Ballads Born of Conflict Still Thrive in Colombia

By SIMON ROMERO

EL RETORNO, Colombia — He arrived at this town on the edge of guerrilla territory with his entourage. They included a producer, a sound man, two scantily clad dancers and a harried servant, who carried his cowboy hat, his snakeskin boots, his tequila and, of course, his bling: a bulky gold necklace emblazoned with the name of Uriel Henao.

“Uriel Henao needs to travel with certain standards,” said the 41-year-old balladeer, referring to himself in the third person, as is his custom. “The people in these parts expect it,” he explained after a convoy of honking pickup trucks and motorcycles led by the town’s fire truck marked his arrival for a concert here in August.

The rock-star welcome for Mr. Henao, who cloaks a gourmand’s paunch under a white leather jacket, was common enough. Colombians call him the king of the corridos prohibidos, or prohibited ballads, a musical genre that describes the exploits of guerrilla commanders, paramilitary warlords, lowly coca growers and cocaine kingpins.

Given the graphic depiction of the drug trade, some established radio stations in Colombia keep the songs off their playlists, sometimes fearful of violent reprisals that might result from glorifying one side or another in the country’s four-decade war.

“We’d rather take a pass on playing the corridos prohibidos,” said Hernando Galviz, a director of programming at Caracol Radio, a top broadcaster in Bogotá, the capital. “Stepping into that realm could be compromising and possibly open our operations to conflict,” he said. “If others want to play these songs, let them take the risk.”
Scholars say Colombia’s prohibited ballads descend from Mexico’s narcocorridos, the accordion-driven songs that mythologize Mexican drug traffickers. While Mexico’s drug ballads have existed at least since the 1930s, the genre seems to have taken root in Colombia about three decades ago when Mexican groups like Los Tigres del Norte became popular in this country.

The malleable genre has spread to several other Latin American nations, with some changes along the way. Artists like Guatemala’s Oscar Ovidio even perform Christian-themed narcocorridos that proselytize by telling the story of bad people who find redemption, said Juan Carlos Ramírez-Pimienta, a narcocorrido scholar at San Diego State University in California.

Colombia’s prohibited ballads are far less innocent.

About 600 bands in the country play them, with names like Jackal and New Texas Group. Their songs boast titles like “Secret Airstrip,” “Coca Growers of Putumayo” and “The Snitch,” reflecting aspects of Colombia’s resilient drug trade.

The genre has developed into a form of oral history of Colombia’s long internal war involving guerrilla groups, paramilitary factions and government forces.

“Ballad of the Castaños” describes brothers who led exceptionally brutal paramilitary death squads. “Betrayal in the Jungle” recounts how a guerrilla defector killed his commander, before bringing the dead man’s severed hand to the authorities as proof.

Supporters of the ballads say they provide an outlet in Colombia’s folk culture, especially in urban slums and remote rural areas, for subjects that some would rather shun.

The songs also serve as an uncomfortable reminder that Colombia, despite making recent strides against large cartels and drug-trafficking guerrillas, still vies with Peru as the world’s largest producer of coca, the plant used to make cocaine.

“The corridos are most popular in hot zones because the songs tell stories of what happens,” said Alirio Castillo, a leading producer of the ballads who accompanied Mr. Henao here. “It’s here where gun battles break out, killing four guerrillas or four soldiers.”

Performers enjoy a broad following in the backlands where the cocaine trade and the private
armies that draw strength from it persist. One such place is Guaviare, a southern department, or province, of sprawling jungles interrupted by the occasional town like this one.

The Colombian Army's Black Hawk helicopters buzz constantly in the skies above El Retorno and the nearby provincial capital, San José del Guaviare, transporting counterinsurgency teams tasked with hunting down guerrillas from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, Latin America's largest rebel group.

Reminders of the war's horrors in Guaviare are evident. Indigenous Nukak-Makú nomads, uprooted from their lands, wander up and down dusty roads in San José, begging for food. Posters describe rewards for turning in FARC commanders like Géner García Molina, better known by his nom de guerre, John 40.

In a twist illustrating the music's appeal here, John 40, one of the FARC's top cocaine traffickers, has also recorded his own subversive corridos with titles like "Gringo Bandit" and "Damn Government." A passage from one song refers to Manuel Marulanda, the deceased FARC leader nicknamed Tirofijo, or Sureshot.

“When he had them in his cross hair,” John 40 sings in the ballad, “the trigger spoke. That is why they named him Señor Tirofijo.”

Other songs exalt the foot soldiers and peons of the country’s long drug war, like Mr. Henao’s “Ballad of the Coca Grower,” which describes how the rural poor earn more money cultivating coca than they do working as day laborers.

“The problem is not ours, the problem comes from over there,” Mr. Henao sang before a crowd of several hundred at a concert here that began after midnight, referring to demand for Colombian cocaine in the United States. “We harvest it, and the gringos put it in their brains.”

People in the audience belted out each word of Mr. Henao’s ballads in unison. Rum flowed freely in plastic cups. Fistfights broke out, upturning tables and chairs. Soldiers patrolled the scene, pushing back drunken men running up for a close glimpse of Mr. Henao’s miniskirt-clad dancers.

Live performances are the bread and butter of Colombia’s ballad singers, since pirated CDs of their songs have eroded their income. In Mr. Henao’s case, El Retorno’s municipal government
paid for his concert here, plus expenses for him and his crew.

During the concert, even some of the soldiers keeping the peace mouthed the words to Mr. Henao’s scathing antiestablishment song, “They’re Rats,” in which he lambastes Colombia’s politicians as “a plague” for a history of corruption that keeps millions in the country mired in poverty.

Mr. Henao finally finished performing as dawn broke. The Black Hawks taking off for their missions in Guaviare’s jungles murmured in the distance.

Mr. Henao smiled as he and his crew passed around a tequila bottle to commemorate the concert. “Colombia needs people like me to tell it the truth about what takes place in this country,” he said. “The truth sells.”

*Jenny Carolina González contributed reporting from Bogotá, Colombia.*