

December 8, 2007

## Juanes breaks down borders

**The popular Colombian previews his world tour at a rare club date. Next stop: the Nobel concert.**

By Agustin Gurza, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

There was something of a carnival atmosphere outside the House of Blues in West Hollywood on Thursday night in anticipation of a rare club appearance by Juanes, the Colombian superstar who normally plays arenas and stadiums around the world. The driveway was jammed with a crush of young Latinos crowding around a tent displaying two new cars to be raffled in some promotion that featured the artist's blown-up image.

Backstage before the show, it was cozy and quiet. Juanes was slouched on a couch in a comfortable waiting room, chatting with the drummer from his superb band. No attendants, groupies or hangers-on in sight. No liquor, for that matter. The handsome 35-year-old singer-songwriter jumped up to greet a visitor with a friendly smile and abrazo, as if the intruder were the star entering the room.

That's what everybody says about Juanes. Success hasn't spoiled him. He's still natural and unassuming. Sencillo, they say, which means "simple" but connotes sincerity and modesty.

Hard to stay humble when you've been the planet's most popular Latin American male performer almost since the start of the century, breaking chart records with every new CD and breaking down borders with an international appeal extending to unexpected places, such as Germany, France and Finland. Tuesday, Juanes will perform in Oslo, Norway, as part of the Nobel Peace Prize concert, also featuring Alicia Keys, Annie Lennox and the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra. The event, co-hosted by actors Kevin Spacey and Uma Thurman, is in honor of this year's peace laureates, former Vice President Al Gore and the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Most U.S. news reports don't even mention Juanes as part of the show. But you can bet that Colombians took notice. Back home, Juanes is more than just a popular singer. He's a national symbol. He stands for the Colombia that many of his countrymen are struggling to shape, one of peace and prosperity that allows the nation's dynamic native culture to flourish.

In a recent online poll by the newspaper El Tiempo, Colombians ranked Juanes No. 2 in a list of the country's Top 10 cultural figures of the last decade. Shakira came in fourth, behind the late Rogelio Salmona, a prominent architect. The poll, published Wednesday, gave first place to Fanny Mikey, the force behind a popular biennial theater festival in Bogota.

That cultural pride was palpable at Thursday's concert, especially when Juanes acknowledged the many Colombians in the audience. It wasn't cheap flag-waving, like you see at many Latino shows. It was more just a sense that he knows who he is and is comfortable in his skin. Call it the good brand of patriotism, not the kind that is arrogant and aggressive, but the kind that's a force for good.

Rather than alienate fans from other countries, Juanes wins them over, as evidenced by the cheers from the Mexicans, Central Americans and others in the crowd. He speaks to them too because he represents what it means to be young and cool -- and successful -- in Latin America today. Being a wealthy star who remains committed to his roots makes him a hero throughout the continent.

At least since his debut solo album in 2000, Juanes has spoken out in his songs about the casualties of guerrilla war in his country. His latest tune on the topic, the beautiful and moving "Minas Piedras" (Rock Mines), was a showstopper Thursday, as Juanes put down his electric guitar and delivered the lyrics like a prayer. The song, one of two he plans to perform at the Nobel concert, evokes nature as the silent witness to warfare and evokes the suffering of innocent civilians -- a blinded old man on a bench, a child crying uncontrollably, a mother emerging from the mountains with her children and new hopes for the future.

Juanes has earned credibility on the subject by putting his money where his lyrics are and his body on the line. The 12-time Latin Grammy winner helps mine victims through his Mi Sangre (My Blood) Foundation, which last month partnered with Columbia University's Center for International Conflict Resolution in New York City to develop campaigns for nonviolence in Colombia. The center is scheduling meetings between Juanes and famous peace brokers, such as former U.S. Sen. George J. Mitchell, who helped negotiate the Good Friday accords in Northern Ireland. The hope is that the singer can bring his artistic sensibilities to bear on finding new paths to peace.

Earlier this year, more than a million Colombians took to the streets to protest political kidnappings that had led to the deaths of 11 lawmakers. Juanes was at the head of the demonstration in his native Medellin, where he has a home in addition to one in Miami.

"People identify with him because he stays grounded," says Colombian singer-songwriter Ines Gaviria, who attended the show while in L.A. to record her new record. "No matter how far he goes, Juanes will always be Colombian."

Of course, his melodic, rhythmic and uplifting music doesn't hurt. On stage, Juanes has a bit of the rock 'n' roll vigor of Bruce Springsteen, the earnest convictions of Bono and the swooning romanticism of, say, John Mayer. As a lead guitarist, Juanes is no Carlos Santana, but his solos are tasty and tailored to the song, not his ego. The Colombian has never been in better voice, thanks, he says, to vocal exercises shared by singer Tony Bennett, with whom he recorded a duet last year on "The Shadow of Your Smile," a rare venture for him into English.

The House of Blues show, opened by a talented but underrated singer-songwriter from Venezuela known as Jeremias, was sponsored by radio station KLVE-FM (107.5) and served as a preview of Juanes' official tour next year. Half of Thursday's 18-song set featured numbers from his latest album, the emotionally charged "La Vida Es . . . Un Ratico" (Life Is but a Moment), released worldwide in October. The work bristles with the turmoil of the artist's recent marital breakup and reconciliation with his wife, actress Karen Martinez, with whom he has two daughters, Luna, 4, and Paloma, 2.

But even in a song ostensibly about a relationship, such as the title track, the message can be applied to the struggles and hopes of Colombia, and all of Latin America. "Life is short," the lyrics say in Spanish. "Don't let it run out. We still have a lot left to do. The good times are coming and I need you to stay. . . . "Give me your hand, please, and don't let me fall."

*[Juanes will perform in Los Angeles as part of his La Vida World Tour, May 7 and 9, at Nokia Theatre, L.A. Live, 777 Chick Hearn Court, Los Angeles. Tickets go on sale Dec. 14. For more information, call (213) 480-3232 or go to [ticketmaster.com](http://ticketmaster.com).]*