



LISA MORALES

Luna Negra and the Daughter of the Sun

Like many singer-songwriters, Lisa Morales started penning tunes as a way to express her emotions. But Morales was only 7 when she began, prompted by the trauma of her parents' dissolving marriage. Decades later, she's still addressing the complex landscape of relationships through music and verse, though her perspective now is that of a woman who's weathered many more storms — and witnessed their sometimes-beautiful aftermaths, too.

With *Luna Negra and the Daughter of the Sun*, Morales sought to reach even more deeply into her soul. Drawing from a creative palette informed by the rhythms, colors and flavors of the Southwest — from the painted-desert skies of her native Tucson, Arizona, where she and cousin Linda Ronstadt grew up, to the sea-salted air of Houston, where she moved at 18, and the history-filled city of San Antonio, where she now lives — she's crafted an album of maturity, sensitivity and strength. On each of its 11 tracks — all but one of which were written or co-written by Morales — she confirms that she is a woman in touch with her emotions and inner power.

But reaching that place was not an easy journey; first, she had to work through several painful losses. On this album, she navigates the subject from different perspectives. In fact, listeners might detect a loose thread weaving through these songs: They often seem to address exits. But her lyrics, sung in English, Spanish and Spanglish, also convey the promise of new beginnings.

Morales somehow tumbles together both hurt and hope in “Avalanche,” a standout track on which she duets with the late Jimmy LaFave. It’s a gorgeous ballad, made even more poignant by the ache in LaFave’s voice as it circles around hers like a silk ribbon, trailed by album producer Michael Ramos’ lonely trumpet.

“At first, I had wanted someone to sing background,” Morales explains. “Then I thought if Jimmy’s going to be on it, let’s make it a duet, because his voice just melts you.” LaFave recorded his part not long before he passed away from cancer — a difficult loss for her not only because the two friends never achieved their goal of writing together, but also because he introduced her to the man who is now her romantic partner.

Before she could open herself to love again, Morales had to recover from the end of her 20-year marriage, an experience she addresses in “Veinte Minutos.” There were other relationships, too; “Todo y Nada,” one of several tracks co-written with Juan Cabrera, explains why one in particular just couldn’t work — because “agua y miel” (honey and water) don’t mix. As for what does work, Morales makes it clear in the Latin-flavored “I Want the Roses” that a little romancing goes a long way. *You want to make my mascara bleed*, she sings. *I want the roses so I’ve got to leave*.

Guitarron, Paraguayan harp and Ramos' lacey accordion enhance Morales' acoustic guitar strumming on that track. Ramos (the BoDeans, Patty Griffin, John Mellencamp) plays accordion and keyboards throughout the album, and on "Avalanche," handles all the instruments.

He also recruited A-list contributors including guitarists Charlie Sexton (Bob Dylan), Adrian Quesada (Grupo Fantasma, Prince) and David Garza (Juliana Hatfield, Fiona Apple). Los Lonely Boys bassist Jojo Garza and Los Lobos drummer Cougar Estrada round out the core band. Both Garzas also provide backing vocals. On "Strong Enough," folk icon Eliza Gilkyson helps lift up the inspiring anthem of female empowerment with her background vocals.

Sharing vocals with another female is familiar territory to Morales, who recorded six albums as one-half of the duo Sisters Morales before releasing her solo debut, *Beautiful Mistake*, in 2012. Morales was 10 when she and older sister Roberta formed their first band, an all-girl outfit.

By then, they were veteran entertainers, often performing for the poets and playwrights visiting their mother, a professor who spoke 11 languages and owned a first-edition bookstore. One particularly memorable guest was fantasy author Evangeline Walton, who wrote *The Song of Rhiannon*. "She didn't know that Stevie Nicks had written 'Rhiannon' for her — her book," Morales recounts. "So we told her about it and then played it for her."

Morales' music career was practically preordained at birth; in addition to her cousin, her genetic influences included a grandmother trained as a concert pianist, an aunt who played first-chair violin with the Tucson Symphony Orchestra and a father with pipes that rivaled Sinatra's. She first performed with a Mariachi band at 4; by 5, she was studying piano. At 13, she played a University of Arizona club gig/radio broadcast.

That was a year before she lost her father, whom she believes chose law over music to be a better provider. That decision may have led to his death, which occurred days after he was found unconscious in a swimming pool with a lump on his head. Despite three autopsies, no explanation was found. Years later, she learned of one possible cause: his law office's representation of Morales' neighbor, Mafia boss Joe Bonanno.

The clouds of depression and guilt — she had dreamed of her father's demise three days before it happened — clung for years; Morales says it took her mother's death in 2009 to make her realize she didn't want to live under them anymore and seek ways to lift the darkness.

On the album's sole cover, "Pena, Penita, Pena" Morales taps into the pain of losing her mother, whose poetic influence permeates every song — especially those Morales sings in her mother's native language. This one, an affecting ballad popularized in the 1950s (better known as "¡Ay, pena, penita, pena!"), features lead guitar by David Pulkingham (Patty Griffin, Alejandro Escovedo) with Morales on classical guitar and Michael "Cornbread" Traylor (Billy Joe Shaver, Javier Escovedo) on bass. Though Morales, who discovered the song while her mother was dying of cancer, imbues it with sadness, she makes it sound like a gentle sunset serenade — and reports proudly that when she played it for her cousin, Ronstadt responded, "I would have definitely recorded that!"

Contrasts between darkness and light — or pain and happiness — figure into the title tune as well. In that song, Morales, who says she often sees music as paintings and colors, turns the forces of nature into vivid metaphors for opposing forces dueling within the soul of a dark-haired girl.

"When I was a little girl, my mother took me to the ocean. Quoting Garcia Lorca, she said, 'This is a gypsy's skirt, and the waves are her ruffles,'" Morales recalls. "That's the kind of imagery I think of in

Spanish. In the song, a bird looks down at this girl and says to her, “The wind whispered to me that you’re worried; you have a predicament about love. Don’t use the pain as a crutch to keep you from living and loving.””

And in the bi-lingual closer, “Out of the Rains,” Morales sings, with understated elegance, of finally finding fulfillment.

But long before she reaches the last note, Morales leaves no doubt that the emotion and power of her music would come through in any language.

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