**Nathalie Joachim**

***Ki moun ou ye***



Every artist has at least one, and usually several: People who function as catalysts, inspirations, animating forces. These can be near or far, living or dead. They operate off stage and out of sight, gently guiding creative acts in almost imperceptible ways.

As Nathalie Joachim traces the journey of her stirring and disarmingly vulnerable new album *Ki moun ou ye*, she immediately gives credit to one such spirit: Her grandmother. She recorded her grandmother’s voice frequently when visiting her family’s farm in Southern Haiti. After her death in 2015, Joachim would listen to recordings of this strong resolute voice, singing old folk songs that had been an essential soundtrack to her life, whenever she needed an emotional lift.

That voice directly inspired—and is featured prominently on—Joachim’s acclaimed previous album *Fanm d’Ayiti*, an homage to the under-acknowledged women who shaped and furthered Haitian music. The project set in motion what Joachim describes as an intense exploration of identity, during which she questioned everything—her values and motivations, her contribution as an artist.

As Joachim began composing the songs of *Ki moun ou ye*, she wanted new energy, different textures and tactics. She dove deeply into sampling, experimenting with altering short clips of her singing solo—a sound the veteran instrumentalist had shared for the first time on *Fanm d’Ayiti*. Joachim took slivers of vocal phrases and transformed them into pad-like textures similar to those from a synthesizer; she built new tonalities out of melodies she’d discarded.

She was startled when, on the very first piece she worked on, “Kembe m,” she began to hear her grandmother’s voice again. But in a different way, as a kind of spectral presence. On an impulse, Joachim grabbed words and syllables from her recordings rather than an entire verse. “I started with these tiny, tiny samples of my grandmother’s voice, in connection with my voice,” Joachim recalls. “This melody is basically me sampling her singing and laughter, and that became the fabric of the song. It evolved into this intimate duet between my voice and the sampled sound of my grandmother.”

That track represents an unusual “bridge” linking Joachim’s heritage (and her previous work) to the songs she was currently writing. She frames the animating idea in the form of a question: “Could I use sampling to unpack what’s held in the DNA of my voice?”

Inspired, she immediately took that further: “What if I start in a very small place where, within the fabric of every song, the only material I can use to start writing is tiny blips of voice from a song I’ve already made a demo of?” Joachim explains that the sounds—her voice, her grandmother’s voice, percussion bits and lots more—all filtered into the compositions. “You can’t trace the milliseconds of samples back to the source—they’re unrecognizable. Basically, these are sounds I hand-collaged together. Every song on the record contains a piece of another song.”

This invisible, almost subterranean linkage gives *Ki moun ou ye* an unusual unity—each song occupies a distinct sonic atmosphere yet, on a profound DNA level, is connected to the work as a whole. The pieces are intricately detailed yet sparsely orchestrated. They situate deep ancestral information within cleverly deployed technological vessels. They’re laced with heavy, existential questions, but are defined by an airborne lightness. Some pieces dwell in calm pastoral textures; some explore hiccupping polyrhythms or contemporary classical dissonances. Some, like “Renmen m plis,” utilize insistent rhythm as a backdrop for gravity-defying and resolutely lighthearted vocal melodies.

All of the pieces defy conventional genre-tag classification. And, more significantly: These trenchant, bracingly honest works represent Joachim’s first real foray into songwriting with lyrics.

Before she started *Ki moun ou ye*, Joachim was firmly planted on the path of a ninja instrumentalist. She’d worked with Alarm Will Sound, Spektral Quartet, Seth Parker Woods, and others, and, with Allison Loggins-Hull, made several inventive records as the duo Flutronix. As the pandemic lifted, Joachim says she began to question her career choices.

She started looking at the flute, her steady companion since age nine, in a different way: “I was very good at it right away, and started at Juilliard’s prep programs at ten,” Joachim recalls of her New York upbringing. She studied at Juilliard through high school and did her undergraduate work there, too. “I immediately stepped into the mode of trying to be the best little flutist I could be—could I get that perfect sound, could I execute those hard passages? It became about the replication of something.”

Joachim says she didn’t question that at the time. But she recalls being aware, even then, that she was different: “The second I got into that building it became ultra clear to me that I was going to have to live this compartmentalized musical life. That what was happening in that building was very different than what was happening with my grandmother. None of those people knew I ever sang, that was just a part of my life that was ‘other.’”

After ruminating on this, Joachim began an immersion in the world beyond the flute that she describes as her “reverse Andre 3000 moment:” “It’s like everybody expects me to be the perfect flutist, which I can totally do. But when I began asking myself “Who am I?,” the question went deeper—is the flute who I am or was that just a thing I was good at that got rewarded? I realized I had different music to make.”

Joachim went deep into questions around identity—her own expectations and those of people around her. She burrowed into her heritage, devouring her parents’ record collection to explore the roots and branches of Haitian folkloric music. That led her to research the music of underappreciated Haitian women that she celebrated on *Fanm d’Ayiti.* Looking back, she sees that project as an important step in her evolution. After absorbing the ferocious spirit of women from Haitian music history, she says she started challenging herself: “Am I this person that I say I am? Music is inherently performative—am I expressing myself genuinely? That was where this project started, in a really vulnerable place where I was very much holding myself to task.”

Part of that involved expanding her identity as a musician, Joachim says. “I became hyper-obsessed with my voice as a vehicle for understanding myself. That’s not unusual—the voice has been used as a tool for healing in world culture forever. As I was missing my grandmother and grappling with these issues around identity, I realized that for me as a composer, the voice was the instrument I needed to explore.”

Joachim had long regarded herself as an instrumentalist first; she initially harbored some anxiety about writing and singing lyrics. She quickly discovered a truth her grandmother knew well: “If you are not embodied in your spirit as a vocalist, it’s very clear. People sense it. No amount of technique helps you get over that, because it’s sort of the ultimate form of self-expression.”

Among Joachim’s challenges was communicating the nuances of language in the title track, a deceptively weighty song with Haitian Creole lyrics that translate roughly to “Who are you?” “What I love most about Kreyòl as a language,” Joachim says, “is that for almost every phrase there’s a secondary or tertiary meaning. ‘Ki moun ou ye’ is like that: Yes, it means ‘who are you?’ But it also means ‘Whose people are you?’ and ‘Which person are you presenting to the world today?’ And, of course, ‘Who owned these pieces of you before you were born?’

“To ask somebody “Ki moun ou ye” is more than a notion,” she continues. “Any Haitian person knows this is a loaded question—it’s not casual.” The song has minimal lyrics—essentially it just repeats the title question—but for Joachim it became something of a mission statement, an organizing principle that served as a gut-check throughout the writing and recording.

“The layers and levels this question dragged me through!” Joachim says. “It made me uncomfortable for a while, but I’ve come to love the loaded-ness of it. People have asked me what’s up with this song, why are there only, like, two words over and over. And I’m like ‘Is it two? Or is it a whole universe we’re dealing with?’”