

BREAKING THE SILENCE

The story of Colombian Drug Kingpin Escobar through the Eyes of his Son

The idea of making “Sins of My Father” first came about around the end of 2005, when I had an opportunity to meet Sebastián Marroquin, the only son of Pablo Escobar. Sebastián was born Juan Pablo Escobar in 1977 but was granted a name change shortly after his father’s death for security reasons. By the time of our meeting, he had been living in Argentina for a decade but few people knew about him, or his story.



Between 1984, the year Escobar ordered the assassination of the Minister of Justice Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, and 1993, when Escobar was finally killed, Sebastián was exposed to violence from many sides. He witnessed from close quarters the horrible violence inflicted on others by his father, described to me by former President Cesar Gaviria as “the worst in Colombia’s history.” Not only did he see violence being inflicted on others, but he was also subjected to the violence used by his father’s persecutors, the paramilitary group known as Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar, or “Los Pepes,” and the Colombian security forces. The latter were desperate to stop Escobar, often seemingly disregarding any respect for human rights in the process.

When Escobar was killed, Sebastián was sixteen years old. He was forced to choose whether to follow in his father’s footsteps or to break with the circle of violence to which he seemed destined. Sebastián chose the latter. Los Pepes lifted a \$4,000,000 reward on his head. Gustavo de Greiff, the Attorney General of Colombia, provided new identities for him, his mother and his sister. And so began their lives in exile. In December 1994, after a brief stay in Mozambique, Sebastián moved to Argentina with his mother and sister under their new identities. No one else knew about this. Neither the Argentinean Government nor the Argentinean President, Carlos Menem, were notified.

After eleven years of silence, Sebastián agreed to tell me his story for the first time. The story of his life with Pablo Escobar. He warned me, however, that he would never dare set foot in Colombia because among the conditions under which he was able to leave the country alive were agreements that he would never engage in drug trafficking and that he would never return to Colombia. Sebastián feared what might happen if he did.

Nevertheless, in March 2007, Sebastián accepted an offer to travel to Ecuador with me. The idea was to drive from Quito all the way to the Colombian border, where we would visit the bridge he had crossed thirteen years earlier with his mother and sister as they fled the country. That was the point at which Juan Pablo Escobar became Sebastián Marroquín. Shortly before our departure, his mother, now known as María Isabel Santos, decided to join us on the trip. She wanted to find out who was making a documentary about Sebastián and to help protect her son. When we returned to Argentina, María Isabel invited me to Medellín to view the private archives of the Escobar family, composed of hundreds of pictures, home-movies and letters.

A few days after I returned from Ecuador, I traveled to Medellín to meet for the first time with the sons of Rodrigo Lara Bonilla and Luis Carlos Galán, Escobar's two most prominent victims. Lara Bonilla had been Minister of Justice when, in 1983, he became the first political figure to publicly denounce Escobar and to call for his resignation as a Congressman. He had also called for the raid of Tranquilandia, the biggest cocaine-processing lab ever found. Within a matter of a few hours, Escobar and his associates lost thirteen tons of cocaine, with an estimated street value of 1.2 billion U.S. Dollars. A month later, on 30 April, 1984, Lara was assassinated by sicarios working for Escobar. Never before had organized crime in Colombia gone so far. Several years later, Galán, a co-founder of Lara's New Liberalism Party, had become a leading candidate for the presidency. On his third attempt, he seemed destined to become President of Colombia. According to the polls, he was a clear winner. On 18 August, 1989 he was assassinated. With him died the hopes of millions of Colombians.

From the outset of making the documentary, I dreamt of a possible meeting between the sons of Lara and Galán and the son of Escobar. I will never wholly understand the reasons why Rodrigo Lara (Jr.), Juan Manuel, Carlos and Claudio Galán agreed to take part in this project. I believe that they could see within me the will to make a sincere and original project in a difficult and complex country like Colombia.

I spent a considerable amount of time with them, traveling all across Colombia. I had opportunities to meet with senators, mayors, and even Vice-President Francisco Santos and Former President César Gaviria, both survivors of Escobar's violence. I was introduced to members of left-wing parties, such as the Polo Democrático, and conservative parties. I visited luxurious penthouses as well as neighborhoods which were entirely under water. I met with journalists and drug-dealers and spent time with soldiers, peasants, intellectuals and even former bandits.

The process of making this documentary allowed Sebastián some time for reflection and in January 2009 he asked me to give a letter he had written to the sons of Galán and Lara. In his letter, Sebastián wondered: "How do you start a conversation with someone who was done so much harm by your own father?" and asked for forgiveness for his father's crimes. Rodrigo Lara, who inherited his father's courage and spontaneity, took the next step. Since Sebastián was still afraid to visit Colombia, Rodrigo came with me to Buenos Aires to meet him. They both knew that this meeting, which took place in the utmost secrecy, was only a first step. The Galán brothers had not yet answered Sebastián's letter and I started to fear that they never would.

Rodrigo's decision to travel to Buenos Aires, however, helped convince Sebastián to travel to Colombia. In fact, Rodrigo and I mentioned this possibility to the Galán brothers. Unfortunately, the timing could not have been worse. The slow investigation into their father's death had just taken a sudden turn. The Colombian Judiciary was investigating a number of public figures, besides Escobar, for potential links to the assassination, and the three brothers feared that a potential meeting with Escobar's son could be misread. Nevertheless, they accepted our proposal with great courage.



In the end, I was able to witness a historic event. Without any sort of preconditions or arrangements, the sons of Lara and Galán gathered in Bogotá to meet with the son of Pablo Escobar. This time Sebastián was able to ask for forgiveness “To their eyes.”

“We don’t have anything to forgive you for,” Juan Manuel answered. His brother Carlos added “My father used to say that we are all victims of drug trafficking. You have been a victim.” What did Sebastián’s request for forgiveness mean then? That night, I finally understood what Sebastián had meant when he asked in his letter: “How do you start a conversation with someone who was done so much harm by your own father?” The answer: by asking for forgiveness. Even if one did not commit the crimes oneself, asking for forgiveness is fundamentally a gesture of humility and friendship. The response he was given was a touching acknowledgment that the sons of Pablo Escobar’s victims did not hold Sebastián morally responsible for the violence waged by his father. If Sebastián Marroquín was able to rebuild a life for himself free of violence, and if Rodrigo, Juan Manuel, Claudio and Carlos were able to see past his link to Pablo Escobar, their fathers’ killer, then we must realize that it is possible for other young Colombians across the country to discover another way of life, free from continuous cycles of violence. As Rodrigo Lara (Jr.) said: “This gesture will contribute to shaping a better country than the one in which we lived our tender youths.”

Nicolas Entel is a filmmaker. His latest project is the documentary *Sins of My Father*, which tells the story of Colombian drug kingpin Pablo Escobar through the eyes of his only son, as well as the sons of his most prominent victims. Nicolas directed the multiple-award-winning documentary film *Orquesta Tipica*. He has won several awards from the likes of the Sundance Institute, NALIP, IDFA and others. He has also contributed to several print publications including *Americas Quarterly* (US), *La Nacion* and *Haciendo Cine* (Argentina).