

Luisa:

Hi María Manuela, how are you?

María Manuela:

Hi Luisa.

Luisa:

Great, I'm glad to hear it. I want to start this conversation by having you tell me about your project: how long ago did you start, and what motivated you to start playing music first and then producing?

María Manuela:

Well, it's been a long time, with a powerful desire in my being to mix for a long time, but I had never found a way or how to do it. I didn't have the equipment or someone willing to teach or accompany me. And in mid-2022, I asked a friend, "Hey, teach me." And she gave me the first lesson. After that, I got severe about downloading music and figuring out how to download it because I remember downloading music a long time ago, like on [The Pirate Bay](#), Limewire, or Ares, but this thing about [Soulseek](#) or finding tracks on Soundcloud is much more complicated. So I started with that. Then, I met my current partner. It was very nice at that time because we started as exceptionally, very, very good friends and bonded a lot through music. So we would get together every Friday, Saturday, Thursday, any day I had free, like "Okay, let's mix, let's hang out and mix, let's have some beers and mix," and later that same year, I had a gig with him for a collective here in Bogotá, [Neotrópica](#). Then, I released a set on Soundcloud and sent it to [CRRDR](#) and he said, "Come and play at one of our parties," I was like, "Okay, how exciting." But still, I didn't feel entirely satisfied just mixing; I felt like something was missing and that something was producing. So, I wanted to fully satisfy this great need to create something through sound by learning to make.

Luisa:

When you think about what was missing that was filled by production, what was it? What was that void? Production fills that void in a context where, in a city like Bogotá, you can perfectly well spend many years as a DJ without producing, moving around a lot in the party circuit, learning, and so on.

María Manuela:

I wanted to exploit my creativity more. I've been a passionate music lover all my life. Since I was very young, my brothers would say, "Listen to this, listen to that." They lived through the rave scene of the late '90s and early 2000s. I was born 15 years later in my family. So obviously, while I was at home sleeping, my brothers would come home at 5:00 a.m. or 6:00

a.m. after partying and say, "Listen to this track," like, "Okay, I'm already getting up, good morning, joy." So that's also very much tied to my brothers and my mother.

Luisa:

And about the context of the rise of the electronic scene... which after the pandemic started much more robust in the city, I think we're only now seeing the fruits of people coming out like, "Okay, with a lot of desire to party because of the lockdown," but then there was also a strong relationship of "let's manage spaces outside of clubs and outside of big promoters because they are responding to sounds from outside that don't interest us." Also, there are very exclusionary club dynamics, as they cater to a very particular niche that can be there, that can generate. So, do you think that trajectory you mention, and the one I've seen of your name as a DJ, comes from there? And, why was production the answer about that context and being a woman?

María Manuela:

These spaces were created precisely after the pandemic. I also started attending collective parties like [Putivuelta](#), [Muakk](#), or [Salta](#). And little by little, I also started familiarizing myself with these "new Latin American sounds." But the fact of production was something more that I felt since I was little; I played the piano, played the violin, and had singing lessons... I made songs as a six-year-old girl, but now, with a background of listening to much more music and many more things, I also strongly desire to do it. And it's a very loving response to the little girl who wanted to make music when she was young, at that age. So it's also like a little gift, a hug to the past Manuela.

Luisa:

And something you mentioned at the beginning about starting your DJ career... over the years, I've been part of this scene; I've noticed that there's also a lot of fear of being seen, of putting yourself out there. And in a context where mainly male names are known, the fear for women and queer people is something that is constantly a barrier; there's a barrier of resources, of time, of course, but there's also fear. How have you faced that process?

María Manuela:

By swallowing it, really. Well, I don't know, it's challenging. For example, at my first gig, I had a horrible anxiety attack; I cried a lot before my set, and I felt like my heart was going to come out of my mouth. And it still happens a lot. I mean, I go to play, and I have to at least drink a chamomile tea before playing and be calm because, as much as the audience is demanding of a woman, the promoters and people around you are also demanding. I've had the good fortune and joy of being able to play outside the country. And it's something curious that happens to me when I play outside the country; I feel much calmer because I feel like I don't know the people; I don't have such a close relationship with those people except through what I do. So

they believe a lot in me and what I do, but here it's much more complicated because they know me and who I am, and it's like, "Oh gosh, how scary." Totally. And being a woman in a male-dominated context is terrible. Beyond everything, like in fashion design, I'm a fashion designer, and it's a field where mainly women study, but the most successful are men. Women and gender minorities study fashion design, but it's heterosexual men who are the creative directors. And it's the same thing happening to me now as a DJ and producer. Also, many women studied fine arts in the context of being an artist, but most men became curators or gallery owners. So I feel like it's not just in the niche of being a DJ and producer, but in general.

Luisa:

Yes, like in cultural and creative contexts and the world in general.

María Manuela:

In the world in general, but yes, women and gender minorities are screwed.

Luisa:

So, when did you start producing? More than the time, which I don't think is the most relevant here, it's about thinking about the conditions that allowed you to do that. Yes, when you sat down and said, "Oh well, I'm going to make my first track," how was that?

María Manuela:

Wow, it was very fortuitous because my dad was in a terrible financial situation and told me he couldn't pay for that semester. And I was like, "Well, I'll get a job, do other things. I'm not in a rush; I'm content with what I'm doing." So, that time was crucial for me to start working. My job is pretty relaxed, and I got serious about learning to produce. So first, with YouTube tutorials, download Ableton and say, "Okay, how does this work?" Then, I pay for an online course and diligently watch it every day, repeating it repeatedly because I'm like a grandma with computers and stuff. So obviously, it was like, "Wow," and with my notebook, writing down all the commands, and that's how I learned. I had a lot of help from my partner, who explained many things not covered in the classes and showed me how to do things more easily in Ableton. It was a wonderful time for me to learn and co-create and co-produce with my boyfriend. So the first tracks I made were [Brenda](#) x María Manuela, collaborating. Then it was like, "Sweetheart, it's time to do your things and start your career yourself." Because it bothered me that I was being known because of Brenda, you know? People would say, "Oh yes, the one who makes tracks with Brenda," and I'm like, "No, dude, I have a name, and I was also part of that." So please, I want to show myself as a solo producer, too.

Luisa:

On this path you've started, both in classes and so on, what tools do you think would facilitate the production learning process a lot? What barriers have you encountered, like those two sides? What would you have liked to have or have at this moment?

María Manuela:

A Push. Yes, a Push. I'd love to have a Push. I don't have one, so I must manually draw in the MIDI, which has horrible latency. I mean, the Push also has latency, but less. So that's super, super, super uncomfortable. But yes, I'd love a Push. Of course, I'd love to learn to use all the devices, like synthesizers and modular synthesizers. You disconnect a cable and connect it to the other side. It seems fascinating and beautiful, but let's go for the Push now. And convenience, well, it's been not very easy for me. I have a good ear and a lot of references, but it's been a huge learning journey. I didn't know that the tun tun tun tun sound is called a kick. I had no idea.

Luisa:

That's why I was thinking, well, also those technical barriers, but also, for example, a personal dream of mine has always been to set up a free production school for women and gender minorities in the city.

María Manuela:

Beautiful.

Luisa:

That involves many things to consider, but if such a space existed, what would you like it to have? Let's imagine what is needed in a learning space like that.

María Manuela:

I need an excellent computer, a sound card, and good monitors, especially since I don't know how to master or mix them, so it would be wonderful to have those tools and someone who knows how to master and mix well—also, the Push. And that's the basics—all the Ableton plugins, which are costly. Ableton itself is expensive. Sample packs that cost money. Everything costs money and is quite pricey because, for a Latin American woman or a gender minority, it's fatal because, in addition to everything, it's in dollars. So each thing is \$6, multiplied by four, so it's tough. But yes, it's a good computer to start with. To start.

Luisa:

And you mentioned references earlier. Who are your references, and how have they guided your production journey?

María Manuela:

The funniest thing is that my references have nothing to do with club music. In production, my major references are two pillar women: Marina Herlop and Carolina Polachek, also beautiful, incredible goddesses. Here's a somewhat controversial person, Kanye West, also *música para planchar*, which comes very much from my mom. Yes, it's like my mom and me. So Daniela Romo, Ana Gabriel, Janet, Rocío Durcal, all that music, number one fan. I was heartbroken for about five years, so they accompanied me for a long time, which was beautiful. Also, I like music from the 50s, like 50s movies. It's super... You're in high school and going to graduate, so they play, I don't know, Paul Anka, Connie Francis, all those songs, like you're going to ride in a Corvette and go.

Luisa:

I love it.

María Manuela:

Those are my references. Of course, there are references from club music as well.

Luisa:

Exactly. I was going to ask, not necessarily from club music, but more like growing up with, well, the passion, a bit like what your siblings, their parties, etc. And then starting to go out to parties in the city a lot, which is something we're going to talk about in this special: it's a city that never stops moving. It may feel like a transient place for the artistic development of some people in the electronic scene, but for others, it becomes the ultimate creative place. How do you nourish yourself from what's happening in Bogotá?

María Manuela:

Memories. My siblings told me about an iconic rave at Camelot. Yes, the amusement park. Yes, like the open amusement park, and it was wild. And obviously through the music, well, Chemical Brothers, of course. Chemical Brothers, Röyksopp, Lali Puna, Modjo, well, all that 90s and 2000s wave. They also obviously listened to a lot of pop, such as Britney Spears and Lady Gaga. So, I also nourished myself from all their parties and the songs they played. I remember arriving, waking up and seeing them dancing to "Lady" by Modjo, and I was like, "This song is amazing." I was very young, right? And now I have a love-hate relationship with partying because I'm very Taurus, so I like to sleep, I want to rest, I hate staying up late, and alcohol lately doesn't agree with me. But there was a time when I was very diligent, going to all the parties, listening to the DJs, very industrious, wild and diligent, listening to the DJs, watching the Putivueltas parties; I remember it a lot, and then started to say, "Wow, these people who play, what is this?" I also looked for the names of the DJs who came or were invited to see what they did, what they were doing, and why it sounded so incredible. Little by

little, I got closer to this Latin club sound, and that's how María Manuela started, wanting to play this new wave of guaracha and Latin music.

Luisa:

You've mentioned the Putivuelta parties several times. What did you like about those parties? The sound, but what else? because there's an important story about what's happening in the city.

María Manuela:

I love the compilations they release; they're incredible. I've also had the pleasure of meeting [Ynfynyt Scroll](#), talking to him, seeing him, and seeing [K. Hole](#) and other members who started. Well, they've been around for a long, long time. And I also love that it's such an open event for all audiences. It's also a place where queer people feel comfortable, where trans people feel comfortable, where women feel relaxed too. Of course, the parties are a bit wild, clearly crazy, but I like the movement they started here in Bogotá.

Luisa:

When talking to producers from other countries and having a general discussion about having more women or gender minorities producing and leading artistic projects related to electronic music, the question of quality always comes up. Several years ago, Frankie, one of the founders of [Discwoman](#), this New York collective, also a booking agency etc., which grew a lot, said in several interviews, "It doesn't matter if there are women who play badly or produce badly, what matters is that there are more women doing things because historically we haven't been able to." So it doesn't matter if there are mediocre women and men. There are always mediocre men, and they make bad music and learn along the way. Why can't we do the same? What do you think about that, and how do you see it developing with your production process? What's your stance on this quality issue?

María Manuela:

Well, you know, I didn't know that. It's a beautiful idea because you learn by messing up. Society doesn't allow us that, and it's like if you mess up once, you'll mess up forever, and you're screwed. It's like they see us with a magnifying glass.

Luisa:

Of course, there aren't second chances sometimes in the circuit.

María Manuela:

No, no, I mean, it's just that if a woman messes up while mixing, like, oh no, the track slipped for a bit, then she managed to get it back on the beat, but everyone is like, no, that DJ is really bad, I don't know. It's like... have a little patience; it's a human being. But they see us with a

magnifying glass. Totally. It's always with a magnifying glass. If the track isn't perfect, then no, if she doesn't have 33,500,000 followers, no, if she's starting, no. It's always like putting obstacles in the way of women and dissidents in everything. I think what she says is very nice, but for me, an issue is, well, a bit of OCD and the fear it generates, and what I've felt is like, it's impossible, and it causes me a lot of anxiety. For example, my blood pressure drops when I mess up while playing. I'm like, what do I do? What should I do? My God.

For example, I don't know if I should say quality because quality can also be summed up in identity and personality. I've heard super dissonant tracks but love them, so I'm curious. It's something I can't handle, dissonance, I just can't. But if I hear them on the Transmilenio¹ I find them excellent. But yes, it's noticeable that they are dissonant, but not when I play them. That can also become a trademark, like swallowing it, a trademark and an identity of I also do things messily, right? For example, I love that funk carioca tracks are poorly produced and poorly mastered, but it's one of the genres I like the most, so quality is a debate that depends on many things. What's essential is neatness. It's not about quality or not quality, but being neat.

Luisa:

Oh, I had another question about how you deal with a track once it's finished and how you move on to mastering it. Well, not you, but how you decide when it's time for that. Just a few days ago, I was reading an interview with Laurel Halo. I don't remember the exact question, but her answer was, "Tracks are never finished. I decide that I'm going to finish with the track, but the track is never finished for me because it will always be an open process that I can leave open if I want and keep exploring." What do you think about it?

María Manuela:

I was leaning a bit towards that, exactly. But it's also tricky, right? It isn't easy to know if it's finished, just like you can also have a track stored for a long time, six months, in the drawer, and then you open the folder and give it another spin. So it's also like a creative process. Well, let's leave this one in the drawer or not, and I'm tired of working on this track, so let's move on to another. Also, it's tough in any profession because I get overwhelmed. For example, in fashion design, it's complicated; in the arts, it's difficult; always learning to stop is difficult. Because you always want to add and add things and this and that, and I don't like this anymore, I'm going to change this. But even if it's a cliché many times and many topics, sometimes less is more because then the track, the painting, or the design gets saturated. It's like you messed it up. It doesn't sound enjoyable. So the cliché is sometimes less cliché.

Luisa:

Well, perfect. And to wrap up, there's a critical topic I've been thinking about lately, and that's distribution, right? Like a few years ago, I don't know, ten years ago, it was unthinkable for a

¹ Public transportation in Bogotá.

producer or even a local producer to release their tracks independently like there was always this big aspiration to release on international labels to gain some recognition. And after the pandemic, in the global context, there's been a boom of self-managed labels, people who, with the growth of Bandcamp, were like, "No, well, I'll release my music," and that's it.

How do you relate to that process when it comes to releasing tracks? Do you think it's important for there to be some kind of infrastructure, like an industry of some sort, that can support artists in that process? If you want, we can do it in parts. First, tell me how you've done it in your process and how you think about it. Then, I'll ask you about the industry.

María Manuela:

As a newcomer to this, I already knew that people uploaded their tracks to Soundcloud, Spotify, and Bandcamp, and that's it. Before, I didn't realize there were labels. I didn't know anything about this industry. Ask me about the fashion industry, and I could still give you a whole class, a total masterclass. However, in this industry, most industries work similarly. Still, it took me a while to understand. Well, I have to pay for Next Pro to upload my sets and tracks, so that's already an investment through Spotify. So I just found out that the distributor is Soundcloud, and you also distribute the track from Soundcloud to Spotify. I had yet to learn about all these super technical things, but these new labels, like Muak, Putivuelta, or Tratatrax, are also much more significant. But it's fantastic; it's like hacking the industry a bit; it's like, why does one have to be on a giant label with management and a huge thing to be able to do what one wants to do? So I also found it incredible, knowing that there are many small labels on Soundcloud where I can also approach and knock on doors. For example, we've done this a lot. I always do tours with Brenda, and it's like, "Hi, this is my press kit, this is me, this is Brenda, we're looking for dates for these times," and just through knocking on doors, talking, searching, also being a bit of a nerd and having a vital database, super important, like writing down, okay, I already wrote to them, I did this, that's how I've achieved what I've achieved. I'm very grateful to all the labels, all the collectives, and all the people who have supported me through this; it's been very gratifying and lovely, very nice.

Luisa: And that also speaks to something that happens a lot, not just in the Bogotá context but in Latin America in general, that here very few people say things like "my agent," "my booking agency," "my label," "the promoter of a big club." I mean, I talk to people who work abroad, and they're like... how does it work? No, the DJ is a photographer, community manager, press officer, tour manager, everything. DJs do absolutely everything, which, well, is excellent. There's a learning and growth process in these small spaces, but for me, there's always the question of how we can make this sustainable. Because then, not all of us have the energy to do everything simultaneously. It would also be essential to have some industry, not necessarily the massive big room techno, Amelie Lens. It's not about that but about making it sustainable somehow.

María Manuela: Yes, being a DJ and producer is very difficult. I mean, first, because you're a woman and second, I think the earnings this has given me haven't even matched all the money I've spent on tickets, accommodation, cars from my house to anywhere, I mean a vehicle for me, I don't know, doesn't cost less than \$25,000 (COP)², like it's still a significant investment I've made and that we've made with Brenda as well, it's an investment to create something and to leave something behind as well. And also, speaking of rhythms, I wanted to make a disclaimer and talk a bit about this, like you see the guys. They're releasing a track every 5 minutes, and sorry, not sorry, but I mean, if I'm ovulating, I can make 50 tracks if you want, but if I have my period, don't even talk to me. So it's like, everyone also expects you to be producing at the same rate as any man, and they still don't understand that you have a completely different hormonal system, like a woman's endocrine system is entirely different. It's like, I can't be hyper-productive at times when my body can't be hyper-productive.

Luisa: Well, that's also part of it. It's related to that, which I had never thought about, and it makes perfect sense. It explains many things in my life, but there's also a big rush to release things all the time, the frenzy of this digital boom, and its sound and problematic aspects, right? Because I'm not going to say it's bad per se, but there are troubling aspects. It imposes production rhythms and forces you to be out there all the time, and not all creative processes work the same way.

María Manuela: Exactly.

Luisa: And that's good to put on the table, like not everyone is at the same pace all the time, and we could impose other rhythms if we wanted to if more women were producing, which I think, I don't know what you think about this, but I think there's a significant lack of female producers in the city and Colombia. It's wild to look back and see that we're only starting to see names popping up here and there now, but in the last ten years, you can handpick them, you know? Like 20 or 30, and we have to think about why that has happened, right?

María Manuela: Yes, exactly the same. Well, everyone has a different pace, right? For example, I see Brenda on the computer all day making tracks or doing everything.

Luisa: But he's a very particular example.

María Manuela: I dedicate 2 hours a day if you want, with all the love in the world, but I won't be glued to a computer all day. It's something I refuse to do. So also, like, refusing to be on the computer has made me think like, well, I have to learn something else, like I have to find a place where I'm not seriously glued to a computer to produce, because that's very hard for me, I mean, at work, I work on the computer and no. So it would also be cool to look for spaces outside the computer to produce. That would be very nice, it would be fantastic.

² About 7 USD.

Luisa: Like collective, collaborative studios. Well, that's a topic, the dream...is there anything else you want to say about what we've discussed?

María Manuela: No, thank you very much for the space, and no, I'm very excited about what's happening. I'm also thrilled with what I've achieved because these have been processes where, I mean, I've been through a lot in the last almost six years. I've had very high highs and very low lows. And like also starting a project, not finishing it, beginning the project, not finishing it, not continuing, not continuing, not continuing, also precisely because of fear of going out. I'm very proud and pleased with what I'm doing and achieving, and I hope that my words and what I say also influence and reach many more women and gender dissidents so that they are encouraged to produce and follow their dreams.