

# Ridina Ahmedová

**A Czech-Sudanese-Russian-Jewish vocal improviser brought up in Algeria, anybody? Well yes, says Ken Hunt.**

**L**ive music remains central to many people's musical experience and at the heart of their appreciation of music. There are musical traditions and musicians you'll never get until they catch you live. Ridina Ahmedová's debut solo album *Hlasem* – Czech for 'by voice' – appeared in May 2006 proving her to be one such musician. *Hlasem* delivered all the goods and all the clues without revealing how the parts interlocked. Seeing her live at the Tanz&FolkFest Rudolstadt 2007, everything fell into place. If anything comprehension brought still greater wonderment. Singer is too measly a word for what she does. She is a voice artist.

While the reality she pioneered from around 2002 is as adept as the principle is simple, the effect created is a complex vocalese, an outstandingly, lusciously layered vocal flow in which voice-threads substitute for traditional instrumentation in original compositions like *Barvy* (Colours) and *Bludicky* (Jack O' Lanterns) or borrowings like *Afro-Blue* from Mongo Santamaria via John Coltrane.

To anyone familiar with Czech surnames and their structure, Ridina Ahmedová screams mixed bloodlines. Hers are a mixture of Sudanese on her father's side and, on her mother's side, half-Czech, half-Russian of Jewish stock. Her father, born in 1946, had been chosen as "the most talented student in the village" and the prize was the possibility of studying abroad in the socialist bloc. He plumped for Prague and economics, his second choice – his first, medicine, his daughter smiles, having been wrecked by a fear of blood. She was born in 1974 in Prague where her family lived until she was four. Then work took her father to Oran in Algeria. "My father was an African, he was black and he didn't speak Czech very well, and it was not very easy for him to find work. The Czechoslovakia of the 1970s was a closed society to strangers. It wasn't just the language barrier, it was a xenophobia too, I think." They lived in Algeria for the next ten years, returning to Prague when she was fourteen. While there was music in the family, it was in the background. Soul and jazz – "good-quality music" – was in the household, she recalls, but she had no musical encouragement *per se*.

Ahmedová was in her mid-twenties before she began to sing, in her case jazz because she was interested in improvisation. "Mostly just through musicians I started to discover the riches of music. There were very good workshops. A lot of musicians, [jazz guitarist] David Doruz-

ka too, grew up there. Most of the professional musicians I meet today I met there as beginners."

We have grown so totally accustomed to studio trickery and jiggery-pokery that we expect accretions as a matter of course – the opposite of those diminishing group photographs with Uncle Joe Stalin 'air-brushing' out comrades, cull by cull. We are used to recordings being denser, different from live performance. Consequently, nothing on *Hlasem*, recorded between November 2005 and March 2006, prepares you for witnessing her music in the flesh.

**"I'm not able to play any instrument to a professional level, so I decided to work with voices only."**

Each performance begins with pre-recording a live vocal part – a melodic figure, a cadence, something that will become a fragment of countermelody – potentially up to five minutes long, in practice under a minute in length. It becomes the loop or sequence against which she sings live. "I don't like the word *electronics*," she declares, "because I associate it with something technical and cold.

I chose this way of working because for many years I was the singer in the band. Different bands. Jazz. Or down-tempo music, like chill-out music. I was mostly singing other people's songs. I grew tired of it. I'm not able to play any instrument to a professional level, so I decided to work with voices only. The vocal multiplier, the Boss [RC-20] Loop Station, is a very simple effect. I don't like to modulate my voices electronically. I love to keep the pure, natural sounds. With no distortions."

Second takes evidently aren't part of her act. Or artistry. Her opening statements are, she explains, "completely fixed". "All the songs are compositions. When I started singing alone I was very scared that people wouldn't be able to listen to only one voice for an hour. I was nervous that it wouldn't be enough to hold people's attention. People *can* stand it," she smiles. "Still, I feel the need to make the programme very varied. To change energies, emotions and vocal colourings. That's why I don't risk *complete* improvisation. With the structures I've prepared I can make the programmes highly variegated. Improvisation is something that can grow on something that is working very well."

I'm a believer: Ridina Ahmedová is in a league of her own.


*With thanks to Petr Doruzka, coincidentally related to his father, the Czech jazz critic Lubo Doruzka and his son, David Doruzka. More information at [www.hlasem.cz](http://www.hlasem.cz) and [www.amp.cz](http://www.amp.cz)* 



Photo: Hans-Jörg Scherwinski/Wing 51 Archives