

# Vocal sunshine

Piers Ford interviews legendary Cuban singer Omara Portuondo and gets a vocal history lesson

Omara Portuondo laughs mischievously as the magnified heat pours through the window of the 15th-floor hotel bar in London where we are meeting to talk about her new album. Welcome as this sudden burst of autumn sunshine is after the dreadful British summer, it has dogged us through the interview.

A sympathetic Portuondo has already noticed the beads of sweat on my forehead and insisted that we all shift around so that I'm sitting in the shade. 'We brought the sun all the way from Cuba for you,' she laughs. 'But you'll have to finish your questions quickly, or it will catch up with you again!'

*Gracias* has been released to celebrate her 60th year as a professional singer. It's easy to forget that the global fame that came with her participation in *Buena Vista Social Club* – the album and film, not to mention landmark concerts, which brought the cream of Cuba's senior popular musicians to the wider world's attention in the mid-1990s – is a relatively recent twist in Portuondo's distinguished career. '*Buena Vista* is the best thing that could have happened and I am very grateful for it,' she says. 'After making this music for so many years, to be able to take it all around the world is wonderful.'

She picks up the album sleeve and turns it over to show the image on the reverse: Portuondo, wise and beautiful at 76, sits alone in a boat surrounded by a handful of scattered flowers, gazing serenely into the camera, the sea stretching to the horizon behind her. 'This is the Cuban sea in the photograph but of course the sea goes around the entire world, so the image is very symbolic for me. When I'm travelling, I'm taking Cuban music all around the world. And this album is basically a "thank-you" to all the musicians, the conductors and people who have been with me and supported me during the last 60 years.'

Although there was no gramophone at home, Portuondo's childhood was filled with the music that her parents sang to her and her siblings. One of her father's favourite songs, 'Drumme Negrita', is at the heart of *Gracias*, re-invented for a new audience with African percussionist Richard Bona's accompaniment subtly underpinning her extemporisation.

Listeners who come to the album expecting to be drenched in the lush strings and guitars that characterised her successful 2000 release under the Buena Vista brand might initially be startled. In many ways, *Gracias* is a jazz album, bringing together an eclectic range of African, Brazilian and – of course – Cuban styles and musicians, with Portuondo's expressive, still resonant voice working its emotive way around and about the carefully chosen songs.

But Portuondo started singing in the late 1940s, when Cuban music was a melting pot that for many years had steadily absorbed these strong influences, as well as the American jazz that easily made the short hop from the American south. With the vocal group Los Loquibambas and later, the *Quarteto Las D'Aida*, she specialised in a jazz-tinged bossa nova style known as 'feeling', which was well received in the US. Aida's vocal arrangements garnered the attention of the best. During those pre-revolution years many of the world's great entertainers visited Havana to play at well-known venues like the Tropicana. On one occasion, Portuondo, who would go

on to share a stage with an extraordinarily diverse selection of great singers and musicians – including Ibrahim Ferrer, Horbie Hancock, Marianne Faithfull and Chaka Khan – sang with Nat King Cole.

'Yes, it's a secret that I've kept to myself all these years but I am actually a jazz singer!' she smiles. 'New Orleans is not far from Cuba and there is a lot of exchange of influences, particularly among musicians. The musicians who join me on this album are very much jazz players. In previous recordings I have sung a lot of pure Cuban music, which features a lot of strings: students learn classical music as well as popular styles. In the 1920s and 1930s, musicians would come home from travelling and bring in the strings and guitars. We've assimilated a lot of styles for such a small country! And a lot of French people came to Cuba with their strings, so that was a big influence as well. But when the film music and jazz became popular in Cuba, it really marked the second stage of my career. And there was a lot of cross-fertilisation. All the big jazz orchestras and bands in North America had Cuban percussionists.'

'This is really a fusion record. All of my life, all of my career, all this different music has existed. I've sung with symphony orchestras as well as bands and groups, and I have loved it very much. This brings together all the styles that I have sung. I wanted to select tracks that had a mixture of jazz and strings. My musical director, Swami Jr, is a Brazilian guitarist so he has brought the colour and touch of those rhythms to some of the songs.'

Although she made her first solo album in 1959, Portuondo continued to sing with Aida for 15 years until she officially went 'solo' in 1967. During the early years of the Cuban revolution, travelling was severely limited and it was virtually impossible to pursue an international career thanks to the poor state of US/Cuba relations. But with the population refocused on its native culture, musicians and artists who had stayed in the country became vital elements of a new phase of creativity.

Portuondo's reputation as an entertainer of national importance was consolidated. As the political situation settled, she was able to represent her country at international festivals and by the 1980s was touring and recording regularly with La Orquesta Aragón. But even during the years of relative isolation, key trends in popular music would find their way into the Cuban mix. 'We always knew what was happening, what kind of music was playing,' she says. 'At one stage in the 1960s, I was singing Beatles songs! I love singing in Spanish but people always ask me to sing in different languages. In the 1940s, they would want me to sing in English. I've sung in Japanese and Korean, and I'd love to sing in French too; I knew Piaf well.'

Portuondo has occasionally been dubbed the 'Cuban Piaf'. Like Piaf and a handful of other great female singers whose art transcends style and genre, she is blessed with that extraordinary gift of being able to create a completely unconditional bond with her audience. Lyrical interpretation and musicality combine with the emotional weight of the moment to spark a special recognition in the listener, and it makes for an immensely moving experience during one of her concerts.



'Piaf was a very humble person and very emotional when she was singing,' says Portuondo. 'I don't write the songs. I just sing the lyrics for the public. But obviously that triggers other things in me, together with the piano and the musicians. It's the same when a member of the public is listening to one of my songs. I might provoke emotions, stir something, because of the combination of the music and lyrics. But you can't do that alone. You need to have your own recollections and other people around you!'

So is *Gracias* a valedictory album? Absolutely not, insists Portuondo. 'I still have a lot of work to do. My parents used to tell me that I would represent Cuban culture wherever I go, and that's what has made me so happy. Cubans love their country and they love their

music and regardless of what else is happening, that will continue. So I'm saying "thank you" to my father and mother, and to my son [one of his songs, "Nuestro Gran Amor" is featured on the album, with accompaniment by Chucho Valdés] as well as to everybody else.'

She says the secret of preserving her voice over a long career is to live quietly. 'When I was little, of course I had singing lessons at school but since then, nothing,' she says. 'I am like an athlete. I don't drink and I don't smoke. I am just very quiet and that's how I like to live when I am not on the road. My advice to young singers is to make sure you do your vocalising but above everything else, love what you do, love your profession. Fortunately for me, the Cuban sun is full of vitamins.' ■