The song “Una Rosa” has been with Xenia Rubinos all her life. As a little girl, it would emanate from a wind-up music lamp in her abuelita’s room, its fiber optic lights lulling her into a trance with swirling colors. Years later, it would resurface on a bootleg CD of classical music from Puerto Rico, sending her rushing to her high school’s band room to try to teach it to herself on the piano. And yet again, in 2019, deep into a creative rut, staring out her apartment window at 4am and waiting for the sun to rise, the melody haunted her. It was at these distinct moments of her life—seemingly when she needed it most—that the song would come to her. Before she made the connection between this melody that had followed her all her life and Abuelita's wind-up lamp, she started writing from memory, subconsciously seeking spiritual sustenance from her ancestors in a song that was always hers, even before she knew it.

That song—and the lamp that first played it back to her—is the centerpiece of Rubinos’ latest LP, also titled *Una Rosa*. “The image of that lamp carries so much meaning for me,” she says. “It's dreamy, futuristic, nostalgic, melancholy, over the top. It’s the perfect image for the music I’m making right now." That music is somewhat of a departure from her earlier work, in that it’s very much “in the box”; rather than striving for pitch-perfect vocal takes and tight live instrumentation, she cut most of her vocals in a single take, writing and recording everything right on the spot and refining them after the fact. It’s the most electronic music she’s ever made, yet also the most spontaneous, the product of her “first mind,” the thoughts on the tip of her tongue. It was also the most difficult record for her to make.

By November 2019 Xenia had been on the go nonstop since the release of her critically acclaimed 2016 LP *Black Terry Cat*, touring the world, performing, and promoting her record. She wrote the personal superhero anthems "Diosa vs Bugeisha", experimenting with a more electronic palette and character building—themes that would ultimately help shape the cinematic narrative qualities of her own novela, *Una Rosa*. But her hustle hid heartache, and she reached a point where she wasn’t sure she’d be able to continue making music. She consulted a *curandero*, who diagnosed her with "perdida de espiritu" (“loss of spirit”). But he also assured her that her days of making music were not over.

And it was the music, as well as her longtime collaborator producer and drummer Marco Buccelli, that helped pull her out of the abyss. At the start of the new year, he dragged her to their new studio and patiently supported her as she re-learned how to make music, and re-built herself as a musician from scratch. It would be months before she felt anything, but as they put together “Did My Best,” a pulsing electro ballad drenched in vocoder and pathos, she finally turned a corner. The cathartic expulsion of sorrow and regret changed everything for her, and when COVID-19 pandemic reached our shores and the world slowed to a halt, it gave her a chance to catch up. “I had no expectations,” Rubinos explains. “There were no parties. There were no shows that I could have been at but I wasn't there, or I had to see someone that I didn't want to see...there was none of that. So it's like all of a sudden everybody was kind of on my level, you know?”

As the music she was making coalesced into something more cinematic, *Una Rosa* began to take shape: A feature-length opus chronicling a triumph over internal struggle, built around a hymn passed down from the ancestors. The visual story began to take shape even before the music was completed. The videos and cover art were completed even before the album, and served as reference points while producing the music. Each single came with a portrait of a different character; The rage-fueled, grill-wearing woman and the caged little girl in "Who Shot Ya?", the grieving party girl of “Did My Best,” the fortune-telling futurist jazz singer in "Cógelo Suave." The record would have two sides: The “RED” A side, comprising hot, aggressive, in-your-face fiery drama, and the “BLUE” B side, with more introspective yet expansive mood. Just like her abuela’s flower lamp, it changes colors through the night hours, accompanying you along the journey.

In the opening sequence, a clock tower’s bell tolls four, opening a portal to a new world, haunted by the hum of a faintly remembered melody, "Una Rosa." The tragic "Ay Hombre" follows, an ode to the dulcet tones of the *cortate las venas* singers that floated through her abuela’s home. From there, the record expands outward. She developed characters based on old boleros, and reimagined rumbas for the 21st century. “Sacude” flips a sparse clave intro into a thumping hip-hop beat. And drawing inspiration from a documentary on [*las cuatros joyas del ballet Cubano*](https://youtu.be/URqZP9uqaEM), she made her version of “Una Rosa”—now identified as a José Enrique Pedreira song—into electronic classical composition...with *clave*. “Don’t Put Me in Red,” a riff on the front-of-house lighting engineers that always give her “latina lighting,” forcefully resists any and everyone who might want to put her in a box. But while she was previously loath to discuss her ethnicity at the expense of discussing her music, Rubinos acknowledges the cultural environment *Una Rosa* enters is a different one, freeing her to explore it more in her music. “I was listening to [the group] Muñequitos de Matanzas, classic rumba from Cuba, and feeling like I wanted to know something about that music,” she says. “I felt something but I didn't understand it...it's my exploration into these sounds I grew up hearing and into this aesthetic—in my own way. I’m not claiming to be an expert, but this is how I hear it, you know?” By the record’s final track, "What Is This Voice?" its journey of exploration comes full circle, culminating in a vulnerable, stripped-down meditation on her identity and voice.

There’s certainly more Spanish on *Una Rosa* than any of her previous records, though it's less something new than a continuation of her musical language. Songs like “Working All The Time” explore and expound on things that she’s previously touched on, like the crushing yolk of capitalism. “Did My Best” dwells in the aftermath of sudden loss, longing to see someone you never got to say goodbye to. “I remember the moment when I felt I was done singing, it’s like when you cry so hard you forget why you were crying in the first place,” Rubinos recalls. “As we listened back, the hairs on my arms and legs stood straight up, I felt my face getting hot. I suddenly felt that old familiar feeling. At that moment, in the basement during an eerie quarantine night of fireworks and ambulance sirens, I suddenly remembered why I sing.”

While it was born of intense trauma and its lingering effects, *Una Rosa* is ultimately imbued with more triumph than tragedy. A reminder that death is not always the end. It’s the story of an artist taking the long route to find themselves, reaching backwards in time to reclaim a song that had always been theirs. Are you listening?