



KINDRED SPIRIT

Cuban singer Yaité Ramos Rodríguez is heading to WOMADelaide inspired by a friendly French phantom

WORDS JANE CORNWELL

Five years ago Yaité Ramos Rodríguez was on vacation, sleeping in the attic of a rambling old house in Normandy, northern France, when she saw the ghost. A woman of indeterminate age, dressed in floating white, winking at her from a gently moving rocking chair. A lit cigar in one hand, a glass of dark liquid – which might have been rum – in the other.

“I was fascinated, not really scared,” remembers Rodríguez with a smile. “She had a warm, friendly presence and this sense of mischief; she mimicked my surprised face. Then, suddenly, like that” – she clicks her

elegant fingers, with their long, frosted nails – “she was gone.”

At breakfast the next morning her hosts (the grandparents of her French boyfriend) were unfazed. The ghost, they said, was known as the White Lady, a benign yet powerful spirit who appeared randomly, only making herself visible to the sensitive, the seekers, those with special talents. Rodríguez, a gifted singer, percussionist and flautist, was transfixed. Here, she realised, was the inspiration she’d been looking for ever since she had relocated to Paris from Cuba in the late 1990s – going on to sing backing vocals in a rich and wide ranging voice that made a series of lead singers sound way better than they were.

Here was a persona with which she could

reinvent herself as a solo artist. The White Lady. La Dame Blanche.

No matter that Rodríguez, 39, is black, the daughter of famed trombonist Jesus “Aguaje” Ramos, artistic director of the mega-selling Buena Vista Social Club, and a proud Afro-Cubana from the steamy tobacco-growing province of Pinar del Rio in western Cuba.

“There was nothing tragic about my White Lady,” says Rodríguez, aka rapper/singer La Dame Blanche, sitting in a cafe by the canal in Stalingrad, Paris, near the apartment she shares with her 12-year-old daughter; another daughter, 18, is at university in Toulouse.

“My spirit was dressed just like a Santera,” she says, referring to adherents of the Afro-Cuban Santería faith, which mixes Catholicism and West African beliefs, even giving cigars and rum religious significance; like most Afro-Cubans, Rodríguez is a follower. “At that point I’d been going through some tough times. It’s not a subject I like to talk about because people think I’m crazy. But I saw her, and she gave me hope.”

Three albums on, and La Dame Blanche is a big deal in France. She’s wowed festivals in New York, Kathmandu and Mexico City; in July she made her UK debut at WOMAD in Wiltshire, delivering a set that became the talk of the weekend. Sashaying onstage in a white lace catsuit, her dark braids wrapped in white cloth, a crucifix on a chain around her neck, she offered the crowd shots of rum before puffing on a cigar, taking the mic and launching into *Ave Maria*, a cappella at first, before two musicians on drums and keyboards changed the song’s direction, the chug of electronic trap and sway of Colombian cumbia accompanying socially-conscious, fiercely-rapped Spanish-language lyrics; now and then Rodríguez broke off to play rounds of fiery jazz flute.

It was arresting, danceable stuff, with songs such as *Una Copa Llena (A Full Cup)* showcasing her knack for catchy chants and bold-as-brass rap verses and *Bajo El Mismo Cielo (Under the Same Sky)*, the title of her current third album, veering from folkie Cuban nueva trova to bouncing Jamaican dance hall and reggae. The song that features on the album also includes flamenco vocals and Spanish guitar, along with input from guest musicians from Brazil, Mexico and South Africa: “I call my music ‘hip-hop-urbano-Cubano,’” she tells me. “Hip-hop reflects a specific place, a neighbourhood, a street corner, the every day. And being from Cuba I am always proud of my roots.”

“Hip-hop is my bridge between musical styles. It allows me to sing, rap, play my flute and mix the sounds I hear in Paris, this very cosmopolitan city.”

There is a part of her that is still the young girl who fought to get her famous father’s attention, being one of seven children born to different mothers (“My father was a great lover”) and a talented musician in an extended family where artistry was the norm (her uncle, for example, is singer Mayito Rivera, late of supergroup Los Van Van).

Growing up in Pinar del Rio, in a small wooden shack with a piano and rooms divided by plywood, she remembers visits by mature-age maestros from the Grammy-winning Buena Vista Social Club.

“They’d come back after playing clubs like the Tropicana and us kids would stay up and watch as they played, talked and sang,” recalls Rodríguez, who studied classical flute and piano from the age of eight in Cuba’s free education system. “My mother would tell us to go to bed, which was fine except that our bed was behind the piano.”

Less amusing, she continues, was the family’s extended musical jams, in which she was left out: “I would try and elbow my way into these long descargas (jams) but there were too many musicians with big talent and big egos,” she says with a sigh. “My father was away a lot, and he didn’t give me much time. I still try to impress him. I love him too much; if he wasn’t my dad I would have given up.”

To make matters worse, her flute belonged to her school. On graduating she was forced to give it back. “But I could sing. So I sang for tourists in big hotels in Havana, and in [the tourist resort] Varadero,” she says.

“When I came to Paris I did the same; I was a member of an all-girl salsa group, a vocalist in a Latin orchestra and a backing singer in [popular Latin fusion band] Sergent Garcia.

“But I missed the traditional rhythms of my country, the batá drums, the rumba, the son [Cuban genre of music], the stuff I’d listened to since I was a baby. I was fed up with singing perfectly and not being acknowledged. I wasn’t being true to myself. So I quit.”

A few weeks later, she encountered La Dame Blanche in Normandy. “Amazing, no? And now she – this character – is taking me around the world. I cannot believe that I am going to be performing in Australia.” ●

WOMADelaide is on March 8-11. Book tickets at womadelaide.com.au