

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

Award-winning vocalist-composer **Zara McFarlane's** latest album reveals her to be as potent a storyteller and historian of Black culture as much as an expressive singer. **Jane Cornwell** spoke to her about the genesis of her electrifying new sound

Songs of an Unknown Tongue is an album for our times. It's a work that reaches back into history, taking in the early folk and spiritual traditions of Jamaica and the life of a second generation Black Briton, weaving in soundscapes marked by live instrumentation, by electro grooves – also rendered live – and woozy, future-finding beats. It's a potent work, pulsing with sorrow and anger, liberation and joy, full of stories sung in a voice that feels like a clarion call.

On this, her fourth album (reviewed in last month's issue), Zara McFarlane didn't set out with militancy in mind. Or at least, not like she did when making *Arise*, a (2017) recording explicitly informed by the political roots reggae of 1970s Jamaica. *Songs Of An Unknown Tongue* is nonetheless a powerful statement.

"Everyone is picking up on the political aspect because of what is going on now," says the East London-based singer, composer and bandleader, 37, alluding to the global momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement.

"I started writing these new songs well over a year ago.

Obviously, being a Black person with a Black history, if I am talking about my experiences and perspectives, then inevitably this is political. But my intention was to create an album that brings the idea of the traditional together with current sounds."

The widely-acclaimed *Arise* explored the musical possibilities of the British-Jamaican identity and the connections between jazz and roots-reggae via tunes including her own 'Fussin' and Fightin' and covers of Nora Dean's 'Peace Begins Within' and Max Roach's civil rights anthem 'All Africa'. Its sentiments inform *Songs of An Unknown Tongue*, whose 10 tracks traverse issues of empire, colonialism, race and identity. "A by-product of being a Black person," she says.

This time it's the sound palette onto which McFarlane daubs her cool, classy vocals that's the thing. It is also where the jazz is. Having visited Jamaica with the aim of penning a musical based on the legend of voodoo-wielding plantation owner Annie Palmer, the so-called 'White Witch of Rose Hall',

McFarlane changed direction, and instead spent six weeks travelling across the Caribbean isle researching early Afro-Jamaican rhythms: kumina, nyabingi, dinki-mini, revival, bruckins. Back in the UK, she decamped to the south London studio of producer/musicians Kwake Bass and Wu-Lu from the curatorial Touching Bass Collective, a freethinking duo she'd found a kinship with.

As an established act and long-time signing to Brownswood Recordings, the eclectic label founded by Gilles Peterson, McFarlane was given space to break with tradition, encouraged to try something new.

"Being with Brownswood means that while I've done albums in an acoustic vein [her 2011 debut *Until Tomorrow*, 2014's *If You Knew Her*], some of my tracks will be remixed. So I get to explore the electronic side a little bit as part of my repertoire."

Hugely, satisfyingly ambitious, with its 10-piece band enabled by funding from the PRS Women Make Music Fund, *Arise* was nonetheless remix-free.

"I missed having that electronic element. I didn't approach this new album wanting obvious, weird electronic sounds. I

knew I wanted it to be rhythm and vocal, and that I wanted to take people on an emotional journey with my songwriting. I've always listened to a lot of dub and reggae, feeling the electronics coming out of the reverb and the delays" continues McFarlane, who has previously cited the likes of Studio One and King Tubby among her influences.

A smile. "In terms of composing, this was all done very differently

to what I'm used to. Normally I write the songs first. I do the harmony parts. I play a little piano or guitar, put down basic chords and bass lines. I show my band" – which features fellow Tomorrow's Warriors alumni, guitarist Shirley Tetteh and pianist Peter Edwards – "and we develop further using their expertise."

"But this record began with me and Kwake, or Kwake and (guitarist/producer) Wu-Lu and sometimes (percussionist/sound engineer) Camilo Tirado choosing rhythms from the videos I'd brought back from Jamaica then replicating those sounds with percussion patterns, creating soundscapes on which to build."

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It was McFarlane's long-time friend Moses Boyd - feted drummer (*Arise*), producer and another graduate of Tomorrow's Warriors - who introduced her to Bass, a producer and prolific collaborator renowned for fusing live drumming with electronic sounds. Various musical director for artists including Sampha and Kate Tempest, a member of jazz/hip-hop group Speakers Quartet and an artist who has jammed with Herbie Hancock, worked with rapper MF Doom and dropped his own clothing range, Kwake Bass proved an inspired choice - both in terms of man-of-the-moment agency and freethinking digital know-how.

"Watching the way these guys bring in the electronic aspects live was so interesting to me," says McFarlane of Bass's on-the-fly electro-shamanism, which sees him wielding buttons, boxes and drums like some beat maker *en route* to Alpha Centauri. "I started writing songs around those pieces, incorporating ideas around storytelling and call-and-response, which I brought back to Kwake and Wu-Lu. Then we had another session where we brought some jazz musicians into play around with some of the ideas we had."

Saxophonist Idris Raman and trumpet player Robin Hopcraft

(Wu-Lu's dad), of seasoned South London collective Soothsayers improvised shapes on two tracks, 'Future Echoes' and 'Roots of Freedom'. Rising star flautist Biscuit and similarly touted pianist Lyle Barton, on Rhodes, feature on these and others. For the most part, however, the album is McFarlane with Wu-Lu and Kwake Bass, achieving lift off with rhythm and vocals.

"It was a mixture of back and forth. I'd be like, 'Okay, we've got this rhythm, let me go and write some melodies to that.' And Wu-Lu and Kwake might say, 'Actually, let's add this.' I was really trying to bounce off the rhythm, to write interesting melodies that either complimented or gave a bit of tension."

With 'Ode to Kumina', a stand out track on *Arise*, McFarlane had previously explored the Congo-derived rhythm whose attendant rituals involve houseyard funeral rites and fierce drum patterns that symbolically contested the enslaved African's subjugation. McFarlane's subsequent research into old Jamaican rituals revealed tropes including call-and-response chants and - as with Dinki-mini and the 'Nine Nights' or Dead Yards pre-funeral traditions - the notion of giving the 'duppy' spirit a proper celebratory send off with music, dancing and storytelling.