



# From Bogotá with love

**Mestizo** is a unique 'cross-fertilisation' jazz collective straddling the Colombian capital Bogotá and the UK. As their self-titled debut album is released, **Jane Cornwell** catches up with some of the principals behind this intriguing project

In May last year, in a studio high in the mountains outside Bogotá, a musical bridge was crossed, and crossed again. The foundations had been laid down in 2018, when the British Council Colombia invited Britain's hottest young jazz musicians over to jam with their *caliente* Latin American counterparts - onstage, before a tens-of-thousands-strong crowd, at Bogotá's free annual *Festivales al Parque*. After which came further collaborations, including a documentary and a pandemic-era gig streamed as part of London's *La Linea* festival, ping-ponging between a Bogotá rooftop and a space in southeast London. This May they toured the UK, including a *La Linea* gig played, finally, in the flesh.

Now comes an eight track debut album: the self-titled *Mestizo*. "The music scene in Bogotá and Colombia is very rich," says MC Nelson 'N' Hardem (Nelson Martinez), a Bogotá wordsmith and underground cult figure with several EPs under his belt, whose Spanish-language flows are a *Mestizo* mainstay.

"It's full of language across traditional and modern music. I knew about the London scene because of friends who are living there and the heads involved in the first *Mestizo* project. People like Nubya Garcia, Yelfris Valdés, Theon Cross and Joe Armon-Jones. Being among all these incredible musicians as they went side-to-side motivated us from the start."

As its name suggests, *Mestizo* mixes the best of both scenes. It bottles their energy and fire. Two musical directors, the British-Caribbean Wayne 'Ahnansé' Francis of London's *Steam Down* collective and Colombian Daniel Michel of Bogotá's renowned Afrobeat orchestra *La Boa* and the label *Mambo Negro*, helm a big band on everything from synths and electric guitars to marimba and gaita reed flutes.

The sound they create reaches across the diaspora, with the Afro-Caribbean heritage of the UK contingent - singer/rapper Shantéh, keyboardist/guitarist DoomCannon, rising star trumpeter Grifon Forbes-Amos - finding commonalities in the Afro Colombian beats, lines and polyrhythms played by the Colombian and Afro-Colombian likes of percussionist/*gaita* player Diana Sanmiguel, marimba/trumpet player Salomé Gómez Burbano and euphonium player Luis Luque.

Not to mention their shared love of jazz, hip hop and electronica. The friendships that were forged face-to-face, in studios, rehearsal rooms and onstage, as well as through files, computer screens and the playlists swapped at the get-go. The collective embraces members past and present; Garcia, Valdés, Armon-Jones and Theon Cross may no longer be directly involved (though the latter's brother Nathaniel Cross represents





on trombone), but their investment continues. Garcia, for example, collaborated with several of the *gaita* players on her widely acclaimed 2020 debut album *Source*.

Their day-long recording stint at Altar Audio – a sonic haven owned by North American-trained engineer/guitarist Juan Valencia on the slopes near La Calera east of Bogotá – involved improvising on themes pre-written by various members including Ahnansé, Michel and Jorge Emilio Pardo, a composer, trumpeter, *gaita* player and nu-*cumbia* bandleader from Cartagena on Colombia's Pacific Coast. Lyrics were brought and worked on by Shantéh and Hardem; a focus on social consciousness and personal growth, on the personal and the political, felt vital.

"The songwriting aspects are very collaborative," says Shantéh, a feted gospel and R&B singer whose pristine voice and innovative flows shine on tracks including the grime-inflected, heavy-horned 'Arroyo', the album's first single – a missive admonishing those who repeatedly take advantage – and 'Goldmine', a melodic tune about finding your elevated self.

"I've been to Bogotá five times now" – the *Mestizo* project is ongoing (each director initially led five commissions of new music in their own country, then set about collaborating) – "and we've become like family. We party. We jam. We drink a lot of *viche* [the alcoholic beverage beloved of Afro-Colombian communities]. And

although I've worked extensively in gospel, I've realised that jazz is my first love when it comes to musical expression. Jazz give you the freedom to tap into other musical styles and genres."

The freedom afforded *Mestizo* is evident on tracks that mix such Colombian traditions as salsa, cumbia, the African-influenced *currulao* (which extensively features marimba) and the aforementioned *gaita*, a wind instrument from the country's Caribbean coast, into an organic whole. Nothing on *Mestizo* feels forced. Ahnansé's strengths as a conductor/director include being malleable enough to switch and adapt: "Wayne is very open when it comes to ideas, and keeping the team open too. He may have something particular in mind, but if Daniel suggested a change of dynamics that worked for the song, he'd do it."

Creating the lyrics felt similarly natural: "Shantéh is so committed to everything that is happening around her, and really makes an effort to understand the reality behind every bar, every lyric, in another language," says Hardem. "Our voices work together because of the telepathy and bond that grows stronger every time we meet, write, compose and perform".

While *Mestizo*'s seven Colombian musicians hail from various internationally-lauded acts (LA33, La Perla, La BOA, Frente Cumbiero, Quantic's UK/Latin American project Ondatrópica), the musicians chosen from the Steam Down stable – each one also an artist in their own right – came match-fit, ready to generate the sort of spontaneous sonic soundscapes that would own space on the compositions.

Among them, the album opener, Pardo's 'Puente Cósmico', a punchy yet dreamy plunge into the notion of deepening one's self knowledge, and an enticement into the

*Mestizo* sound, Ahnansé's fierce, grooving 'Borrachero' is lifted by powerful English/Spanish lyrics telling of the foolishness of addiction. Michel's 'Caminito' is a dance number that pays homage to Colombian refugees displaced by conflict.

"These are people who've lived and worked their whole lives on the land," says Hardem, who co-wrote the lyrics with singer/percussionist/*gaita* player Diana Sanmiguel, whose all-female trio La Perla bring an urban punk aesthetic to traditional rhythms. (Indeed, the only downside to this incarnation of *Mestizo* is that of the 17 musicians, only three identify as female.)

'Reflection', with music and lyrics by Ahnansé, finds Sanmiguel and Shantéh sharing vocal duties: 'Uncover discover/rewind and recover' they sing over keys wielded by DoomCannon and producer Ronal 'Chamimbe' Balanta, over drum and conga patterns woven by Steam Down's Benjamin Appiah and Alejandro Cifuentes (of seven-piece cosmic jazz combo Bandejas Espaciales). Throughout, horns glimmer and holler.

"The Steam Down crew are so open to new experiences," says Hardem. "There's such value in their sense of community, in the purity of the music, the love for the craft. In their rooted identity and free delivery."

"Like any other containers of this *Mestizo* music, jazz is just one part of the recipe," he continues. "Whether we call it jazz or folklore doesn't really matter. *Mestizo* goes forward and strong with all of them."

The *Mestizo* collective's recent tour of the UK will galvanise them further, while highlighting the fecundity of a young music scene in which – as is the case in London, Melbourne, Chicago – a DIY attitude means players create their own gigs and jams. Where genre-hopping is a given, jazz absorbs music of black origin, and young crowds smash a fourth wall to cheer on and dance with the players.

Hardem agrees. "We don't get worldwide coverage because of where we are geographically, certainly not of our independent music scene. There are almost no record labels [aside from Mambo Negro] to make moves on this kind of music. Which also made the recording of *Mestizo* such an amazing experience."

"We recorded in a world-class studio with incredible staff. Everyone was committed to the goal of making the best music possible. We had a lot of talks. There were some long waits between sections, and there were arrangements that happened on the spot. There was a lot of laughter and creativity."

"It was a very, very happy day, and I feel this shines through in the album. It's alive." 🎶



Clockwise from left: singer Shantéh, trumpeter Grifon Forbes-Amos, Diana Sanmiguel and El León Pardo.

