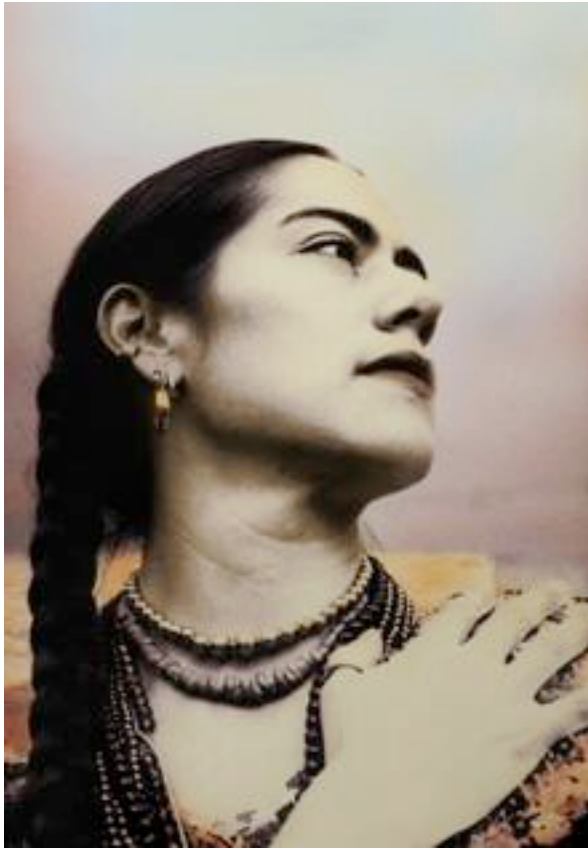


Clash of cultures inspires Downs

Mexican-American singer gets to roots of old, new worlds

By Mark Jordan



From birth, Lila Downs, the Mexican-American singer who performs at Germantown Performing Arts Centre Sunday night, has straddled two worlds.

Her father, Allen Downs, was an American academic, an art professor of Scottish heritage from Minnesota. Her mother, Anastasia Sánchez, was a Mixtec Indian from the remote Mexican state of Oaxaca, a strong-willed former child bride who escaped an abusive husband by walking, penniless and barefoot, to Mexico City.

But after having a child, Downs and Sánchez did not stay together. Downs spent her childhood shuttling back and forth for extended periods between the modern, Anglo world of the Midwest, and the exotic, tradition-bound world of rural Mexico.

It's that clash that is at the heart of Downs' music. Over a half-dozen albums, the Latin Grammy-winner, with her husband and collaborator, saxophonist Paul Cohen, have simultaneously preserved the musical heritage of her mother and expanded on it through careful integration with American influence.

"I like to look for the roots of all different kinds of music," Downs says from her New York home, "so my music has the influence of the blues or some jazz, a bit of different forms of Latin music like rumba, different genres that really aren't very well known in the U.S."

Her upbringing has made Downs a unique ambassador for a way of life that is rapidly vanishing. Today it is estimated that there are only about 300,000 Mixtec-speaking people left.

"I feel that I'm a very privileged individual because I'm able to go back and forth between borders," says Downs. "That isn't the case for a lot of my family members or a lot of the people from my home village on the Mexican side."

Downs spent most of her youth living with her father in California and Minnesota. Allen Downs unexpectedly died when she was 16, and it aggravated the average adolescent identity crisis.

"That kind of influenced my position in life, and it made me very thirsty for my native roots," she says of her time in Minnesota. "I became very aware of my otherness. Why did I have dark skin? Why was I so different from everybody around me?"

Moving to Oaxaca to be with her mother, Downs immersed herself in her mother's culture, rich with its own language, religion and artistic style, including a rich tradition of song. For college, she went back to Minnesota, studying classical voice and anthropology.

"Particularly I was interested in the way some people control other people," she says. "In Mexico that's our story: the clash of the native cultures, which were quite developed in some parts of the country, with the Spanish and, of course, Catholicism. It's something that's very confusing, because growing up I would see my grandmother speaking her native language and then gesture to the earth because she had these kinds of relationships through her unique culture with the natural world."

After dropping out for a few years to follow the Grateful Dead, a choice that was more about the lifestyle than the music, Downs finished her degree and eventually found her way into performing.

She had already recorded three well-received albums when actress Salma Hayek tapped her to work on her movie film biography of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, an iconic figure in Mexican culture who came from the same area as Downs' mother.

Downs appeared in the movie and contributed a song to the soundtrack, "Burn It Blue," which she performed at the Academy Awards when it was nominated for Best Original Song.

Though she enjoyed the experience, Downs, who recently completed work on a new album due for release in the fall, plays down her involvement in the film.

"It's more of a reference for people who are in the media because it's not really changed my life drastically," she says.

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