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By Peter Margasak

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Colombia's Best-Kept Secret



**CLAUDIA NAVAS-COURBON
AND GRUPO BAHIA
Road Trip!**

photo/Nathan Mandell

While studying video at the School of the Art Institute about five years ago, Claudia Navas-Courbon stumbled on a part of her native Colombia she'd never known growing up in Bogota. Also an aspiring poet, she was looking for inspiration when she began reading obscure late-19th-century Colombian novelists like Tomas Carrasquilla and Jorge Isaacs, writers who described the mysterious beauty of the country's Pacific lowlands--a geographically isolated rain-forest region populated largely by descendants of African slaves who'd been brought in to find gold. "Those books gave me all of these images about dances, folklore, and music," she says excitedly. "I just thought it was amazing that I'd never heard about it. It's not unusual to find books about this period, but the point of view was always different. Usually the Spanish chronicles tend to be very diminishing [of native and nonwhite culture], but these authors described the richness of the culture."

Strangely, it was a summer trip to central Mexico in 1997 that solidified her interest in the Colombian coast. "It struck me that there were so many idiosyncrasies of the people in the various villages, and after being in Chicago for three years it was like rediscovering something," says Navas-Courbon, who is 25 and of Spanish descent. "I thought to myself, 'Wait a minute, I've seen this before,' and, of course, I knew it from Colombia." Upon returning to Chicago she began to plot a feature-length documentary, her first, about the African influence in the Pacific lowlands. It's currently titled "Mazamorreo: In Search of Memory/En busqueda de memoria"--*mazamorreo* is a Spanish word that means panning for gold. She's editing it now in hopes of finishing by September, and says it will be shown at next year's Chicago Latino Film Festival.

Claudia and her French-born husband, Nicolas Courbon, spent December in Colombia, doing research for several weeks in Bogota and then flying to Guapi, a predominantly black town of about 30,000 people in the lowlands. There they conducted interviews and shot footage of dancing, storytelling, and music at a festival celebrating Christmas--as in the rest of Colombia, most of the

population is Catholic. Navas-Courbon had learned a little about the region's distinctive musical traditions through a couple out-of-print recordings, but upon seeing them brought to life in Guapi, she had another brainstorm, the result of which is that she's brought the ten-piece Grupo Bahia on their first visit to the U.S.--they arrived last Wednesday. "I figured that I could make the video and screen it, but I thought it would be fantastic for people from Guapi if they could show their culture themselves," says Navas-Courbon.

The hypnotic, stuttering currulao rhythm is the heart of the music. Traditionally, chanted call-and-response vocals ride over simple melodic motifs played on marimba and propelled by several African hand drums. But Hugo Candelario Gonzalez, a Guapi native who teaches music in Cali--Colombia's second largest city, three hours from Guapi by boat--wanted a broader audience to appreciate the music he grew up with, so he formed Grupo Bahia in 1992 to embellish currulao and some of the other 80 rhythms indigenous to the region with additional instrumentation--horns, piano, and bass--and mix it with other styles. On Grupo Bahia's terrific 1998 debut album, *Con el corazon... Cerca de las raices*, which isn't distributed in the U.S. but will be sold at the band's shows here, he's given it a strong infusion of salsa--in fact, several members of the group have also played in popular Colombian salsa outfits like Grupo Niche and Guayacan. But his marimba is the defining instrument, and the rhythmic foundation is markedly different from the typical Afro-Cuban groove, employing a 6/8 time signature with the accent on the fifth beat.

"In Colombia, Cali is known as the salsa capital," says Gonzalez, with Navas-Courbon serving as interpreter. "But [salsa] is not from there. The currulao is the native music of the Pacific lowlands." Still, salsa and Colombia's more popular fusion, cumbia, are what rule the airwaves. "There's a stigma to the region," explains pianist Andres Gomez. "It's poor and many people are poorly educated there, so many Colombians don't treat it seriously."

Last Saturday Grupo Bahia played a Colombian independence-day celebration at the Chicago Marriott, and this weekend they'll play both Saturday and Sunday at the Old Town School's Chicago Folk & Roots Festival and Saturday night at HotHouse. But Navas-Courbon is most excited about a free performance Friday at 7:30 PM in Humboldt Park, which she expects to bring out many of the metropolitan area's 55,000 resident Colombians. See listings under Folk & Country and Fairs & Festivals for further information on times and locations.

Send gripes, leads, and love letters to Peter Margasak at postnobills@chicagoreader.com.



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