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Cumbia

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Cumbia is the most representative musical form of Colombia's Caribbean coastal region of *la costa* and is the most popular genre of music in Colombia and in almost all Latin American countries. In traditional *costeño* musical culture, cumbia has multiple connotations: It refers to a rhythm, musical genre, and dance. The first written reference to cumbia (or *cumbiamba*) dates to the end of the 19th century. Since then, cumbia has spread far beyond its local roots. In the process, it has undergone many changes in instrumentation and affected national and international styles in its various stylized forms. This entry examines the origin of cumbia as well as its evolution and spread over time.

The Origin of Cumbia

Cumbia has its origin in the rural communities of African descendants living along Colombia's Caribbean coast in the Magdalena River Valley between El Banco and Mompo. Originally, cumbia was an instrumental form only, played by the *conjunto de cañamillero*, while in the Sinú River Valley (where it is called *gaita*), it is played by the *conjunto de gaitas*. These two traditional ensembles combine a *caña de millo* (millet-cane transverse clarinet) or two *gaitas* (vertical duct flutes of different sizes) as melodic instruments and a rhythmic section composed of three drums (*tambor alegre*, *llamador*, and *tambora*) and shakers (*maracas*). Rhythmically, cumbia is in double meter (4/4) with accentuation of the offbeats (the second and fourth beats) played on *llamador* in traditional *conjuntos* or on a cymbal in modern dance bands. Traditional cumbias are still performed by well-known professional musicians, including the singer *Totó La Momposina* (Sonia Bazanta) and the group Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto.

The Tropicalization of Costeño Music

Colombia's national cumbia craze began in the 1940s and 1950s, when commercial big bands captivated the imagination of middle- and upper-class citizens of Colombia's major inland cities. The process of adapting traditional rhythms and melodies from the conjuntos to cosmopolitan ballroom dance bands (*orquestas*) brought a transformation from *música costeña* to *música tropical*. The rhythmic structure and melodic style of *costeño* musical genres or *ritmos* (cumbia, *gaita*, and *porro*) were stylized and orchestrated by composers and conductors including *Lucho Bermúdez* (Luís Eduardo Bermúdez Acosta) and *Pacho Galán* (Francisco Galán Blanco). Both had come from the regional music tradition of *la costa* to produce stylized orchestral arrangements and add big-band sound to the music. The orchestration underwent a process of *cubanization* (adding congas, bongo, maracas, and brass section) in accordance with the fashionable mambo style of the Pérez Prado, Xavier Cugat, and Benny Moré orchestras. Bermúdez and Galán were also inspired by the *papayeras* (brass bands) from the towns in the Sinú River Valley (above all San Pelayo), where the brass band style was strong and rooted in local traditional music (*porro* and *fandango*).

These ballroom dance orchestras played in elite social clubs mainly in the interior of the country, but their music was also broadcast, recorded and live, by radio stations in Barranquilla (La Voz de Barranquilla), Bogotá (La Voz de la Víctor, Radio Santa Fe, and Emisora Nueva Granada), Cartagena (Emisora Fuentes), and Medellín (La Voz de Antioquia and Ecos de la Montaña). The roles played by Colombian record companies (Discos Fuentes, Discos Tropical, Sonolux, and Discos Vergara) were also fundamental to the diffusion of *música tropical*.

Pacho Galán gained commercial success with "Ay Cosita Linda" (Oh Beautiful Little Thing) creating a new rhythm *merrecumbé* (a mixture of *merengue vallenato* and cumbia in 6/8 meter), while Lucho Bermúdez recorded the song "Danza Negra" (Black Dance), a cumbia sung by vocalist Matilde Díaz; the song was so successful that people began to identify it as *the* Colombian cumbia (as the text of the song suggests). Some hits from the 1940s and 1950s, such as the cumbias "Danza Negra" and "Colombia, Tierra Querida" (Colombia, Beloved Country) by Lucho Bermúdez or "Se Va el Caiman" (The Caiman Goes Away) by José María

Peñaranda, are considered classics and known throughout the entire country, even half a century after their inception. Indeed, these songs have become musical icons of Colombian national identity.

The Spread of Cumbia in Other Latin American Countries

The 1960s marked the progressive decline of ballroom dance orchestras and the rise of the smaller combos with brass band lineups made of two or three horns, electric bass, and percussion. The bands Los Corraleros de Majagual, formed in 1962, with two accordions (including the virtuoso *acordeonero* Alfredo Gutiérrez) and Sonora Dinamita (inspired by Cuba's Sonora Matancera), created by Lucho Argaín (Lucho Pérez Cedrón) in Cartagena in 1960, were popular within Colombia but had greater impact outside the country.

This simplified and commercialized cumbia—called (as pejorative) *chucu chucu* (an onomatopoeia from the scratching sound of the *guacharaca*, a scraper similar to the Cuban *güiro*)—spread to all Latin American countries, where it was popularized through radio and commercial recordings. Cumbia received specific acceptance in Mexico, Peru, Argentina, and Chile, where it went through a process of appropriation and transformation according to local tastes and was commonly associated with the urban working classes.

Some hits became very popular in Colombia and across Latin American countries, such as “La Pollera Colorá” (The Red Skirt), recorded by Pedro Salcedo y su Conjunto in 1962, now a classic of the genre (with the clarinet imitating the *caña de millo*). This piece was very successful in Mexico and can be considered the starting point of the cumbia diffusion in Mexico, especially in the area of Monterrey. The Mexican cumbia (*cumbia norteña*) entered in the repertoire of the accordion-based *conjuntos norteños* of northeastern Mexico and crossed the border into Texas, spreading in popularity among the Chicanos and Tejanos. Celso Piña began his career in the 1980s in the poor neighborhoods of Monterrey—where a subculture *Colombia* emerged among people from marginal and segregated neighborhoods—with a kind of accordion-based cumbia mixed with *Vallenato* style and is today the most celebrated cumbia artist in Mexico.

In the 1970s, Peruvian cumbia called *chicha* (corn beer) adopted the pentatonic melodies from the Andean *huayno* and the rhythmic patterns from the Colombian cumbia and added electric guitars and organs (such is the case of the hit “El Aguajal” by Los Shapis, a *chicha* version of the *huayno* “El Alisal”). Then, in the 1990s, Peruvian *tecno-cumbia* abandoned the folk *huayno* component for mixing Colombian cumbia with Tex-Mex styles (such is the case of the singer Rossy War). Cumbia was introduced to Argentina in the 1960s, with the arrival of the Colombian band El Cuarteto Imperial; when the Argentine economy collapsed in 2002, a new style of cumbia, called *cumbia villera*, emerged from the slums of Buenos Aires (called *villas*), where it was taken by the working class *negros* (the blacks) and by the Argentine middle classes (the *cheto*).

In the 1980s, commercial cumbia enjoyed substantial acceptance abroad, thanks to the success of songs like “La Colegiala” (The Schoolgirl) by Rodolfo y su Típica. The song became a hit in Europe and was used as jingle for a coffee commercial. Meanwhile, the panorama of Colombian music began to change due to the influence of *salsa*. It is precisely in Cali and the nearby port of Buenaventura that the first Colombian *salsa* groups emerged: Peregoyo y su Combo Vacana, Guayacán, and Grupo Niche. But the most successful Colombian *salsa* group was Fruko y sus Tesos, founded in 1971 by Ernesto Fruko Estrada (formerly of Los Corraleros) including the singer Joe Arroyo, who had an extremely successful solo career until his death in 2011.

See also [Colombia: History, Culture, and Geography of Music](#); [Colombia: Modern and Contemporary Performance Practice](#)

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