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Omara Portuondo releases **Gracias**, an album marking her professional career spanning 60 years. Recorded last year in Havana with contributions from such names as Avishai Cohen, Trilok Gurtu, Chico Buarque and Chucho Valdés, and produced by Alê Siqueira, this latest album includes tunes Omara has always longed to sing.

"...it is a tour de force of passion and pleasure, sweeping from gorgeous arrangements to hot-blooded percussive workouts. The core of the album richly captures the passage of time...Listen to "Cuento para un niño" or "Lo que me queda por vivir" and try to keep your feelings in check. It can't be done, and it should be us giving thanks for such a stirring accomplishment."

– **SonicBoomers**

"After a career spanning so many years in which she had always sung to please those around her, I asked: 'Omara, what would you like to sing?'" Such a simple question like this from the producer Alê Siquiera would trigger this album *Gracias*, which for Omara Portuondo marks a 60-year career in music. Her special gift to herself and to everyone is a selection of the tunes that have most defined her career, the odd jewel composed especially to mark the occasion and an exceptional résumé of contributors.

All the stops have been pulled out in order to pay this Cuban songstress the tribute she so deserves. After rising to fame and concocting her first tunes with the Las D'Aida quartet, Omara Portuondo became one of the most highly esteemed solo singers of her country during the 1970s and the 1980s. However, it wasn't until the Buena Vista Social Club™ project saw the light of day that she was able to achieve justifiable widespread fame along with other major figures of popular music from her country including Ibrahim Ferrer, Rubén González and Compay Segundo.

She recorded her third solo album in Havana last year in a family-like atmosphere at the behest of the producer Alê Siquiera and under the musical direction of Swami Jr, from whom she is never apart. Contributors include outstanding guests such as the singer-songwriters Jorge Drexler, Pablo Milanés and Chico Buarque, bassists Avishai Cohen and Richard Bona, pianist Chucho Valdés and percussionist Trilok Gurtu. For the recording, Omara decided to follow her producer's recommendations and prepare a repertoire bringing together compositions she has already sung or ones she has always wanted to sing from all corners of the globe, written by songwriters she regards highly.

Is this record the least personal and most disdainful title from Omara as a result? Does it constitute another one of those experiments we are so used to seeing in the industry lately, where an old graceful figure sells her soul to the recording devil to avoid falling behind and prove she can still do the old magic? Nothing of the kind. Her voice fills every rhythm on the disc, allowing us to become acquainted with a singer who sets herself way above the virtually all unmerited labels that have been attached to her

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hitherto. Omara Portuondo illustrates her ability to explore a varied terrain with the same grace, she demonstrates that a double bass solo can be an agreeable part of music that is in essence intended to be sung, she shows her ability to mix with musicians with varying styles and geographical backgrounds and she shares the stage with first-rate solo artists and is still able to shine. The venture of surrounding herself with young virtuosos and seasoned stars is by no means beyond her, and the times when her musical entourage is less abundant than on previous projects or releases.

enable us to see that achieving a career of 60 years is by no means an accidental feat or down to the industry or any other factor. Some things can only be achieved through talent, generosity, a love for what one does and adopting the right attitude; indeed, this is especially the case when it comes to earning the respect of your colleagues in the profession and the public.

Although Omara Potuondo maintains that it is she who wishes to give thanks for achieving six decades doing something she has always felt passionate about, it would not be a tenuous or overly reverent gesture to return this gratitude with the same affection she puts into every song on this album. Thank you, Omara!

Omara begins this album away from Cuba, saluting a genuine crooner *avant la lettre*, the Frenchman Henri Salvador, with “Yo vi”. Swami Jr’s subtle string arrangements bestow this delicate version with a metaphorical hint of what the singer has witnessed over the years, as indeed the title points out, and of the declaration stating that this album forms merely another rung in the ladder of her career, because “the heart whispers/that there are so many dreams to realise”.

Working alongside musicians with experience in improvisation can be risky, though it does afford unique opportunities, as shown in this version of “Adiós, felicidad”, which is imbued with some surprisingly modern moments. Omara Portuondo gives a lesson in contention while singing the lyrics of this tune and even hands the floor for some bars over to the double bassist Avishai Cohen, who gives a well-defined solo in acknowledgment of the chance of being able to sing with an individual he considers possesses one of the most exemplary voices in Cuban music.

“O qué será” is clearly another song Omara has long wished to record. After sharing the stages in Brazil with Maria Bethânia last year, for this song the Cuban singer has joined forces with another genuine Brazilian music maestro, Chico Buarque, for a version that conveys an interplay between the languages of both singers, and indeed of all the musical traditions of everyone contributing. For this album Omara resurrects a song she recorded in 1974: “Vuela pena” by Amaury Pérez. As heart-warming as it was when she performed it for the first time, the lyrics seem to take on a new form here: now it’s time to dispel the pain of passing time and the loss of certain dear friends along the way, like Ibrahim Ferrer, it’s time to chase away the inherent pain of human life which, as the song points out, has transformed Omara “into the oldest of queens”.

“Cuento para un niño”, by Rojas Torrente, which is strategically placed at the midway point on the album, is unquestionably one of its climaxes. After a career spanning so many years, Omara is still moved by a story so close to her heart that she is unable to hold back the tears for some final verses in an emotion that is calm, though implied throughout the tune.

With “Ámame como soy”, Omara takes the opportunity to pay tribute to an individual who has had a decisive influence on her musical career, the great Elena Burke, one of the singers who gave her the chance and her companion in *Las d’Aida*. Here she sings for the first time in her career a tune by one of the composers whom she most reveres and admires, Pablo Milanés, who also sings on this special occasion.

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“This girl’s voice reminds me of my childhood, when I was a little girl”, Omara states when referring to a contributor who is clearly the apple of her eye, her granddaughter Rossío Jiménez, who for “Cachita” shows the courage to star alongside her grandmother, the only accompaniment being the harpsichord played by Andrés Coayo. With this song, Omara goes back to that image of her childhood – a family devoted to music for pleasure – which years later would lead her to become the renowned figure she is today.

The album now takes a return to Cuba for a rendition of one of Silvio Rodríguez’s compositions that has managed to cross the border with such success that it has featured in two recent tunes from the jazz saxophonist Charles Lloyd. The atavistic beauty of “Rabo de Nube”, captured wonderfully by Omara in every nuance of this rendition, is enhanced by the fine touch of the performing musicians. The introductory lines from Avishai Cohen on the bow, the subtle touch of Trilok Gurtu on the tabla and the tone of modernity lent to the tune thanks to the Fender Rhodes played by Roberto Fonseca. Perhaps this is the whirlwind Silvio was hoping for.

The title track from the album, “Gracias”, which Drexler wanted to contribute to the project, begins with a clear taste of Brazil, one of the Cuban singer’s favourite music styles and a manifest influence in Uruguayan singer-songwriter Jorge Drexler’s productions. Omara is an admirer of the singer-songwriter’s work and has long wanted to sing one of his tunes. What better way to bow down to one of the all time greats than by devoting to her a song that was conceived especially with her in mind?

Not only does this album include encounters and tributes, it also features reunions such as the one between Omara and Chucho Valdés who, with the accompaniment of Cachaíto López’s double bass, re-record “Nuestro gran amor”, a composition by Omara’s son. He has been a vital individual in the singer’s professional career and has remained by her side year upon year for her performances on stages around the globe.

Omara’s ability to transform an apparent farewell message into a call of hope reemerges in “Lo que me queda por vivir”. However, despite the song’s title – the life I have left – one only needs to listen to the first line of the song: “the life I have left will be spent smiling”, to realise that there is no place for sadness in this tune.

Indeed, the album kicked off with a French feel of chansonnier, and for the ending the album leaves Cuba in search of a part of the Caribbean island’s musical roots. “Drume negrita” takes a salute to African music in the company of the Cameroonian Richard Bona, whose vocal skills and virtuoso talent once again demonstrate on this album that good music knows no limit in terms of ages, but rather is marked by shared sensitivities.

"...still going strong at 78, Portuondo is exemplary... she only keeps improving... The greatly understated young Cuban pianist Roberto Fonseca...brings a beautiful lyricism to the project... framing Portuondo's remarkable instrument and classic repertoire."

–ROOTS

"Portuondo gives a modern touch to nostalgia creating a disc that will delight fans inside and outside Cuba."

–SONGLINES

"Omara Portuondo is still Cuba's great diva."

–THE GUARDIAN

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Gracias :: Track Listing

Comments by **Omara Portuondo**

01. Yo Vi:

This reminds me a lot of the Caribbean and its islands. It gives me an overwhelming feeling of peace.

02. Adiós Felicidad:

For me, this is the story of my life, of a love I once had but which never actually came to pass. A love that could never be.

03. O Que Será:

Oh Brasil! All my live I've been captivated by this country and its music. I've always wanted to sing this song. I've finally done it alongside Chico Buarque!. It's a dream come true.

04. Vuela Pena:

One day, Amary's father told me that his song had composed a song and asked me if I wanted to sing it. When I heard it, it was so heart-breaking that I record a video in 1974. The song was stuck in my head ever since and I just had to record it.

05. Cuento para un niño:

This song is dedicated to children, to their innocence and to the difficult task entailed by becoming an adult.

06. Ámame como Soy:

I've always wanted to sing this. It was used in a film I loved and was also sung by Elena Burke. In some way, it is a tribute to Elena.

07. Tú Mi Desengaño:

I find this song of Pablo fascinating, though I always thought that only Pablo could sing his songs. I decide to give it a go for this album and he liked it very much.

08. Cachita:

This remind me a great deal of my granddaughter, who in turn reminds me of myself when I was a girl. I was extremely moved by singing with Rossio.

09. Rabo de Nube:

For years I have been fond of this song and particularly its writer, though I've never had the chance to record it, so thank you Silvio!

10. Gracias:

I was moved by the fact that Drexler composed this song for me. I wish to thank him and all the musicians I've worked with throughout my life.

11. Nuestro Gran Amor:

This song portrays the profound love I feel for my son, who wrote it, and who has remained by my side on this journey for so many years.

12. Lo Que Me Queda Por Vivir:

This song represents to me what life still has to give me, and as the song says it will be a smile.

13. Drume Negrita:

I just to sing this to my son when he went to bed and later did the same for my granddaughter. Thanks for Richard he made this song the best version I ever listened.