

BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Jan Fairley gives a taste of the spicy Mexican song-weaver

LILA DOWNS

Lila Downs entered the world music scene as a bright star in 2000 when *Arbol de la Vida* (Tree of Life), her first international album was released. From the first notes of the first song 'Simuna', the whole album was totally mesmerising with Downs' voice snaking up and down fabulous melodies. It's a mind-blowing sequence of entrancing songs of death and love, snakes and iguanas, earth and wind, with catchy, melodies and lively rhythms. Downs is like a modern female medicine woman, a shaman weaving ancient stories

for the present, her unearthly shape-shifting voice accompanied by Mexican guitars, harp, sax, *marimba*, drums and masses of textured percussion.

At the time I felt Downs' unique approach to her music compared to that in art of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo: they both shared the same intense Indian beauty and I joked Downs was Kahlo re-incarnated as a singer. Then blow me down when I spoke to her she told me she would be singing in *Frida* – a film being made about Kahlo's life. As all those who have seen the film will vouchsafe, Downs looked more like Kahlo than Salma Hayek did.

Singing in Spanish and lesser heard Mexican Amerindian languages, Mixtec, Nahuatl and Zapotec, many outsiders were surprised to learn that these tongues are actually still current in Mexico today, particularly around the area where Downs grew up in Oaxaca. For this reason, as well as a Spanish name, her first album has an English title: *Tree Of Life* and *Yutu Tata* in Amerindian Mexican.

The iconoclastic *Tree of Life* was the result of Downs' own research into the symbols of women's weaving in the villages around where she grew up. Downs is honest about the fact that while she remembers a childhood with her grandmother, a folk healer who worked with herbs and plants and talked Mixtec at home, she's only learned these indigenous languages in adulthood as she was brought up speaking only Spanish and English.

Born in 1968 in Tlaxiaco, Oaxaca, her mother is a Mixtec-Amerindian woman from Oaxaca, while her father was a US academic and film-maker from Minnesota. Unlike many other Mexicans, Downs grew up moving easily between Mexico and the US. She was unaware of just how different, difficult and often tragic the migrant reality was for other Mexicans, until a man came into her mother's Oaxacan car parts shop when she was helping out. He asked her to translate a 'low on details' death certificate of his son who had died searching for his fortune in the US. She later beautifully expressed the complex betwixt and between emotions of migration in her album *La Linea* (Border) in 2001. Living in the US in her teens, she went through a period when she questioned the Mexican bits of her life. As a result, for a time she dropped out, dyed her hair blond and escaped into Grateful Dead fandom, living by making and selling beaded necklaces. Her father's death made her see that these two worlds needed to be bridged rather than one held ascendant over the other.

Downs makes magical her Mexican heritage, approaching it through its present vibrancy rather than engaging in any revival. In a sense she cleverly reverses the image that all things good and truthful lie outside that world. The music of Mexico has always been undeniably rich and alive, but for most of us, until Downs came along, it was largely ignored by the outside world or simply taken as regional folklore.



Downs' naturally rich and versatile voice was enhanced by studying singing at college. There was talk of her becoming an opera singer but instead she moved into Mexican music. In time she started to sculpt character and emotion into the narratives of her lyrics, be they *boleros*, original songs based on Amerindian poetry or her versions of seminal Mexican songs like 'La Llorona' (The Weeping Woman).

Her new album *Una Sangre* (One Blood), is an entrancing and varied sequence of very fine songs. With two versions of the title-track and dashing playfulness musically, it shows her moving forward maturely on all levels. Wittily full of the rich mysteries of Mexico, its themes reveal her even more as an engaged political artist in the broadest sense. Her singing of female ideals, experiences and wisdom continues, epitomised by a beautiful song for female human rights lawyer Digna Ochoa that universalises the struggle of women. Each song inhabits a world of its own but links beautifully to the next. Her re-interpretation of the popular hit 'La Bamba' is sheer joy from start to finish while an earthy yet techno-tinged version of 'La Cucuracha' with references to Victor Jara and Ché Guevara will certainly be remembered. Strangely enough, Downs always reckons she has a melancholy spirit. Her music, pulsating with a zest for life – past and present – defies that.



Tom Le Goff

BEST ALBUMS

Tree of Life (Narada, 2000)

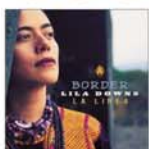
OOO This multi-titled album would be my desert island disc. In her first international release, Downs taps into the potent power and passion of ancient Mexico as lived today.



Border (Narada, 2001)



Downs explores the two worlds meeting at the border. Includes 'La Llorona' (Weeping Woman) about a woman driven to sacrifice her children – a song which haunts the Mexican psyche.



Frida – Music from the Motion Picture

(Universal, 2003)



Oscar-winning soundtrack to the film about the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. Downs version of the dramatic tango 'Alcoba Azul' was stunning on screen, as was her evocative duet with Brazilian superstar Caetano Veloso for the film's hit song 'Burn it Blue'.



Salma Hayek as Frida Kahlo in the film *Frida* (Miramax Film Corp 2002)



BEST AVOIDED

La Sandunga (Narada, 2003)



Downs' first mostly acoustic disc, popular in Mexico, holds the seeds of her musical vision but heard after *Tree of Life* seems out of place.



NEW ALBUM

Una Sangre (Narada, 2004)



Continuing in the innovative vein of *Tree of Life*, complete with *rancheras* and Chilean *cumbias* (popular with Mexicans involved in the 19th century gold rush) inside these upbeat, sassy songs are the political themes of the times from the morality of war to selling out to materialism. Deserves to take Downs into the big league of world musicians. Reviewed in the next issue. |



LIKE LILA DOWNS? THEN TRY...

◆ **Amparanoia, *Rebeldia Con Alegria*** (EMI, 2004)

Spanish group led by Amparo Sánchez whose feisty dance songs exude comparable energy and female sensibility. Read review of the album in the Europe section.

