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Omara Portuondo's friends pitch in on latest CD

Reed Johnson, Los Angeles Times



The queen of Caribbean vocalists is on the phone from Poland, chatting about a subject much on her mind lately: gratitude. "I am thankful for many things," Omara Portuondo said, and at 78 she has good reason to be.

Omara Portuondo (right) and Ibrahim Ferrer of the Buena V...Portuondo, 78, has been an entertainer for six decades. [View Larger Images](#)

For starters, the principal chanteuse of the Buena Vista Social Club this year is celebrating her sixth decade as an entertainer. Long before Fidel Castro became a Communist, Portuondo was hoofing up a storm as a dancer at the Tropicana Club in Havana.

Her subsequent career as a solo singer, which began in the 1960s, has partnered Portuondo with a cross section of Latin American musical luminaries. That venturesome spirit of collaboration extends to her latest disc, fittingly titled "Gracias," which was just released.

"Gracias" includes tracks in which Portuondo doubles with Chico Buarque, the Brazilian Renaissance man of performing arts; the Cuban singer-songwriter Pablo Milanés, co-founder of the so-called nueva trova style of politicized progressive folk music; and Chucho Valdés, the Cuban bandleader, pianist and composer.



Portuondo has known some of these artists, such as Valdes and Buarque, for decades. Other relationships were formed more recently, as with Jorge Drexler, the Uruguayan singer-songwriter who won an Academy Award for composing the song "Al Otro Lado del Rio" (The Other Side of the River) for the 2004 Che Guevara biopic, "The Motorcycle Diaries." He and Portuondo harmonize on the record's title track. "It was very beautiful, because he's a very agreeable person, very gentle," Portuondo said.

Although some tracks on "Gracias" - such as the classic "Adios Felicidad" (Goodbye Happiness) - have a melancholy timbre, the record is decidedly upbeat. Its spare, mainly guitar-driven arrangements, with a smattering of lush strings, frame Portuondo's suavely insistent voice. Contemporary performer

If any further proof were needed that Portuondo is still a vibrant contemporary performer, not a nostalgia act, she recently put out another disc of duets with Brazilian singer Maria Bethânia that earned a Latin Grammy nomination. Capping the year for Portuondo was the release of "Buena Vista Social Club at Carnegie Hall," a live 1998 recording that captures the resurgent skills of the veteran Cuban musicians not long after Ry Cooder helped give them worldwide exposure by bringing them together to record with him.

Portuondo has been celebrating various milestones this fall with an extensive tour that has taken her this month to Eastern Europe, where she has long commanded a loyal following. "The people know the Buena Vista Social Club, and they know the songs," she said.

The sense of thankfulness that gave rise to "Gracias" springs from multiple sources. Portuondo wanted to acknowledge the many people who've inspired her: her parents, her fellow musicians and Cooder, whose Buena Vista Social Club project spurred a revival of interest in Cuban music.

The timing of "Gracias," as well as its contents, tacitly acknowledges that many artists of Portuondo's generation already have passed from the scene. Three of the Buena Vista Social Club's principals, Ibrahim Ferrer, Compay Segundo and Ruben González, have died in recent years. Pio Leyva, a former backing singer to Beny More and a kind of auxiliary Buena Vista Social Club member, suffered a fatal heart attack in 2006.

"It makes me feel very bad," Portuondo told an interviewer for El Nuevo Herald last month. "You know the anguish that is provoked by the leaving of loved ones, but we already know that all of us have to die."

The past several months have been tough on Cuba. Hurricanes Ike and the devastating Gustav, as well as tropical storm Fay, struck the island during this year's storm season. Socially, Cuba is weathering a period of transition, as Castro recedes from public view, handing over prominence (if not necessarily actual power) to his brother Raul.

Hopeful about U.S.

Portuondo sounds a faintly hopeful note that the new administration of U.S. President-elect Barack Obama might ease U.S. travel restrictions that have made it difficult even for elderly Cuban singers to gain entry into the United States.

But in conversation, Portuondo doesn't dwell on circumstances beyond her control. Her touring and recording engagements allow her to reconnect with friends and fans and to witness how the great Afro-Creole diaspora is bubbling up through Cuba, Colombia, Peru and parts beyond.

"The mestizaje (mixing of races) exists in all parts of the world, culture, religion, many things," she said.

So too does the mixing of old and new songs, even as the clock keeps ticking. For that, Portuondo suggests, the giving of thanks will continue. "It's the least we can do."