



She comes from London, from the rattle and buzz of the Goldhawk Road, from the chatter and birdsong of Ravenscourt Park, from the neon hum of the 94 night-bus from the West End, on which she'd sit, late at night, passing students at the music college still practising their instruments, the sounds of strings and woodwind soaring into dark air. In the city where ALA.NI grew up, all music was magical. She comes to us with a voice that also feels magical, taking the dark romance of the past into our bright, modern world.

ALA.NI's debut album tells us of timeless things as she sings: of love and romance and its strange, silver edges, and of the seasons and weathers of one particular, painful relationship, that bloomed with spring's shoots, but died in winter's heavy snow. Bringing together the four EPs she put together to chart this love story – Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter – You & I lifts the shackles we put on our senses, and the rhythms of our hearts, as it tells us all about one extraordinary woman, and how she arrived here.

ALA.NI's story begins in stage school, but it's not a conventional, sing-for-mummy-darling sort-of tale (she's laughing as she says this). A perky child of Grenada-born parents – a reggae-calypso bassist father, and a couture seamstress mother – ALA.NI sang *Over The Rainbow* at the age of 3, and her talent was immediately obvious. As her older cousin was studying at the Sylvia Young school, her Mum and Dad followed that lead. Simple. As a result, ALA.NI has been working since she was 5, she notes, wryly – but is glad of the training & discipline which stage school life instilled in her.

Nevertheless, music was her escape when she was young, and still is. Raised in Ravenscourt Park by her single mother, ALA.NI realised that she could do something uplifting with the sound that came out of her mouth. She had lessons with an Italian opera singer, and soaked up the sounds of female vocalists that made her body jolt when she heard them: principally the likes of Aretha Franklin, Jessye Norman, Joni Mitchell and Wilhelmina Fernandez. ALA.NI doesn't listen to music to relax, but to pick it apart, to try and understand the basslines, the time signatures, the arrangements & the structures. At home, ALA.NI prefers talk radio and silence- when she's in music, she's submerged from head to toe.

After leaving school in her late teens, ALA.NI sang behind or alongside people with huge talents on tours, like Andrea Bocelli, Mary J Blige and Blur. She was successful, but didn't carve out a space for her own art until four years ago, when a sequence of events turned her life around. Firstly, her great-uncle, the '20s and '30s cabaret star Leslie Hutchinson, was given a plaque outside his old London home. One of the only black men to move in high society circles at the time, ALA.NI was galvanised by his determined success. Then something happened creatively that had never happened before: a song, *I'll Remember*, arrived out of her mouth, all in one piece, one night at 3am. ALA.NI sounded different as she sang it– and it shocked her. Then it happened again, two years later, when *Cherry Blossom* also emerged, fully formed, in the middle of the night whilst on holiday in Grenada.

ALA.NI didn't know how to fight this. This music sounded like a warped fairytale web of David Lynch miniatures, rushing between the sweet glow of innocence and the sad pang of

experience. She sang the songs to a friend, who was dazzled, and told her to go for it. ALA.NI took the deepest of breaths – and she leapt.

She quickly moved out of her small West London flat, where old memories clung to every corner, and rented space in a converted vicarage owned by an arts charity. Here, ALA.NI would hear other artists by day, but be alone every night, with only a Roberts Radio and Dansette by her side. She wrote incessantly, a cappella, conjuring up arrangements in her head as she went, hearing her new, clear voice everywhere. She realised that as a backing singer she had spent too much time trying to fulfil the limited remit of her training, where as a woman of colour she'd be expected to sing Reggae, RnB and Soul styles almost exclusively. She hadn't been able to do melismatic American soul runs, because she wasn't a melismatic American soul singer. She had been turned down for jobs because she sounded too English, but she was English. At last, finally, absolutely, she was who she was.

You & I tracks where ALA.NI was in her head in a very literal way, too. It was indeed largely inspired by one particular relationship, with a man who was with someone else at the time. A relationship she hoped would win out, but quickly became one she couldn't have. As such, ALA.NI's outlook is now tempered by wisdom and an acceptance of change, which the listener feels keenly as You & I plays. Come To Me conjures up the warmth of being together during those first rushes of desire, with "flowers blooming by the door". By the time we get to One Heart, though, the singer tells us: "I sense you are torn/Evidently, you love me/And another, this I know". By Roses & Wine, the lover "runs out of time". By Darkness At Noon, the light has gone out entirely: "We agreed to end this love affair/To erase every word that you said that set me free."

Other lovers and experiences also bleed into these lyrics, though, ALA.NI insists – and she also did things to trigger off emotions while she was writing this record, she sighs, meeting a person, obsessing over them, and then trying and recreate those old feelings in the studio. One song – Ol' Fashioned Kiss - is even inspired by an dear, old friend she became reacquainted with during the recording, a TV actor, who every girl in Sylvia Young wanted to kiss, although ALA.NI never did. You & I was captured in Damon Albarn's Studio 13 and Andrew Hale's (Sade) studio, both in the heart of the old, bustly West London that ALA.NI felt was dying too, and the sense of loss the record conveys is genuinely, astonishingly, touching. It turns out that her farewell to that affair in the greatest of ways, was also a farewell to the city she loved – soon after, she moved to Paris, which is where she lives and works now, charging into the future.

You & I has changed ALA.NI in other ways, too. Performing regularly as a solo artist has been quite a leap: she generally prefers to be the observer rather than the observed. One night in particular changed the way she felt about playing live, though: a spot at David Lynch's Silencio club in her new hometown, to rapturous acclaim. Dressed in a navy blue dress behind a heavy red velvet curtain, people gasped when the curtain was drawn back, and she sang. That evening, the idea of the performance, and its timelessness, soaked into her bones, and the idea of history being brought into the present – her own, and that of music – was suddenly golden, forever.

But ALA.NI still misses home, especially that hum of the night bus, and those college students practising at 2am. That music college has recently been torn down, ALA.NI says, sadly, but she'll try and keep its memory going. How lucky we are that her night music, deep, warm and alive, will sing for that past, this present, and for all of us.