

Review: Daymé Arocena Mixes a Cosmopolitan Vibe With an Earthy Tone

By Jon Pareles / March 23, 2016

The Cuban singer and songwriter [Daymé Arocena](#) was dressed entirely in white, the color of santería ceremonies, when she performed at Subrosa on Tuesday night, and she started her late set with a song invoking Yemayá and Ochún, the saints of oceans and rivers. Her voice opened up to approach the earthy, full-throated cries of Afro-Cuban ritual chants. But the music surrounding her was far from traditional. It was jazz from a piano-bass-drums trio, with the harmonic and rhythmic complexities of hard-bop and the melodic grace of Brazilian pop. Ms. Arocena unites cosmopolitan musicianship with deep roots.

Her other songs — mostly from her 2015 album, “Nueva Era” (Brownswood) — were considerably more secular. With lyrics in Spanish and English, they addressed topics like troubled romance, a dusty house and, in “El Ruso,” the Russian-language classes that were once required in Cuban schools.

Her songs are built on bass riffs: jumpy, syncopated ones, often in odd meters, that were nimbly played by Rafael Aldama Chiroles on six-string electric bass. Her verses could take daring leaps and sophisticated chromatic rambles, underlined by Jorge Luis Lagarza Perez on piano, while her choruses returned to the succinctness of pop, at one point getting the audience to clap along.

But Ms. Arocena’s songs were above all about mutability. The only certainty was that they would end up a long way from where they began. Introspection gradually, and naturally, evolved into drama or exultancy; a percussive incantation, “Don’t Unplug My Body,” went through variations both assertive and seductive. Her trio’s arrangements moved among quiet transparency, bluesy swing and percussive intricacy, shifting harmonies along the way. In more than one song, Ms. Arocena and her group changed key together for the very last chord.

As the songs unfolded, Ms. Arocena deployed a kaleidoscope of voices: low and breathy, teasing and sultry, clear and euphoric, articulately scatting, even at one point using her hand like a mute to create an abstract wah-wah effect, batting rhythms back and forth with Raul Herrera Martínez on drums.

Between songs, Ms. Arocena was an endearing storyteller, explaining some of her songs with earnest sincerity and wry twists. And when she sang, she had a beaming, irrepressible smile, the expression of a virtuoso who knew she was pushing each song toward gleefully unexpected places.

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