

Review Daymé Arocena brings exultant Afro-Cuban rumba to Eagle Rock



Cuban vocalist Dayme Arocena makes her Los Angeles debut Monday at the Center for the Arts Eagle Rock. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)



By **August Brown** · Contact Reporter

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When Daymé Arocena took the stage on Monday night for her Los Angeles debut, the 22-year-old looked resplendent in a white dress and matching headwrap. The backing band for the Havana singer and composer was already out in front of her at the Center for the Arts Eagle Rock, winding up to play her regal song “Madres” and begin a tour of contemporary rumba and ambitious Afro-Cuban jazz.

But at her first notes, a wave of bass feedback overwhelmed the church-sized venue for a moment.

Arocena gripped the mic, grinned and slyly led her band through it. “That’s all the spirits trying to play with me,” she joked. It seemed as if the room wasn’t built to contain a voice that big.

As the relationship between Cuba and the U.S. thaws after generations of estrangement, the dialogue between the two countries is sure to only deepen. Cuba's contributions to American jazz, Caribbean traditional styles and the Afro-pop diaspora are well noted. The island nation's contemporary music world is less well known here, though, and Arocena is one of its most inviting ambassadors.

The songs she performed on Monday spanned her latest album "Nueva Era" and her forthcoming "One Takes" EP (released on the influential BBC DJ Gilles Peterson's Brownswood label) and tracks from a documentary, "Havana Cultura Rumba Sessions: La Clave," that screened before the show. Arocena's catalog has touchstones from modern and established Cuban music, along with forays into contemporary R&B. Her show was a brief but comprehensive tour through all of it.

Arocena's voice hits a rich and resonant low timbre (Nina Simone fans will find a sonic kinship here). But Arocena's mood was almost all joy on Monday, as she nodded to President Obama's recent visit to Cuba and laid out the history of her interlocking musical paths.

Backed by a four-piece band (two percussionists, bass and piano), she often marched them through her exuberant rumba with a wooden clave in hand, demarcating tricky time signatures in ways that the packed crowd could clap along to. Her songs are rooted in moody, complex bass lines (here played by the stellar young Rafael Aldama Chiroles) that turn exuberant when layered with hand percussion and big washes of piano.

But her singing called back to decades of musical conversation between Africa and the Americas. R&B fans would recognize the gentle poise of Sade in English-language singles like "Don't Unplug My Body" and "African Sunshine," But Arocena always left room for rafter-clearing high notes that emphasized her virtuosity. On "El 456," she whipped the audience into a call-and-response chant that proved her myriad talents are always in service of a communal experience.

With travel restrictions to Cuba lifting, Americans will be heading there in search of some real, fundamental essence of the nation's musical life that has been all but forbidden for decades. For a few hours in L.A. on Monday night, that feeling came right to their backyard.

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