

Mexican Weave

Singer, dancer, painter – Mexico's Jaramar has been surrounded by culture since birth. Jan Fairley encounters her in the Netherlands.

How many musicians make music in cemeteries? That's exactly how Mexican group Jaramar spent Saturday 28th October 2006, as part of preparations for the Day Of The Dead on 31st October. "We were playing in this beautiful cemetery in Hollywood. The music began at 4 pm. Everyone was making Day Of The Dead altars, decorating them with photos of the dead person and all the things they liked: their favourite food, flowers, mementos, candles, making pathways of marigold and everlasting flower petals, to lead spirits to their altars. There was a great brass band from Oaxaca, and we sang a lot of typical Mexican songs about death."

I'm sitting backstage at the Oosterport Theatre in Groningen in the Netherlands, a couple of hours from Amsterdam, as Jaramar's band is getting ready for its gig. I've arrived in time to hear the vibrant *La Petenera* at the soundcheck. A sailor's song from Veracruz, its rhythms celebrate the Chileans who passed through Mexico on the way to the North American Gold Rush. I've met Jaramar herself; Argentine percussionist Julio Mangiameli; bassist Luis Arreola; guitarist Luis Ochoa and the veritable Nathalie Braux who plays clarinet and alto-saxophone and is in charge of musical arrangements and direction. Jaramar, small and dark-haired with her fine-boned face and agile body, is an arresting figure on stage, obviously a dancer as well as a singer. It turns out she is a painter too, an all round artist. Born in Mexico City, the only child of a distinguished dancer mother (Alma Rosa) and museum archivist father (Alfonso), who took her everywhere from dancing stages to field trips, she's been surrounded by culture since birth. And, as she tells me, having lived in Europe in the 1970s, and for a short time when very young in San Antonio Texas, Jaramar speaks Italian, French and great English as well as her native Spanish.

Many musicians decide against interviews before gigs: they're rehearsing, busy fixing things, wanting quiet time or simply too nervous. But not Jaramar. She's organised and ready to let the band head back to the hotel to shower and change, while we cosy in the dressing room from the rain and wind blowing outside, to chat. We're helping ourselves to sandwiches, fruit, tea and red wine, which the band later toasts a glass with before going on stage.

Jaramar and all her musicians (with backgrounds in Latin, classical, jazz, rock and world musics like klezmer) live in Guadalajara (which sounds picturesque but actually is a city of seven million). They're touring Holland and Belgium per-

forming material from her new album *Que Mis Labios Te Nombren* (Let My Lips Name You). Jaramar has acquired a European following since the 2003 release of *Travesía*, a compilation culled from ten years' work between 1992-2002, and in 2004, *Duerme Por La Noche Oscura* (Sleep For The Night Is Dark), a children's album full of lullabies illustrated by her own paintings.



Jaramar's grandmother and inspiration

Travesía saw Jaramar singing Mexican, Mediterranean, Spanish and Sephardic early music styles. With her new album, she's shifted focus to Mexican traditional and popular songs primarily inspired by her paternal grandmother, Lucila Soría. "My grandmother was a very unusual woman, outside the Mexican pattern, in that she was married five or six times. When she was in her 70s she married a man my age, which gives you an idea of her extraordinary strength and personality. She was extremely sexy, always dancing."

"She was a singer and a marvellous singing teacher and took me under her wing when I was about nine years old. Every Sunday I went to her house and she played piano and sang and taught me songs. She loved romantic songs, of people like Agustín Lara [one of Mexico and Latin America's most popular *bolero* (romantic ballad) singers], which make your voice work by going up and down and I remember how I loved their theatricality. My grandmother used to say to me, 'Jaramar, these songs will teach you to sing'. For this new project I wanted to go back to my life history, re-encounter my family. For many years I tried to avoid it as I needed to find my own self, my own sound and image,

because I am an only child so I have no brothers and sisters to work that out with, but now I felt ready to find myself in a different way."

"I talked to my dad and together we found songs in my grandmother's papers, song collection and records. It's a collection of love songs of many colours, some dark, some light, all passionate and emotional and luminous for me. We found a lot of tragic love songs by Alfonso Esparza Oteo from the Yucatan and I chose three: *Un Cruel Puñal*, *No Vuelvo A Amar* and *Dime Que Sí*, full of typical regional cadences. There's the very sensual *Milagro* by Agustín Lara who was huge in the 1940s. He was a pianist in a brothel and the prostitutes were women he sang to. He sings about the dark-blue circles of tiredness under the women's eyes.

"There's *La Lloroncita* and *La Petenera*, a bitter-sweet lament and a 'death and solitude' sailor's song made of old Spanish *copla* verses from Veracruz, beautifully constructed and full of homespun wisdom. There's a *ranchera*, *Flor Triste* (Sad Flower), and *A La Orilla De Un Palmar* about an orphan girl who lives alone at the edge of palm trees, a dialogue between two people who want to be lovers. Then there's an old Spanish romance, a *lirica popular* about a wife who dies during the absence of her husband at war, buried by the time he returns. *No Vuelvo Amar* is an old cantina love song of a broken heart, you know, 'I will never love again', which sounds clichéd but I think we all have moments in our lives when we feel like that. Armando Chong, our sound recordist, arranged it and it is a real homage to my grandmother as it is one of the first songs she taught me. Then there's *Luna*, my first ever recorded composition which sees me overcoming my own inhibitions and fears about composing. It's about surviving being in and out of love, about the moon cleansing the soul."

"My music helps me know what kind of woman I am, and who I am has a lot to do with my upbringing. I was born in Mexico City in 1954 in San Pedro de los Pinos. Later we lived in Coyoacán. My stage name comes from my full name which is Alma Jaramar del Carmen Soto Martínez. When I was 19 I was fortunate to win a Mexican government scholarship to come to Europe to study textile design in Rome, then Paris. Then I returned to Mexico to a job in Guadalajara where I got married and where both my children were born."

"I was 26 when I became a professional singer. I had this group Escalón with my husband Alfredo Sánchez who played gui-

tar and composed the music, and his brother Carlos, a pianist. We did *canto nuevo* influenced by Chilean *nueva canción* and Cuban *nueva trova*, which was very popular in Mexico at that time, the late '70s and '80s, a passionately committed period. We wanted a new poetry and language because we thought song could change society, change the world. There were many interesting groups singing in *peña* clubs and in 1981 one of the TV channels did the first *festival de canto nuevo*, giving a different prize each week for 13 weeks to new compositions. And our group Escalón from Guadalajara won the big overall prize. It was a turning point. We became good friends with many other groups taking part, creating an alternative movement to promote our work."

"I discovered renaissance music when a theatre director in Guadalajara invited me to sing old Spanish songs for a Valle-Inclán play [famous Spanish early 20th century playwright]. I was entranced by the material he gave me – it was so different. I discovered a world of Sephardic songs and Moorish romances and became singer with the group *Ars Antiqua* for five years. Alfredo accompanied me on guitar and we were invited to festivals in Guadalajara, Guanajuato and Mexico City."

"Then I did a new project with Alfredo and Eduardo [director of *Ars Antiqua*], making a fusion between electronic and ancient instruments, bringing lutes, hurdy-gurdies, crumhorns, flutes and percussion together with synthesizers. We played medieval music like the 13th century *Cantigas De Alfonso X 'El Sabio'* in experimental style. Our approach was not music anthropology, more following our instincts to show this music was alive. We had a very eclectic audience."

"We found the label *Opción Sónica* in Mexico City in 1992, and did our first CD in

'93, so that's how my solo career began. We did six CDs in all with them, plus I was part of their Mexican Divas project. Our kind of fusion project which we call *mestizaje* has developed over the years: it's gone from being electronic and modern with ancient to acoustic."

Travesía involved songs from a number of discs: her first, *Entre La Pena Y El Gozo* (Between Pain And Pleasure; 1993), involved Spanish popular love songs. Her second, *Finjir Que Duermo* (1994), was embedded in dreams. "With that disc I realised that poetry makes me choose a song. I have to be able to make sense of the world through what I am singing, so it is like me speaking really. That is when the poetry of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz [medieval female Spanish nun poet] began to be important in my work. I find her poetry very intense and mystical. She gives new meaning to earthly topics like unrequited love."

For Jaramar's third CD, *Si Yo Nunca Muriera* (If I Never Died; 1995), she used, "Ancient poetry of the Mexican codices, about death, about not being able to take what you live with when you die, and about what is left, like poetry! Then I did *Lenguas* (1998), celebrating singing in other languages as well as Spanish, in Languedoc, old Portuguese, Zapotec [indigenous Mexican language]. Then I did *A Flor De Tierra* (1999) which has Violeta Parra's *Corazón Maldito* [Parra being seminal Chilean folklorist-composer, 'mother' of Latin American 'new song'] and songs from Venezuela, and then *Nadie Creerá El Incendio* (No One Believes The Fire; 2001)."

Does she have a huge repertoire of Latin American songs? "Yes. When I began I sang Violeta Parra, Soledad Bravo [Mexico], Chabuca Granda [Peru], Bola de Nieve [Cuba] and lots of Mexican songs, many learnt from troubadour singer

Oscar Chávez. And I recorded *Flor De Azalea* by Manuel Esperón, one of Mexico's greatest composers, which became like a leitmotif for me. Esperón composed it for Jorge Negrete for a Mexican film made in the 1940s, the golden age of Mexican cinema. Then I made *Nadie Creerá El Incendio* which is about the passion of women. The poet Carmen Villolo was preparing an anthology of 20th century Mexican female erotic poetry which she gave to me to work with and I used them alongside the poems of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Alfredo composed and arranged the music." Tonight, I'll sing *Sentir* by Enriqueta Ochoa from that project. She is 70 right now and is one of Mexico's great poets. Working with those women poets I realised that whether they wrote centuries ago or now, when a woman decides to write she must overcome many fears, so by the time she gets there she is quite fearless."

The most recent project Jaramar tells me about under the auspices of Guadalajara's Contemporary Art Museum involves visual arts, theatre, movement, poetry and music. "The theme was five *cartas de amor* [love letters] of a 17th century Portuguese nun Mariana Alcoforado who had this passionate affair with a French military man who abandoned her, went off in his boat, leaving her tragically. The letters move from raw pain, inner suffering and desperate anger to something passionately and philosophically intense. Three of us worked on it for months: me, the poet Karla Sandomingo and Natalie who composed all the music. We made the story our own by writing it as letters to each other. We'd like to make it into a movie."

Que Mis Labios Te Nombren (Discos Imposibles). www.moonstruck.nl
www.jaramar.com.mx
www.myspace.com/jaramar

