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The Face: Omara Portuondo

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Omara Portuondo, salsa singer

OMARA Portuondo is causing a stir on the terrace of the Hotel Nacional de Cuba.

Waiters are fussing. Tourists are doing a double take. Cubans are interrupting to deliver the traditional greeting: a loud smacking kiss on one (high-boned) cheek. Used to attention -- long before garnering international fame with the Buena Vista Social Club, she was a star in her homeland -- Portuondo smiles regally. Then suggests, sotto voce, that we go and sit somewhere a little less obvious.

"Life has been very generous to me," the singer says through a translator, once we've relocated to a couch in a corner hidden by potted palms. "I'm still touring, I'm still making records. I've dedicated my life to doing what I love and have enjoyed great success. Which is why," she adds, smoothing out the folds of her white cotton sundress, "the time has come to say thank you."

Portuondo's new album, *Gracias*, celebrates her 60-year career with a selection of classic tunes and the odd jewel composed to mark the occasion. Her voice is as rich and smooth as ever. "I dedicate it to my parents, who taught me the old trova songs and inspired me to sing," says the woman variously described as the Maria Callas, Edith Piaf or Sarah Vaughan of Cuba. "I dedicate it to all the musicians I've played with, from the women in *Las d'Aida*

CLOSE-UP

* **Big break:** My elder sister Haydee was dancing in the Tropicana Club chorus line when someone quit and they asked me, a shy 15-year-old, to join them.

* **Career highlight:** One highlight was singing *Silencio* on stage at Carnegie Hall with Ibrahim Ferrer in 1998. When the applause started -- so loud! -- I cried tears of joy.

* **Career lowlight:** Back in 1952 my mother was very ill but she insisted that I go and perform in America, so I did. When I was there I received the news that she'd passed away.

* **Favourite author:** I love the novels of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the poems of the Cuban revolutionary hero Jose Marti and the stories of Agatha Christie.

* **Guilty pleasures:** Sweet things, especially arroz con leche, rice and milk with lots of sugar.

(her 1950s harmony quartet) to the guys in Buena Vista. I dedicate it to the Cuban people and everyone in the world who has supported me."

The only female artist showcased in the Buena Vista Social Club, the multi-generational line-up of maestros that reintroduced classic Cuban music to Western audiences, Portuondo sealed her worldwide reputation in a scene-stealing turn in Wim Wenders's 1999 documentary.

Her Carnegie Hall duet with septuagenarian compadre Ibrahim Ferrer was a personal highlight: having finished the poignant bolero *Silencio* -- "If the flowers in her garden see her sadness," she sings, "they will wither and die" -- Portuondo sheds tears that Ferrer tenderly wipes away. "I was overcome," she says with a smile. "For me it was the moment the world knew about Ibrahim Ferrer." Disillusioned with performing, Ferrer had been shining shoes on Havana street corners to supplement his state pension. Along with the likes of pianist Ruben Gonzalez and singer-guitarist Compay Segundo, who was then playing a hotel bar, he enjoyed a spectacular renaissance. All three have since gone to the great orchestra in the sky. "I miss them very much, of course. But you know," she adds with a sigh, "a lot of things pass in life."

With a live album, *Buena Vista Social Club at Carnegie Hall (World Circuit)*, being released to mark the tenth anniversary of the concert, Portuondo shows no signs of slowing down. She's just finished an extensive concert tour of Asia and Europe, singing songs from *Gracias* alongside her signature bolero, the Buena Vista favourite *Veinte años*. "I didn't get to Australia this time," she says apologetically. "I have been there three times" -- once with the Buena Vista line-up, twice as a headliner -- "and I love your country. The sun, the people, the koalas, the kangaroos! I will visit again one day, God willing."

It's hard to believe Portuondo was born in 1930, the same year the Hotel Nacional, an art deco landmark, was built. "Temperament," she explains. "You have to have the right temperament. I am a calm person. I know how to adjust to my environment. Touring makes me active and fills me with a great desire for life. When I'm home I get a lot of energy from Cuba. The tropical climate and mix of different races and cultures have made us a very musical nation. And music," she says, "has so much power."

Portuondo is one of the last living links to the country's flamboyant pre-revolutionary times. Her first memories are musical; too poor to afford a record player, her Spanish mother and Afro-Cuban father (a one-time star infielder for *Almandares*, Havana's premier baseball team) used to sing to each other in their tiny Havana flat. "Cuba was very racist then; I never saw my parents walk down the street together but they sang all the time at home. When they got a radio we listened to everything: the popular Cuban styles, Bach and Chopin, broadcasts from Carnegie Hall. Can you imagine how excited I was to actually play there?"

At the end of World War II, a teenage Omara joined her sister Haydee as a dancer at the Tropicana Club, then began singing with the vocal trio *Loquibambia Swing*, a handful of American jazz musicians who pioneered the feeling or "filin" genre -- a jazz-influenced version of the bossa nova -- for which she became renowned. She and Haydee then decided to form their own all-woman foursome, *Cuarteto las d'Aida*, which proved crucial in Cuba's musical history (think a sort of Caribbean version of the Supremes). "We used to sing and dance with a spontaneity that won the public over. We were acclaimed everywhere, on radio and television, and when Nat 'King' Cole played the Tropicana, we sang on stage with

him." They were in Miami when the Cuban missile crisis struck. Haydee stayed; Omara flew back and went solo ("With so many singers in exile, there was a gap to be filled"). She married, had a son, Ariel, now her manager, and later divorced. She performed, as she still does, up and down Cuba, including revolutionary nueva trova songs in her repertoire. She represented her country at the Sopot Festival in Poland and the Fete de l'Humanite in France.

She is politely evasive on issues of politics, but is enthusiastic in her praise for Cuba's cultural life, which she insists is respected and looked after from within. "After the triumph of the revolution the new ministry of culture made a sweeping effort to rescue all the different cultures throughout the island. Now there are casas de cultura, art instructors, ballet schools, folkloric groups. Much of the younger generation is participating. Look at the success of my friends (ballet dancer) Carlos Acosta and (jazz pianist) Roberto Fonseca! They do Cuba proud."

The melodic romanticism of the forthcoming Gracias and Buena Vista Social Club at Carnegie Hall is, she insists, the sort of aural balm the world is crying out for. "When I travel I see how much things have changed. The world is in a state of constant stress and commotion. It's good to enjoy music that relaxes you and brings a smile to your face." As her son arrives to signal the end of the interview, two British tourists suddenly part the palms and smile. "Thank you for the music, Omara," says one. Portuondo pauses. "No," she says, almond eyes twinkling. "Thank you."