Global Campus of Human Rights

SOUNDS OF JUSTICE PODCAST

Episode 7

Elusive Harmony: Music in the search for societal healing

LAURA HASSLER, EMIR HASANI and MARÍA CAMILA MORENO

in conversation with IGNACIO SAIZ

Ignacio Saiz: Welcome to Sounds of Justice, a podcast on music and human rights brought to you by the Global Campus of Human Rights. I'm your host, Ignacio Saiz.

In recent decades, countries emerging from conflicts, dictatorship, or institutionalised injustice have sought to confront legacies of repression through processes of truth-telling, memory, accountability, and reconciliation. From Argentina and South Africa to Northern Ireland, Sierra Leone, and more recently, Colombia, these processes have posed profound questions. How can divided communities live together after atrocity and social fracture? And what role can culture and the arts play in fostering coexistence, trust, and shared belonging?

[MUSIC: LéLé Mam, Imam Bey's Mosque]

Music has been a key mode in which societies navigate these transitions. People have narrated testimony, voiced grief, and shaped collective memory through music of all kinds. Music-making has been a space where divided communities recognise one another's humanity and imagine futures not wholly defined by the divisions of the past.

My first guest is especially well-placed to help us think through both the possibilities and the limits of music in processes of social healing after violence and trauma. Laura Hassler is the founder of Musicians Without Borders, which for more than 25 years has worked with musicians around the world to use the power of music to create change in communities affected by conflict and displacement. Laura, welcome to Sounds of Justice.

Laura Hassler: Thank you so much for having me.

Ignacio Saiz: What can you tell us about the piece of music that we just heard?

Laura Hassler: Well, this is a recording that we made with a group that I led, one of my vocal ensembles. It's a poem by the Bosnian poet Semezdin Mehmedinović, set to a traditional Bosnian melody. And I heard it during the war in Bosnia and it moved me so much, and it says, 'There are neither great nor small tragedies. Tragedies exist. Some can be described. There are others for which every heart is too small.' We sang this and moved, I guess, also as

a group into attention, more attention for people who had suffered the loss of war. And the first place that we as Musicians Without Borders were engaged in was, in fact, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Ignacio Saiz: So, tell me a little more about what led to the founding of Musicians Without Borders. Was it the experience of the Bosnian conflict?

Laura Hassler: Partially, but it was a number of things that sort of came together. I had a background, in my youth especially, as a peace and civil rights activist within the nonviolent movements of the time. I was a protest singer during the Vietnam War. I moved to the Netherlands as a young woman and here I worked in a number of different initiatives that used music to bridge differences between people of different cultures.

And I loved folk music from the Balkans, and I used to sing that with my groups. And then when the Balkan Wars started, there was this horror and this feeling of how can this be happening so close to us? And I think all of those strains came together with the idea of, let's see if these same kinds of approaches that we've been using in the Netherlands to create connections between people, if we could connect with musicians in the Balkans, who would share that kind of understanding of what music can do and see if we can work together.

Ignacio Saiz: I'm very keen to play a piece that you've selected for us that speaks a little bit to that past that you just mentioned, growing up as a protest singer.

Laura Hassler: So, this is a song that was written by Phil Ochs, who was one of the better-known protest singers. It was both the external call for end to war and injustice, but it was also the internal motivation. And this song is about the internal motivation, which speaks so much to what inspires me.

[MUSIC: Phil Ochs, When I'm Gone]

Ignacio Saiz: Back to Bosnia, I'm keen to hear how your first projects in Bosnia came about, how you worked with local musicians.

Laura Hassler: We were invited by a small organisation that had set up an afterschool programme for children in Sarajevo, because there was almost no school, and we were invited to perform at their opening. But we found our way to a refugee camp outside of Sarajevo. I think they were refugees from Kosovo, but they were living in tents in the mud, it was December, it was raining, there was no closed space for people. And we started making music, and children came, and we had a sack full of darbukas, and each of us took a kid on our knees, and so that the kids could play drums. And at a certain point, people came out and started dancing and singing, you know. So, it was a lesson: artists can be peacemakers, because we have that creativity in us. And we understand the ways in which, in our case, music can weave these connections, and how you can improvise with it. And in that trip, we made connections with various musicians, and that led to exchanges and various kinds of things. And at a certain point, we realised, well, okay, we're, we're bringing people here, we're sending people there, all very nice, but it's not leading to anything, it doesn't change anything.

And then one of the musicians who was involved with us was a volunteer in a Dutch project that was trying to help people, survivors in Srebrenica, where the massacre had taken place in 1995.

And she said, if I only had a van, I would have been able to go out to all of the different communities, because they were all people living in ethnically defined and separated communities, I would have been able to work with all the kids. So, we worked together, and we found enough money to buy a second hand van. And she drove off to Bosnia. And that project was to last for 10 years. And it did bring change.

Very soon, she pulled in Bosnian musicians and dancers, and they became the team that she worked with. So, the principle of collaboration, and working with local musicians was very, very early on. But it was something new. Nobody had ever heard of musicians as peace activists.

Ignacio Saiz: Now, I'm also struck by how you talk about the concern for lasting, durable change over time. Because, you know, some people might think music in these contexts, at best, it's kind of relief or comfort. But it's more than that. It really is a vehicle for change. Could you see that unfolding?

Laura Hassler: Yeah, absolutely.

Ignacio Saiz: That societal change, I mean.

Laura Hassler: That societal change. Our projects are impacting thousands of people, by now we are engaged in eight different countries with projects. But the projects themselves are not huge, but you see the impact on the people in them. And those people then affect their own communities. And that's the idea. Also, the idea of long-term engagement is that you build relationships. And we see it really as building and strengthening a network of musicians around the world who are working for peace and justice.

[MUSIC: LéLé Mam, Zaplakala]

Laura Hassler: We produced a programme of Bosnian songs and Bosnian poems, which we then first performed in the Netherlands and then brought to Bosnia. And this was one of those songs.

Ignacio Saiz: Beautiful. So, your work began in Bosnia, in the Balkans, and now you mentioned that you work in eight contexts from Central America to the Middle East or the SWANA region. I'm curious to know how the model that Musicians Without Borders uses has evolved and adapted across different cultural contexts, different political contexts.

Laura Hassler: Well, I think we very quickly learned that no situation, no history is equal to another. Somebody who had connections with the nonviolent resistance movement in Palestine heard about our work in Bosnia and invited us to come and present that at a conference in Bethlehem. There were different Palestinian activists and social workers and humanitarians who came up and said, ‘this is what we need here’. And that led to, like, an exploratory visit. There was one of the leaders, cultural leaders in one of the refugee camps

outside of Bethlehem, who said ‘We could use you to come here and train our young people to become music leaders’.

And that was kind of: OK, this needs to be something that basically is bringing some skills where needed, as asked. So that led to a very different kind of approach where the first part of the work in Palestine was all about training, training kindergarten teachers, training young people in refugee camps. At a certain point, our programme manager there discovered that there were young guys from one of the Palestinian camps who were secretly rapping, doing rap in a basement room, they wanted to be rappers so badly. And so, we brought a couple of professional rappers to work with them and teach them how to teach rap to children. And once they started that, which basically gave kids a way to express themselves in a musical idiom that they felt connected to, then they were accepted by their communities, because they were contributing to the welfare of the children. It's a very interesting process, but it only happens when you're listening.

We've helped to establish a rock school in Mitrovica in northern Kosovo in a place that was known for a rock and roll culture before the war, which included all different people from both ethnicities. And then ending up in Rwanda, where a clinic for people affected by HIV asks us to help to bring music to thousands of children who are also living with HIV, as a way of building community and a feeling of safety and of reducing stigma. That's a huge difference. But the co-line is that you listen, you respond, you look for ways of doing things, you respect what your partners are bringing in, and you try to build long term projects that gradually you can also step back from.

Ignacio Saiz: You've talked a lot, Laura, about the principles animating your work. I'm keen to understand what it means for you to bring human rights values to music-making. What do those lofty, airy principles or provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, how do they concretely translate into music-making or collective music-making in particular?

Laura Hassler: That's a great question. I would say that we usually refer to three guiding signpost principles: the power of music being one, the universal human rights being another. The other one are the principles of active nonviolence. And to me, that's the place where you find the concrete sort of directives into how you work and what you do and what you don't do: the principles of movements that have engaged with people in order to make those lofty principles, bring them into communities and work with them.

But the power of music, just like anything powerful, can be used for good and it also can be used for harm and has been, including in a number of the places where we work. Because music can be used to bring together a group of people in opposition to another group of people. That's happened in Rwanda, it's happened in the Balkans, it's happened in many places. And there, to me, the principles of active non-violence help us to take those steps, but also to guard against the misuse of the power of music.

Ignacio Saiz: This brings me to a final question I had. It's probably 27 years that you've been in existence now. What can we learn from all those years of experience, both about the power of music as a force for change, but also about the limitations, particularly, I'm thinking in

contexts where, where the conflicts or the violence that you've sought to mitigate or react to has persisted or even re-emerged?

Laura Hassler: To me, I think one of the things that we continue to defend and be proud of is the long-term impact of our projects on communities. Because even if you can't end a war where you are, and sometimes violence flares up, the work that music can do when done with these other guiding principles, it changes lives. And when lives change, communities change. And when communities change, you are sowing the seeds for peace. And we've seen this because we've been involved with partners for so long. We've also seen how, you know, a project in Kosovo expands to include a project in North Macedonia, a project in Palestine expands to include a project in Jordan, a project in Rwanda leads at the initiative of the Rwandan musicians to a project in DRC Congo.

In that sense, even though we're living in very depressing times in some ways, at the same time, you see this awakening happening amongst people and also amongst artists. More and more artists are seeing the potential of their role to speak out, to resist this injustice and violence that's going on and to refuse to be part of it.

Music is something fundamental to human existence and human consciousness, and in so many cultures and throughout all of human history has been a way for people to be together and to understand their common humanity. And that understanding is also growing. And for that, I think, you know, we don't have any idea of how far we can go, but it could be very far.

Ignacio Saiz: On that note, I warmly salute and applaud the work you do, Laura, and the work of your team. We're going to end with a piece that illustrates the kind of multiplying, amplifying effect that you spoke about.

Laura Hassler: This is a band from the Roma Rock School. The Mitrovica Rock School organises annual summer schools in Skopje, Macedonia. And there we met the people from the Roma Rock School. They have a rock school for kids from the Roma neighbourhood of Skopje, together with ethnic Macedonian and other ethnicities of kids, where they bring in elements of traditional Roma music and rock music and other influences and create bands and music together. And they've now become a partner together with the Mitrovica Rock School. So very proud of them.

Ignacio Saiz: So to play us out, we will have the song 'Can You See Me?' a powerful song about identity, being seen, finding your voice, performed by Replays.

Laura Hessler, thank you so much, and good luck with the work you do.

Laura Hassler: Thank you.

[MUSIC: Replays, Can You See Me?]

Ignacio Saiz: Welcome back to Sounds of Justice. I'm your host, Ignacio Saiz.

We've been talking about the role music can play in healing societies divided by conflict and in dealing with legacies of repression. The city of Mitrovica in northern Kosovo remains

deeply shaped by the divisions that marked the Kosovo conflict, with Albanian and Serb communities still largely living separately. For years, the Mitrovica Rock School has brought young people from both communities together through their shared passion for music and especially rock music, which I understand has long been part of the city's fabric.

So, I'm delighted to welcome Emir Hasani to Sounds of Justice to talk to us about his experience of using the power of music to build human connections across historical divides. Emir is a musician, teacher, and a director of programmes at Mitrovica Rock School. Welcome, Emir.

Emir Hasani: Thank you, a pleasure to be here.

Ignacio Saiz: Emir, how did the Mitrovica Rock School come about and what was it that drew you personally into the work as a young musician?

Emir Hasani: Mitrovica as a city here has a long history in pop and rock music. So, from the 60s with the jazz music and then with the rock fest it was always part of the local culture. After the conflict has happened, there was always an idea to bring back people together. Local musicians always wanted to do it, but there was never quite the right time or right place and then Musicians Without Borders were here and another local organisation, CBM, they started a project called Mitrovica Rock School. And it was basically a band camp in neighbouring Macedonia, Skopje, just to try out how that can look like. After that, everyone had an idea: OK, we have to do something like that in Mitrovica and develop something. It ended up just starting as two separate branches in both parts of the city, north part and south part of the city. Back then it was completely divided. And then once a year, they would again meet for a band camp somewhere outside of Kosovo. But as years went by, the whole idea was to bring it all back home here and try to do as much as we can locally. And my introduction, I was already a musician back then. And there was always, as there is a problem in finding the rehearsals places.

Ignacio Saiz: What kind of music, Emir? Was it rock or what music were you into then?

Emir Hasani: Yeah, punk, metal, rock, everything. We just started using the space as a rehearsal space. But then we got introduced to a lot of different options. For me, this was the first time that I was introduced to sound engineering as an option. So, this really, really interested me in that moment. And besides that, there was an option of a band camp and meeting people from another part of the city, which is like five minutes away, but I never had the opportunity to do that otherwise. So, from that on, I was pretty much hooked to it.

Ignacio Saiz: What did it feel like to make music with people from communities, as you say, communities that are five minutes away that maybe you hadn't had much contact with before?

Emir Hasani: Even though, as you say, it's five minutes away,like physically, but in another sense, it was really like two worlds apart. We really didn't have any connection.

And I really didn't know what I can expect from my potential bandmates and the level of musicality. The band coaches, I think they did a great job back then also connecting the

people on the same musical level. I think that helped a lot because this was the first time that I've met people from other side who completely had the same interest as me and we started creating songs and that really developed some relationship that really mattered and continued to this day, I would say.

Every young person in the whole world, I think, they want to just feel as if they belong to the whole world on the same level. It doesn't matter if it's in Mitrovica or Skopje or Brussels or New York, wherever, it has to be this similar experience in a way. And then if your peers in the school are from another part of the town, it doesn't really make a difference.

Ignacio Saiz: Let's listen. Can you think of one song that would be good to play here from the Mitrovica Rock School?

Emir Hasani: Yeah, I think we can play a song from one of our band programmes. We call it the Mixed Band Programme. It's a band programme for our students from different communities living here. As we call it, it's a rock school, but there's a lot of different genres inside. And the lyrics will be in English language, because that's a common language that we use here between the branches because it's completely two different languages and it's not that easy to communicate.

[MUSIC: Artchitects, Let It Go]

Ignacio Saiz: So, Emir, Laura was telling us earlier that when you... I think she said something like 'when you change an individual, you change society'. And I'm very curious to know if you've seen signs of that over the years in Mitrovica. Have you seen that individual change leading to anything broader in the society at large?

Emir Hasani: Well, I think every person holds its own world inside of them, every person has its inner circle of people that they communicate with, they live with. And throughout these 18 years, we had a lot of students, I would say, this is 100 to 150 per year. If one or two from a generation become a professional musician, that's also a success for us. But many of them in the fields that they are working in, they're continuing to promote the ideas, but not just only promote, just live the ideas, that's the best way to promote it. So basically, they're not a stranger to communication with another community. Definitely makes a bigger impact, I would say, in that sense.

Ignacio Saiz: So, Emir, you've had many exchanges with similar initiatives. How have those exchanges deepened your understanding, or even shifted your understanding of music's power to connect and to heal in societies that are marked by divisions?

Emir Hasani: Those experiences always lift up your spirits a little bit, maybe, and then especially if you can share your practices and if you see them work somewhere else as well, then you're also rethinking them and re-evaluating them, so I think that helps a lot.

Ignacio Saiz: We're going to end with a piece, I think, from Rwanda. Tell us in two words your connection to this initiative, which I think was supported by Musicians Without Borders in Rwanda, is that right?

Emir Hasani: That's right, yeah. They wanted to try something different basically in Rwanda and start a band camp and see how that would go, and I had a lot of experience with that. It was a completely new experience for me as well as for the musicians, I would say there, the type of music, the genre and everything, and they created their own songs. I wanted to kind of replicate what we would do when we do band camps, but then adjust it a little bit because it's just a different space and different culture. It was definitely inspiring, I think it's one of the most interesting experiences in my life. This is why it's beautiful to be a musician, I would say, because everywhere you go in the world, you have brothers and sisters, basically.

Ignacio Saiz: That's a beautiful note to end on, Emir. We're going to let Rwanda Youth Music take us out into the next segment, but Emir Hasani from Mitrovica Rock School, thank you so much.

Emir Hasani: Thank you, thank you.

[MUSIC: The Galaxy, Sinamenye]

Ignacio Saiz: Welcome back to Sounds of Justice with me, Ignacio Saiz. In this episode, we've been looking at the role music can play in societal healing, particularly in countries emerging from conflict or violence where deep divisions or scars remain.

From Kosovo, we're going to move to Colombia, where rap, hip-hop, and many other musical forms have served as tools of memory, rehabilitation, reconstruction, following the 2016 Peace Accords, which ended more than 50 years of armed conflict.

[MUSIC: MC Saya, Bienvenidos a Colombia]

Our guide to the sounds of Colombia's transition is María Camila Moreno, Director of the International Centre for Transitional Justice in Bogotá, Colombia. As well as having decades of experience embedding human rights in transitional processes, she's an anthropologist by training, and that might just be the reason she has such an interest in the power of music and cultural creativity in fostering human coexistence.

My conversation with María Camila is in Spanish, but you'll hear an English translation. [English voice-over by Auska Ovando]

Ignacio Saiz: When we talk about transitional justice, what often comes to mind is truth commissions, trials or other formal and legal mechanisms. People don't usually think of hip-hop festivals. So, I began by asking María Camila Moreno what had led the ICTJ to organize an international hip-hop gathering as part of its transitional justice work.

María Camila Moreno: Pues mira, Ignacio, yo llevo pues muchos años trabajando en este tema de la justicia transicional. Y suele ser un ámbito de expertos, por lo general, de conversaciones entre abogados especialistas. Siempre el objetivo de los mecanismos de justicia transicional es garantizar los derechos de las víctimas, propender porque las sociedades hagan una reflexión sobre su pasado violento y puedan encontrar caminos para

hacer frente a ese legado de violaciones. Desde hace ya unos años en ICTJ, nos hemos venido preguntando cómo lograr que estos mecanismos formales, realmente hagan una contribución real y efectiva a la transformación cultural de las sociedades. No se trata de una justicia transicional para que el estatus quo se mantenga, sino se trata justamente de poder transformar aquellas causas y aquellos factores que han permitido que sociedades caigan una y otra vez, como en el caso de Colombia, en conflictos armados y en violencia.

Auska Ovando voice-over: Well, I've been working on transitional justice for many years now. And it tends to be a field of experts, a conversation among lawyers and specialists. The aim of transitional justice mechanisms is to always guarantee the rights of the victims, to encourage societies to reflect on their violent past and also find ways of dealing with that legacy of abuse. For some years now at ICTJ, we've been asking ourselves how these formal mechanisms can make a real and lasting contribution to the cultural transformation of societies. Because transitional justice isn't about preserving the status quo. It's about transforming the causes and conditions that have allowed societies like Colombia to slide repeatedly into armed conflict and violence.

María Camila Moreno: Yo sabía del inmenso talento que hay en Colombia, sobre todo de jóvenes, y lo importante y potente que es la cultura del hip-hop aquí. Y entonces empecé a pensar en propiciar un encuentro que le permitiera a jóvenes de diferentes lugares poner en común su experiencia, y intercambiar sus reflexiones en torno a el rap, fundamentalmente, como un instrumento de resistencia, pero también de cambio y de reflexión sobre la realidad de jóvenes, hombres y mujeres, en contextos muy difíciles, de transición de la guerra a la paz, pero también contextos como suele ser, de marginalidad, de exclusión.

Auska Ovando voice-over: I was aware of the immense talent we have in Colombia, especially among young people, and how powerful hip-hop culture has been here. So, I began thinking about organizing a gathering where young people from different places could share their experiences and exchange ideas about rap, basically as a form of resistance, but also as a way of reflecting on the realities young men and women face in very difficult contexts, where they're not just transitioning from war to peace but also often dealing with poverty and exclusion.

María Camila Moreno: Entonces empecé a buscar aliados, y en esa búsqueda me encontré con la Fundación Cartel Urbano, con dos personas maravillosas que además venían de un proceso en marcha que se llama MELAH, que es el Movimiento de Expresiones Latinoamericanas de Hip-hop. La Comisión de la Verdad, que ya en ese momento estaba en pleno funcionamiento, había movilizado a distintos sectores de la sociedad en torno a la reflexión sobre qué nos había pasado, sobre la importancia y la necesidad de la memoria y de escuchar las diferentes voces en torno a esas memorias que por mucho tiempo habían sido en Colombia silenciadas y negadas. Entonces ahí es que decidimos convocar este Festival Internacional de Hip Hop: Verdad, Memoria y Resistencia. Invitamos a artistas colombianos, pero también de Latinoamérica, y también a artistas de Gambia, de Costa de Marfil y de Senegal, que compartieron también sus experiencias.

Auska Ovando voice-over: So, I started looking for partners, and that's how I came across the Cartel Urbano Foundation and two wonderful people who were involved in a project called MELAH—the Movement of Latin American Expressions of Hip-Hop. The Truth Commission, which was already well underway by then, had sparked a broad public conversation about what had happened to us as a country, about the importance of memory and the need to listen to voices that had long been silenced or denied in Colombia. So that's when we decided to convene the International Hip-Hop Festival for Truth, Memory and Resistance. We invited artists not just from Colombia but from across Latin America, as well as artists from The Gambia, Ivory Coast and Senegal who came together to share their experiences.

Ignacio Saiz: I was curious to know what happens in the room when artists and activists from post-conflict contexts in Latin America and Africa come together to exchange experiences through hip-hop and rap.

María Camila Moreno: Fue muy emocionante ver cómo efectivamente ahí encontraban rápidamente un lenguaje común y unos referentes comunes a pesar de las grandes distancias culturales. El hip hop es un movimiento en todas partes de resistencia. Es un grito por el reconocimiento, por el sentido de pertenencia. Pero también estos artistas son cronistas de su tiempo y son cronistas de su lugar. Muchos relatan que el rap les salvó la vida. Muchos chicos y chicas que venían de contextos socioeconómicos muy muy difíciles, que encuentran en el rap una voz, una forma de expresar sus sentimientos, pero también de narrar lo que pasaba en sus comunidades, no? Y se vuelven casi como que en el medioevo en juglares, que van contando a distintos públicos lo que les pasa a ellos y lo que pasa en sus entornos, pero también con un profundo sentido social, de compromiso con el cambio en sus comunidades. Eso fue otro elemento común que fue muy poderoso ver en el encuentro.

Auska Ovando voice-over: It was very moving to see how quickly they found a common language and shared references, despite the huge cultural differences. Hip-hop is a movement of resistance everywhere; it's a cry for recognition, for belonging. But these artists are also chroniclers of their time and place. Many of them say that rap has saved their lives. We're talking about young men and women from tough socioeconomic backgrounds who've found their voice through rap, who've found a way to express what they feel and to tell the story of what's happening in their communities. They become, in a sense, like minstrels from the Middle Ages, telling different audiences what's happening to them and to those around them. And they do so with a deep sense of social commitment—a determination to bring about change in their own communities. That was another common thread that emerged during the gathering, and it was powerful to witness.

[MUSIC: H20 Hip Hop Organizado, Inevitable]

Ignacio Saiz: That led us to another question: how are artists addressing hip hop's traditionally sexist culture or image, and what space was opening up for women's voices?

María Camila Moreno: Machista y a veces incluso rayado hasta en la misoginia, ¿no? Esa fue una reflexión también muy interesante del encuentro. Las rimas por mucho tiempo estuvieron muy vinculadas como a esta cosa tan machista de la fuerza, del duro. Ha ido cambiando en la medida también en que los artistas han ido incorporando otros temas, otras preocupaciones. Hoy hay un hip-hop, le llaman el rap conciencia, ¿no?, que es incluso con mensajes mucho más políticos, una denuncia a la violencia, incluso también al machismo. Y ahí entonces surgen voces femeninas muy potentes. Cada vez más hay estas voces femeninas que también le aportan a esta escena del hip-hop otro tipo de reflexiones y de sensibilidades. Y fíjate que incluso ahora, mujeres trans también contando con el rap sus experiencias, sus realidades muy duras. Y también han ganado un espacio en esta escena que antes no existía realmente

Auska Ovando voice-over: Sexist and at times even borderline misogynist, no? That was a really interesting discussion at the festival. Rap lyrics have long been associated with this very macho idea of strength, of the tough guy. But that's been changing as artists have started to take up different issues and concerns. Today there's a type of hip-hop called *conscious rap* that has more political messages and that speaks out against violence and against sexism itself. And that's where some very powerful female voices have emerged. More and more women are bringing different perspectives and sensibilities to the hip-hop scene. And even trans women are now using rap to tell their stories about the harsh realities they face. They've won a place for themselves in a scene where, until very recently, they simply didn't exist.

Ignacio Saiz: The festival also gave birth to a remarkable initiative called *Reexistencia Hip-Hop*. So, I asked Maria Camila how that worked and what it set out to achieve.

María Camila Moreno: Con el encuentro pues tuvimos la oportunidad de ver el gran talento que hay en Colombia en este género, pero también todas las dificultades que enfrentan los artistas, pues tienen que trabajar con mínimos recursos y muchas veces pues no logran realmente que su trabajo sea conocido. Entonces, después del festival, pues un poco que quedó esa inquietud ¿no?, por qué no diseñamos un proyecto que pudiera impulsar a algunos de estos artistas. Y fundamentalmente nos interesaba identificar artistas que estuvieran trabajando con un vínculo fuerte, digamos, en la transformación social y de sus comunidades ¿no?

Auska Ovando voice-over: The festival helped us appreciate just how much talent exists within Colombia's hip-hop scene. But it also revealed the many obstacles these artists face. They're working with very limited resources, and many never really manage to make their work known. So, after the festival we were left thinking: why don't we design a project that could help sustain some of these artists, particularly those who are deeply committed to social transformation within their own communities?

María Camila Moreno: Entonces, nuevamente con Cartel Urbano y un artista de rap muy reconocido que es Alí AK Mind hicimos una convocatoria para dos ciudades. Cali venía de lo

que llamamos aquí en Colombia en el 2021 el estallido social. Fue un centro de protesta, de expresión popular y juvenil y entonces Cali se convierte en la ciudad de la resistencia incluso. Hicimos la convocatoria en Cali y en Bogotá y escogimos 12 artistas con la idea de apoyar o proyectos inconclusos o nuevas creaciones. Tiene un componente que fue muy importante que es el componente de la mentoría. Esa mentoría estaba como en dirigida a diferentes temas, la producción misma, pero también el trabajo de voz, pero el marketing, cómo meterse al negocio, la edición. Y eso fue muy muy muy importante porque era un proyecto orientado a fortalecer lo que hacen, ¿no? Eso fue muy lindo, ese laboratorio de creación.

Auska Ovando voice-over: So once again we partnered with Cartel Urbano, and with a well-known rap artist, Ali A.K. Mind, and we launched an open call in two cities. Cali had been at the heart of what we call the *social uprising* of 2020–2021. It became the epicentre of youth protest and popular mobilisation through culture, so much so that the city became a symbol of resistance. We selected twelve artists and invited them to develop either unfinished projects or entirely new creations. And a really important component of it was mentorship - mentoring in all aspects: music production, voice work, editing, marketing, navigating the industry. And that was critical because it was a project aimed at strengthening what they do. That creative lab was something really special.

[MUSIC: IGZ Siloé, Entre Rimas]

Ignacio Saiz: As we listened to the music that emerged from that project, one theme kept recurring: artist after artist spoke of rap as something that had literally saved their life. I wanted to understand what that meant.

María Camila Moreno: Ahí siempre estábamos permanentemente como en dos dimensiones. Una dimensión del rap como una herramienta de incidencia social y comunitaria. Un trabajo de prevención de que estos niños terminen en la calle o en la delincuencia. Y estaba la otra dimensión, que es esta dimensión más personal, más individual. Tarde o temprano todos llegaban un poco a eso, el rap me salvó. Me salvó de la calle. Me salvó de la droga. Me salvó de la marginalidad. Me dio un sentido de la vida, me dio un lugar de pertenencia. Y eso es importantísimo, porque estamos hablando también de sectores que han vivido desde siempre la discriminación, la exclusión.

Auska Ovando voice-over: It was as if rap was working constantly on two different levels. On one level, as a tool for social and community advocacy. As a tool of prevention, even, helping to keep young people away from the streets and out of trouble. But there was also this second, more personal dimension. Sooner or later, they would all arrive at the same realization: *rap saved me.* It saved me from the streets. It saved me from drugs. It saved me from a life on the margins. It gave me a sense of purpose, of belonging. And that's hugely important, because we're talking about communities that have spent their entire lives experiencing discrimination and exclusion.

María Camila Moreno: Para muchos hacer parte del proyecto de una u otra manera era sentirse reconocidos. Era que unas personas que de pronto aparecieron les decían: 'lo que

ustedes hacen es muy importante, es muy poderoso, ustedes son líderes, su trabajo vale la pena'. Eso para ellos era realmente muy, muy importante. Fue muy emotivo todo el tiempo, sabes? Fue una época en que recibí muchos abrazos! Y tener la posibilidad además de tener esta mentoría de Alí era para ellos como un bálsamo, sabes?

Auska Ovando voice-over: For many of them, being part of the project meant feeling recognized in some way. For someone to come along and say: 'What you're doing is really important, really powerful. You guys are leaders. Your work matters'. That meant so much to them. And it was very emotional - I got so many hugs during that time! And to have the opportunity to be mentored by Ali was really uplifting for them.

María Camila Moreno: Hay un grupo que es muy impresionante, que es Roll The Voice, que son estos chicos que hacen hip hop en sillas de ruedas. Varios de ellos son víctimas del conflicto, pero con una capacidad de resiliencia, con una energía. Después de haber pasado por momentos muy duros, muy oscuros, encontraron en el rap un sentido de la vida, y encontraron en el colectivo una razón para seguir luchando, por ellos mismos, por sus familias, por sus comunidades, eso es bellísimo.

Auska Ovando voice-over: There's a very powerful group called Roll The Voice who do hip-hop in wheelchairs. Several are survivors of the armed conflict, but they have incredible resilience and energy. Having lived through some very dark times, they say rap gave them a reason to live, and that being in the collective has given them a reason to keep fighting - for themselves, for their families and communities. It's really beautiful.

Ignacio Saiz: From there, we moved to Colombia's Truth Commission and ICTJ's work with the Elegguá Collective in Buenaventura, who used music to bring the Commission's findings to young people.

María Camila Moreno: Después de que la Comisión de la Verdad presenta al país su informe, empezaron a surgir muchas iniciativas de difusión. Es un informe de 10.000 páginas, denso, el resultado de cuatro años de investigación rigurosa, seria. Por lo tanto, el gran desafío fue cómo lograr que efectivamente ese informe permee a la sociedad colombiana, o sea, logre realmente generar las conversaciones que el país necesita sobre nuestro pasado y nuestro presente. Fueron surgiendo distintas iniciativas en el país de distintos colectivos que tenían interés de generar estas conversaciones en sus entornos.

Auska Ovando voice-over: After the Truth Commission presented its report, a lot of dissemination initiatives began to emerge. The report itself is about ten thousand pages long, it's a dense document, the product of four years of serious, rigorous research. So, the big challenge was how to ensure its findings would reach every sector of society and also generate the kinds of conversations the country needs to be having about our past and our present. So, groups across the country started coming up with their own initiatives to prompt those conversations in their communities.

María Camila Moreno: Buenaventura, que es el principal puerto de Colombia en el Pacífico Colombiano, es una ciudad muy afectada por la guerra, por el conflicto con unos también

problemas de violencia estructural, vinculados, sobre todo hoy en día, al narcotráfico, a las economías ilegales y al crimen transnacional. Entonces, en medio de ese contexto han surgido movimientos sociales muy importantes que han promovido el surgimiento de nuevas organizaciones. Entre ellas, esta Fundación Elegguá de Leonard Rentería, que es un comunicador social, un joven de las barriadas de Buenaventura, rapero, que con otros amigos y compañeros fundan este colectivo de comunicación que hace comunicación popular. Entonces, él nos propuso que apoyáramos una iniciativa para difundir los hallazgos principales del informe de la Comisión de la Verdad, pero dirigido fundamentalmente a los jóvenes, lo que ya suponía explorar metodologías y lenguajes distintos para traducir ese informe académico, sobre todo, en un lenguaje que le pudiera llegar a los chicos y las chicas de los barrios de Buenaventura. Por supuesto, usaron el rap, usaron otras estrategias de comunicación popular para propiciar estas conversaciones.

Auska Ovando voice-over: Now, Buenaventura – the main port on Colombia's Pacific coast – is a city that was very badly affected by the armed conflict. It also suffers from problems of structural violence, nowadays linked mainly to drug-trafficking, to illicit economies and transnational criminal networks. Some very significant social movements have emerged in that context and they've given rise to new organizations. One of them is the Elegguá Foundation, set up by Leonard Rentería — a young community media activist and rapper from Buenaventura — who with a group of colleagues founded Elegguá as a community-based communications collective. So, he approached us to support a project to raise awareness about the Truth Commission's findings among young people. That meant exploring different methods and modes of translating this very academic report into a language that could speak directly to young people from the neighbourhoods of Buenaventura. And of course, they used rap, along with other community-based communications strategies, to spark those conversations.

María Camila Moreno: Además, el Pacífico colombiano, ha sido un lugar muy importante para el rap colombiano. En los años 80, el rap de los Estados Unidos llegó muy rápido a Colombia en los buques que llegaban al puerto de Buenaventura. Y es que chicos de estos barrios marginales se iban de polizones en estos barcos y llegaban a los Estados Unidos. Y regresaban a Buenaventura, regresaban con esta cultura ya del hip hop y fueron de alguna manera quienes introdujeron, digamos, en buena medida al país la cultura hip hop.

Auska Ovando voice-over: I should add that Colombia's Pacific coast has a special place in the history of Colombian rap. In the 80s, rap arrived from the US on the ships that docked in the port of Buenaventura. Young people from Buenaventura's more deprived neighbourhoods would stow away on these ships and make their way to the US. And when they came back to Buenaventura, they brought that hip-hop culture with them. So, it was largely thanks to them that hip-hop was introduced in Colombia.

[MUSIC - El Marimbazo, SNEFF]

Ignacio Saiz: I ended by asking what these experiences had taught María Camila about the relationship between music and transitional justice, and whether she still believed that music could really be a powerful force for social transformation.

María Camila Moreno: Pues Ignacio, yo soy una convencida de que de que tenemos que seguir explorando lenguajes distintos si queremos realmente llegar a públicos más amplios y que no nos quedemos en los interesados de siempre y los expertos de siempre. Yo creo que la justicia transicional de la mano de la cultura, digamos, y de las expresiones culturales mejor, realmente pueden hacer una contribución para la transformación de las sociedades, ¿no?

Auska Ovando voice-over: Ignacio, I'm convinced that we need to keep exploring different languages if we really want to reach wider audiences and go beyond the usual specialists and experts. When it works hand in hand with culture and cultural expression, I believe transitional justice can really contribute to transforming societies.

María Camila Moreno: Somos una sociedad que todo lo queremos resolver con leyes. Pero al mismo tiempo tenemos una capacidad impresionante de saltarnos las leyes, ¿no? Eso nos tiene que llevar a la pregunta de cuándo y cómo vamos a transformar esos valores culturales, esos referentes que se necesita. Y pues yo creo que la apuesta sigue siendo necesariamente a llegar a los jóvenes ¿cuáles son las sensibilidades que hoy tienen estos jóvenes en estos contextos tan difíciles?

Auska Ovando: We're a society that thinks law is the answer to every problem. And yet, at the same time, we also have a remarkable capacity to find ways around the law when we want to. So, we have to ask ourselves: when and how do we transform those cultural values, those cultural reference points we need? So, I think the focus still has to be on reaching young people, to understand what resonates with them, growing up in these difficult circumstances.

María Camila Moreno: Entonces, pues nos toca explorar esos lenguajes. Y la música, la música permite conectar corazones, ¿no? La música permite que las distintas sensibilidades también se expresen, ¿no? Necesitamos que la diversidad no sea solo un discurso, sino que la diversidad sea emoción también. Que la diversidad sea sensibilidad, que la diversidad tenga la posibilidad de expresarse en todas las esferas de la vida social. Por eso yo creo que hay que seguir explorando estos caminos.

Auska Ovando voice-over: So we need to explore those other languages. And music, music connects hearts. It allows different feelings to find expression. Diversity has to be more than just rhetoric. It also has to be something we feel at an emotional level, that we are able to express in every sphere of our social lives. That's why I think we have to keep exploring these pathways.

Ignacio Saiz: Muchas gracias, María Camila.

María Camila Moreno: A tí, Ignacio.

[MUSIC: Yoki Barrios and Uva Lunera, Hombre Luchador]

Global Campus of Human Rights

Ignacio Saiz: We began this episode of Sounds of Justice with a range of sounds from Southeastern Europe: LéLe Mam singing Imam Bey's Mosque and Zaplakala; the band Replays from the Roma Rock School in North Macedonia singing Can You See Me?; and Let It Go by the Artchitects, a band from the Mitrovica Rock School in Kosovo.

We also heard the Rwandan rock group, The Galaxy singing Sinamenye, and the vocal group Windborne performing When I'm Gone, written by US protest singer Phil Ochs.

From Colombia, we heard the rapper MC Saya with Bienvenidos a Colombia; Inevitable by H2O: Hip Hop Organizado; Entre Rimas by the group IGZ Siloé; the Buenaventura-based artist SNEFF singing El Marimbazo; and we ended with Hombre Luchador (The Fighting Man), performed by Yoky Barrios and Uva Lunera.

You can find other episodes of Sounds of Justice wherever you get your podcasts and on the website of the Global Campus of Human Rights. I'm Ignacio Saiz. Thank you for listening.

RELEVANT LINKS:

Musicians Without Borders | Music as Resistance podcast

Mitrovica Rock School

International Center for Transitional Justice in Colombia