



Musical chemistry is the wellspring for Cuban singer Omara Portuondo's latest record *Omara & Chucho* in which Omara and legendary Cuban jazz pianist Chucho Valdés reprise their liaison on the groundbreaking 1997 Nubengra disc *Desafíos* (Challenges). Its ingredients are gloriously simple: Omara's warm, richly nuanced voice, Chucho's inspired piano accompaniment and a set of heartbreaking songs that both artists love. The disc showcases what has become a rarity today – two veteran musicians with an uncanny rapport creating beautiful music, à la Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong. If the disc's title evokes *Chico & Rita*, Fernando Trueba and Javier Mariscal's recently acclaimed animated film of Cuban musicians moving between Cuba and the US, their essence is shared: tribute to what Omara calls 'the island's jewels'

– Cuba's enormous wealth of pioneering musicians and their unforgettable music, recalled with fondness and respect. Omara came to many people's notice in the mid-90s as the 'first' and only lady of Cuba's extraordinary Buena Vista Social Club collective. The nature of her initial involvement became inextricably confused with a myth-making machine that shifted over time according to PR opportunities and marketing tastes. Suffice to say, teasing stories concerning Omara and Compay Segundo being former lovers, or Omara having 'something going' with Ibrahim Ferrer was, as she recounts with some hilarity, "men talk!" Not that it has not been one of the most wonderful life and late career-enhancing experiences for her. When she and Ferrer shed tears singing 'Dos Gardenias' in Wim Wender's eponymous film, and more often than not on stage together, the feelings were genuine. As she

says, all those with whom she shared the Buena Vista experience remain in her heart. Indeed, as with 'Dos Gardenias', the unashamed romanticism of most of the songs Omara sings, with their tales of moments lived then lost or impossible love, suit her well. Even the images for her latest album which show Omara and Chucho fondly holding hands and even 'in bed' together, belie the fact that, like many women of her generation, Omara has pursued a full-blown career at the expense of long-term relationships. Long-ago married then separated from poet Jorge Jiménez, with whom she had her only son Ariel, Omara has been an independent woman for most of her life. She began early, singing non-stop in public to much acclaim since her mid-teens with tremendous versatility and poise. To know Omara is to be in the presence of a consummate professional whom nothing



Omara performing with Orquesta Aragón



Omara (seated) with Las d'Aida and Nat King Cole

fazes. Unlike the men of Buena Vista Social Club, Omara had never been forgotten or needed to be discovered. Born in the Cayo Hueso neighbourhood of Old Havana on October 29 1930, daughter of a Spanish mother and Afro-Cuban father who had a runaway romance when mixed marriages were taboo, Omara remembers her top baseball-player father singing duets with her mother, while she sang along on second voice from around four years old. She learnt much of her early craft singing along to radio, music theatre and film.

Omara's parents were part of a *vanguardista* cultural scene of poets,

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At 81, Omara Portuondo still sings beautifully in tune, drawing on an infinite repertoire

musicians, artists, sports people that included Cuba's most famous black poet Nicolás Guillén. Omara duplicated this experience in her early teens by becoming part of the musicians and poets who formed Cuba's seminal *filin* movement. Before long, with singer-composer José Antonio Méndez, guitarist Alberto Menendez and pianist Frank Emilio Flynn, Omara formed the group Loquibambia, singing in English and Spanish, influenced by US styles. "We loved bebop and doo-wop and early jive and we

danced swing. We called our own music *filin* because everything had sentiment, emotion, feeling. That was so important to us. We took the energy of the moment, of our generation and made it Cuban." Omara's popularity saw her soon become known as 'la novia del filin' (The Fiancée of Feeling). It's impossible to understand Omara's musical aesthetic and indeed that of Buena Vista Social Club itself without situating them within the Cuba's prominent cabaret scene, both before and after the 1959 revolution, notably that of the legendary Tropicana nightclub where Omara and sister Haydee were dancers in their teens. Although the audience was hugely reduced when the North Americans were booted off the island, the Tropicana has remained a touchstone for the quality of its artists and world-class shows, with many members and musical directors of Buena Vista Social Club playing there.

After Loquibambia, Omara became a member of pioneering vocal quartet Las d'Aida; sang (like Celia Cruz) with the all-female orchestra Anacaona; and later became a key soloist guesting and touring the world with numerous orchestras like the peerless Orquesta Aragón. Today at 81, Omara still sings beautifully in tune, drawing on an infinite repertoire. From Spain last month while preparing to embark on tour with Chucho, she told me she adores performing, has no plans to stop, and is already thinking of her next disc. Wracking my brains I can think of no other female singer alive of any genre to rival her. True, some critics over the years have not warmed to her singing style and at the height of Buena Vista fame her admiration for torch-song singers and Barbra Streisand was scoffed at. But she's always remained true to herself, a sentimental woman with a passion for country, friends and family. Omara Portuondo is the grand dame of Latin song, a veritable musical legend. ●

DATE Omara performs with Chucho Valdés at Kew Gardens on July 10, where Songlines will also have a stand. See the Gig Guide for more details



Ibrahim and Omara together onstage as part of Buena Vista Social Club

BEST ALBUMS



Omara & Chucho (World Village)
Kicking off with the *a capella* track 'Noche Cubana', with Chucho Valdés adding touches of Rachmaninov, Beethoven, and Wynton Marsalis guesting on trumpet, this is intimate Cuban cabaret at its best. See review in this issue.

D Songlines Digital subscribers can download a free track from this album. See p69



Duets (Malanga Music)
Omara duetting with a host of singing partners including Elena Burke between 1981 and 2005 – some gloriously over the top.



Flor de Amor (World Circuit)
Nick Gold's second production for Omara coaxed out of her some of the mellowest sounds, with a glorious backing group – none other than the Buena Vista boys.



Gracias (World Village)
This is Omara's own personal favourite. Produced in 2008 by Brazil's Alé Siquiera and Swami Junior, it includes duets with Chico Buarque, Pablo Milanés and her granddaughter on 'Cachita'.

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BEST COMPILATION



Dos Gardenias (Tumi Music)
This eclectic disc is a favourite. Early on Omara sang the iconic 'Gracias à la Vida', composed by Chile's Violeta Parra, that speaks for a continent. Catch also Silvio Rodríguez's song for Che; and 'Vale la Pena Vivir', Demetrio Muñiz' paean to why Cubans love Cuba and more.

IF YOU LIKE OMARA, THEN TRY... SUSANA BACA



Afrodiaspora (Luaka Bop)
The Peruvian singer's latest disc is a pearl that embraces songs from Spain, Mexico, Cuba, Argentina, New Orleans, Puerto Rico and beyond.

REVIEW Read the *Top of the World* review in this issue – track 6 on the covermount CD.



Peru's leading lady – Susana Baca

→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

OMARA PORTUONDO

Jan Fairley marvels on Cuba's first lady of song's remarkable career

PORTRAIT TOMÁS MIÑA VILL