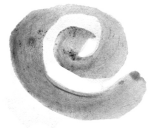


On using music to channel your emotions and understand where you came from



Puerto Rican composer and vocalist iLe discusses the ways in which her home and culture inform the music she makes, why it's important to travel, coming from a lineage of strong women, and why writing is a valuable way to understand yourself.

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As told to Miriam Garcia, 2303 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Beginnings](#), [Inspiration](#), [Identity](#), [Adversity](#).

Some of your closest collaborators and friends have described you as an old soul in the body of a young woman. Where does this come from?

Probably because since I was very young I listened to a lot of salsa from the '70s and boleros from the Caribbean. It's something that I like to listen to all the time.

Your music is influenced by boleros, trio music, salsa, and boogaloo. What was your first encounter with these older music genres?

Music was always present in my home, from salsa and jazz to boleros and rock. I remember a lot of musicality around me. I was the youngest, and I grew up absorbing all this music. While I was growing up, I mostly listened to artists from my country, and I appreciate that. Also, one of my brothers became a salsa bolero freak. So he taught me about it too.

Older music transports me to other times, and it makes me wonder how everything was back then in terms of instrumentations and the textures musicians used. I enjoy appreciating that, especially singers who interpret and provide an emotion that makes me feel closer to the music. That is very valuable for me and is something that I have learned when I perform as well. I think in music it is very important to be honest about what you are doing with your art.

You come from a family of artists, particularly musicians and composers. I can picture all of you together in a room or studio, talking about each other's work and performing together.

We are a big family, we grew up together and we share our thoughts together. We have our close friends and people we love, but as a family we feel complete. It's something that I value and I appreciate because I know that not everybody has that, so I feel fortunate to be really close with my family. We need each other and we love each other.

Also, when I was very young, I got the chance to travel with my family. I learned about other cultures, other ways of living, and I try to share my own experiences as well, as I find that very nurturing. I like to expand myself

as much as I can, and a good way to do that is by traveling and sharing your stories. I learned that from traveling with my brothers. Being away from my country allowed me to appreciate it more and to see it from another perspective, so now I understand it more.

Can you elaborate on what you said about expanding your vision of your country and your surroundings? How did traveling influence your creative process?

For example, Puerto Rico is a very small island surrounded by water, and sometimes you might feel a little trapped. So, artistically speaking, it is hard because art is not well supported in Puerto Rico. We're starting to do something about it little by little, but it takes a lot of money that we don't have. Also, the governments we've had don't support artists much. If it's not lucrative, obviously they don't see it as something relevant.

As an artist, we might feel very frustrated with our colonial status and state of mind since we, as Puerto Ricans, think we're not enough, we think that North America is better than us and it is easy to start feeling ungrateful. For example, some Puerto Ricans think that we don't have an accent. I always give that example because it's something very simple and weird at the same time. Why do we feel that? That has to do with our colonial mindset, we think that our culture is not good but at the same time, if someone says otherwise, we exclaim the opposite and we show pride in who we are.

When you travel, you are able to see a little of the rest of the world and how other people manage their reality. You start to see that we are not alone, that we have something in common and we have a lot to learn about appreciating us more. After traveling, the only thing I felt I could do was to share what I was seeing with my friends and the people I know. That is when I started singing. I like to share that on stage as well because sometimes you are in your own bubble and you disconnect from the rest of the world. Nowadays more than ever it's important to feel connected.

Feeling connected by relating the local with the global.

I don't know if there will be a day when the world is going to be perfect. But in the meantime, how do we manage our own imperfections? If Puerto Rico becomes independent one day it's not going to be perfect because we still have to work on ourselves, and we have to find our ways to work together as a team. That is what happened after Hurricane Maria. It was a disaster. The whole island was destroyed. It was very tough for us. But at the same time, we did something about it and we helped each other. It might be a slow process, but in the end, we start seeing the achievements of our work and efforts.

In art you always find a way to channel your emotions; you try to understand yourself and understand your surroundings. It's a difficult but fun process. For me, at least, it's an artistic solution that helps me to feel less alone. What I don't like about Puerto Rico is the lack of appreciation we have for ourselves and the emptiness that I feel when I attend political protests. That is a big struggle for me. In my new album I talk about this. It was made in Puerto Rico, but in the end there is something universal about appreciating and learning how to use our courage and acknowledging our fears but overcoming and transcending them, and working as a team for the good of our country and, ideally, the world.

The strong bond that you have with the women in your family is really present in your music. You perform and record songs that your grandmother and your sister wrote. How would you describe this intergenerational collaborative process?

I am super grateful that my grandmother is present in my music. My first album has many of her songs. She had a very strong character and I liked that about her. She was not submissive at all, and this is unusual because during her time women tended to stay with their husbands just because they had to. Even though they didn't feel loved, they were submissive to the relationships because women were the pillar and they felt that they had to rescue their partners. She didn't feel that way. She was very intuitive, and so are my mother, aunt, and my sister. I like their intuition through life.

When I was recording my grandmother's songs I felt her presence and energy. But it was hard for me to feel calm

because I didn't know if she would have liked my performance of her songs. She was very picky. But my mom and aunt assured me that she would have liked them. The women in my family are strong and they taught me how to be strong as well, but also each one of them knew that it was ok to show their vulnerabilities and they transformed those vulnerabilities into strengths.

You won a Grammy with your first album *iLevitable*. Did you find yourself facing certain expectations or insecurities for your second album after that?

I understand that the Grammys are an event for the media. It is something that I celebrate—I enjoy it, I feel happy about it, and I appreciate it. But I know that there's so much music out there that doesn't get a Grammy or any other kind of recognition, but is still great music. For me, it doesn't have to do with the trophies—that kind of recognition is not related to the quality of the music. Obviously, I was very grateful because it was my first album and I was so sure that I wasn't going to win anything. It was a surprise, but at the same time, it's not something that moves me. I just want to do what I feel like doing. Now everything is so mainstream. I listen to it, I try to understand it so I don't feel disconnected, but I want to do my own thing. I don't want to feel pressured. I obviously adapt to my reality and circumstances, but I do my music in my own way and that's what moves me.

You're interested in supporting the independent music scene in Puerto Rico. Most of your musicians are part of this scene. You also sometimes DJ for local parties. How do you choose the musicians that are going to be part of your band? How does this independent music scene influence your creative process?

I like musicians who have a special language in their touch. For me, it doesn't matter how experienced they are—it has more to do with the way they express their instrument, their music, and obviously their connection with me. Their energy has a lot to do with it as well. They might be great musicians, but sometimes it's a shame that they have an attitude that I don't connect with, or a big ego. And for me, that takes you down. That's why I feel so grateful that all the musicians from my band always have a good attitude and energy, and they're very into the project, they enjoy it, they enjoy their time, and they realize, as well as I do, that we don't know how long this is going to last. You have to enjoy every moment, you just have to.

In your songs, you're really open about the current political situation in Puerto Rico, the violence against women, and the damage caused by Hurricane Maria. What do you seek when you write about these kinds of topics?

I feel like it's a psychological diary. It's almost like therapy because I have some feelings, but it's not until I write them that I understand them better. I like that about writing, and that's why I recommend it to anyone. It doesn't matter if it's a song or whatever, it's important to understand yourself, and writing is the best tool to do that. I always recommend writing to my friends and they appreciate it because it's like seeing yourself through words, and it's something that is difficult but at the same time it's a good feeling. When I write I think, "Oh, this is how I'm feeling now, I understand," and then suddenly it becomes a song—but first I need to vomit everything out, and that helps me a lot because you go through so many things in life and everyone has their own circumstances. At the same time, though, we are seeking the same things—we're seeking love, we're seeking freedom, and it's important to break that wall, that barrier that sometimes you put yourself in and that gets in the way. Having another perspective in life keeps you going.

In your new album, there is a song about Puerto Rico called "Ñe Ñe Ñe." The lyrics are so political because the song is kind of a dialogue where the citizens expose the lack of the government response during the current political climate, like Puerto Rico's debt to other countries and the damage caused by foreign intervention, and the government replies "Ñe Ñe Ñe", which means "stop whining." Was there a particular event that inspired you to write this song? How did you decide what kind of music and rhythm could be a good fit for a song that is so politically charged?

Although the lyrics were not inspired by a particular event, the song speaks briefly about our ambiguous political status in Puerto Rico. Most of the songs on the album have a variety of rhythms, but that song is the only one that is pure since it's a Puerto Rican *Plena* which is one of our African rhythms. Nowadays *Plena* is more used to party. But people who really know *Plena* use it for something else, for example, to tell stories like what

happened to the neighbor or another kind of event.

For me, *Plena* was the best rhythm for this song because it's almost a satiric way of making fun of the government. In this case, I was talking more specifically about Puerto Rico. But some people have reached out to me to tell me that they think about the Argentinian government. For me, it's very important that Puerto Ricans know that what happens to us is related to what happens in other countries because we feel so disconnected that it's important to connect ourselves with the rest of the world.

You recently turned 30. Do you usually make birthday wishes or think about what you have accomplished?

Maybe it's because I'm a Taurus, but I like to prepare myself, and I think last year I prepared for my thirties. Now I'm more energetic and refreshed. That's what I wanted to accomplish, to feel better. It's a change, it's a transition, and transitions are always difficult—but I cried, I cleansed, and now I'm ready.

iLe Recommends:

Visit Puerto Rico, I always recommend it not only because it's my country, but also because it is beautiful.

Write your feelings

Listening to music, your friends, and nature

Understand what might seem different

Enjoy yourself

Name

iLe

Vocation

Composer, Vocalist

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