

MOONLIGHT BENJAMIN / Full Bio (ENG)

I had only just been born when a small group of people brought me to the orphanage run by the Reverend Doucet Alvarez. Among them was my biological father, overwhelmed at having seen my mother die a few moments before my birth. Panic and fear reigned - it was a birth unlike any other. Everyone began to pray with no regard for their different religions. Once I had come out of my mother's lifeless body, one of the group advised my father to put me into the care of this orphanage, located in the west of the country.

The praying continued all the way there. When they arrived at the orphanage, the Reverend Doucet Alvarez, fascinated by the story, said, 'If she has stayed alive, there is certainly a reason. I will call her Moonlight. A light which will light the future – I will adopt her as my daughter.' And his mother, who was there, answered, 'I will also adopt her – she will be my last child.'

I grew up with these kind, loving, respectful people who loved me in their way. My mother was difficult to understand, my father very gentle, my brothers and sisters seemed without number – it felt like a never-ending family. During this period of my life, I was unable to evaluate or even judge the situation in which I was living, as I knew no other. One thing is certain, I never suffered.

My biological father and my mother had had other children before me, who all died after my mother's death. Some said there were 5 others, some 9...it's a mystery.

Shortly before my 17th birthday, in 1988, I met Tinès Salvant, a singer and guitarist who helped me to grow up (in a way, unknowingly), at an outing organised by the church. Within the community itself, plenty of things went on apart from worship and bible study. Different activities such as theatre, singing, games,

cooking lessons etc.

After having sung one evening, Tinès Salvant suggested that I take part in the recording of his first album, as a backing singer. I accepted without hesitation.

This meeting encouraged in me the desire to escape the church and my home. A few months after recording the album, he asked me to do a series of concerts mostly in the north of the country. This request was, for me, like a gift from God, a first step towards freedom. I left to do this tour with my eyes shut, and I was away for 8 months. I lodged with the Meme family at Cap Haïtien, the second largest town in the country. They were an extremely generous family who fed and housed me for the whole time without asking for anything in return. This tour with Tinès Salvant made no money – in eight months I can't have earned more than 300 gourdes, the equivalent of about 3.70 euros. It was a tough and complicated period of my life but at the same time magical and amazing and I will never forget it.

Following this intense time, I decided to go back to Port-au-Prince, with nothing but a suitcase containing a few worn-out clothes and a pair of shoes whose gaping toes showed my toes and smiled as I walked. It was wonderful.

I sometimes felt lost but having tasted such freedom I couldn't see myself going back home nor to the church. I cherished my life and I was looking to be free of the past, of everything. It was at this moment that a childhood friend, Dilia Remolien, talked to me about Voodoo, which is a culture of tolerance and resistance. I understood that in this way of living, in order for things to be well, one needed to be in tune with oneself. That one is both the director and the actor in one's own life.

I met Max Aubin, a singer and guitarist, and we made music

together, although nothing came of it. I went from studio to studio working as a backing singer to try and earn my living. I also worked as a checkout assistant at Haiti Colour Lab photo laboratory.

In 1996, I was invigorated by my collaboration with Jean-Claude Martineau – he had an amazing wealth of experience - and we gave recitals. In 1999, along with Max Aubin and Jean-Claude Martineau we won the competition Chanté Noël, organised by the TV channel Télé Max. Max Aubin wrote the music and Jean-Claude Martineau the lyrics. A few months later, Max was dead. I will never find the words to describe how I felt at this loss. It was at this point that I had the idea of going elsewhere to make music.

I left Haiti in 2002, taking with me my native language of Creole, to finally share the culture from which I came, which lived and still lives in my heart. I came to the rose-coloured city of Toulouse in the south of France to study music at Music'Halle. Another life began, another language had to be learnt – French – which I was already familiar with. Sometimes I met other Haitians coming out of concerts, but not many.

I worked on other projects before coming to my last album, SILTANE, which features 11 tracks. All the songs speak of Haiti, of its different facets, of its evolution or its lack of evolution.

When I work on my texts, I often let myself be influenced, most of all by Frank Etienne. I love what his soul conveys. I work with his texts too, as I find his writing very rhythmic, which makes it easy for me add a melody.

MEMWA'N, the first title, sets the stage. It talks of the many pitfalls of Haitian society, of its propensity for repeating mistakes, for falling again and again into the same identical or at

least similar traps, as if it moved forward but without any memory...

MOSO MOSO evokes the love I have for this country in spite of its problems, the way I am drawn by the feelings that are aroused by this elusive land of contrasts, by this country which attracts and repels at the same time... “ it is my hope and my despair, it is the dagger that cuts my throat little by little.”

The choice of lyrics and music on this album are inspired by the fact that Haiti, in spite of its difficulties, is a country of incredible power. I wanted an interpretation in the image of Haiti - wounded certainly, but standing tall. I wanted to combine my music with a Rock sound to show this power, even though in the past I was not particularly interested in this sound, as I didn't know much about it. But I used to listen to the group Europe when I was very young, and also David Bowie. I continue still, with Freddie Mercury and Janis Joplin. People often talk about the power of my interpretation... On this album this comes perhaps from that fact that I have had this difficult and complicated past, that I have always had to fight, even for things that were my due. And as a woman affirming her existence, it is my duty to command respect. It is, unfortunately, an eternal battle for us who are women.

I deplore all sexist and racist behaviour and attitudes towards women – behaviour and attitudes that to me are always a sign of weakness. It seems to me that men who commit rape are those who do not want to see what is real in themselves, who do not take the time to discover the riches that are within them. Who believe that sex is the only way to escape their suffering. I am not a feminist, I am in favour of all that is just and balanced. I think it is a pity to miss out - let us carry on the fight!

Being a Haitian in France has been a significant step in my life. My goal is to continue to create, to share and to love, in France or

elsewhere.