

ANA LAAN: CAPTURING THE LANGUAGE OF SONG

Marty Sattell meets the multi-lingual star from Sweden whose music is gaining popularity in Spain

Sweden is known for many things, among them the Nobel Prizes, paracetamol and Ikea. What this great nation of successful social democracy to the north is not regarded for, however, are its Jewish girls schools that have musically formed internationally successful artists.

It's logical that the Nordic nation isn't very well known for its musical breeding grounds of Judaism, since this writer can only count one artist that traces her musical education to a Swedish Jewish boarding school — Ana Laan.

Although not born in Sweden (she was born in Madrid to Spanish and Swedish parents), Laan moved to Stockholm at six months of age. She grew up in a multicultural environment, speaking Swedish, Spanish and English at home and, as a result, attending a Jewish school for seven years. Counterintuitively, it wasn't the musically rich Stockholm scene that gave her the furthest interest in music, but her time in her school's choir and her home life.

Laan admits that she has recently gained a certain affinity for Scandinavian music, such as Björk and The Cardigans. "When I hear a lot of Scandinavian artists, not just Swedish, I feel at very at home with what they do", she says, still maintaining it was her choir work at home and in school that gave her the best current music, both the artistically and personally.

"When I was a kid I didn't see bands and I really don't remember listening to Swedish bands or anything," Laan says. "I would say my main pop influence was Madonna, but I wasn't too into them." Instead, she looks to modern Israeli and Sephardic composers as her earliest influences.

Her "old fashioned" (in she puts it) home life likewise served as an important foundation for her music. Growing up, Laan had no television and her family would sing harmonies after dinner. This multi-lingual upbringing manifested itself in her music as well, as she sings in English, Spanish, Swedish and French as a solo artist.

While the vocal play Laan uses in her songs comes from her school choir and from home, she says, her experience in the former also cultivated a "need and joy of singing". "Music in many manifestations of Jewish culture is very important," she says, adding that song has often been a means to deal with the historical plight of the Jewish people. "Shantarkovitch defined Jewish music as 'laughter through tears'. The fact of music being so important certainly left a trace on me."

It goes without saying that the vocal aspects of Laan's music are its most integral, and it was with her voice that she initially began her career as a musician. After moving back to Madrid to study English language and literature at Complutense, Laan began working with many Spanish-speaking musicians as a backing vocalist, including David Bisbal, Sergio Dalma and Chelena Rosennings. Notably, she also lent her voice to Jorge Drexler's "El Otro Lado del Río", which won the 2004 Academy Award for Best Original Song.

At about the same time, Laan also recorded a few albums (*Apocalypso* in 2002 and *Skulpturas* in 2004) under the name de plume Rita Calypso — a project undertaken by Madrid-based Sirena Records' Ramon Lina, for which Laan explains she was more or less a voice actor for the fictional Calypso. "It was really Ramon's project," she says. "He chose all of the songs. I was really just a hired voice."

But these albums came at an important time for Laan. While an accomplished backing vocalist, she had already begun writing her own songs, but had left a lot unlisted. Recording as Calypso was an important step for Laan, who knew that the opportunity let her "be a solo artist without having to be a solo artist". Performing under a pseudonym for the critically acclaimed *Apocalypso* (the album got four stars from *El País*) gave her the genuine confidence and practical studio experience for the release of her debut solo album, *Origens*, in 2004 in the US and 2005 in Argentina. Notably, the album won the 2006 Independent Music Award for Best Latin Album.

Her second album, *Chocolate and Flowers* was released this March in Spain and is available in the US and Argentina. It will also enjoy a Japanese release later this year. In comparison to her first album, Laan says that *Chocolate and Flowers* has "a lot of space". "I wanted to let the album breathe a bit more", she says, meaning that the album sounds less "correct", as she terms her first, more organic and more relaxed. Also, there is more English on this album, as well as some French and Swedish, and of course, Spanish.

Really, Laan's collection of 13 rock songs on this album is a remarkable effort. Her grammar yet seamless voice makes every song instantly listenable — an important fact since her craftsmanship reveals itself on repeated listens, especially considering the abun-



By Sattell

Photo: Paco Olvera

dance of excellent instrumentation on the album. One footnote to use the backronym "steady" to refer to Laan's vocal harmonies on the Swedish ballad "King King, Kickass Star", but perhaps there is no other word. The organ on "Paradise" and the piano and strings on "Ea" are wonderfully composed, and the inclusion of the latter throughout the album, Laan says, "was a dream come true". While "Paradise" was chosen as the Eurovision Song of the Week from 3-23 March, the bonus news "Maya" and smeltie "Was Alla De Le Ransvalla" are its hidden gems. All in all, *Chocolate and Flowers* is a collection of clever and upbeat pop songs, perfect for the upcoming late-spring and summer months.

Since the release of her latest album, Laan has noted an increase in her popularity in Spain and America by dint of increased hits to her Myspace.com page and augmented affinity.com sales. Perhaps it is her multi-lingual lyrics that account for her international appeal, but the robustness of her music suggests otherwise.