

Mercedes Sosa performing in London in 2008. This concert was her last before her death in 2009



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→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE
MERCEDES SOSA

Chris Moss celebrates the life of Argentina's folk singing superstar, who became the international voice of nueva canción

Sometimes these regular cribs on seminal musical heroes have the cold content and respectful tone of obituaries – whether the subject in question is alive or dead. For Mercedes Sosa, the soulful folk singer of Tucumán in Argentina, let's make an exception and talk about epiphanies.

In 1989, I was teaching English to foreign students in Leeds while waiting to go to Buenos Aires to begin a contract to work for two years as a teacher there. My boss, to prepare me for a new life in a faraway expatria, loaned me a black cassette of *Mercedes Sosa's Greatest Hits*. I was 23 years old, raised on The Stranglers, Bowie, New Order. This music was new, strange, in a foreign language – and it was a revelation.

The song 'María, María' sounded to me like a celebration of everything on the planet. I had no idea what was being sung besides the name of some wonderful woman, María, but I could tell it was all good. 'Unicornio Azul'

was an 80s pop song mangled with prog rock poetry, but it worked. 'Gracias a la Vida' sounded sincere and sorrowful and seemed to come from deep inside the heart of this woman. Later I would learn she wasn't a writer, but depended on inspiring talents like Chilean Violeta Parra, author of this ode to an existential *gracias*, to make her magic work.



The young Mercedes pictured in 1973

Fast forward – that little black cassette deserves the lead metaphor – to 1997 and I'm at a big summer music festival at the football stadium of Club Ferro Carril Oeste, in western Buenos Aires, and there she was, seated – by this time in her life, she was always seated – onstage, with a little Andean bongo drum known as a *tambor* between her legs and a rapt audience of all ages, all classes, all stripes, shutting up in reverence or singing along when invited. Sosa sang the songs I by now loved: all those above, plus the anthemic 'Canción Con Todos', the lullaby 'Duerme Negrito' and the portentous 'La Maza'. Her lungs always blew me away – that rich alto voice, that seemed not just visceral but vital, coming from deep beneath the earth – and with it she could do just about all the shades and moods.

Two years later, she died, and there was some news in the usual places, just as there'd been a few Latin Grammys in her later years, and yet it always seemed to me that the UK,

most of Europe and much of the world outside Latin America failed to wake up to the magisterial talent of *La Negra Sosa*.

Haydée Mercedes Sosa was born in Tucumán, in north-west Argentina, in 1935, on July 9 – Argentina's Independence Day, as it happens. Her dad was an unskilled labourer and her mum a washer-woman. One of her grandfathers was a French immigrant, while the other was a Quechua-speaking Indian. Her *mestizo* background gave her those striking looks and a culture that combined Andean and the European traditions, which she drew upon later as a singer.

That sounds like an obituary already – so imagine a warm, subtropical land, close to the Andes but protected by them rather than threatened. In the 16th and 17th century,

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Much of the world failed to wake up to the magisterial talent of *La Negra Sosa*

when Buenos Aires was a tin-pot village trading with English pirates, Tucumán and much of the north-western corner of what would become Argentina was annexed to Alto Peru (now Bolivia). The meeting of Spanish settlers and Quechua and Aymara speaking natives loosely affiliated to the Inca empire would provide a seedbed for the sowing of *criollo* music: a Spanish guitar plucked, an African drum beaten and voices from the mountains and the plains. From this meeting were spun a dozen rhythms: *chacarera*, *zamba*, *vidala* and *vidalita*, *milonga* and, ultimately, tango, too. Sosa, in her teens, won a singing concert sponsored by a local radio station and the prize was to perform for the station. She turned pro and, in 1962, recorded her first album, *La Voz de la Zafra*. With her husband, musician Manuel Oscar Matus, she then began to

explore *nueva canción* (new song), a socially conscious movement already gaining ground in Chile and Cuba that drew on indigenous native and folk elements. Parra's 'Gracias a la Vida' and Horacio Guarany's 'Si se Calla el Cantor' (If the Singer is Silenced) were just two of the many *nueva canción* songs that Mercedes Sosa began to use in her repertory. From 1965 on, she recorded album after album – at least one album almost every year until 2005 – and expanded the thematic and tonal range of *nueva canción*, hometown Argentinian folklore and rock-folk fusions. Most of her work was as a solo performer, but she popularised the songs of other, overlooked Argentinian artists – notably Atahualpa Yupanqui – and also performed and recorded alongside Chilean band Quilpayún, emerging pop singer-songwriter Fito Páez and composer Ariel Ramírez, among others.

When the military seized power in Argentina in 1976, Sosa, whose work had an affinity with the Guevarist, pan-Latino leftism then in vogue, was banned from the radio. She was harassed and threatened by police and by military and paramilitary forces, and, in 1979, arrested. She was released following international protests but decided to go into exile, first in Spain and then in France.

She returned to Argentina in 1982, and began to collaborate with rising local stars such as León Gieco, a folk-rock star who would often join her onstage to sing his stirring 'Solo le Pido a Dios', and bad boy rocker and jazz fusion fan Charly García. If Sosa was championing these rising stars, she was also expressing solidarity with youth movements and an openness to rock and other genres. Later duets with Pavarotti, Joan Baez and Sting are testimony to her internationalism. But where Argentinian pop, rock and club music generally borrowed and bastardised imported influences – derivativeness is the defining cultural norm on the west bank of the River Plate – Mercedes Sosa, grounded deep in her own folkloric roots, always performed alongside foreigners as an equal.

Like many great artists, Mercedes Sosa focused on the life and culture closest to home, and performed with friends and comrades, giving the local universal value. I've no idea why her voice and her songs transported me so effectively to Argentina months before I actually boarded the plane. But, she still serves that purpose now I am back in England. A Latin American legend, she sang out loud for those who had no voice and she deserves a wider audience, here in Britain and beyond. **N**

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PODCAST 'Gracias a la Vida', chosen by Jonathan Dimpleby, features on this issue's podcast

BEST ALBUMS



La Voz de la Zafra (RCA, 1962)

Sosa's first album features a range of native rhythms including the *zamba*, the *galopa* and the *guarania* and marks the arrival of a major talent.



El Grito de la Tierra (Polygram/Universal, 1970)

Sosa's versions of Atahualpa Yupanqui's tender lullaby 'Duerme Negrito' and the revolutionary crowd-pleaser 'Canción Con Todos' (written by celebrated folklore lyricist Armando Tejada Gomez and *nueva canción* star César Isella) are the stand-out songs on this powerful folk album.



30 Años (Verve, 1995)

This 30th anniversary collection has virtually all the essential songs, including 'María, María', 'Gracias a la Vida', 'Todo Cambia' and more, making it the superlative sampler.



La Negra: The Definitive Collection (Wrasse, 2011)

This new double compilation isn't exactly definitive – neither 'María, María' nor 'Gracias a la Vida' are included – but its 40 tracks (including 'Todo Cambia', 'Alfonsina y el Mar' and 'Solo le Pido a Dios') make for a generous collection. Reviewed in #80.



Competition

We have three copies of Mercedes Sosa's album *La Negra: The Definitive Collection* album to give away. Simply answer the following question:

In what year was Mercedes Sosa arrested?

See p7 for *Songlines* competition rules and address.

Closing date February 3 2012

BEST AVOIDED



De Mi (Polygram, 1991)

The title means 'Mine' with Sosa acting as protective mother to all her co-singers; 'Una Canción Posible' with Victor Heredia and a fragment of 'María María' with Milton Nascimento and Fernando Brant) are the not very lofty high points of a messy pop-rock-folk album of collaborations.

IF YOU LIKE MERCEDES SOSA, THEN TRY... ATAHUALPA YUPANQUI



30 Ans de Chansons (Le Chant du Monde, 1994)

Listening to moving songs like the original 'Duerme Negrito' and 'Canción para Pablo Neruda' is like going back to the source. A fabulous songwriter, Yupanqui, born in the pampas of Buenos Aires province, has an earthy, emotive delivery.



Mercedes Sosa and president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner

JOSE PONS