

Black and White, Wild and Tender

Young pianist Liza Micelli finds in the piano a balance between the duality of the forces of nature.

by Ana Teresa Toro / ana.toro@elnuevodia.com



If you listen to her speak, the empathy is automatic. She has one of those candid and spontaneous voices that sound like family. Her Spanish has the accent of being a second language, but the way she utilizes it reveals she understands and uses it at a level that goes much more beyond the mere expression of ideas. Liza Micelli speaks from the heart.

That is the perception that remains when you listen to her talk about the piano and her relationship with Puerto Rico, where she arrived in 2008 to study her bachelors in Jazz and Afro-Caribbena music in the Conservatory of Puerto Rico. Before this, the 25 year old pianist born in Chicago, fruit of an Italian-American family, studied music at Columbia College Chicago. A group of professors from the conservatory travelled to this institution to offer a series of workshops, and it was there where Micelli heard professor Luis Marín for the first time.

“When I heard his playing and felt that energy, I knew that’s what I wanted,” says Micelli who graduated from the conservatory in 2011 and has stayed in the country both for her interest in the music of the region and for her desire to record her first record here.

To do this, she will currently be offering a series of concerts and keeps a page open on the Kickstarter website, a platform through which artists from diverse disciplines present their projects, set a specific economic goal and seek sponsors to create a short film, art exhibition, a play, or as in this case, the recording of a record. If the goal is not reached, the electronic service returns the sponsors' contributions.

The record will be titled "The Great Dictator" and she made us promise not to reveal the meaning so that it be left for interpretation. We only dare to say it's worth the surprise.

Discipline and Freedom

There was always a piano in the family. It was the fun after dinner, and from a young age she learned to play it by ear.

"I always thought it was something the whole world knew to play, until I asked my mother to play with me and she said: 'You are the only pianist in the house,' " remembering the moment that she learned that the language of the piano was something to be learned.

Her twin sister also showed an inclination toward music, and from a young age focused on the drums. This is how she grew up; composing songs with her sister and discovering Latin music thanks to a Tito Puente CD their grandfather gave them.

"I was fascinated by the montunos I was listening to, but I didn't know how to recreate that sound. I've always thought of the piano as a percussion instrument," she explains. "If I wasn't a pianist, I'd be a conguera," she admits.

In the conservatory, she asked to learn montunos, but the response wasn't what she was expecting. "They said no, that that was learned in the street..." Now I understand that there are many things, sounds, for which our ear is not ready and we have to wait."

The same thing happened in her development as a musician, because it wasn't until age 11 that her father took her to her first piano lesson.

"I didn't know how to read music, I didn't know the language, and so I used to change the pieces that my teacher would give me," Liza narrates about her

natural resistance to structure and the classical piano vocabulary, but also understood, “that base is needed.”

From the Conservatory –where she came as an exchange student before enrolling- she was struck by the discipline she encountered. “I wanted to hangout, and my friends to my surprise told me no, that they had to practice, and I realized that was something I was lacking. I was always very free. I needed that structure. “

That, added to her love for the island and mainly, by the diversity of sounds and percussion, made her decide to stay. “I fell in love with Puerto Rico. Here there are so many hidden treasures I am discovering. The energy of the musicians is incredible. They play as if it were their last day on earth.”

Diverse Sound

Although she has become known in the local jazz scene, Micelli doesn't consider herself a jazz pianist. “I love jazz. My body asks for it. I have to do it, but I also love pop music and indigenous rhythms of Latin América, of the United States, Caribbean, the Mediterranean... I'm from Chicago and love its folklore, which is the blues,” describes the young woman, who occasionally sings when performing because it really connects her with the public.

“I like the simplicity of popular music because it reaches so many people. And at times, jazz becomes too academic and critical. The musician who doesn't know how to read is often judged. I think it's important to understand the technical, but many of those percussionists do not read anything, and maybe that's why they have so much energy, because reading and thinking so much takes away from that freedom,” she says, conscious in her search of that balance.

The same balance she describes when talking about her sound, “My personality is mostly very soft, but the piano has allowed me to get to know and reveal the stronger facets of my character,” she says.

In Puerto Rico she found what she was looking for, and perhaps a little more. “I'm on an adventure, that began as a child, and maybe at the end of my life, I'll find myself in a circle.”

Tu Nuevo Amanecer

By Sandra Munévar

Liza Micelli is a young musical prodigy that radiates the energy of her youth, which is evident when you see her and listen to her speak, especially when the topic is about music, making clear that it is not a hobby or simple pastime, music for her is clearly a way of life and her greatest passion.

Liza was born in Chicago, Illinois, but arrived in Puerto Rico, the “Island of Enchantment” in 2008 to study at the Conservatory of Music of Puerto Rico, her studies culminating in 2011. She is an artist that has a lot to talk about because her talent and charisma is overflowing, two very difficult characteristics to find in one person. For this reason, *Tu Nuevo Amanecer* spoke with her, and this is what she told us.

Sandra: Hi Liza, for us it is our pleasure to contact you. We have seen your work and it is surprising the talent you have for music. What aspect influenced the moment you discovered your talent?

Liza: For me, playing the piano was something as natural as breathing, but my parents were the ones who made me realize that not everyone plays the piano. That was something that surprised me a lot.

In the case of Charlie Chaplin and *The Great Dictator*, that movie made me realize of all the things that we are and the potential that we have as human beings. The movie and its words have inspired the form in which I play the piano. There is no reason to fear “SOUNDING” the piano, or to say what I want or what I believe in being that I am woman. Just in case you were wondering, I’m not a feminist (she laughs). You ask if the movie has helped me discover my talent. At best, it has helped me find the audacity to express myself without fear, as a pianist and person.

Sandra: Who gave you your first opportunity to showcase yourself on the music scene?

Liza: My elementary school music teacher Mrs. Linda Reinert who sadly passed away a few weeks ago. In fifth grade I began to compose songs with my sister Dina and she used to invite me to play in front of the class

while recording my performance. Then there was an art fair and my sister and I did a mini-concert for the school playing three pieces we composed.

Sandra: Do you believe that living in the “Island of Enchantment” influenced your love for music?

Liza: Definitely! My love and inquisition for music is what attracted me to Puerto Rico. I wanted to be part of this music and know more; especially the percussion. I realized that playing Afro-Caribbean music allows me to be a percussionist.

Sandra: Why did you choose the piano?

Liza: The piano pretty much chose me. There was always a piano in my house since I can remember. I was more or less 5 years old when I began to play the piano, and I would try to imitate the music of the movies I saw. It was at 11 years old that my father signed me up for formal lessons. He told me, “Enough with playing by ear! You have to learn how to read music.” He was always attentive to my sister’s and my musical and professional education.

Sandra: What other instruments do you play?

Liza: I play a little guitar, which I find very similar to the piano, and percussion, congas in particular.

Sandra: What is your favorite style of music and who are your favorite artists?

Liza: The first artist that comes to mind, and has been like this forever is Michael Jackson. I love pop music, and I’m not afraid to say it! All music fulfills me. Some of my other favorites are Richard Bona and Sting. Their albums include various influences simultaneously, and they do it with such elegance, coherence and balance. I want to accomplish that same sound! A mélange of everything thing that I am!

Sandra: What project are you apart of currently?

Liza: This year I had the opportunity to work with and record with Puerto Rican bassist Sammy Morales and his group SM QUINTET. Another blessing I have had was an invitation by legendary percussionist Cachete Maldonado to be the pianist of the new generation of Batacumbele. It is a great compliment and honor for me!

Finally, with much effort and work, I have had the opportunity to present my music and arrangements under my own name. I was going to return to Chicago, but I realized that I haven't finished here. So I decided to pass the whole summer, closed up in my Old San Juan apartment composing and arranging for my debut album.

I want to record with the musicians from Puerto Rico for their spirit, attitude and energy. These elements come naturally to their culture, giving life to music. I can't leave here without completing this goal, the first of many!

I am super excited for those who will share their talents on this album. I never thought working with them would be a reality.

Sandra: Do you want to dedicate yourself to music for the rest of your life?

Liza: I have dedicated my whole life to music ever since I was a little girl. Why stop? It is something I need to do. There is always something to learn and share.

Sandra: With whom would you like to share the stage?

Liza: Richard Bona!

Sandra: How is your CD coming along?

Liza: Precisely, I would like to take the opportunity to ask for public support since I find myself in the process of collecting funds to record my first project. For this reason, I have put together a series of concerts and Kickstarter program.

The web program Kickstarter allows the public to make donations to artists of all disciplines in order to help them in the realization of their

independent projects. My contact on this page is
www.kickstarter.com/projects/lizamicelli/la-gran-dictadora.

The goal is to reach the majority of donations by September 16, so what I ask of all readers is to visit this webpage and donate at least \$1 to support this artistic project.

Liza is an artist that has a great future ahead of her and surely we'll have more news about her, its in our hands to support her, she only has till September 16 to reach the desired quantity. If not reached, she doesn't receive a cent. If the goal isn't met, the donors will be reimbursed the complete total of their monetary support.

For more information visit
www.kickstarter.com/projects/lizamicelli/la-gran-dictadora or her personal page lizamicelli.com or you can write her directly at liza.micelli@yahoo.com.