



### TAMAR ILANA & VENTANAS

Though they sprang from the same soil and from closely related languages, flamenco and Sephardic Jewish song could not be more different. Flamenco burns with passion and fury, and performances reach an emotional fever pitch. Sephardic singers let the wry tales in songs speak for themselves, with reserved precision.

It's the tension between the two that fires Toronto-based singer Tamar Ilana's imagination. "I have given up on purity," laughs Ilana. "I take from both, draw on both the story and the emotion. I infuse flamenco feeling into Sephardic stories, and vice versa."

Ilana and her trans-Mediterranean ensemble Ventanas, which Ilana founded in 2011, bring the feelings into intimate dialogue, embracing the many instrumental and melodic possibilities of North Africa, the Balkans, and Turkey to create fresh interpretations and original songs. Oud and baglama, flamenco footwork and darbuka intertwine with a powerful commitment to convey what lies at heart of these unexpectedly connected sounds, the joy and yearning. The combination, which garnered the group two Canadian Folk Music Award nominations in 2014 and 2015, shines on *Arrelumbre* (release: June 5, 2015).

"I was raised with the idea that we needed to preserve folk songs that might otherwise be lost, in the purest form possible," reflects Ilana. "Ventanas tries to preserve the traditions, but we present them in an exciting way, both sonically and visually, that makes them more welcoming to a wider audience. We infuse them with new energy, with dance and diverse instrumentation, to keep things moving forward."

This forward motion comes naturally to Ilana, who has lived and breathed the region's musics from girlhood, traveling and performing with her ethnomusicologist/singer mother. She went to remote villages to record centenarians and performed as she went, sometimes wishing she could be like other kids. Gradually, as Ilana came into her own as a musician, singing on stage went from childhood chore to profound love.

Her early adventures gave Ilana a remarkably deep well to draw on. The repertoire--everything from early music to Eastern European folk songs (the kind of four-part harmony heard on "Makedonsko Devojce")--and its narratives and nuances are second nature. Her two main touchstones as a singer and bandleader flow from her ongoing engagement with the Iberian past: flamenco and the songs of the Sephardic Jews, who were expelled from Spain centuries ago and adapted to new cultures as they migrated to new lands (as heard in the lovely medley of Moroccan Sephardic wedding songs, and the album's title track, "Arrelumbre"). Ilana studied flamenco with several teachers in Seville and in Toronto, masters who taught her songs like "Ven a Mí."

Ventanas seamlessly incorporate other musical fascinations into very traditional forms, like the oud and violin that weave into the furious emotion of "La Sala del Crimen." Or the flamenco guitar flourishes that grace the Persian classical piece "Amed Nesim-i," a composition Ilana learned from and performed with family friends in Madrid.

The melding of ideas and sounds runs deeper than instrumentation. Ilana and Ventanas blend novel performance approaches as avidly as they embrace fresh sounds. As Ilana dove deep into flamenco technique and songs, she found her studies cross-pollinating with the Sephardic songs her mother had taught her, and suggesting new pieces. "These songs' stories have been in my head for so long," she explains. "I've thought about them so much."

The results: originals like "Libertad," inspired lyrically by the images of a favorite Sephardic song, yet musically sparked by her dialog with Athens-born oud player Demetrios Petsalakis. It was Petsalakis who encouraged Ilana to start working on pieces with him. The songwriting collaboration is bearing fruit, as Petsalakis comes up with the melodies, and Ilana runs with them, crafting words in Spanish or Ladino. Then the band leaps in, expanding and elaborating the arrangements together.

It's part of a larger journey, deeper into the spirit of tradition, yet farther from its sources and strictures. "This album marks a transition between all traditional songs that we arranged and all original songs, which is where we hope to go," Ilana remarks. "We want to keep the spirit of the traditions alive, while creating something new. You can hear this in 'Primavera.' We start off with an original piece in a Balkan 7/8 rhythm and then overlay the flamenco rhythm of bulerías, and then we dive into a traditional flamenco verse before resurfacing into the original melody in 7/8."

This complexity serves the band's ultimate purpose, to take the compelling elements from divergent traditions--the fiery and the charmingly restrained--and bring them into perfect, balanced harmony.

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