



SONGS AND SPIRITS

For Christine Salem music is more than just art – it’s a direct connection to the spirits of her ancestors. Jane Cornwell speaks to La Réunion’s rising *maloya* star

PHOTO J NOEL ENILORAC

Christine Salem was 12-years-old when the *djinns* paid their first visit. A friend’s mother, a priestess at the *servis kabaré* ceremonies linked to *maloya*, the rich percussive music of Réunion Island, saw something in this dark-eyed girl that felt ancient, other. So she put her in a trance and brought it out. “The spirits came through me,” says the 30-something composer and performer, sitting poolside at a hotel on her beloved La Réunion, an island off the east coast of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. “I started singing words I didn’t know,” she adds in her self-contained way. “I began writing in Arabic.”

She fetches a black notebook from her bag and shows me pages filled with cursive script she had written automatically, right to left, usually in the middle of the night. Certain words repeat themselves: love, peace, wisdom. None of this would be very remarkable had Salem not grown up speaking only French and Creole. Until that childhood trance, she knew nothing of Arabic or the other languages that mix and mingle in this ‘overseas department’ of France, an 11-hour flight from Paris.

Today Salem’s shows find her singing in a hybrid language, a blend of Malagasy, Comorian, Swahili and Creole (itself a mix of the languages that have shaped the island). And all while wielding a hefty *kayamb* reed shaker, which she plays by twisting her upper body from her hips as she croons and chants in her potent contralto, or calls-and-responds with her singing percussionists, David Abrousse and Harry Perigoné.

“Réunion is a melting pot,” says Salem. In 2009 she set about researching the languages and forms linked to *maloya*, which is a tradition rooted in the work songs of the slaves who were taken from East Africa and Madagascar. The genre was banned until the 60s for its connection to Creole culture and performances of some groups with links to the Réunion Communist Party were banned until 1981. “Everyone understands different traditions according to where they come from,” she says. “Practices that used to be hidden are now more open. Thirty years ago, if people played the music of *servis kabaré* in the street, their instruments were broken or burned.”

Having endured generations of repression, *maloya* is now officially recognised by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage and is the main expression of the identity of Réunion at a cultural and musical level. *Maloya* runs like a golden thread through the four-day Sakifo festival in the southwest coastal town of Saint-Pierre. There is electro *maloya* from Nathalie Nathiembé, whose dynamic support slot on the opening night eclipsed that of headliner Manu Chao. There are also *maloya rap*, *maloya rock* and *malogué*, or *maloya-reggae*. Sakifo’s dedicated *maloya* hut, a palm-thatched affair with tongue-sizzling Creole food proved the place to be. Performances-cum-jams led by the Pavarotti-sized singer Tiloun saw a host of local artists joining in on instruments including the *bob* (musical bow), *pikér* (bamboo log drums) and *roulér* (rum-barrel drums).

Tiloun’s silky vocals were cracking from overuse by early Sunday morning, when Sakifo’s free Risofé concert brought the denizens of Saint Pierre out in force. This year’s host, 79-year-old *maloya* icon Firmin Viry, welcomed guests including Tiloun, Lindigo frontman Olivier Arasta and the WOMEX award-winning Danyèl Waro, his former pupil, to the beachside stage. Waro and Viry shared a hug before Waro stepped up to the mic to sing – like everyone else – in Creole. “Danyèl is a poet, a protest singer and my role model,” says Salem of her elder, the man who introduced *maloya* to

the world. It was through Danyèl Waro that Salem met Philippe Conrath, whose Cobalt label releases music by both artists, and who in 2002 arranged for Salem to play European gigs including a showcase at WOMEX that kick-started several years’ worth of touring and recording.

Salem kept up her day job as a social worker and summer camp leader right up until October last year, when burgeoning musical stardom prompted by performances at the likes of the Australasian Worldwide Music Expo forced her hand. Social work kept her grounded; she saw something of herself in the free-spirited kids of Saint Denis, the island’s capital, where she grew up learning music in the streets of the ramshackle Camellias neighbourhood and playing defence in her local football team. The second youngest of five sports-mad children, she heard that her father was an accordion player. “I can’t be sure,” she says. “I never knew him.”

Singing made her feel good, so she took workshops in gospel and American pop, fell in love with the blues of John Lee Hooker, the doo-wop of the Platters and the soul of Otis Redding. At school she studied French history: “I didn’t understand why I was learning about white people in Europe when I had black skin and lived on La Réunion.” She shrugs. “The school curriculum has only just started to include the history of Réunion. But I’ve always had a lot of questions about my origins.”

After a stint in a hotel band Salem turned her attention to *maloya*. In 1997 she founded her own outfit, Salem Tradition, and made several records that explored the paths of tradition – “the instruments we play in *maloya* are found all over the Indian Ocean” – while keeping a foot in the present. She reconnected with her ancestors in *servis kabarés* and in concert where, depending on the room, the audience and her state of mind, she can still fall into a trance without warning. “Christine, when onstage, doesn’t fake it,” says Tom Puéchavy of the band Moriarty, Salem’s long-time musical soulmates who feature on her current CD, *Salem Tradition*. “I was watching her play a little venue in France back in 2002 when she snapped,” says Puéchavy. “Her eyes rolled and for about ten seconds she was no longer connected to her musicians and the crowd but to something else.”

But it wasn’t until five years ago, when Salem embarked on the project Razinaz (Roots) and began visiting the regions of her ancestors and writing music based on the rhythms played during ceremonies in Madagascar, Comoros and Zanzibar as well as in Réunion, that she finally felt comfortable with who she is and what she can do. “It was fantastic meeting people who do the same thing as me,” says Salem, who met with ethnomusicologists and local women’s groups and backpacked around by herself. A research trip to Mozambique is in the works. “In trance, we all spoke the same language. We communicate with the ancestors in the same way.”

If Salem’s mission to open Réunion *maloya* to the languages and forms of its genealogy confuses some Creole-speaking *maloya* artists, then so be it. Salem is blazing her own path. Part Nina Simone, part shaman, her performance on the closing night of Sakifo drew a crowd that kept on swelling; songs such as ‘Alouwe’ featured strong vocal melodies on a beat that sped up into trance, with lyrics that seemed to call out to the ancestors. A sudden wind bent palm trees, sending gusts of vanilla through the air. “You want the next big star?” the ancestors seemed to say. “Here she is.” ■

DATE Christine Salem will perform at WOMAD Charlton Park on July 28