

A British newspaper recently called Daymé Arocena “Cuba’s finest young singer”, which makes her laugh, a lot. Reminded, she throws back her head and guffaws, rocking back and forth as if this is the funniest thing she has ever heard.

“That is really crazy,” says the compact 24-year-old, adjusting her trademark white head wrap as she sits in a bar in hipster East London. “Do you know how many fine young singers we have in Cuba? Music is the soul of Cuban culture! It is in our DNA!”

Most people in the West probably know Cuban music through the Buena Vista Social Club, that ensemble of ageing maestros who in the late 1990s revived the sounds of pre-revolutionary Cuba – son, mambo and danzon, cha-cha-cha and guaguancó – and became an unlikely global phenomenon. But right now, in the towns and cities of this resilient Caribbean island, a wealth of young singers and musicians are cherry-picking from genres including jazz, pop and hip hop; rock, neo-soul and electronica. Collaborating. Experimenting. Creating.

Arocena is one such artist. Her current second album *Cubafonia* references Cuba’s deep-rooted musical past and places it in a wider musical context, all while keeping her remarkable voice to the fore. Whether singing, chanting or scatting (vocal improvising), or showing off a range that swoops from a rich, low timbre to rafter-clearing high notes, this cheerful Cubana is carrying the flame for her generation.

“My generation is the product of influences ranging from the Buena Vista Social Club to [AfroCuban jazz heroes] Irakere but we are also something fresh,” she says in her heavily accented English. “We are the singers and musicians of the 21st century, and we are many.”

Still, few young Cuban singers have garnered the attention afforded Arocena; at least, not in the West.

Hers was a case of right place, stellar talent: in 2009 her crossover potential was spotted by hyper-cool British DJ Gilles Peterson, in Havana. At Peterson’s invitation Arocena began working with electronic producers, singing three tracks on the debut Havana Cultura Mix (including the hit *UKnew Before*) and performing gigs in London, backed by musicians from London’s jazz underground.

“I was knocked out by her professionalism and people connection,” Peterson has said. “She is a serious artist who knows exactly what she wants musically. She is deeply spiritual and also a total laugh.”

In 2015 Arocena released her debut CD *Nueva Era* on Peterson’s Brownswood label. The work introduced a club-loving western crowd to rumba, the rhythmic bedrock of so much Cuban music, and a street-smart genre that is inseparable from the chants and songs of Santería – the Afro-Cuban faith rooted in the Yoruba people of West Africa and the Roman Catholicism of Cuba’s 15th century Spanish slave masters.

Growing up in the lively Havana neighbourhood of Diez de Octubre, one of 21 occupants in a two-bedroom apartment, Arocena was surrounded by rumba: “My neighbourhood was poor but filled with people who love singing and dancing on the street. You can feel that in my music.”

The singer takes her Santería faith seriously, dressing all in white, observing rules and rituals, asking her designated



STREET ENOUGH

She’s studied classical, loves jazz, but Cuban singer Daymé Arocena says the best music school is the street

WORDS JANE CORNWELL PICTURE CASEY MOORE

orisha deity – Yemayá, the ruler of the seas and the mother of all living things – for guidance on concerns from songwriting (“She whispers in my ears”) to relationships and body confidence.

“I used to be ashamed of how I looked, of how short and round I am, but slowly I learned to love myself,” says Arocena, whose song *Don’t Unplug My Body* has crowds clapping and vibing. “As women we must accept what nature has given us and be comfortable with our sexuality.”

She flashes a grin. “Nobody can resist that.”

The orishas aren’t the only deities Arocena follows. There is also Beethoven, Bach and The Beatles, along with those she found in her father’s collection of American jazz CDs: Aretha Franklin, Nina Simone, Ella Fitzgerald. “Ella was the first jazz

singer I listened to. Her scatting drove me crazy. And Nina; I couldn’t get enough of her.”

Arocena’s reputation continues to grow. Earlier this year in New York, performing a Tiny Desk Concert for National Public Radio (NPR), she was introduced as a combination of Aretha Franklin and the queen of salsa, Celia Cruz (“Haha,” she laughs, batting the comparison away).

Gigs from Los Angeles to Tokyo and at British festivals including Glastonbury and WOMAD have seen her guesting with the likes of jazz heroes Roy Ayers and the cooler-than-thou Miguel Atwood Ferguson; the *Comó Remixes*, issued this month by Brownswood, turn a melancholy ballad by Arocena into an all-out party banger.

Next March, along with her Havana-based trio, Daymé Arocena makes her first visit to Australia exclusively for WOMADelaide that

sees her sharing a bill with such artists as Ghanaian highlife king Pat Thomas, Brazilian funksters Bixiga 70, Los Angeles nu-jazz saviour Kamasi Washington and the Indian sitar goddess, Anoushka Shankar.

“All of this,” she says, sweeping an arm around the bar, out to the street and the world at large, “is like a crazy dream.”

Arocena was singing before she could talk. As a baby she’d make scatting sounds and copy melodies she overheard on the television; as a kid she’d dress up and stand on street corners, singing, charming passers-by.

She won a singing competition at junior school then appeared on Cuban TV performing *Let It Be*; aged 10 she gained entry to a prestigious music conservatory, opting to specialise in Western classical choir conducting. Aged 14 she was fronting a youth big band called Los Primos, after which came jazz-fusion quintets and gigs in Canada.

“In Cuba we study classical music at school, but everyone knows you can be an amazing musician without school because you learn everything from the street. I love jazz but I have this street party influence. I’m always laughing and joking because I’m a street girl.”

A street girl who takes her craft seriously. You can feel this in her live shows, which see her barefoot in white, variously shaking her ankle bells, beating out rhythms on her chest and marking tricky time signatures on a wooden clavé in ways that get her audiences clapping along. Singing of mothers, men, heat and dust in a voice that ranks amongst Cuba’s finest; a voice that – like her songwriting – can only mature and grow.

“I am only just beginning,” says Arocena, laughing again. “You just wait.” ●

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