

interview with Juanes

Musician



**“Being a father means
opening your soul”**

The Colombian singer-songwriter Juanes, winner of 28 Grammy and Latin Grammy awards, became a father in 2003 when he and his wife, Karen Cecilia Martínez, welcomed Luna into the world, followed by Paloma (2005) and Dante (2009). For him, fatherhood is “the greatest gift in life” and he explains that it marked a new chapter for him. Since then, his discography has featured songs written for his children, like *Para tu amor*, which was composed when his daughter Luna was 2 weeks old, or *Tu guardián*, “a song that helps them get to sleep and protects them from monsters”.

In this father-to-father conversation with Michael Feigelson, CEO of the Van Leer Foundation, the artist reflects on how having children changed everything, how he takes care of himself so that he can take care of others, the role of music and art in raising children, and the importance of communication and being emotionally open to being a better husband and father.

The moment when I learned I was going to be a father is a special memory for me. Do you remember when Cecilia told you that you were going to be a father?

I’ve never told anyone this, but a few days before, in Los Angeles, a friend of mine sent me a message that said something like “I dreamed about you last night, and you had a daughter with little golden curls.” When we got to Bogotá, Cecilia missed her period, so she had an exam and indeed she was pregnant. I called my friend and asked her “Hey! Are you a witch or something?” (*laugther*).

We had always wanted to have children. I was very excited and nervous, typical for someone starting a new chapter of their life. I wasn’t scared. Actually, it was something I wanted from the bottom of my heart.

And the pregnancy? For us, it wasn’t quite what we had bargained for. The first three months were especially difficult. How was this process for you?

We were living in Bogotá when we started this new chapter, and at the time I was travelling too much. Not being able to be with Cecilia made me feel powerless, but at the same time we were very young and could handle it. When Cecilia was four



Photo: Juanes family photo archive

↑ Juanes and his two daughters

or five months pregnant, she came to Miami, and things were harder there because we didn’t have any friends or family, and when I travelled, she stayed alone. But we always dreamed of that new future, that new experience, and we accepted the challenge.

Then, the day arrived, and you met Luna for the first time. Can you describe that moment?

How did you feel?

Her birth was a time of great joy, but it was also a very tense moment because when one of my sisters gave birth three decades ago, there was a severe complication, and she fell into a coma for 27 years. I felt the same anxiety as I did then.

Afterwards, we forgot everything we prepared for, everything we rehearsed for the birth. When she was born, I counted her fingers, looked at her eyes, her lips, her nose, her mouth. There was so much joy in that room. The doctor, the nurse, and Cecilia and I were there and then, the next moment, somebody else was with us. We were so happy.

What did you learn from the experience of the first few days after Luna's birth that you could apply with Paloma and Dante? What was different?

I was too nervous with Luna. I didn't let anybody hold her. I was paranoid about everything. I woke up at midnight to make sure she was breathing well. I think that we were a little bit more relaxed with Paloma and Dante.

Mothers and fathers are always so committed to our children that sometimes we forget to take care of ourselves, of each other. How do you care for your wellbeing and that of Cecilia so that you can be parents?

Cecilia and I had a lot in common, and we still both like to play sports and stay healthy. But it's also important to talk a lot, to communicate. I think that dreaming together and seeing ourselves together in the future is important.

How do you use music in your role as a father to transmit that energy to your children as they grow up?

I think that art is very important in the cognitive development of any human being, especially during formative years. Art changed my childhood, and I was acutely aware of this when Luna, Paloma and Dante were born. I think that music, and everything that is playful, including textures, colours and scents, are critical.

I'm terrible at singing, but I discovered that, by singing the Hebrew chants from my bar mitzvah to my daughter, chants that I thought I had forgotten, she fell asleep. Lots of people feel uncomfortable singing because they don't sing well. What tip could you give to new dads who don't sing well on how to use music with their babies?

I think music is like air. Anyone can and should breathe it. It doesn't matter if you're not a professional singer. You don't have to be Pavarotti to sing to your baby. Your son or daughter connects with the vibration of your voice even before birth. Tuning isn't important. What's important is singing with love. They discover their voice, their tongue, their lips. They discover the sounds they can make and then they make words.

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I know that, with Dante, there was a moment when you made the decision to take a break from work. How did that process go?

When Dante was born in 2009, I couldn't handle the pain I felt and his crying when I left home. It was devastating because the same thing happened with Luna and Paloma. At that time, I realised that I had lost a lot of time without making a space where I could look after myself.

It was pretty strange at that moment. They thought I was crazy. Why would I want to stop earning so much money and abandon a very successful streak? But I made the right decision. I only took a break of four or five months, but that was what I needed. I needed to be at home with them. Today we have a great relationship. We are really connected, and I think that this is thanks to the fact that I made that decision.

← Paloma, Juanes, Dante, Cecilia, Luna



Photo: Juanes' family photo archive

Why do you think that it is so hard for us to make that type of decision as fathers?

We are educated in a society where you always need to be producing, but our children and our relationship with them is what we need to care about. I was very anxious at that time because it could have been the end of my career, but today, in retrospect, I feel happy because I made a decision that was consistent with who I am.

“Vulnerability makes you strong.”

In our work, I’ve seen that, especially for fathers, and men in general, it’s difficult to open up emotionally. Why do you think this happens?

I think that, maybe for the same reason why society demands that we produce more and more, we have also had a macho society in which men can’t cry, can’t show any type of “weakness”. But I think vulnerability makes you strong. Talking with your best friends or people you confide in about your problems at home or with your children can be the healthiest thing you can do.

I understand that you often sing to your mother. It seems like a really great way to care for her, to repay her for the care she gave you during childhood. How did this tradition start? What do you usually sing to her?

Growing up there was always singing in my house, especially when we spent time together in the living room. I think that my mother is really connected to that time. When I sing those songs to her, I think she remembers. Whenever I go home, she asks me to sing to her. In my house we listened to a lot of music from all over, but mostly Latin American music. She really likes when I sing a song to her called *Sapo Cancionero*, interpreted by Los Chalchaleros.



Photo: Juanes' family photo archive

↑ Juanes with his mother and daughter

Note

In 2006, Juanes started the foundation Mi Sangre, which is dedicated to a culture of peace in Colombia. Mi Sangre develops life, leadership and social entrepreneurship skills in children and young adults. By guiding the new generation, Mi Sangre helps prepare future mothers and fathers in Colombia.

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