

Los Angeles Times

The Colombian star reignites his affair with the city that launched his career.



Photo Lori Shepler – Los Angeles Times

Over the past eight years, Los Angeles has witnessed firsthand the evolution of Colombian singer/songwriter Juanes, from down-and-out, anonymous wannabe to idolized international superstar and ambassador for peace in his native country. This week, the city that gave him his big break welcomed him back in a big way, with a four-night engagement at Nokia Theatre.

The handsome and charismatic performer expressed an aw-shucks amazement at the capacity crowd that enthusiastically greeted his opening night Wednesday. "I close my eyes and I can't believe it," he told his fans in Spanish. "Les amo (I love you)."

The singer, who has resisted industry pressures to record in English (except for a duet with Tony Bennett), also acknowledged non-Latino fans who like his music though they might not understand the lyrics. But they were hard to spot in the overwhelmingly Latino audience of mostly twenty- and thirtysomethings. Unlike fellow Colombian Shakira, who doggedly pursued a crossover career, Juanes has remained predominantly monolingual and proudly pro-Colombian.

Since his gripping 2000 debut album, "Fijate Bien" (Watch Your Step), Juanes has balanced melodic pop hits with songs exploring the human toll of narco-political violence that almost destroyed Colombian society in the 1980s, during his adolescence in Medellin. Now 35, Juanes has been dubbed the Bono of Latin America for his activism. He performed at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremonies in December; in March, he led an all-star lineup in a concert hailed as an Ibero-American Woodstock that drew 100,000 fans to a bridge at the border between Colombia and Venezuela, a recent flash point in the region's ongoing guerrilla war.

The singer brought his heartfelt peace message to Los Angeles with "Bandera de Manos" (Flag of Hands), a call for racial and social harmony, and the moving "Minas Piedras" (Rock Mines), accompanied by projected photos of land mine victims, many still smiling despite amputated limbs.

Oddly, he thanked the audience for "allowing me to do these types of songs," as if conscience and commerce were incompatible.

The show was preceded by a video ad for Ford featuring the singer displaying the car maker's voice-activated features while stuck in traffic before a concert. The crowd thought the show was about to start, but the ad turned out to be a shameless tease, though nobody audibly objected.

Juanes has managed to retain his integrity while selling more than 10 million records and amassing 12 Latin Grammys for his four studio albums. The joyful "Me Enamora" (I Love It), his recent single, spent 20 weeks at No. 1, the second-longest run in the history of the Billboard Latin charts, next to Shakira's "La Tortura," her duet with Alejandro Sanz. Juanes might have broken the record if he hadn't knocked himself out of No. 1 with his own follow-up, the exuberant "Gotas de Agua Dulce" (Drops of Sweet Water).

Almost half the concert was composed of songs from last year's "La Vida . . . Es Un Ratico" (Life Is but a Moment), a return to form with some of the edge, bite and depth of his remarkable debut, which was strangely absent from the set. The problem on stage was the high-decibel, bottom-heavy attack of his six-piece rock band which demolished the delightful folkloric textures and sonic subtleties of his recordings.

When Spanish singer Antonio Carmona did a guest appearance on the gritty, African-influenced "Bailala," his flamenco hand-clapping and cajón-playing were barely audible.

But only newspaper critics pick at these nits. Juanes closed with fellow Colombian Joe Arroyo's salsa classic "Rebelión," about a defiant slave defending a woman from her master's beating. By then, it was obvious how much L.A. loves him too.

– Agustin Gurza – Los Angeles Times, May 9, 2008