



Why iLe's New Album, *Almadura*, Is Both Departure and Evolution from Calle 13

iLe's natural and inherited musical talents were nurtured between classic piano training and the hyper-political songs of Calle 13, Puerto Rico's most influential group in the last few decades. Now the singer/songwriter takes center stage with her haunting and flaring album *Almadura*. She and Alicia revisit moments of inspiration and desperation—especially for her beloved PR's political limbo—and pull threads from the vivid stories and powerful messages that elevate her music to anthem status.

Lyrics: *Congelado, paralizado*
Sin moverse, hipnotizado
Con los ojos vendados, los oídos tapados
Sin saber hacia donde vamos

Alicia Menendez:

That was *Sin Masticar* from iLe's *Almadura*. For the Puerto Rican singer and songwriter, music has long been a family affair. As a teen, her brothers recruited her to become a member of Calle 13. Together, they've won three Grammys and 21 Latin Grammys. iLe has spent the past few years reintroducing herself as a solo artist, and along with Residente, her brother, and Bad Bunny, co-wrote and performed *Afilando los cuchillos*, the song that became the anthem to Puerto Rico's protests. Listening to *Almadura*, it is clear that iLe, like the island she loves, is recognizing the depths of her own strength.

Welcome to New York City.

iLe: Thank you.

Menendez: Good to see you in your hotel room. Thank you for making this work. I appreciate you. You released *Almadura* prior to the protests ousting the governor. Your lyrics I saw in countless protest signs. My friend Ana lives on the island, and she calls *Almadura* a premonition.

iLe: Oh. I've heard that a little, but it's super crazy for me, because maybe the only thing I can think of is like when you wish something so bad that suddenly it becomes a reality. I think that might be what happened, because I've always had this frustration, not only about our colonial status and how we see things, but the thing that frustrates me the most is when I start seeing the people thinking that they're not enough, that they are not capable of doing anything, that we need dependency, and for me, that's not part of our essence. And I can see so much more from the Puerto Rican people than what we see in ourselves, and for me that was my biggest frustration, and what made me write these songs.

Menendez: Did you always see the island's relationship to the U.S. that way, or did you have an aha moment?

iLe: I've always seen it, because thanks to my family, like we all share as a majority the same ideals, and I remember having that teenage moment of questioning myself if I actually believed in independence, or if it was just because my family believes in it, and I remember having that moment and realizing that yes, I do believe in independence, and I... Little by little, I've been appreciating more who we are, and what we have, and even

though Puerto Rico has been a colony for so long, our identity still remains, and that is something that we should recognize and wonder, why does our identity still remain? And that maybe has to do with the moment we are living now.

Menendez: Sharpening the Knives became the anthem of the protest. How did it come together?

iLe: Well, I suddenly received a call from my brother that they were just doing this song. I mean, it was almost... Yeah, like one day to another, and they told me to write the chorus. He just sent me the beats that were made by Truco. I had an idea about what it was going to be about, because we were all very angry about the whole situation, but I didn't hear what my brother wrote, or Bad Bunny, and neither my brother... I mean, we were all on our own writing what we were feeling.

But since we're all Puerto Ricans, I think we were sharing that same anger, and we were fierce with everything that was going on, and we just expressed ourselves in different ways, and that's how it all came together, and they just told me about the knives concept, so I just wrote what I felt, and the melody and everything, but it was like a very... from the heart.

Menendez: What did it then feel like to listen to that song play in the streets in that moment?

iLe: It was amazing, especially because the people just knew the whole lyrics like the day after, or the same day. I don't remember. But it was crazy, but empowering, you know? I mean, Puerto Rico must have a lot of political songs, but we don't know about them so much, and I think in that moment, we were just like seeking for something that we could chant.

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Lyrics: *¿Por qué me temes?
Si soy fruto de algo que no tiene nombre
El error que no comete nunca el hombre*

Menendez: So, let's talk about some of the songs on the most recent album. Temes, beautiful, traditional ballad, and then sort of zone in on the lyrics and that refrain, "Why are you afraid of me?" It haunts me. What inspired you to write this song?

iLe: Well, I knew... I mean, when I was feeling the energy of this album, I was very angry, and I needed... I literally exploded with these songs, so I knew that I wanted to speak about us as women in this world, our constant battle and everything, but I wanted to do it very direct, and very clear, and not too poetic, you know? And too hard to understand for the

people that don't understand this yet, don't understand that this is a problem that we need to work out. So, I was thinking a lot. I was looking for a lot of information. I saw a lot of news and images that I didn't want to watch, but they helped me to get into different situations that I've never been in. Never, luckily. But-

Menendez: You mean domestic violence.

iLe: Domestic violence, and verbal violence, whatever violence it can be. It can be very subtle, or it can be very big and physical, but now you can find everything on the internet, and obviously, as the rest of the world, in Puerto Rico it also happens, like feminicidio, as we call it, and there was like recently, when I was writing this song, there was one that happened in Puerto Rico, and I used a phrase in this song thinking about that moment that she was stabbed in the back and on the neck. It made me wonder, like, "Well, he was so coward that he killed her from the back. He couldn't even see her face."

It was powerful, you know? To think why? Why he couldn't see her, you know? Even though there's many that do have that morbid, that do see her, but at the same time, it came from that situation, that fear that must go through men that do these type of things. I mean, why is that... Why? I mean, it comes from that questioning. I mean, why does he might feel the necessity of killing this woman? I mean, why does he need to feel powerful? Why does he need to shut her up from... What is he afraid of? And that's how the song started growing and growing. And for me, the bolero part fit perfectly, because I love bolero so much, because they make you feel closer to the song, and they speak to you, but most of boleros, all of boleros, almost, are romantic.

And I enjoy especially these boleros that are more dark tones, and more mysterious, so suddenly I explored with it, and I'm glad that it fit perfectly this mysterious-ish, dark tone boleros, but speaking about a reality that is very raw and very real, and something that we need to understand very straightforward.

Lyrics: *Soy pensamiento indebido*
Grito de voz silenciada
Soy el dolor que no siente

Menendez: In Contra Todo, you become Puerto Rico. Was that your intent?

iLe: Well, it comes from that. I mean, it's rooted from the Puerto Rican situation, but at the same time, I've noticed that it's something that happens a lot in other countries. Even though, for example, Latin Americans are not in a literal colony, but at the same time, they are indirectly, and they're very dominated, as well, by the United States, most of them. I feel like it's become pretty universal, but yeah, obviously I was feeling connected to the Puerto Rican situation, and I see that song as something that is buried under the ground, that starts getting out of it, and recomposing, and going.

Menendez: You've been singing since you could talk.

iLe: I mean, they say that dramatically. I don't know.

Menendez: So, is that like family lore? Or is that the truth? Do you remember that?

iLe: I remember, there's like a cassette that I... We cannot find, but I was like a baby, and with Pampers, and I was singing songs, Juan Luis Guerra, Whitney Houston, but you know, in my own language.

Menendez: And yet growing up, you weren't particularly interested in being center stage. Like, I think sometimes we think of artists and it's like, "I'm gonna put on a show all the time." That wasn't you.

iLe: We're a big family and I was the little one, so we all did naturally... It was not like organized or anything, but we naturally did talent shows in our families-

Menendez: That's my favorite pastime as a child.

iLe: Yeah. So, I remember being the center of attention, maybe because I'm the little one and I was so used to that, I wasn't seeking for that anymore, because I got tired of it. In a way, I had in me that... I mean, I enjoyed music a lot, and I enjoyed singing, and I used to play the piano, and I knew since I was very little that music was a big part of me.

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Menendez: Tell me about how they approached you with the idea of you becoming a part of Calle 13.

iLe: They didn't approach, they just ordered me as big brothers. I mean, my brother René picked me up at school one day and it was weird that René picked me up in school, like that didn't happen, so he picked me up, and he started putting me like a song that was by that time La Aguacatona, and he started... I mean, I used to imitate voices, and he told me, "Try to sing this, lyrics, as someone," you know? And I started imitating, and then he told me another name, and I started imitating, and imitating, and then he said, "Oh, try to do it like yourself." And I said, "Like myself? I don't know how to do it like myself, like what you talking about?"

I didn't know what he was doing, but we were suddenly going to my other brother's house, and then they asked me to sing that chorus. I didn't know what was going on. I mean, I knew my other brother, he had a band that they ended up, and I knew that my brothers liked to mess around and do things, but we were literally messing around. I didn't know what they were doing. I didn't take anything seriously or anything. We were just messing around and having fun, and I did the chorus, and like that, and then suddenly that chorus was for a demo, and then suddenly like the White Lion listened to it, record label from Puerto Rico. And then suddenly everything escalated super quickly, and everything started up, and it was like we didn't know exactly what was going on and what we were doing. We were just literally going with the flow.

But I was at school, and then I was traveling, and then I don't know.

Menendez: I love that before we started, I said I wanted to make sure I had the count of the Grammys and the Latin Grammys, right? And you're like, "I don't know." Like you stopped keeping track, and yet it is quite an accomplishment. What did you, as a family, sacrifice to have that level of achievement?

iLe: Well, it's weird, you know? People getting to you, being public, and obviously being open about believing in independence, people in Puerto Rico started to... At the beginning, people rejected a lot, the group, obviously being urban at the time... I mean, still, but at that time, reggaeton was very powerful, and suddenly like it was this guy talking about other things. What are they talking about? And I think everything started when René wrote this song about Filiberto Ojeda Rios, that got killed by the FBI in his house when he was very old, so I think that's when everything started to blow up in a good way for me, but at the same time, a lot of rejection from Puerto Rico, and a lot of confusion.

Menendez: But what did that mean, that you would go places and people would say things? What did it actually look like to experience that rejection?

iLe: Well, I mean I didn't experience it directly. Even though you read things in social media, a lot of threats. I'm sure that my brother received many threats, and you know, he kept going, and they kept going, and I mean that was scary, you know? Because Puerto Rico is very small, and people can find you very easily. And I mean, everything can get very dark, but at the same time, we were just making music and we were just thinking that everything was going to be okay in a way, and we were together. I mean, we're a big family, and we were always together, and we support each other a lot, and that has a lot to do with it.

Menendez: How did the idea of pursuing solo acts evolve?

iLe: I mean, my brothers, like I said, older brothers, since day one, they always said, "No, this is my little sister. She's going to make an album." Say what? What you talking about? I'm 16.

Menendez: I'm PG-13!

iLe: Yeah. I mean, I was having fun. It was very normal for me. I'm the little one, you know? Almost like a puppet, but in a good way. I was enjoying it. But at the same time, was like, "Stop saying that in public." You know?

Menendez: Because it felt like pressure?

iLe: Yeah. Pressure, but at the same time it was like I don't know.

Menendez: Why? What else did you think that you might do if you weren't going to become an artist?

iLe: I thought I was going to be a pianist, but I don't know in what way. You know, maybe I wasn't going to do a piano album. Maybe I was just going to play over there. I don't know. I was studying, and I was just not thinking about who I was going to become at all.

Menendez: You were 16.

iLe: Yeah. Exactly. And they were saying that I was going to make an album. No, you have to listen to it, and everyone was expecting, expecting, expecting, so now when I released finally my first album in 2016, they all asked me, "What took you so long?" And I said, "I didn't took me so long. This was the time that I wanted it, like myself." But it was funny, because I told him that, stop saying that, and they stopped, but they'd say it so much that people just were expecting it since the beginning, and I was just having fun with Calle 13, with the band, and... I mean, I took the chance to explore a lot about myself on stage, and that's a very important process.

You have to observe the energy of the audience, and in yourself, how you're feeling, how are you becoming on stage, and what are you doing with your body. You know, how are you feeling inside and outside? For me it's very psychological, and it takes a lot. I feel

grateful that I had that time, but I was enjoying that time, not thinking at all about the other things. So, everything happened naturally. Everything was very intense. It was 10 intense, long years, and we felt that we needed to explore on our own other things, so that's what we did.

I didn't even know if I was gonna make it, but suddenly everything flowed, and here I am now.

Menendez: Your music is often called revolutionary. Do you consider yourself a revolutionary?

iLe: I mean, maybe it caused me to say the terminology or whatever, but yeah, maybe I am. If you see it in other ways, yeah. I think I am. I don't... The thing is that I don't do things thinking about that, you know? About how I'm going to be considered or whatever. I just do what I'm feeling and I'm just basically sharing everything, so I sometimes don't know if I'm putting away young people with what I want to say, but yeah. Maybe I am.

Menendez: iLe, thank you so much.

iLe: Thank you.

Menendez: Thank you as always for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Cedric Wilson is our mixer. Emma Forbes is our assistant producer. We love hearing from you, we really do. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, or wherever you're listening, and please leave a review. It is one of the quickest ways to help us grow as a community. Finally, be sure to follow us on Instagram and on Twitter. We're @latinatolatina.

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