

Interview with Augusto Hernán Rodríguez López, Southeastern Plains  
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An Excerpt

Augusto Hernán Rodríguez López was born in Medina, Cundinamarca on April 27, de 1963. He is an instrument maker who specializes in harps.

**How long have you been making instruments and where did you learn?**

I come from Medina, Cundinamarca. . . . My father was a carpenter; that's where the idea came from, but I did not learn this first. First, I was a musician. I played *cuatro*, harp, and *maracas*.

When I was fourteen, I would go to Cumaral to the fair. That was a treat to listen to a *llanero* group play. I listened intently. On Saturdays, I would listen to “*Viajando por el Llano*,” a long-time radio show on the La Voz del Llano radio station, and it made me happy. My brother has always loved *llanero* music, and I would learn from him. We were avid radio listeners. But I always wanted to have an instrument in my own hands, and I dreamed of playing the harp. As it happened, I came to Cumaral for high school, where I found a long-established and deep-rooted heritage of *llanero* music. There, I was finally able to see a harp, to hold it in my own hands, to feel it close to me; and my first instinct was to buy a harp, to have one made for me. But where would I find the money? During school vacations we would plant acres of corn. My father would say, “Let's help the ‘chino’ (kid) plant his half acre.” That year I decided I would buy my harp.

My father was a carpenter and farmer. He made coffins—I played music for the living and he provided his services for the dead. I had my harp built [in my father's workshop by one of the carpenters]. [He] began to build it and I was right there with him. I would help to plane and split the wood, everything by hand because we had no [power] tools. During the year or so that he stayed with us, I learned how harps were designed at that time. . . . The first ones I built had a lot of defects because he never told me the correct dimensions; I had to imitate him because he would not share his secrets. I also tried my hand at making *cuatros* but they were a pain in the neck, one side was always bigger than the other.

And I used to eyeball the frets, and that's not the way to do it. You have to buy the top cover because you can't get the right result working the wood. The grain of the wood, the face of the wood has to run in a certain direction, and it can warp under the pressure of the strings. You have to use a veneer for the top to resist the pressure the strings running in a single direction apply. But the underlying structure, the sound box, is made from cedar; and cedar is readily available.

So I started with Prisciliano [the carpenter]; I would shadow him. Every month or two I would spend a whole day with him and his crew. I would treat them to a soft drink or would invite them to lunch so they would share their information and let me watch how they work. I was bound and determined to learn by observing how they worked with the tools. Then we bought a gasoline motor to power the splitting of the wood, and everything changed. I began to find customers that were willing to buy from me even though my instruments weren't of the highest quality. They would ask me to build them

a harp; they would offer a tape recorder as barter. At first I would work in my friends' workshops of some friends. However, I decided that I would save up to buy a saw, and I did. We built this house, and I decided that I would get better organized. I had a small workshop. But I also had a band, and I started to do things with the Casa de la Cultura, and that's when things really took off for me with *llanero* music and instruments. I would teach in the afternoon, and in the morning I would work on instruments that I could sell to the students and the schools. After a while I realized that making instruments was more profitable and less stressful, so I stopped playing.

**Have you taught anyone to make harps?**

I'm teaching my son. He's on his way. He's introducing innovations beyond what I have done because he has a different mentality. He's not bound by my experience. He has a different vision, which is helping him develop his own more sophisticated style.

**What produces the sound of the harp?**

The wood and the workmanship. There's a lot of knowledge involved. You have to know how to buy the wood. It cannot have knots; the fibers need to be aligned in one direction and not crossed. It needs to be totally dry. The sound comes from the vibration of the wood. If the wood is not right, the sound will be dull and any musician would notice.

**...and the sound?**

The quality varies. There are melodic sounds, that is, when you play the instrument you hear a resonance 25 yards away. With others, the sound dies right away. That is due to the quality of the wood. I buy the wood at the lumber yard. I go myself to choose it. I can tell if a board is not good. It may look good; it may be good for making a piece of furniture, but it doesn't fit our needs. In my case, they already know the kind of wood I am looking for, and when they see a piece that fits my needs, they call to say they have a beautiful board for me. Beginning with the selection of the wood one starts to define the characteristics of the instrument. It's not the same thing to buy a 30,000 pesos instrument or one that costs half a million or a million pesos.