



OMARA PORTUONDO 85th Anniversary

Buena Vista Social Club™ Diva celebrates her music and life with a special tour accompanied by special guests

“With our music we Cubans have exported more dreams and pleasures than with our tobacco, more sweetness and energy than with all our sugar. Afro-Cuban music is fire, savour and smoke; it is syrup, charm and relief. It is like sonorous rum, which brings people together and makes them treat each other as equals. It brings the senses to dynamic life.”

Fernando Ortiz

There was fresh spring rain in Havana when I strolled into Egrem Studios in the first weeks of the new millennium, a studio where decades of gorgeous music have seeped into the walls. Hearing the warm voice of Omara Portuondo live and close up is always a joy and there she was, singing her version of “He Perdido Contigo” (“I’m lost without you”) a typically swooning, romantic song. Omara was recording an album “a dark, smoky, two-in-the-morning record, full of yearning and lost love” as producer Nick Gold described it.

The album was her first solo album since the miraculous success of the Buena Vista Social Club. It was through that record and Wim Wenders’ film of the same name that many non-Cubans discovered Omara. For Wenders and so many others, the highlight of the film was the touching duet of her and Ibrahim Ferrer singing “Silencio” “And my soul, sad and sorrowful/wants to keep secret its bitter pain.” As they take the applause, a tear forms in Omara’s eye and Ibrahim removes his handkerchief from his pocket and gently wipes away the tear.

While other much loved Buena Vista stars like Ruben Gonzalez and Ibrahim Ferrer were lured out of retirement. Omara has been continually performing in public since the age 15, a legendary singer whose voice reflects a long, creative life of passion and music. She has been singing professionally for an incredible 70 years, and while revolutions and wars shook the globe, she has carried on, with indomitable elegance.

Omara was born in the barrio of Cayo Hueso, in Havana, known for its musicality. There was some scandal in the family. Her mother Esperanza Peláez came from a wealthy family of Spanish ancestry who assumed she would marry a rich, white man with a high social position. In fact, she ran away with a tall, handsome, black baseball player called Bartolo Portuondo. For years they could not walk down the street in public, but the marriage endured. Bartolo was a friend of the national poet Nicolás Guillén and a lover of music and the house, lacking a gramophone, was filled with singing.

As a shy 15 year old, she broke into the lush, sequined world of cabaret, following in the chorus line shoes of sister Haydee, and became a dancer at the Tropicana, the glamorous club that continues still in Havana, a frozen relic of the decadent pre-

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Revolutionary days. But singing was her forté, and she would spend weekends singing American jazz with the blind pianist Frank Emilio in his band Loquibambia Swing. The band was a mélange of pan-American sounds and they created a new sound called “fillin” –feeling – and Omara was dubbed “La novia de fillin”, “the girlfriend of feeling.

She sang in the in the all girl Orquesta Anacaona in 1952, before with Haydee, with another female group Cuarteto D’Aida, a 1950s Cuban Spice Girls, directed and named after pianist Aida Diestro. Things began to really move for Omara and the group were signed to RCA Victor, toured the U.S. and backed up some of the biggest stars of the moment like Benny Moré (“the Barbarian of Rhythm”), Edith Piaf, Bola de Nieve and Nat King Cole at the Tropicana. This was at the peak of the glamour, some say kitsch, of the famous nightclub.

As a soloist Omara accompanied some of the great innovators like Arsenio Rodriguez and Isolina Carillo. Her first solo album was not, as with other Buena Vista Social Club members, after the release of that ground breaking album but was way back in 1959, entitled Black Magic.

After the Revolution of the same year, Omara carried on touring the States until things reached a crisis point with the Missile Crisis and Cuban-American relations were broken off. Omara and the Cuarteto D’Aida were in Miami when her sister, along with many other Cuban performers, decided to stay. Omara returned to Cuba and in a way filled a gap left by the departure of so many musicians from Cuba and her career flourished – at first with a reformed Cuarteto D’Aida and then, from 1967 onwards as a solo artist. For a while she appeared in vocal events in the socialist world and sang revolutionary songs and songs about Che Guevara and, later, Salvador Allende.

The U.S. was off limits, but she toured with Orquesta Aragon in Europe and in Africa, where they still have a huge following. “Omara is a legend in Cuba, and it’s safe to say there’s no one of my age who didn’t grow up under her influence,” Cuban-born ballet dancer Carlos Acosta says “When I was a kid I’d see her all the time on television, singing the kinds of songs my parents liked.” Omara was a versatile performer, but her speciality was a heart-rending romantic bolero – she was often compared to the great exponents of melancholy jazz like Billie Holiday or Edith Piaf. She married and divorced and her son became her manager. Omara, a documentary film about her career won a prize at Cannes in 1986.

In 1997, just when she had hit normal retirement age and might be expecting to slow down, the Buena Vista Social Club project boosted her profile throughout the world. Ry Cooder had heard her in the mid-90s and she happened to be recording in Egrem when an aborted Afro-Cuban project opened up some studio time . She said she was due to tour Vietnam but immediately recognised the importance of reviving the old school music and became the only female member of the gang. (Another might have been Celina Gonzalez, perhaps the only other female Cuban singer with enough stature but she rolled the santeria cowrie shells and divined the deities were against her participation).

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The album ricocheted round the world and novelist Salman Rushdie called 1998 “that Buena Vista summer” . Wim Wenders’ stylish film added rocket fuel to sales of the album. Omara as well as “Silencio” and had another gorgeous duet drenched in nostalgia “Veinte Anos”, sung with Compay Segundo, a song Omara had recorded before and had originally learned from her parents.

Her solo album of 2000 picked up a Grammy and was followed by the Brazilian tinged Flor De Amor in 2004 which featured a song with family resonance called “Tabu” about inter-racial love. Other recordings and tours followed – a 60th anniversary album Gracias and stellar collaborations with Cuban jazz pianist Chucho Valdés. She was the first Cuban woman to be an International Ambassador for the Red Cross. In recent years, she’s sung everywhere from the Royal Opera House in London to the Latin Passion festival in Hong Kong.

The best way to celebrate Omara’s 85th year and 70 years of performing professionally? A very special worldwide tour which will include some exceptional invited guests. The great Cuban diva and artistic ambassador of her country wants to celebrate with a grand fiesta which represents the impressive sweep of her career – on every stop meeting with old friends and new to perform together much loved Cuban classics from ‘Besame Mucho’ to ‘Veinte Años’. The tour will reflect different aspects of her long career, taking it way back to her younger years and her continuing love of elegant cabaret, from the Buena Vista days right up to the present with different tastes and flavours, of what will be a musical feast, full of piquant sabrosura.

As Cuban writer Ivan Garcia put it “Her voice is still lush, as it was when she sang in her parents’ dressing room. In Cuba, some things are lacking. But we do have Omara Portuondo. She still lives in an apartment overlooking the sweep of the Malecon in Havana, and even if her dynamic career slows down it’s hard to imagine she won’t be lured out to some of her old haunts like the Café Cantante or the Tropicana.

Producer Ry Cooder said about the Buena Vista Social Club musicians, that he was lucky, as we all are to “have caught the tail end of a comet” of a great music culture that was cut off for decades.

Omara Portuondo is a diva in the best sense, an ambassador of Cuba to the world. Now in her mid-eighties, there is a sense in which the curtains of an era are slowly, elegantly coming down. But she will forever, as the old showbusiness adage has it “Always leave them wanting more.”

Peter Culshaw

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