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Cucu Diamantes: do I smoke? Only cigars

Diva, performer of the night, Cuba's answer to Amy Winehouse - Cucu Diamantes is all these and more.

By Mark Hudson_Published: 12:28PM BST 28 Apr 2010



An intoxicating mix: Cucu Diamantes's music is a heady cocktail of Latin melody, Hispanic rhythm, disco, rock and jazz. Looking at pictures of Cucu Diamantes, you'd assume she had a tiny little voice. Matchstick-thin, unfeasibly leggy in mile-high stilettos, clad only in make-up and fin-de-siècle bordello underwear, the Cuban-born singer exudes camp artificiality and carries so little body ballast you'd expect little from her but a squeak or an effete attempt at a Marlene Dietrich purr. In fact, her larynx has an earthiness, a Cuban housewife's voice made hoarse bellowing along alleys laden with washing – or that's certainly the way it sounds. And her manner is similarly down to earth.

“Even when I was at school, people said I sounded like an old lady,” she chuckles ruefully over a fuzzy, time-delayed phone connection from Havana. “I think it's my soul talking, the person inside me.”

Surely smoking had something to do with it. “I only smoke cigars, and not many, maybe one a month – for the taste.”

This voice is heard to stirring effect on her first solo album, *Cuculand*, a stylish blend of belting Latin melody, eclectic Hispanic rhythm – from driving Colombian cumbia to Seventies-style New York boogaloo – disco, rock and jazz assembled with a wonderfully sure pop feel by Diamantes' Venezuelan-born husband, bass player and long-time musical collaborator Andres Levin. It's a cocktail that could give her a platform way beyond the Latin crossover crowd.

“The album is about love,” she says, “about the sacrifices we make when we try to love. If one person gives you pain, another will give you real love. I believe in love, particularly in these times when people seem more in love with the internet and Facebook than with each other.” Diamantes sprang to fame with Yerba Buena, the New York hipster fusion band she formed with Levin in 2002. Probably the first Latin act to fully engage with that uniquely New York milieu where gay culture and celebrity clubbing meet street music and the artistic avant garde, Yerba Buena blended hip hop and Cuban rhythm with Afrobeat and Middle Eastern elements to bracing effect.

Born in a poor part of Havana, of Spanish, African, Chinese and French descent, Diamantes woke up every Saturday and Sunday to the throbbing of the bata – Afro-Cuban ritual drums. “There were religious parties every weekend,” she says, “and I would take part in them. I use those drums on several songs on my album, to remind myself of where I come from.” Hardly knowing her parents, she was raised by a lesbian aunt, a cartoonist, who instilled in her a love of art. She won a scholarship to study art in Rome, after which she faced a choice of becoming a conservation assistant in Barcelona, working on Gaudi’s Sagrada Familia cathedral, or pursuing her real passion – music – in New York. She chose the latter, teaching Afro-Cuban movement at a ballroom dancing school before becoming a dancer with transsexual nightclub superstars Sophia Lamar and Amanda Lepore.

Down the mangling line from Havana, I hear her talking about hormone supplements and breast sizes, and begin revising my impression of the person I’m talking to. Is she saying she’s a man? “No,” she cackles in horror. “I only pretended to be a transsexual. For me it was a fantasy to work with those people. I learnt from them about the diva process, about transforming yourself with make-up and costume, to become a performer of the night.” From there she founded Yerba Buena with Levin, with the aim of “experimenting without thinking too much”. “Everything we do, we do with laughter. We’ve been working together every day for 13 years, and it still feels like we’ve just started,” she says.

Now she’s in Cuba, working on a film to accompany her music – “a cross between Magical Mystery Tour and Priscilla Queen of the Desert, but shot in the deep places of Cuba” – as she braces herself for the international reaction to her album. How would she feel to achieve global success as a kind of thinking man’s Shakira?

“A what?” she booms down the line from Havana, and again I feel the conversation take an awkward turn. “A Shakira with a male part?” No, I fumble desperately for the right term, a Shakira for... intellectuals. “I’ve been called the Cuban Amy Winehouse, but none of these descriptions feel relevant to me. I won’t lie to you: success would make things a lot easier moneywise. But it isn’t something I’ve ever pursued. To preserve the innocence of my mind, to wake up every morning knowing I’m going to learn something new, that’s the passion that drives me.”

‘Cuculand’ is out now on Wrasse Records