

“We're the best at waffles, chocolate, beer and French fries. Everybody thinks they're from France; no way. They're from Belgium. Let me tell you, it's all from Belgium.” The corners of Brenda Mada's mouth upturn when she touts her home country's hallmarks. Said with teenage effervescence, Mada's remarks can't help but elicit a smile from the listener. Better still, her music does the same and more.

Born Brenda Pauly in the mystical island of Madagascar, Brenda adopted the truncated surname in tribute. Though she now calls Atlanta home, she knows she's repping a pair of unorthodox stepping stones: “I'm definitely bragging about everywhere that I'm from Belgium: ‘I'm from Belgium, I'm from Madagascar.’ I'm happy to be different and show Americans that there is another world out there. There is the whole of Europe; there is this massive continent called Africa. They will open your mind. I'm telling every American I meet to travel.”

Ironically, just having a conversation with any American was in itself Brenda's dream until recently. She landed on these shores knowing only her native tongues of French and Dutch. Brenda was 15 when Atlanta heatmaker Bangladesh (Lil' Wayne, Beyoncé, Nicky Minaj, Rihanna), impressed and impelled by what he'd seen of Mada on YouTube, arrived in Brussels. “I was in school, and my dad called me: ‘Brenda, Brenda, there is an American producer who wants to meet you. He's coming to Belgium tomorrow!’ My dad likes to joke so I didn't believe him for one second. I was like, ‘Cool Dad, but I have school now. Bye.’ But they really came. Can you imagine my father and my mother, who are so small, meeting this big American dude with a giant voice? ‘Hey, my name is DeShawn [Bangladesh's business partner] and we want to sign your daughter.’ And I couldn't help. DeShawn was talking to me and I was looking at him, shaking my head. I didn't understand a word he was saying.”

Though her conversational skills would require work, Brenda's performance chops were never in question. She had been singing and dancing for years, the product of a structured childhood. Brenda recalls missing countless sleepovers and birthday parties because the day's training had been intense and the next day's regimen was already looming. But her father's insistence on discipline morphed from imposition to inspiration as Brenda saw her life's path scythed clear.

Now, she's making music that reflects a repressed spirit recently set aloft—case in point, her steamy, slithery hit single “House Party.” Not the rager its name suggests, “House Party” is slow and slinky, more Atlanta snap than European EDM. But it was born across the pond just the same: “We grow up differently in Europe; we're mini adults very quickly. So when I came to America, I felt a culture shock. I would say, ‘What are we doing tonight? Are we going to hang out or go to the club or what?’ And they'd tell me, ‘You can't go to the club until you're 21.’ I was so mad. I'd be the only one staying in while everybody went out. That's when I made up my mind: ‘You know what? I'm going to throw my own house party. I'm going to do my own thing.’”

Her own thing apparently is lacing fire hand-in-hand with Bangladesh, whom she credits for getting a handle on her unique vocal tone. Alongside “House Party,” listeners should keep an ear out for “Fallin,” which balances a demonic trap beat with Mada's dulcet, almost cheeky vocals. The song's playfulness reflects the ambivalent subject matter: a young girl torn between wanderlust and the wonder of young love: “My background might be different, but I think a lot

of young girls go through the same things as I do. I feel like love is an international language, so everybody can understand it.” There’s also “Stupid Love,” a clever mélange of ballad and modern pop, dusted with trap and even a snare pattern smacking of the Fugees’ iconic “Ready or Not.” Ambitious and unorthodox sonics, yes—but so is Brenda Mada.

“I have this tattoo on my neck that I drew; I feel like it offers me protection. I wanted it to represent my story: a young bird learning to fly for the first time. I had to leave my family behind, to leave the security of the nest. I’ve been through so many experiences in a short period of time. I’ve cried a lot. I’ve met so many people and feel like I understand both the European mindset as well as American culture. I feel ready, I definitely feel ready.” The worldly Brenda Mada is ready, but is the rest of the world?