos Fuentes studio with some of the original purveyors of the style. The result was *Ondatrópica*, which captured both the sound of the Caribbean coast and Afro-Colombian styles from the Pacific coast, along with touches of dub, hip-hop and ska.

It's easy to forget when listening to the dense constructions of Meridian Brothers that Álvarez's foremost instrument is guitar. It's a tool he fell out of love with for a number of years, citing "a lack of inspiration (and heroes)", but rediscovered it in Denmark when he began using patches and programs to alter the sound of the instrument, treating it more like a prepared piano. Upon returning to Colombia he combined his classical background and knowledge of tropical music with the techniques and software he'd been using to create the effects-heavy sound (Álvarez claims there to be around 30 software and hardware effects used on his guitar) heard on the *Frente Cumbiero* and *Ondatrópica* albums. His guitar style is often described as psychedelic, but he sees this comparison as little more than a coincidence. For him, his approach is abstract, technical, inspired by "old polkas, classical guitar 'riffs', renaissance and baroque music and Peruvian chicha", though he does admit that his research into signal processing and fondness for polyrhythms may be the reasons for this psychedelic categorisation. The most animated home

for his guitar sound is Los Pirañas, an improvisational instrumental trio with Ojeda on drums and Galeano on bass. With two albums that position the group's sound between Konono #1, the hyperactive end of Peruvian cumbia and The Nels Cline Singers, the group reveal the members at their most elemental, with Galeano's love of 1960s and 70s cumbia, garage and psych, Ojeda's knowledge of Latin rhythms and Álvarez's highly processed sound all coming to the fore.

As for Meridian Brothers, Álvarez continued creating his own personal musical universes on *Salvadora Robot* and then *Los Suicidas*. While the former saw him return to the more kaleidoscopic approach of his earlier albums, *Los Suicidas* was another concept, this time focused on largely instrumental ambient organ music. For Álvarez, it was his finest work, though the critical and public response was muted. "I love that album," he insists. "For me it's the best thing that I have done. But reality is not the same as the fantasies that one can create in one's head."

Meridian Brothers' new album *¿Dónde Estás María?* reverts to a trusted formula of eclecticism in style and continuity in approach. While Álvarez has shown an inclination for changing rhythms from song to song, all of his albums have had a uniformity in methodology and instrumentation. On *¿Dónde Estás María?*, this approach became even stricter with the creation of a 'fictional ensemble' featuring just two keyboard sounds, fuzz guitar, bass, drums, vocals and, for the first time, cello. The instrument was brought in to ape the string sounds of 1970s Brazil and help create a sense of melancholia that he felt when listening to recent records he had acquired there. "[In Brazil] you hear a lot of drums, a lot of power in the percussion, but sometimes a very melancholic feeling," he explains. "We don't really have this with Caribbean music nowadays." At times he sought to create a string section by playing the cello so high to get a violin sound that he often got calluses on his fingers. The refrains of Peruvian huayno also added to the music's melancholy feeling, inspiring the vocal melodies as it had done in Peruvian cumbia of the 1970s and 80s.

The key to all Álvarez's projects has been in creating a fantasy of Colombian culture, taking tropical music out of the margins and recasting it in the centre, while reaching out to underground scenes in major cities across Europe and the Americas for inspiration, fortification and exposure. Lyrically and in its use of the cumbia rhythm, *¿Dónde Estás María?* takes root in Colombia, but the technical and structural innovations of Meridian Brothers, as well as their broad influences, have helped tropical music reach a wider audience. The global attention has proved vital in changing what Álvarez calls Colombia's "self-confidence problem".

Through all of the projects above, as well as others like Romperayo (Ojeda's studio project with Álvarez sometimes playing keyboards in its live incarnation) and Chupame El Dedo (a 'tropical metal' duo created by Álvarez and Ojeda for a commission in Berlin), Álvarez and company have become the link between contemporary and folk music that Colombia needed, and broken the Bogotá music scene's focus on rock and the institutional predilection for jazz and classical. Thanks to Meridian Brothers and associates, tropical music is not just for Christmas. □ Meridian Brothers' *¿Dónde Estás María?* is released by Soundway. The group tour Europe in September: see Out There

