

Genre-Bending Pahua at CMA's City Stages

by Max Newman



“It’s everything. To have a project like this is something that makes you evolve as a human.”

That’s how Mexican DJ, producer, percussionist, and vocalist Paulina Sotomayor describes her Pahua project which bridges the gap between alternative electronic music and Latin rhythms.

On July 10 at 7:30 pm she will bring her talents to the Cleveland Museum of Art’s Transformer Station as part of CMA’s City Stages series of free outdoor concerts that feature the best in global music.

And Pahua certainly is that. With over fifteen million streams on music platforms, the artist is thrilled about the upcoming concert. “It’s my first time in Cleveland. I am really excited and we are going to try to do something super special.”

And the performance will feature a unique brand of music, as well. “I like to call it folktronica music,” Sotomayor said during a Zoom conversation. “I started in Mariachi when I was a child, so I was playing a lot of percussion, with the polyrhythms of Latin music. My journey with electronic music began because I started taking production lessons and getting into house music. And I realized that a lot of house music roots are from folk. Because of this, these types of music, as well as genres like afro-pop and reggaeton can exist in the same universe.”

Many of Sotomayor’s influences come from both the electronic and folk music worlds. People such as Dominican pop artist Yendry, who’s music Sotomayor described as a “mix between Bachata and Cumbia, Mexican vocalist and songwriter Natalia Lafourcade who she said has a voice that is “so beautiful and works so well in her own music,” and

Cuban singer and flutist La Dame Blanche “who raps and sings in a way that is connected to it’s powerful folk root,” have all impacted Sotomayor’s musical style.

Some influence has also come from within her own family. “My dad is a lover of music, and he’s why I started playing Mariachi when I was six years old. I was there for twelve years, and then I became interested in the drums, and all of the polyrhythms that come with different types of music. Even when I started in electronics I was always looking to experiment with rhythm, and have fun with it.”

Sotomayor is very aware of the differences in constructing rhythm in the electronic world versus the analogue world. “When you are in a nonhuman software it is difficult to maintain a sense of delicacy. But, with the way music software is growing, there are things that are possible there that are not possible when you are just playing. So there are great things about both of them.”

Sotomayor picked the name Pahua, translating to “avocado,” for its phonetics, and because she liked the way it represented a fruit that was “not sweet but not salty. It’s kind of a middle ground.” The project, she says, has been important to her both musically and personally.

“I love working with different people, but sometimes it’s difficult to have projects with different egos and so many different roles. With this project I’ve been able to get more involved in all areas of it, not just creatively, but on the administrative side of things as well. It’s also made me want to get involved in more artistic spaces where I don’t have as much knowledge, like video games and ceramics.”

Earlier this year Sotomayor was chosen to be an ambassador for Spotify’s EQUAL Global Music Program, designed to combat the music industry’s inequality between genders. “I got to pick a playlist of tracks from my country, for people that want to hear more of that music. And there are also production lessons and workshops with spotify, and I just think it’s really cool because it is providing visibility to the feminist side of music.”

As for Sotomayor’s Cleveland Pahua performance, she wants to make sure it is as original as possible. “It’s really different from the studio because on stage, I’ll have a guitar that is not in the original music, and then the particular way that the percussionist is playing is also a rhythm that is not from the original music. I also try to do everything from beginning to the end, just with transitions. I never stop, I just do around one hour, totally full of energy. I really love to play live.”

Photo courtesy of Pahua

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