

# Celia Cruz, the “Queen” of Spain

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Throughout her extensive artistic career, and even after her passing, the tributes and recognition received by the “*Guarachera*” of Cuba represent the greatness and transcendence she achieved, not only in the Americas but on a global scale as well.

The profound impact of her work as an exceptional performer of Cuban music has contributed to the worldwide distribution of our greatest cultural treasure. Likewise, the formidable artist—who began all her extraordinarily backed-up performances with her signature cry of *¡Asúcaaaa!*—had come to personify the flag of that free Cuba that was suffering, as she was, the ruthlessness of exile, and who (thanks to her voice), was able to manifest its pain and desire for freedom.

The story of her humble beginnings and how her career as a singer and “*son*” interpreter began, have filled many pages in newspapers, magazines and online media sources. Her performances on television shows and during the Grammy Awards have also garnered media attention. Quite aside from her status as a

bonafide myth, Celia Cruz also embodied her people’s rejection of the dictatorship that was oppressing them.

Celia was born in 1925, in the Santos Suárez neighborhood of Havana. She was barely a child when she won her first pair of shoes by singing for a tourist couple. At a very young age, Celia began to sing on Cuban radio programs such as “La Hora de Té” (*Tea Time*, one of many competitive “talent shows” in which the prize might be just a cake), or the opportunity to take part in other contests, which she did until she was signed as a chorus girl for the Radio Cadena Suaritos station. On more than one occasion, Celia acknowledged that the idols of her youth were Abelardo Barroso (an exceptional Cuban singer with a resounding voice), and Paulina Álvarez, a highly talented “*danzonete*” singer from Matanzas.

Her first big break occurred in 1950, when La Sonora Matancera orchestra called her to fill in a vacancy created when its lead singer quit. From then on, her prestige as a



*Celia Cruz, at different times in her artistic career*

*sonera* rose in all of Cuba and the rest of Latin America too, throughout which she traveled with the band. It was during this fifteen-year association with La Sonora Matancera that she made famous her trademark “¡ASUCAAAA!” The now deceased but extremely well-known Cuban singer Tito Gómez—the venerated *Orchestra Riverside* and Enrique Jorrín Orchestra soloist of *Vereda tropical* fame—said on one occasion of her early career that the heights of brilliance reached by Celia’s voice were simply unobtainable by other female Cuban vocalists of the time; hence the source of her popularity and resounding success.

In 1960, while touring Latin America, and motivated by a rejection of the Communist course their country had taken, Celia Cruz and La Sonora Matancera decided not to return to Cuba; they established themselves permanently in the United States. Her husband and she left the orchestra in 1965 to embark upon their own careers. This joint venture brought her collaborations with some very well respected Latin musicians in New York—Tito Puente, Larry Harlow, Johnny Pacheco, Ray Barreto and Willie Colón, among others—as well as with salsa greats like the Fania All Stars, which greatly boosted her career. Meanwhile, her husband Pedro Knight became her manager. During the 1970s, she further jumpstarted her career when she toured with Fania to Latin America, England, France and Zaire, participating with real salsa celebrities in mega-con-

certs in which she was the only female Cuban voice.

In 1990, Celia won a Grammy in the category of Best Tropical Latin Performance for a joint album titled “Ritmo en el Corazón” with Ray Barreto. During the seventies, she also sang duets with important salsa and popular music performers like Oscar D’León, Willie Colón, José Alberto El Canario, Willy Chirino, Ángela Carrasco, Johnny Ventura, Cheo Feliciano, India, Caetano Veloso and even the acclaimed Italian tenor Luciano Pavarotti, with whom she sang a live performance of “Guantanamera.”

Of her international tours, albums and awards, including her performance in documentaries and the feature film “The Mambo Kings,” it could be said that the decade of the 1990s was her most prodigious. There is certainly evidence of this in the profound mark she left on her Spanish public, an audience that fully enjoyed her concerts all throughout Spain and on television. Essentially, a band of experienced Panamanian and Cuban musicians was created to accompany *La Reina* [The Queen] in her performances around said country; they would receive the scores some time before her scheduled performances so they could rehearse enough to be able to successfully back up the larger-than-life singer. It is precisely this little known facet of her career that we wish to highlight in this article.





## Queen of Spain

Cuban trumpet player Manuel Machado graduated from the National School of Art in Havana and has lived in Spain since 1992. For years this studio musician has been in high demand by many music groups and well known solo artists in Spain. According to this brass virtuoso, Cuban musicians of Celia's generation, trained, as they were, under the capitalist system, had very high standards and were extremely demanding. Nevertheless, he affirms that they also revealed their more human sides and were cordial and easygoing with their colleagues and audiences. Machado states that Celia, as well as Bebo Valdés—another shining star of Cuban music living in Sweden since 1960—remembered Cuba and Havana as though the years since their unavoidable departure from the Island, on account of the loss of freedom, hadn't passed. Machado, who was constantly amazed by Celia's energetic performances, says he will never forget the way The Queen used to greet the musicians who were going to work with her, when she first met them: "*Bueno, qué, ¿Cómo está la cosa? ¿Echamos pa'lante, no?*" [Well, what's up? How are things? Are we ready to go?]. He also affirms that she had a tremendous way with people, always able to entirely win over her audience as soon as she stepped onto the stage. Machado also goes on to describe how Celia showed great respect for her husband and manager, Pedro

Knight, and gave lots of loving encouragement to the many musicians who considered her like a mother. He shared that her nickname for him was "El Negrón" and that in order to urge him during his solos with her she would say: "*sopla Santa Clara*" [Santa Clara's in the house!], Santa Clara being his hometown in Cuba.

Another thing that impressed him about Celia Cruz was the fact that when she was with Cubans she would never discuss the political situation in Cuba: she never mixed business with politics, despite the terrible despair she felt because she could not return to her sorely missed homeland.

Moisés Porro, a master drummer and conga player who graduated in percussion from the National School of Arts in Camagüey, Cuba, was a steady member of the rhythm section in the band that accompanied Celia for her performances throughout Spain. The image that Porro remembers most of Cuba's foremost *guarachera* was that of a down-to-earth and friendly artist who chatted with the musicians and even their families as if she had known them all her life. He was also surprised by the fact that Celia, despite her well-earned fame, never played the diva: she put her entire body and soul into her performances of Cuban music without ever losing her humanity with either the musicians or her adoring public. Just like Machado, Porro believed that Celia was a true professional, in every sense of the word, on or off stage: she never brought up Cuban politics



in her casual conversations with her accompanists either before or after any performance, despite the fact she couldn't hide her boundless love for Cuba or the pain her people's suffering caused her. Perhaps the only time Celia dared to bring up the issue of Cuban politics was when she was a guest, in 1998, on "Séptimo de Caballería," a extremely popular Spanish T.V. musical program. In response to a comment by the program's emcee, Miguel Bosé, who in some way had been praising Cuba and the situation there, Celia reacted firmly, rejecting out of hand any recognition of the regime that in the past had denied her permission to visit the Island when her mother was dying, and that for 50 years had fettered the entire populace.

It is, perhaps, the highly seasoned Panamanian timbal player Beto Hernández who has best preserved in his memory many stories about the 'reign' of *La Reina* in Spain, during the first half of the nineties. He said it amazed him that in spite of her advanced age, and the fact that she had to be helped onto the stage, Celia was still able to transform herself into a young *sandunguera* [a charming, dancing woman]. This musician confided to me that he had only ever gotten the kind of incredible vibes that Celia and her magnetic personality emitted while playing with Andy Montañez and Oscar D'León. He tells us that she always had flowers and a bottle of cognac in her dressing room, and that although she didn't drink she always took a wee bit of the stuff just before

performing, to temper her voice. Beto, like his fellow musicians Machado and Porro, expressed that *La Reina* never behaved like a diva and that she had an incredible ability to get her voice and style entirely in sync with CANAYÓN, the band that was accompanying her at the time. With a view to the gala performances Celia would be giving throughout Spain, the band incorporated a brass section so that it could crank up its own percussion sound.

The salsa repertory that Celia performed bore the signature sound of Johnny Pacheco and other talented members of the Fania All Stars such as Luis Ramírez and Luis Perico Ortiz. *Isadora*, *Ud. Abusó*, *Yerberero Moderno*, *Cuba qué lindos son tus paisajes*, *Bamboleo*, *Azúcar Negra*, among others, were some of the songs her audiences most requested. Beto confessed that it was truly a blessing to have heard some of these songs when he as a child and then suddenly get to play them with some of the best loved salsa stars—like Celia Cruz. Beto believes that Pedro Knight was sort of like Celia's alter ego, particularly since it was he who deftly directed the band to signal the introduction, a *montuno*, *mambo* and *moña*, and then, when the moment for Celia's cue came, would touch the little tuft of white hair on his forehead in the same way a base coach might signal one of his ball players to make a particular move.

Her shows were always sold out (a minimum of 5000 seats). Beto recalls a memorable performance that took place in a Roman-style



Photo Courtesy of Moisés Porro

amphitheater, in Murcia. When Celia sang *Bemba Colorá* and improvised a new lyric that said: “*zapato que yo tiro no me lo vuelvo a poner*” [if I’ve thrown the shoe I won’t wear it again] (her hobby for collecting shoes, outfits and wigs was legendary), the public’s response was delirious. Such was its excitement that everyone started taking off his or her shoes and placing them on the edge of the stage, which illustrates just how close her connection with her audience could be.

She was able to keep up her tours throughout Spain, and her contact with Cuban musicians such as bass player Alain Pérez and pianist Pepe Rivero, who were living there, almost until the cruel illness that ultimately took her manifested itself. These activities produced recordings like *Dios Bendiga a la Reina*, one of her last albums. Notwithstanding, the profound impact she had on her Spanish fans, who remember her with fondness and associate her

with Cuba thanks to her personality and her *ASÚCAAAA*, is permanent.

Perhaps the saddest thing about Celia Cruz is not her passing but rather the fact she was never able to fulfill one of her greatest desires: to come face to face with her Cuban people back on the Island and sing for them in Havana’s Parque Central. The day that multitudinous concert actually takes place, Celia will be among those of us there who celebrate the coming of a new era for Cuba, all of us shouting: *ASÚCAAAA!!!*

This article was translated by Clara Reyes, Kristan Hoffman, Rebekkah Belferman and Marina Fedner, students in Professor Kenya C. Dworkin y Méndez’s advanced Spanish-English translation class at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA.