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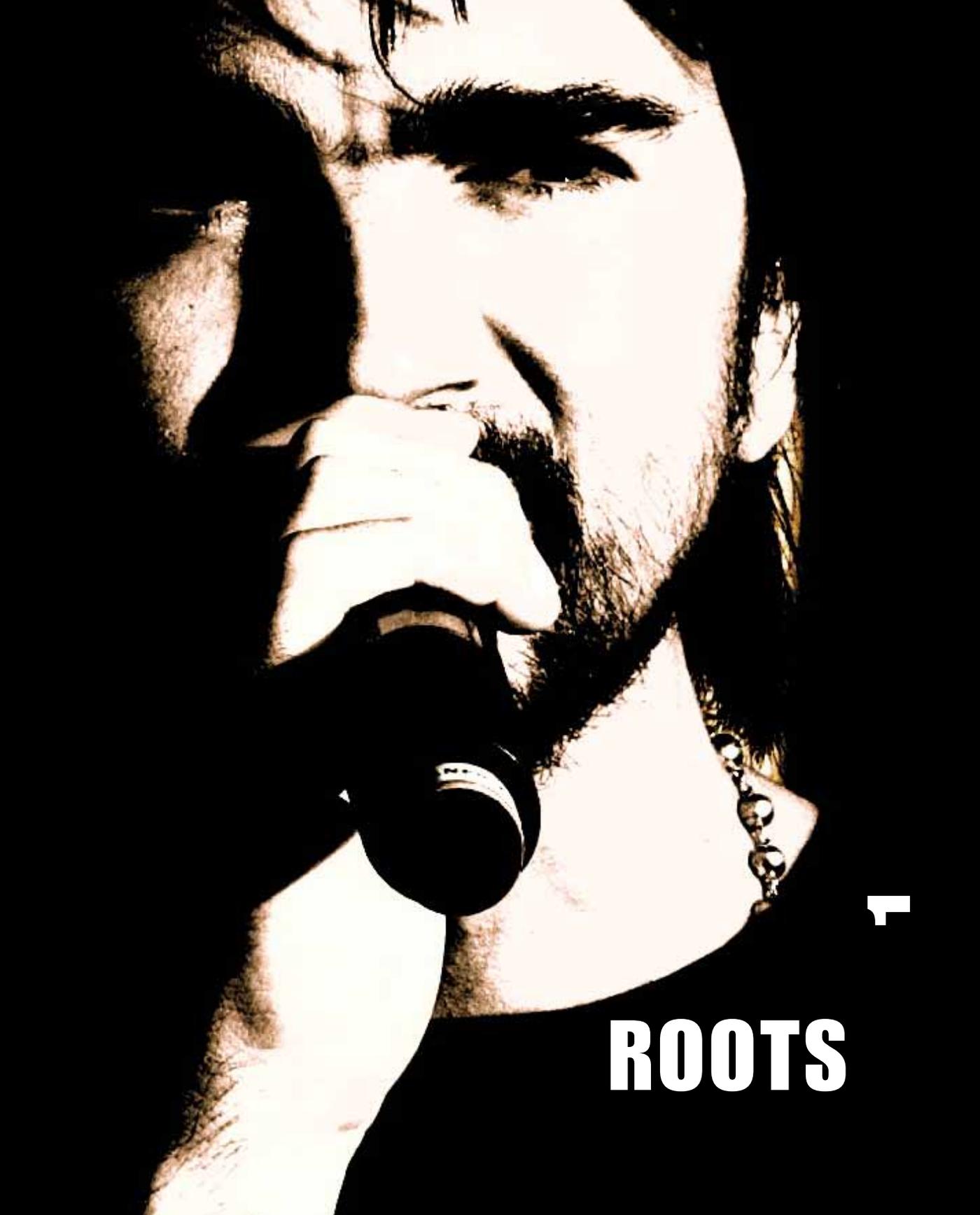
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1

ROOTS



hen I was a child,
my mother taught
me the value

of spirituality, and it has
marked my life ever since.

I even have a few images
stowed away in my mind:
kneeling down to pray
before going to bed while
my brother Jaime slept or
watched television.





I was only five years old and would constantly repeat to myself: “As long as God is with me, I will never want for anything, nothing bad will happen to me, and I will always have faith. No matter what happens, no matter the situation . . . I will always have faith.” I continue to say that today. Whether in various forms or under different names, I’ve done this all my life.

As I continued to grow and dream, God was my constant, vital reference point, even in the day-to-day happenings of life. He helped me succeed in school, to feel the strength necessary to go out onstage and sing at school assemblies, and to pass those math tests that always terrified me.

Every week, during religion classes at the Catholic school I attended, we discussed biblical passages with the teacher. My faith was blind and I saw the world only from that point of view. Obviously, that was the only perspective I saw and accepted from my environment, family, and school. Now I’m more aware than ever of the power of the mind, of our capacity to construct and destroy with our thoughts. My entire journey through music and life has been based on yearning, on dreaming, on that blind faith in the universe that makes things happen when you wish for them. From the biggest success to the deepest failure, I’ve visualized it all in my mind before it comes to pass. Of course there are variations, but in essence I’ve seen it first, I’ve imagined it . . .

At night, after dinner, my parents prayed the rosary. I fondly remember those warm, simple nights with the whole family, parents and children sitting at the table. Javier Emilio is the oldest of six siblings and the main reason I’m singing and playing the guitar today. Next came Luz Cecilia, who was always the most diligent and studious, the perfect daughter, until destiny made its cruel-



est judgment and brought it down upon the entire family. Immediately after she gave birth to her daughter, Luz Cecilia suffered internal hemorrhaging that left her in a coma that persists to this day—she’s spent twenty years in bed without knowing a thing, if she can feel or hear or see. Looking back, we still can’t understand why this happened to her or our family.

Then there’s José Luis, perhaps as studious as Luz Cecilia, dedicated to household finances, very reserved and prepared. After him is Mara, or María Victoria, who’s been a joyful soul, a horse lover to the end, and one of my closest confidantes—she knows everything (or almost everything) about my life. And Jaime, the finest of all the Aristizabals, an organized and devoted sports fan. Finally, Aunt Adíela rounds out the family that surrounded me in my youth.





All of these people were part of the loveliest moments of my childhood. Now that I'm a father myself, I try to re-create the same sense of closeness with my children, and with my friends and acquaintances as well. "Family is made around the table," I once heard someone say. It's absolutely true! What better place but at home to share the day with the people you love?

When I think back to that time, I always see my dad, Javier Aristizabal, sitting in his chair after having his usual cup of tea—a ritual as sacred as the rosary itself—repeating the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Glory Be to the Father, the First Mystery, then beginning the exact chorus again in unison with my aunt and mom, who was responsible for keeping the cadence and giving rhythm to the oration. My dear mother, Alicia Vásquez, has always been and continues to be a balm in my life. She is one of those quiet, taciturn women who say little and yet, when they do, speak with such wisdom and honesty. A woman of few words and great truth. Pure goodness. That's my mother.

At first, my siblings and I had to stay at the table until we finished the entire rosary—every night of the week, Monday to Friday, and then on the weekends as well. As we grew up, my siblings—from oldest to youngest—were allowed to leave the table at the start of the oration.



The youngest of the six, I spent the most time at the table—ten years more than Javier, the oldest—and ended up sitting with my parents and aunt Adíela, following the exact same chorus each and every night, with my mom’s unmistakable cadence and rhythm. Somehow, I came to understand it as a meditation or a form of disconnecting from reality and entering a sort of trance that empowers everyone present. Today, I see it as one of those magical moments that define our life and which we can only fully appreciate many years later. I feel it’s a moment of introspection that goes beyond simply repeating words from memory; to me it’s like a moment of silence in which you truly listen to that internal voice that’s always speaking to you—the voice that speaks to all of us. I sum up the day or night, I reach a balance, and I put my mind and my faith to work constructing new dreams, new days. What has become a daily exercise has accompanied me, in one form or another, since the tender days of my youth.

Sometimes as I’m stretched out on the floor next to the bed, my wife will call out, “Juan, are you okay?” She asks because it looks like I’ve passed out on my back, but in fact I do it to meditate. From time to time, an hour or more can pass in which my mind goes a bit crazy, swaying this way and that until it finds the particular shade of white that it seeks.

Like many houses in Latin America, ours was filled with religious images. In fact, when it came to the crucifix hanging in my mother's room, the only thing she didn't do was talk to it. Every time she passed by she would touch it as a means of asking for something or offering her thanks for a blessing received. So I learned to do the very same thing, and every time I was near it, I touched it to ask for a favor or to show my gratitude for a favor received.

Hanging over my bed was a watercolor painting of Jesus that my mom bought for a few dollars from a woman in Carolina del Príncipe, the town where my parents had a country home we'd go to for vacation or on the weekends. That image of Jesus emitted a special sort of energy; there was a great sense of mystery in his gaze, a strange mysticism amid a very dark background. The peculiarity of the image—common in religious paintings—was that I could see Jesus following me with his eyes from whatever angle I stood. I knelt down in front of that painting every night to pray, and there my sense of spirituality and connection with God grew. The painting still exists to this day, and now hangs in my mom's house in Medellín.



From a very young age, my imagination was brimming with fantasies, histories, theories, legends, poetry, and reality. Back then, we lived in a house in the center of Medellín not far from Calle Argentina and El Palo. It was a







big house with many rooms and a patio out back. We even had a turtle. I spent my time walking from one end of the house to the other, playing and discovering the world through music, television, and schoolbooks.

My childhood was a happy one, and I grew up surrounded by many family members. I remember my dad and my brothers and sisters singing popular Latin American songs, by Los Hermanos Visconti, Los Chalchaleros, Carlos Gardel, Lucho Gatica, and Julio Jaramillo. Javier, the oldest, was the first to catch the guitar-and-song fever, and we all followed, each in our own unique style.

Javier always sang tangos and music by Los Hermanos Visconti; José preferred songs about broken hearts, Las Hermanitas Calle, an occasional *vallenato*, and *carrilera* music. Jaime sang Francis Cabrel and *la boquitrompona (guasca)*. And finally there was me, crazy about every genre, especially Cuban ballads and music from the south, like *zambas*, *chacareras*, tangos, and the like.

There were always a few guitars lying around the living room, and they caught my attention at a very young age. Three or four on the sofa, the armchair, the table. This always bothered my mom, who would hide them in a corner or behind a curtain so the house wouldn't seem messy, but it was hopeless: the guitars always found their way back out into the open.

It was usually Javier and I who sat down to play songs by ear—by Los Hermanos Visconti, Los Chalchaleros, Julio Jaramillo, and so on—or compose what we could. Javier even paired up with an old friend named Pol, and they called themselves Los Conti, in honor of Los Hermanos Visconti. You can imagine the fanaticism we had in our house for that Argentine folk duo. On some occasions we were all able to get together to sing—Jaime, José, Javier, and myself. I admit there were moments when I got pretty excited, since music united us in a truly incredible way; it was like one of those climactic moments in movies where everything and everyone is at the peak of happiness. There are a few pictures of me playing music with my brothers when I was eight years old and could barely wrap my arms around the guitar because it was bigger than me.

One day when I was home from school with the chicken pox, I went into José's room and found a beautiful harp buried under some clothes and shoes in his closet. It was a woody color and was missing a few strings, and it had some thick wool yarn wrapped around the head and soundboard, which was often how it was used by student bands. I took it out, laid it on the bed, and dusted it off. It looked like it hadn't been used in several years. I think it belonged to my aunt Pastora (who wasn't a shepherdess, even though that's how her name translates) from her days playing in a neighborhood group. I traced my fingers across the strings and that alone was enough to create a sound that drove me absolutely wild.

It was love at first sight. For years, I'd felt a special attraction to music through my father and



