

"Shake Away"

On *Shake Away*, Downs takes listeners on a journey that's both intensely personal and vividly universal. Recorded in New York and Mexico City, the songs range from the pointed "Minimum Wage" to the mystical "Silent Thunder" to a cover of Lucinda Williams' "I Envy the Wind" in English and Spanish ("Yo Envidio El Viento") versions. Downs explains, "In the U.S, we've gone through a lot of fear. The idea was to heal, to 'shake away' the anger and hate. We also went through a lot of political trouble in my birthplace of Oaxaca, and sometimes we distance ourselves from the pain. We cannot forget or hide, but we must be positive. Since I was young, its important for me to bring different people together, race-wise and religion-wise."

Indeed, it's a rare gift that she gives freely and beautifully on *Shake Away*.

Lila invites the legendary Argentinean singer Mercedes Sosa on a duet of Lila's song "Tierra de Luz" (Land of Light) about nostalgia for the motherland. Downs cut "Perro Negro" ("Black Dog"), inspired by the tale of the transfigurational naugalisimo dog. The lyrics reference corrupt leaders in Latin America, and, Downs notes, "some of our musicians are from Venezuela and Columbia; we share the same situations in our countries." She's joined on the song by longtime amigo Ruben Albarran from Café Tacuba: "I wanted somebody who has fire in their heart and can speak truth," says Downs. "In our own countries, we're afraid to talk about it. I hope my music encourages discussion about Justice. That's what I'm trying to work on with *Shake Away*--getting out these demons that are biting away at my soul. People like Ruben add that 'machete' effect."

Downs takes the well-known Fleetwood Mac gem "Black Magic Woman" and, switching between Spanish and English with the help of acclaimed singer/guitarist Raul Midón, imbues and elevates the song with jazzy tribal mystery. ("The song reminds me of Hilary and Obama, now!" she says with a laugh.)

Downs, born in Oaxaca, Mexico, is the daughter of Mixtec cabaret singer Anita Sánchez and Allen Downs, a Scottish/English-American art professor. She grew up in Oaxaca, California and Minnesota, where she graduated from the University of Minnesota in voice and anthropology. Much of her musical vision is anthropological in nature, as varied as the ancient and earthy cultures that nurtured her and continue to inspire. As a musical spirit guide, Downs is accompanied on the *Shake Away* musical journey by her longtime band, La Misteriosa, multi-cultural multi-instrumentalists who include Paul Cohen, her collaborator, producer and husband.

Her powerful persona, positive aura and voice that ranges from dusky to penetrating caught Hollywood's attention. She played a role in the Salma Hayek film about Mexican artist (and Downs doppelganger) Frida Kahlo. She sang the soundtrack song "Burn It Blue," which was Oscar-nominated, and became the first Latina to perform at the Academy Awards telecast. She also captured a Latin Grammy in the Best Folk Album category for 2004's *One Blood/Una Sangre*. Precious as these experiences are, they are not the highlight of her career. To date, that would be The Festival of Sacred Music at the Hollywood Bowl, where Downs participated alongside luminaries including the Dalai Lama. "I sang in Mixtec, my mother's native language. There were so many Mixtec people in the audience in California who wash dishes, who cultivate the fields, and we got a standing ovation. It was the most intense moment in my life. I thought 'ok, I've done my job, I can die now.' It was an honor to have that connection."

It's a connection she strives to make every moment, succeeding admirably on *Shake Away*. As on previous albums, Downs also taps into the native Mesoamerican music of the Mixtec, Zapotec, Maya and Nahuatl cultures, notably on *Shake Away* songs "Taco de Palabras," and the traditional tune from Mexico's Veracruz state, "Las Pollos." Blues-based songs like "Little Man" and "Skeleton" benefit from a "border flavor" influenced by brass-based Banda music. And for the first time, Downs musically explores her paternal lineage with "I Would Never," written by Paul Buchannan of Scottish band the Blue Nile, a song dedicated "to the workers." The title track, in Spanish, "Shake Away (Ojos De Culebra)," (Eyes of the Snake) reaches back into the symbols in Olmec culture. "It's a metaphorical event, losing your skin. But I went to a place with Shamans who inject the venom in their body to become immune, a practice traced back to Pre-Columbian times," Downs explains. "Mexico also has an important African community--in the history of music in Latin America we owe so much to our African roots, yet people in the US might not know how important that is."

To bring her vision and songs to fruition, along with her seven-man band and producers Cohen, Aneiro Tano and Brian Lynch, Downs plays guitar and percussion. The band utilizes traditional instruments including accordion, harp and clarinet. The trumpet, trombone and tuba appear in several arrangements, bringing the sound somewhere between Mexico and New Orleans. In keeping with the spirit of connection, all writing, recording and performing is very collaborative: "Whoever plays with us becomes family."

Though many new songs address the heated topics of immigration, political justice, and transformation, Downs' vulnerability, compassion and humor are also clear, her siren song irresistible on *Shake Away*. From the Beat poet-style of "Nothing But the Truth" to the spare dolorous "Yo Envidio El Vento"-- which is followed up the almost-carnival atmosphere of "Perro Negro"--*Shake Away* is a triumph. "I'm so lucky," Downs concludes. "People who follow our music are from all walks of life, and they want to scratch the surface to know the whys and hows. Every day we get to connect in so many ways."

Lila Downs – Shake Away

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