

## Dayme Arocena

Singer, composer, arranger, choir director and band leader, Daymé Arocena is a skilful, charismatic presence in Cuban music. Dressed always in white, it's a visible reminder of her induction into the Afro-Cuban religion of Santería: its chants and repertoires are just as important to her as jazz and Cuban neo-soul. Aged 24, Daymé's family background is typically packed with music. Her grandmother, she says, "sings better than she does" and her father has stacks of CDs – littered with the likes of George Benson's smooth jazz classic 'Breezin' – which have trickled into his daughter's tastes over the years.

She often immerses fragments of rumba rhythms and outbursts of scatting into her songs and performances. "Even though I'm a classical musician," she explains, "at school I also sang Santería songs, which is the official Cuban religion for me. I studied its beautiful energy and all the elements from the sea, to the wind and the earth. My saint is Yemaya, saint of the sea."

Daymé experimented with a series of instruments – violin, trumpet, piano and guitar – before she found that Choir Directing, a route popular with Cuban children, was her niche. Her talent was spotted at a young age, with her winning the prestigious Marti y el Arte award in 2007 and becoming principal singer with big band Los Primos at age 14. With marks of approval soon to follow from the likes of the Lincoln Centre's teacher and trumpet player Wynton Marsalis and much-lauded saxophonist Jane Bunnett, it wasn't long before Daymé came to the attention of François Renié.

Communications Director at Cuban rum maker Havana Club and founder of the Havana Cultura\* platform, which co-produced the Havana Cultura album series with Brownswood Recordings, he took an immediate shine to her. "Gilles and I met Dayme for the first time on Gilles' first trip to Cuba," he recalls, "with Edrey [from Grammy nominated Cuba band Oguere] improvising a rumba session at a friend's place. She started to sing and we were amazed. She was just a teenager." She already knew and listened to the singers, rappers and musicians involved in the Havana Cultura project but was considered too young to join in.

But her time came a few years down the line with the Havana Cultura Mix project, which saw Gilles Peterson mentoring selected producers from around the world to make a record in Cuba with local musicians. Following her audition, all of the producers decided they wanted to work with her: she sung on three tracks on the album, including the massive "U Knew Before". Seeing huge potential in her, Gilles invited her to London to perform at the album launch event to enchant a packed out audience and seal plans for a solo record with Brownswood Recordings and Havana Cultura.

Her debut album, Nueva Era, was released to critical acclaim in 2015. With The Guardian declaring her "a rich and powerful new voice from Cuba" and Songlines recognising her as "one of the most exciting new artists to come along in years", the album was an important first statement for an artist who's got plenty more to say. With her soon-to-be-released One Takes EP forthcoming and excitement bubbling up around more European live dates and a debut US tour, the future looks bright for an artist who's spent years building up to this moment.

\*The acclaimed Havana Cultura album series – fruit of a collaboration between Gilles Peterson, Brownswood Recordings and Havana Club – includes two major collective productions, Havana Cultura: The New Cuba Sound (2009) and Havana Cultura: The Search Continues (2011); the Havana Cultura Sessions EPs featuring Danay Suárez (2010) and Daymé Arocena (2015); and two electronic music albums, Havana Cultura Remixed (2010) and Havana Cultura Mix: The Soundclash! (2014).