

Omara Portuondo

A Short Biography of a Long Career

Omara Portuondo is the grand dame of classic Cuban song. Even in her 90s — her seventh decade of performing — she remains a beloved chanteuse and celebrated entertainer. In her final performances before retirement, Portuondo will share a retrospective of her life in music, simply called “Vida.”

Critics and fans alike have marveled at the quality and purity of Portuondo’s prodigious voice. Her versatility has allowed her to move from one style to another with complete mastery throughout her career — from jazz to Nueva Trova, Cuban traditional music to son, danzón, boleros, and more.

Outside of her native Cuba, Portuondo is most recognized for her work with *Buena Vista Social Club*. As the story goes: American guitarist Ry Cooder and World Circuit Records producer Nick Gold visited Havana with for what they called “the Buena Vista sessions” in 1996. Portuondo happened to be working and recording in the same studios and bandleader Juan de Marcos González invited her to sing. She chose the anthem “Veinte Años,” duetting with Trova guitarist Compay Segundo, which became the centerpiece of the album. *Buena Vista Social Club* went on to sell more than 8 million copies and win the 1998 Grammy Award for Best Traditional Tropical Album and Tropical / Salsa Album of the Year; the accompanying film won the Best Documentary Feature at the Academy Awards two years later.

But even before this, Portuondo’s star was secure in the Caribbean and throughout the Spanish-speaking world. Between the 1950s-’90s, she co-founded the D’Aida Quartet, became a notable interpreter of the Great American Songbook, and released nearly a dozen records. Despite the racism, misogyny, revolution, and socio-economic and political controversies in Cuba during those decades, Portuondo used her voice as a driving force to celebrate Afro-Cuban music on the island and spread joy and community around the world.

In the 21st century, Portuondo began to receive the global recognition commensurate with a career of her stature. She was been awarded prizes, medals, honorary degrees, and more from around the world, including the laureate of the Order of Félix Varela (the highest decoration in Cuban culture), the Official Medal of Arts from the French Embassy, and the Order of the Rising Sun from the Japanese Emperor, not to mention a music-specific Latin Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award for her contributions to Latin American and world music.

Throughout her storied life and career, Portuondo has used music to connect with fans in profound and unexpected ways, transcending borders while honoring the soul of her beloved Cuba. To this day, Portuondo is still referred to as “The Cubanísima Omara Portuondo”, or “The Diva of Buena Vista.” She is a genuine symbol of her country’s deep and enduring culture.