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Portuondo is a different kind of diva

by SIOBHAN MURPHY



Omara Portuondo

'Hay que ser feliz [you have to be happy],' offers Omara Portuondo, fixing me with a bright stare. She says it mischievously, for I'm currently looking far from 'feliz'. Hunched over a low table, grimacing as I try to make out what the Buena Vista diva is saying, I'm almost certainly looking closer to 78 years old than the tiny, wrinkle-free dynamo sitting opposite me.

The bell-like clarity and pure diction of Portuondo's singing is strictly for stage and studio. In person, she speaks fast and low, with a thick Cuban accent. Hair scraped back into a wide black headband and wearing a tracksuit, she's restless and soon bored, yawning so wide I can see her fillings, resting her head against her friend's shoulder and fiddling with everything on the table.

Portuondo is currently promoting her latest album, *Gracias*, a celebration of her 60-year singing career. Does she get tired of the travelling and working?

'I'm not tired - not yet,' she says. And where does all this energy come from? 'Los frijoles negros [black beans]!' she laughs. And Baracoa chocolate, suggests her doctor, who adds that a recent survey showed there are almost 2,000 centenarians in Cuba. 'It's the Cuban nature, look at Compay Segundo, Ibrahim Ferrer, Fidel Castro,' says Portuondo. 'So if anyone thinks this album is my farewell, they're mistaken.'

Gracias might sound like something of a departure to those only familiar with Portuondo's Buena Vista Social Club work. That phenomenally successful project focused on the pure, old-school trova tradicional songs, as sung by travelling troubadours as far back as the 1920s - and, maybe accidentally, helped foster the illusion of a time-capsule Cuba, with its musical traditions preserved in aspic.

The Holy Grail for fans - the live recording of the 1998 Buena Vista concert at Carnegie Hall - is being released on World Circuit next month.

But the songs Portuondo has chosen for Gracias represent what came after trova tradicional in Cuba's dynamic musical history; the music that established her in her native country. Unlike other famously forgotten Buena Vista members, Portuondo had been a well-loved national star for most of the past 60 years.

Portuondo remembers music always being a part of her life. Gracias's closing track, Drume Negrita, is an Afro-Cuban lullaby Portuondo's father sang to her when she was little. Her father, a Cuban national baseball player, started teaching her songs when she was eight. 'He told me then I would represent our country as a singer throughout the world,' she says proudly.

Starting out as dancers at Havana's Tropicana club, Portuondo and her sister Haydee were soon singing in groups whose repertoire consisted of the 1940s style known as 'filin', romantic songs that followed on from the traditions of trova and bolero, but also incorporated US jazz. 'The name came from people saying: "You have a real feeling for singing that song,"' says Portuondo.

After Castro's revolution, nueva trova emerged in the 1960s: a development of filin that also fitted into the pan-Latin American movement of nueva canción - poetic political-protest songs.

By this time, Portuondo was a solo artist. This body of work, by artists such as Silvio Rodríguez, Amaury Pérez and Pablo Milanés represents a vital part of her repertoire. These are still songs of love, loss and longing, rather than overtly political tracts. And the eclectic musical influences show that, despite the US blockade, there was plenty of cultural exchange between Cuba and its other neighbours, particularly Mexico and Puerto Rico.

'I made lots of recordings that couldn't leave Cuba,' says Portuondo, 'but we had links with the Eastern European countries. When I worked in Finland, I was surprised to find they knew how to play Son music.'

There was also a passion for Brazilian bossa in Cuba, echoes of which can be detected on Gracias: Chico Buarque appears on the dual-language O Que Será; producer Alê Siqueira and Portuondo's long-time musical director Swami Jr are Brazilian. Portuondo's last album, a project with Caetano Veloso's sister, Maria Bethânia, has just been nominated for a Grammy. Could she be contemplating new avenues? 'I don't know what's going to happen,' she says.

In fact, she seems more taken with the idea of giving lectures on Cuban culture. But then, she reveals, when she was young, she actually wanted to be a diplomat. 'When I started singing, I also applied to study for the diplomatic service but then I became too busy as an artist. But I can be an ambassador for Cuban music, and with music you can change the world,' she smiles.