

Lila Downs

LA CANTINA “entre copa y copa...”

Exploring and expressing Mexico's rich culture has been a lifelong passion for Lila Downs. *La Cantina*: “Entre Copa y Copa...” marks a unique turn in her career path, as she focuses intently on the rich and familiar repertoire of Mexico's beloved *cancion ranchera* tradition. The *cancion ranchera* is typically a ballad about heartache, solitude, love and longing — a song such as one would typically hear in a local cantina. It is a musical tradition quite akin to Portugal’s *fado*, or to the Delta blues — deeply soulful, often lamenting, always emotionally vivid. Downs and her partner, multi-instrumentalist Paul Cohen reflect, “Our new album brings out smiles and complicity from every person in the audience. After all, who doesn't like to go out to a bar, have some drinks and cry to your favorite songs?... Well, maybe not everyone cries, but we can all remember — as we say in Spanish: ‘I'm not crying. It's that cigarette smoke making my eyes burn...’”

Special guest Flaco Jimenez, the legendary Tejano accordionist, brings his rootsy *norteño* sound to the mix. In the hands of Lila and her band, this historic repertoire is handled with a hip, contemporary edge that surely draws from her residency in the great melting pot of New York City in recent years — a world away from her dual upbringing in Minnesota and the Sierra Madre mountains of Oaxaca.

Living in such varied environments, Downs took after her mother’s stage career by singing mariachi tunes at age 8. Her career continued to evolve, studying voice as a teenager in Los Angeles and then in Oaxaca City at Bellas Artes, before graduating with a double degree in voice and anthropology from the University of Minnesota. But it was only through music that Downs reconciled her heritage. “It took a long time to decide that I wanted to sing,” she says. “Something needed to motivate me.” That motivation was the songs and stories of the Oaxacan people. Her Mixtec mother spurred Downs to sing songs with *sentimiento* — a deep, almost empathic emotion which has left audiences of all cultures and countries spellbound.

Downs recalls the first time she was struck with this particular brand of *sentimiento*. “While I was in Oaxaca, I was asked to translate from English to Mixtec death certificates of young boys who had left for the United States searching for work. Their relatives wanted to know how they had died. It was so powerful, being this translator of their deaths. I had to sing about it, to honor them if I could.” Composing became a powerful artistic and cultural outlet for Downs and in 1997, she released her extraordinary debut album, *LA SANDUNGA*. Featuring interpretations of Oaxacan traditional songs, boleros, and rancheras, as well as her own compositions, this first expression of her very original vision evoked a rich past while ushering a vibrant new contemporary voice onto the world stage. For *TREE OF LIFE* (2000), Downs further bridged past and present by drawing inspiration from the mythological account in the 16th century *Codex Vindobonesis* telling of the first Mixtec people being born from trees. Singing in both Mixtec and Spanish, Downs artfully showcased the traditional cumbia and ranchera styles alongside eclectic mixes inspired by border life.

The idea of life on the border provided the central theme to her follow-up album, *BORDER/LA LINEA*. Dedicated to the Mexican migrants, the collection of songs exposed the plight of migrant workers as well as the hardships and racism endured by indigenous peoples. Accompanied by pre-Colombian and Mexican folk instruments, Downs infused jazz, gospel, and hip-hop influences into traditional cumbias for a powerful musical, cultural, and political statement.

On stage — whether in Europe, the U.S., or Mexico — Downs cuts a striking figure. Donning vibrant, traditionally-inspired clothing, jewelry, and thick braids, she embodies the spirit of her music with an emotion-drenched physicality. Her resemblance to Mexican artist Frida Kahlo has long-been noted and — in addition to playing a role — she sang the Oscar-nominated song to the major motion picture, *Frida* which starred Salma Hayek in the title role. She also became the first Latina to perform at the Academy Awards telecast.

The next year, Downs released *ONE BLOOD/UNA SANGRE*. In some ways, the album represented a culmination of her music and mission, delving deep into her Oaxacan heritage with songs sung not only in Spanish and English but in such rarer Mexican languages as Nahuatl, Trique, Zapotec, Mixtec and Purepecha, with a vibrancy celebrating the Mexican diaspora, connecting the modern with tradition. Winning a Latin Grammy for Best Folk Album, *ONE BLOOD* was lauded by press worldwide and catapulted Downs among the finest interpreters of folkloric music.

Lila Downs continues her celebration of her homeland on *LA CANTINA*. Included on the album is *Tacha*, a corrido about a young woman who leaves her small rural community to become a table dancer in the city. *El Relampago* (“the lightning bolt”) is a celebration through song of the earth's fertility, interpreted in the old mariachi style known as *son calentano*. *La Cumbia del Mole* is a tribute to the women who cook the artful and spiritual Mexican mole, a rich and spicy sauce. The recipe for mole combines chiles, nuts, fruits and chocolate, ground and cooked for the fiestas of the pueblos. Among the classic rancheras included in this album is the song *Pa' todo el Año*, by one of the most important composers of the genre, Jose Alfredo Jimenez:

“...Para de hoy en adelante, ya el amor no me interesa,  
Cantare por todo el mundo, mi dolor y mi tristeza  
porque se que de este golpe, ya no voy a levantarme,  
y aunque yo no lo quisiera, voy a morirme de amor”.

From now on, I have no interest in love;  
I will sing the world over, about my pain and my sadness  
Because I know that from this blow, I will never stand up again  
And though I may not desire it, I will die of love.

Downs sings on this album with an innate emotional vibrancy, and her extraordinary voice is as varied in color and range as the musicians with whom she performs — a

harpist from Paraguay/Mexico, a guitarist from Brazil, an accordionist and bass player from New York, a drummer from Chile, and a pianist/saxophonist/musical director from New Jersey, each bringing his particular musical slant to Downs' highly distinctive sound.

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