

In the process she has filled in a gap in her own history: "About 11 years ago I went to Jamaica for my grandmother's funeral. She was well known in her village in Hanover Parish in the northwest, so there were a lot of people there. They killed a goat to be eaten, and two guys came to drum and another guy came to dance. I only realised what I saw when I read about it here."

McFarlane's month-long research trip saw her meeting folk music experts including the celebrated pianist/educator Majorie Whyllie, and poring over archives at the National Library of Jamaica. At the Institute of Jamaica in Kingston she collected videos and audio of folk rhythms born out of syncretic religious ceremonies: revival, with its Pentecostal associations and attendant singing, drumming, dancing, hand-clapping, foot stomping and groaning.

Bruckins party, with the dipping, gliding dance, still practiced, that celebrates the emancipation of Africans from slavery. Nyabinghi, the bedrock music of Rastafari, with drumming that includes elements of kumina, and whose rhythm helped birth reggae and ska.

"The rhythms are all intertwined, and there didn't seem to be a definitive explanation on any of them. I'm looking forward to experiencing some of them live the next time I'm back," says McFarlane, who on returning to London unpacked her treasure trove, examined each rhythm up close. "I listened really carefully, deeply, and began to hear the emphasis and accents."

The seed of an idea – of 'songs of an unknown tongue' – was planted. A title for a song, she'd thought at first, until it became a broader notion. Not a song but the name of the album: "I was drawn to this idea of relearning the past to inform the future," she says. "Of gaining ownership of histories that have been lost, because I, we, do have songs of an unknown tongue."

Album opener, 'Everything Is Connected', a paean to the cycle of life, invokes imagery of towering cotton trees in which spirits of the dead live inside snakes and insects and under which folk ceremonies enable trance-like states: "People 'catch' these spirits and do weird



things like walking, not climbing, right up the side of the tree without falling." 'Black Treasure' is a deceptively breezy subversion of colonialism and slavery, as well as reclamation and celebration, says McFarlane, of Black people, of Black British womanhood.

**/// Being a Black person with a Black history, if I am talking about my experiences and perspectives, then inevitably this is political ///**

"As Black people we can feel unappreciated, and as a Black woman it's sometimes like you're at the bottom of the pile. This is also about people taking Black culture and reinterpreting it without fully understanding it," she says with a sigh, "and then trying to re-educate you on

something about yourself."

Growing up in Dagenham, a town with a prominent BNP presence and reputation for racism, McFarlane experienced the sense of displacement particular to a diaspora, which she names in the song 'Native Nomad': "There's a feeling of being disconnected from your homeland, the place you were born. So when you're told to go back where you came from..."

"But then when I go to Jamaica with my mum, who was born there, we are seen as English, not Jamaican. It's easy to feel you don't belong anywhere."

While McFarlane was never taught her history ("Neither were my parents"), her Jamaican heritage informed her upbringing, in an extended family where the church choir, reggae and R&B and amateur shows played parts. She was a teenage regular at Tomorrow's Warriors, Gary Crosby's famed music academy aimed at Black youth and girls. She studied musical theatre at the BRIT School and did a Masters in Jazz Studies at Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

She was swiftly in demand as a lead vocalist, shining on projects including Crosby's Jazz Jamaica, drawing vocal comparisons to Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan. She won a MOBO for Best Jazz Act, and was Jazz FM's 2015 Vocalist of the Year. Further awards await: on *Songs of an Unknown Tongue* she's never sounded as pure – particularly on the glorious 'My Story' – or as accomplished.

Here and there, her voice is multi-tracked in celestial harmonies. On the hypnotic, nyabinghi-informed 'Broken Water' it is electronically treated, made fathoms deep: "Many Afro-Caribbean people do not know where they come from in terms of African descent" – the surname McFarlane is clearly not that of her ancestors – "because their bloodline was taken away on those ocean crossings. That loss is what *Songs of an Unknown Tongue* leans into, the idea of reclaiming.

"I'm learning a language again," she says with a smile. "I'm discovering the things that are owned by me."




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