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Powerful Music: Survival & Lila Downs

The banquet hall was filled with the deafening chatter of excited Latinos. The opening act began to play traditional Cumbia, which is a Latin style genre “played on drums, flutes and percussion instruments of African and indigenous origins” (Mauleon). As the music began filling the hot air with deafening sounds of crash symbols and singing Latinos, my mouth filled with distaste. Young teenage girls began to dance in front of a small stage. I rolled my eyes, the music was awful. I sat close to my husband and wondered how he was able to drag me to this event. Little did I know, this event would become a significant turning point in my life.

Finally, the opening band performed their last song and my ears felt relief. As we took our seats on icy metal chairs, I watched as the young teenage girls and their families took their seats with an intense amount of anticipation. They stared at the empty stage like giddy school children. We were part of a Quinceanera that was open to the paying public. The Quinceanera, a party for a young Latina girl turning fifteen, was a dual event featuring a concert performed by Lila Downs. I knew nothing of her, until the woman sitting next to me informed me that Lila Downs performed in *Frida*, a motion picture about the life of Frida Kahlo. *Who is Frida Kahlo?* I thought to myself. I focused my attention on the decorative shawl wrapped around this odd woman. She kept talking about Lila. I was a young, immature girl uninterested in Lila Downs, so

I focused on the woman's shawl. The woman was the size of a football player, towering over me with broad, full shoulders. The shawl stretched around her displaying a bright print of vibrant colors surrounded by a picture of an Indian woman who had a thick unibrow.

The crowd applauded as the lights lowered. A spot light shone on the stage. The band members took their positions. I quickly poured a shot of tequila down my throat, which felt like a light flame traveling through my body. I was preparing myself to endure a night of music that I was not interested in. The woman with the shawl jumped next to me anxiously, bumping into my arm. Her large pony-tail repeatedly smacked me in the face. Her thick black hair smelled of cigarette smoke and melted plastic. Completely focused on the kid-like woman, who was shouting and swinging her arms in the air, I almost forgot that Lila Downs took her place on stage and was preparing to sing.

Lila stood barefoot on stage, braless, skin bare of any kind of make-up besides a fiery red lipstick. Lila was an exact replication of the Indian woman pictured on the shawl. Lila's beautiful earrings contrasted her unattractive unibrow. The earrings were elegant, stunning pieces of gold which matched her decorative tunic filled with images of gold roses and gardenias. Lila's hair, which traveled down to her waist, was tightly weaved into thick, black braids similar to rope. The braids had colorful extensions of ribbon falling freely. She did not look to the audience. She kept her eyes fixed on the spot light. She was calm and collected with sweet gentleness encouraged within her kind eyes. The audience grew silent as the guitar and violin players began to pick at the strings of their instruments. The small screens to the side of the stage displayed large, bold letters reading, "Cielo Rojo." Lila's opening song.

Lila began to howl and the strength of her voice overpowered the instruments. The first words that were pushed from Lila's mouth reminded me of the word, "ah." She took "ah" and elongated the word, turning it into her own, new word. Singing from the pit of her diaphragm, she pushed out "ah" and made it sound like a long, hollow "aw." Her voice transitioned from a high-pitch scream to a low, faint whisper. I caught myself under a spell as her voice echoed throughout the banquet hall. In Lila's voice, something was mystical, almost as if she were singing for an Indian ritual. As the song continued, Lila's voice carried genuine passion and agony. Lila closed her eyes, raised her hands to the sky, and gently swayed them back and forth as the music's pace picked up and kicked back and forth, before coming to a small pause. In the silent pause, Lila sang a single word: "Sola." "Sola" was the first verse of the song, sung with a smoothness that easily slipped from her tongue. Sola: "So", sung with deepness and "la" sung with an uplifting contrast. She turned one word into two separate contrasting words, yet she blended them so that the audience still knew what the original word was. As the verses continued, she took many words, including "caminando," and stretched them. This had a great impact on me as a listener because I could feel the passion of a single word and I was able to reflect on the meaning of the word. "Voy Caminado," the verse Lila sang next, translates into "I'm going to walk." She stretched that verse and it emphasized the word "walk." Lila started the word with strength and power, and ended the word with a slow, declining drop of echoing patterns sung from the back of her throat.

I watched Lila's movements correspond to the mood of her music. Many of her songs started slow causing her movement to look as if she were a snake in a pool of water, slowly moving and gliding as if she were one with the flowing ripples. Lila used each finger individually and curled it, grabbing at some invisible force in the air. As the pace in her songs

picked up, her hands would suddenly beat at the air; her arms would smack the invisible force her fingers were once curling onto so elegantly; her feet and legs were lifted energetically, mimicking a dance ritual. I found myself laughing at times because it seemed as if she was dancing with an invisible man. The audience members danced together during all of her upbeat songs. Lila allowed my husband to step on stage where they briefly danced together. When he was escorted off stage by security, he rushed to me and placed his hand close to my nose where I could smell a faint smell of Lila's scent: a sweetness of a lavender mixed with the intensity of rose scented incense. I was not the only one who became addicted to Lila's presence, performance, and appearance. The whole hall, full of American and Latin cultures, were indeed transfixed on Lila.

Even though I could not fully understand many of Lila's songs on the night of my first encounter with her, I could clearly see how her music and lyrics affected the Latinos in the audience. The Latino community in that banquet hall swayed with her. Their mouths hung open and they applauded vigorously after each song. They were connected, on the same level. They were affected because Lila sang of truth and that meant everything to them. They knew something I did not: Lila was a symbolic representative of hope, life, and survival. Lila Downs has proven that the richest, most influential music comes from artists who sing about what they feel and what needs to be heard, such as survival and life. In her capacity as a Latina artist, Lila takes advantage of her power as a musician and expresses Latino-relevant issues through the beauty of music. Lila is a symbol of tragedy and strength shared by all humans, not just a single culture. Real life tragedy affects us all and Lila attempts to show her audience how it affects the world as a whole by using her intoxicating voice.

To understand Lila's music, one must first accept and comprehend the world Lila comes from. Her mother was a Native Mexican Mestizo, which is one of the few indigenous tribes in Oaxaca, Mexico. Lila's father is a Scottish-American; therefore, Lila grew up in two different, unique worlds which plays a large role in why her music is so transverse (Downs). Lila takes everything from her heritage, childhood, and old folk stories told among her people to create musical ingenuity. Many journalists and critics have placed Lila Down's music in many genres. In Mark Holston's article "Super Sonic", he states that Lila's music is a "panoramic range of Mexican music," which evidently "casts a wide stylistic net, appropriating banda, conjunto[...]mariachi forms and even rap." By becoming a cross-genre artist, Lila has allowed herself to *spread* her music. Michael Simmons has clearly found the perfect way to describe Lila's music by stating, "Downs and Choen (both songwriters) created a maverick sound by weaving rancheras, cumibas, boleros, and other Mexican and Latin styles together with the energy of rock and the swing and chops of jazz." Instead of falling into the Mexican Folk genre, Lila was wise to open herself to a wide range of genres. Anyone who tries to listen to her music will definitely relate to one or more aspects of her songs because of their unique diversity.

An amateur listener to Lila's music may not comprehend what she is saying, especially considering she sings in many languages, including native tongue languages such as the Mixtec tongue. However, the way she expresses herself through the sounds and rhythm of her music will truly connect an audience to her song. Michael Simmons states, "Even if one doesn't fully understand what she's saying, her open heart is universal." It is important for an artist to sing, move, and dance with passion. Even if the audience cannot comprehend the language, physical movement can easily be interpreted. During songs of pain and tragedy, Lila uses her eyes, hands, and voice to express the meaning of her words. A great example of this was during her

performance of “Donde Estas Papa?”. I witnessed her perform this song on the streets on Oaxaca. While singing this song, Lila looked up to the sky, as if she was singing straight to her deceased father. During her verse, “Cierro los ojos y sueño,” which translates to, “I close my eyes and dream,” Lila closed her eyes tightly and grasped at her heart with an unsteady hand. During the climax of the song, she sings “Hola papa/Tu eres mi fuerza/mi valor/mi orgullo/y caminamos juntos/para siempre,” which translates to “Hello dad/ you are my strength/my value/my pride/ and we’ll walk together forever. During these verses, Lila drops her voice to a whisper, reaches her hand out as if asking her invisible father to take it. Lila then begins to softly whimper, breathing heavily. During that performance, I didn’t need to understand Spanish to comprehend Lila’s own survival story. She used all the tools necessary to express the meaning of the song. Lila utilizes her gift of communication brilliantly. After analyzing Lila Downs, Michael Simmons concluded, “Musical communication can be emotionally superior to its verbal counterpart.

Although Lila’s music can simply be listened to for pleasure, there are deep messages of great importance within each song. After reviewing many of Lila’s songs, it has become quite evident that she passionately desires to spread the truth of life and survival. A majority of her messages aid in the power of her own Mestizo people and those from other Latin cultures who have, or are trying to cross the border; yet because she is “cross-cultural”, these messages were created to inform many cultures of this issue because it affects all cultures (Gage). This is why she sings songs such as “Minimum Wage,” in English. “Minimum Wage” sings of those who desperately run across the border to find a “minimum wage” job in America. The lyrics are created to make the American culture think about the seriousness of what is happening on the border, whether or not they are for, or against illegal immigration. In “Minimum Wage,” Lila’s

lyrics state, “Well, they chased me through the dessert/ then the agents strapped me down/then they ask me why in Spanish/Why you keep on comin’ back.” By placing an image of a Mexican chased down by agents into the lyrics, the singer gives the listeners a small glimpse of what it’s like on the border. A heartfelt piece performed by Lila Downs titled, “Ofrenda,” describes the terrible story of Mexican immigrants who return to Mexico dead after embarking on a long, difficult journey, who were incredibly desperate to cross the border. Lila explains, “The overtones of migration enrich the culture of a country.” In her album, *The Border*, Lila sings of other tragedies including, “the exploitation of women in the maquila industry on the border[...]hundreds of them have disappeared in Ciudad Juarez with absolute impunity” (Montesinos). Lila has proven through these songs, that music has a great power: a power to make people reflect on life.

Life is full of hope and survival no matter what circumstances you find yourself or others in. I can relate to the tragic problems of survival that Lila sings of because my past involves a life shared with an illegal immigrant named Alan, who was deported back to Mexico after living and working in America for sixteen years. Before Alan made it to America, he had to cross the horrid border when he was nine; therefore, Lila symbolizes an aspect of survival for him. After Alan was picked up by immigration and sentenced to deportation, I was forced to make the choice to leave America. I had to learn how to survive emotionally through the tragedy of my husband’s deportation. Listening to Lila while we drove through America and Mexico, I finally realized the importance of that Latin community I witnessed back on the first night I saw Lila. They were from a different world, or were part of families who were part of a different world: a world where survival meant taking countless chances to cross a dangerous border to start a new life. Yes. I finally understood the expressions marked on the Latino’s faces. I finally understood why

the kid-like woman with the shawl was jumping up and down, full of excitement. It wasn't about the voice, the genres of music, or the instruments; it was the symbolism. Finally, someone was willing to take a chance and speak about the seriousness of life. Lila Downs took that chance and spoke it through music.

Although my survival story is different from a Mexican's or a Mestizo Indian's, I am still faced with tragedy that will always tie me to Lila Downs and discovering this revelation is immensely important to me. I may never hear from Alan again. He chose to end our story of survival. That chapter of my life has ended, but I owe it to our memories and to the daughters Alan and I share, to spread important messages of survival. Lila Downs created a turning point in my life. I stepped out of my comfort zone and into a dimension that I truly needed to experience. A dimension I want the world to experience. Through Lila Downs, I have learned not only about my own survival, but of the survival of a culture completely different from my own. Using the beauty of music, Lila proved that music is not sound. Music is power.

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