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Interview

Lila Downs is back to Oaxaca for a two-night-benefit concert

Interview p.7



Travel

Nature's Call
Hiking and biking are just 90 minutes away

Travel p.13



Artist

Victim of the city's spell
Salvador Yrizar unleashes his imagination

Profile p.11



News

Borderline
The US-Mexican border is back on the political agenda

Report p.12



The Women of Nopal

From the Pueblo's Market to the Supermarket...
page 8

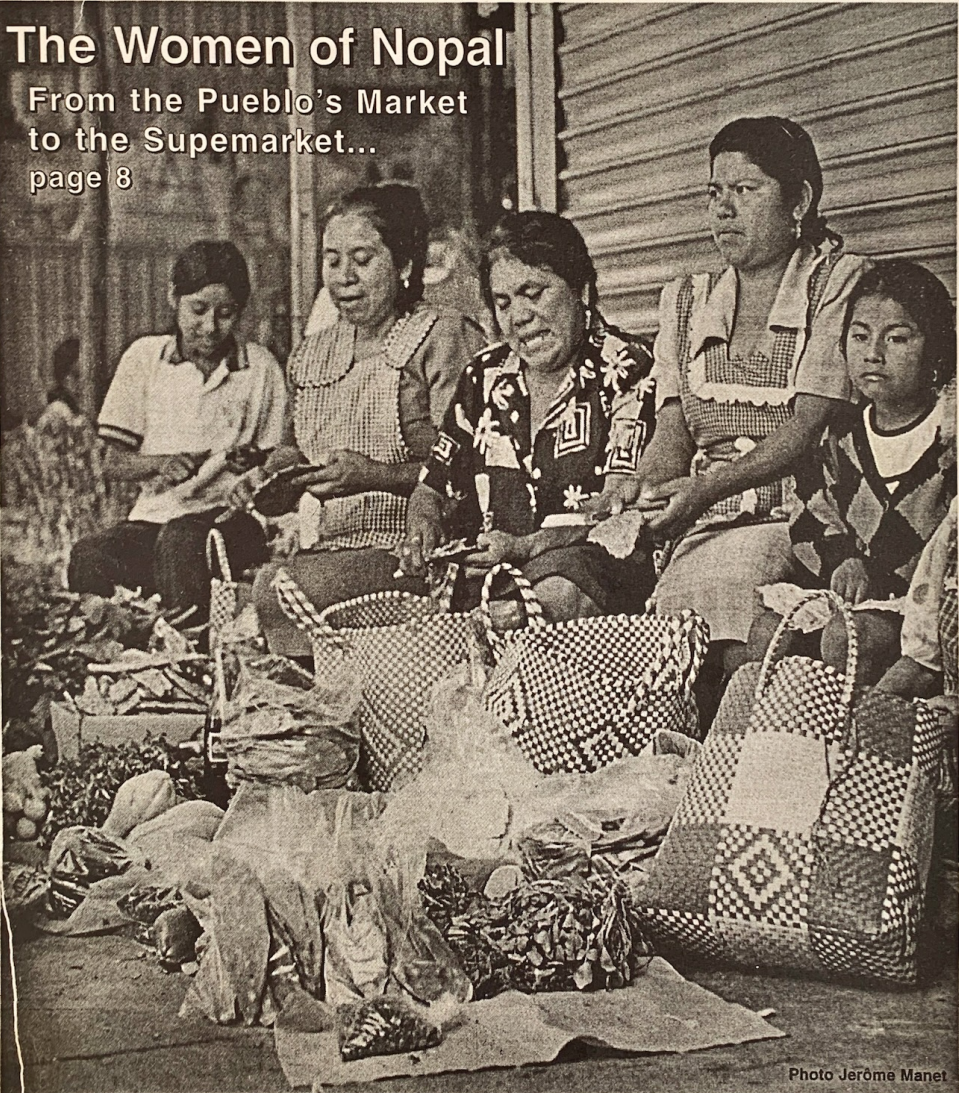


Photo Jérôme Manet

LEARN SPANISH AT THE ICC: OAXACA'S BEST LANGUAGE SCHOOL

WHAT'S ON > NEWS > ACCOMODATION > DINING OUT > CLUBS & MORE ...

I N T E R V I E W

Crossing Borders and Boundaries

One of the most spellbinding modern voices of Mexico, Lila Downs, returns to Oaxaca this month for a two-night benefit concert. We caught her strolling the streets of the city with her mother.



Photo J. Pêcheur

Singer Lila Downs

By JULIE PECHEUR

She sits quietly, in an erect dancer-like posture, her dark, penetrating warm eyes gazing politely. She speaks thoughtfully, carefully choosing her words, nodding and smiling gently. And then, suddenly, she bursts into a deep throaty laugh. The cat is in fact a tiger; the stream a torrent.

Last month, between a series of concerts and interviews around the world, Lila Downs stole a couple of days for herself and flew to Oaxaca to see her mother, Anita, and soak in the peaceful vibes of the city. "Ideologically, spiritually, and culturally, Oaxaca is the place that gives me my center and the strength to continue what we do," she says.

Downs is on both a personal quest and an altruistic crusade. She writes and sings about the Mexican migrant workers who cross into the United States, about racism on both sides of the border, about social justice and indigenous legends, love and peace. Her previous album was entitled "The Border" or "La línea." She has named the next one, which will be released in June, "One Blood" or "Una Sangre." Because that's her ultimate dream. One blood, one people, one world... "People think I am crazy, but I do believe we can come together more, make love not war." And her conviction gives the hackneyed motto a new brightness.

Downs herself has come a long way to accept her own complex background. She is the daughter of a Mixtec-Indian woman and a Scottish-American cinematographer and artist. Her parents met in a Mexico City café, where her mother was singing after having run away from her village. Lila was born thirty-five years ago in Tlaxiaco, a town in the Sierra Madre mountains of southern Oaxaca. Since her father was a University professor in the United States, she grew up shuttling between California, Minnesota and Oaxaca, gradually internalizing racist

remarks in both countries.

At the time, Downs tried to escape racial prejudices by negating her Indian heritage. "The issue of having been very ashamed of my Indian background is a very deep issue for me," she says gravely in front of her mother. "This is why, through the music, I have made a rediscovery of my roots."

Her mother recalls Downs was only five when she sang her first *rancheras* and *boleros*, the traditional Mexican songs, and eight when she started accompanying *mariachi* bands. She later decided to become an opera singer and enrolled for voice lessons in Los Angeles. But at the time, the rigidity of the music school did not fit her idealistic frame of mind. "I really didn't like being a singer," she remembers with a bright smile. "I felt it wasn't intellectual enough, not revolutionary enough."

Downs was 16 when her father passed away, precipitating her exploration of who she was, or wanted to be. "The White Man in my family died and so my life changed," she explains. "My mother had always spoken Mixtec with my grandmother, but I had never realized how beautiful it was. At some point, you decide who you want to be, who you want to identify with, and that is the beauty of life."

After several years of wandering, dropping out of school, following the Grateful

mer juggler and clown, and a multi-talented musician from New Jersey. They defined their style and polished their sound playing every night in clubs around Oaxaca. They have composed, performed, and lived together ever since. Last year, they established their base in New York City's Lower East Side, comfortable in a neighborhood where Eastern and Western Europeans, South Americans, Asians, Indians and Pakistani live side by side.

Over the years, Downs has been joined by four other musicians – the Brazilian Guilherme Monteiro on guitar, the Chilean Yayo Serka on drums and Cajon, the Cuban Yunior Terry on acoustic bass, and the Paraguayan Celso Duarte on harp and violin. Paul himself plays the piano and tenor saxophone. Together, with numerous equally talented international guest artists, they fuse traditional sounds with American jazz, blues, and even hip-hop, using the world's worth of hand-held percussion instruments. In their coming album, which also draws on sounds from Africa, Downs also reinterprets such classics as "La Cucaracha," the funny song liberally used to critique various Mexican historical figures. Although this time, the target is the US President, George W. Bush.

Downs' mezzo-soprano voice, with a three-octave range, has transformative powers. Whether in Spanish or English, Mixtec or Náhuatl, it can linger in the deep jazzy low tones or erupt in a swift angry hip-hop with the same exactness and passion. Her presence on stage and off, with her black braided hair and multicolored *huipil*, the traditional Mexican blouse, is stunning. Her international fame was greatly enhanced after she had a cameo role in the 2002 movie "Frida," for which she also performed five songs including the title track "Burn it Blue," which was nominated for an Oscar.

Her band now tours incessantly – over eighty concerts last year and almost as many planned for this year. Yet, for the fourth consecutive year, Downs will be in Oaxaca for a benefit concert, organized by the Casa de la Mujer, an organization that promotes education among Oaxacan women. Thanks to last year's concert, nine young *Oaxaqueñas* are currently continuing their education at the high school level.



Photo J. Pêcheur

Lila Downs with her mother Anita and Paul Cohen in Oaxaca

Dead, and selling jewelry on the streets, the disillusioned Downs moved back to Oaxaca. There, on her mother's land, she learned traditional weaving and slowly healed her rifted soul. She finally returned to school and graduated with a major in voice and anthropology from the University of Minnesota.

One day, a dozen years ago, Downs was working in her mother's car-parts store when a man came by and asked her to translate a piece of paper. His son had tried to cross the US border and failed. The man could not read English and was hoping Lila could translate the death certificate. Deeply moved by the brutal reality of the migrants' fate, Downs wrote her first of many songs: "Ofrenda" or "Offering." From that day on, music and lyrics have become her personal weapons of mass construction. "I really believe music can bring people together," she says with her soft firmness.

In 1993, Downs met Paul Cohen, a for-

LILA DOWNS IN CONCERT
 February 27 & 28 @ 8pm
 Teatro Alvaro Carrillo
 Oaxaca
 AT THE CORNER OF CALZ. MADERO AND
 TECNOLÓGICO AVE

Tickets on sale at: Casa de la Mujer, Constitución 301; La Mano Mágica, Alcalá 203; Eléctrica Mexicana, Suc. Las Casas 308; Ópticas América, Sur-Hidalgo 817.

\$100 - \$150 PESOS (ALL PRECEEDS DONATED TO THE CASA DE LA MUJER'S SCHOLARSHIP FUND)

The Women of Nopal

Their husbands gone to the United States, the women of Ayoquesco became entrepreneurs. With the Nopal Cactus, they have turned a rural pueblo into a thriving community

A report by **RACHAEL SHEPHERD**
Photos by **JEROME MANET**

Dipping my *tostada* into the delicious home-cooked bowl of *frijoles*, onion, and nopals mixture, I listen to the cheerful banter of the women. Seated on plastic chairs in the kitchen around a bucket and armed with razor sharp knives, the women are slashing off the thorns of nopal cactus pads. "Thank God for this opportunity we have been given," says Francisca Cruz Sánchez, arranging the now spineless pads along the thin adobe walls.

The women all live in Ayoquesco de Aldama, a small town, about an hour south of Oaxaca by bus. On a muggy Saturday last month, they took me into their homes for a taste of the green life and the green cactus. Despite the multiple hardships along the way, they smile proudly throughout the tour: after decades of unsupported work and agonizingly low market sales, they have successfully organized themselves into an all-women cooperative called *Mujeres Empacadoras de Nopal de Ayoquesco* (MENA) or Women of Ayoquesco who Sell Nopal.

The word nopal derives from *nopalli*, which is the name used by various indigenous groups. The cactus, whose pink, red, yellow and orange flowers of the prickly pear cactus found in the deserts throughout Mexico, is part and parcel of the Mexican tradition. It is depicted in one of the country's most famous icons: the royal golden eagle eating a rattlesnake on top of a nopal cactus. (According to an

ancient legend, the Aztec people were told by Huitzilopochtli (their God) that to find their promised land, they were to find the place where an eagle landed on a nopal cactus while eating a snake. After wandering for hundreds of years, they found the eagle on a small swampy island in Lake Texcoco. They named the place Tenochtitlan (meaning "Place of the Nopal Cactus"), and in 1325, they built what is now called Mexico City.)

Nopals have been a Mexican staple since time immemorial. Recorded as early as 11,000 years ago, it might have been one of the first foods of man in the Americas. Today, most restaurants serve it in a variety of recipes and it is frequently eaten in Mexican homes.

It is a perfect non-meat dish to eat during the Roman Catholic observance of Lent.

"The nopal is very tasty and of great quality," says Francisca Cruz Sánchez, MENA's president. "We don't use any chemicals, only goat and cow manure, so it is organic." Rich in calcium and fiber, nopal is incredibly healthy, and its proponents claim it protects against ulcers, lowers cholesterol, and stimulates circulation. Because nopal prevents the increase in glucose levels by decreasing the concentration of sugar in the blood, daily consumption is also recommended to treat and prevent diabetes. (Furthermore, its viscous juice can even be used to weatherproof your roof!)

Since learning to farm at the young age of eight, each MENA woman sup-

ports her family literally off the nopal, both as food and as a source of income. Each of the original eight members of MENA harvests her own crop in her yard. Today, an individual field grows about 300 plants that are cut and harvested every fifteen days. The daily routine begins at dawn. They wake up to gather the fresh nopals and other vegetables to sell at the local markets around their village. A seemingly typical lifestyle for a Mexican family. But not for these women of Ayoquesco just a few years ago.

Then, the nopal market was a fierce one, rife with discrimination, doubts and financial difficulties. In 2000, at Oaxaca's Saturday Abastos market in, the largest in the area, the nopal was a rare commodity. Fearful of losing customers and money, the "regular" Abastos nopal sellers did not welcome the MENA women. "People tried to kick us out," remembers Sánchez. "The local vendors threw water at us and refused to help us. But we decided not to get upset." The poor weather conditions that year produced a



low crop and exacerbated their plight. The women, who were selling solely fresh organic nopals, were down on their luck.

Then in 2001, Catalina Sánchez Jiménez, now MENA's treasurer, discovered a process that would revolutionize the city of Ayoquesco and the lives of its people. After her husband had traveled to the United States in search of remittances for their family and returned with only fifteen dollars, they decided to try again. Only this time, they crossed the border together. Despite the difficulties of living in a foreign country without speaking the language, Catalina found work in a factory and learned the process of bottling. The discovery would revolutionize the city of Ayoquesco and the lives of its people.

Catalina returned home and announced to her friends that their problems were solved: instead of relying uniquely on fresh nopals, with erratic harvests and sales, they could now package part of their production and export it. With most of their husbands working in the United States, the women brought together their courage and agreed on building a unified group to focus on the packaging of the nopal and export within the Oaxaca region and abroad. MENA was born.

That same year, Francisca traveled to the market in Zimatlan de Alvarez and met a local,



Daniel Zárate Martínez, who was eager to help. He introduced the women to María Gómez Vargas, who worked for the Fundación para la Productividad en el Campo (APOYO), or Foundation for the Development of the Countryside, a group dedicated to the economic development of rural areas. With a US\$5,000 grant from the Inter-American bank, she helped the women invest in and design their future. Since 2003, with the addition of several innovative irrigation systems in their fields, the women produce a 100% natural product. They are still working on the construction of their warehouse, where they will eventually work, instead of the small kitchen in Catalina's adobe house.

In just two years, these women established the reputation of Ayoquesco: just ask any Mexican about this town and he will reply "the town of the Turtugas," alluding to MENA's brand name. The small jars of green cactus are sold in two varieties: cut *nopalito* pieces served brine or marinated in vinegar with carrots. A jar costs



MENA's Founders: Rosalba Santiago Lustre, Yolanda Cruz, Catalina Modesta Sánchez Jiménez and Francisca Cruz Sánchez

Nopales en Salsa Verde

Ingredients (serves four)

- 4 cups nopales, remove thorn, dice
- 10 tomatillos, remove husks and wash
- 1 small white onion, chop
- 1 cup cilantro,
- 1 serrano chiles cut in quarters
- 2 cloves garlic, mince
- 1/3 cup olive oil
- 1/2 cup water to mix sauce
- salt to taste

Preparation

Cleaning the Nopals: Cleaning the nopales can be a chore. It is best to cover the table with newspaper and to wear gloves. Using a thin, sharp knife, remove all the bumpy thorns. (it is better to buy them already clean) Place the nopales in the boiling water and add one teaspoon of salt. Boil for ten minutes. Drain and set aside.

Preparing the Green Salsa: Wash the tomatillos and place in a blender with the chiles. Add just enough water to blend. Once the tomatillos and chiles are blended, add the onion and cilantro. Heat the olive oil in a saucepan, then add the garlic. When the garlic produces an aroma, add the mixture from the blender. When this mixture begins to boil, add the nopales. Serve with fresh cheese and warm tortillas.

a mere fifteen pesos and a kilo of raw pads costs only twelve. There are now 45 Ayocusco families involved in the nopal business. "Our goal is to have our own packaging place and to get our nopals sold in supermarkets," Francisca states enthusiastically. As a matter of fact, their product is already sold at places in Los Angeles and Salinas in California.

The MENA women have come far and the hardest part seems over. Whether walking the grounds of their local fields, attending a meeting with the Municipal President, or enjoying their nopal, all the women of MENA carry a spark of light that seems impossible to extinguish. There is no doubt that their product belongs to the future. They work passionately-for their community, each other, and, most of all, their nopal. To them, each day is a step forward. "Nopal is our business, our future," concludes Catalina.

You can buy MENA's nopal at the Pochote-organic market (Friday and Saturday), 817 García Vigil, between Gómez Farías and Humbolt.

For more information about nopal or MENA, please check *Oaxaca, Simple Flavors*, a beautiful book by Yolanda Cruz and Jérôme Manet. The book is on sale at the Café Los Cuiles, at Plaza La Bastida.