Celia Cruz: Legendary Lady of Latin Music
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Celia Cruz

By Derek Rath

The Mambo Queen. The Iron Lady of Salsa. The First Lady of Cuban Music. Chances are, if you're not a fan of salsa or Cuban music, you may not have heard of Celia Cruz. If you are a Latin music aficionado you know her name ranks with Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin or any of the great jazz, pop and soul vocalists of this century that you may happen to be familiar with regardless of cultural backgrounds. The name of Celia Cruz is writ large in giant slabs of gold across the Pantheon of Latin Music, for she is truly the indisputable Queen of Salsa, who has ruled through her music's fads and fortunes for over 40 years—and shows no sign of slowing down. She is singing as vibrantly as ever and, equally, her story is synonymous with that of Cuban music in general. Like a historic montuno, it weaves an unforgettable voice and personality together in rhythm with all the great salsa giants of the last four decades.

It is common for a legend to have vague or imprecise beginnings, often to hide an embarrassing inconsistency with the subsequent public image or a libelous potential behind it. Holding court (and dressed to kill) at the downtown Los Angeles Bonaventure Hotel with all the grace, wit and authority of true royalty, Celia dominates the room with an affirmative life force full of passion, compassion and laughter. She is keen to cut to the chase and dispel any falsehoods about her own meteoric start with Sonora Matancera in 1950. Those early records, like faded images in a treasured archive, point the way clearly to what was to come. Those youthful pipes, lighter and less formidable than they are now, already had the exuberance and authority that was to become her trademark, along with her irrepressible *joie de vivre.* "I first worked with Sonora Matancera in 1950. It was like a dream," Celia reminisces. "Actually, it *was* a dream before because I really had dreamed I was working with them, and then it became a reality."

This reversal of fantasy is just about the only reality that the Legend-that-is-Celia-Cruz reportage is accurate about on her beginnings. Myths abound: *Born into a large family, she was the youngest of 14 children....*

"Wrong!" she laughs, "There were only four. Somewhere they added another 10."

Growing up in Barrio Santra Suarez near Havana, Celia was always singing around the house. Her mother recognized the young girl's gift, and, as the story goes, *she earned her first pair of shoes singing for a tourist who bought them for her.....*

"Ah! I'm glad you brought that up!" Her eyes light up like fire. "According to my mother, one of our relatives was visiting our house and she asked us to present ourselves to him. I was a little girl, and I sang a song to him, and he had a pair of shoes for me. But this was in our house—I was not singing for tourists. This has always bothered me because it was a misinterpretation, and it always comes up in interviews and I would like to clarify this once and for all. It bothers me because it sounds like I was outside singing for money, and it's not true."

Even with these minor clarifications, her early life will probably retain its romantic mystique if only because Cuba (and its music) was so different in her youth. In pre-Castro days it was a free and wide-open country, with good trade relations with America and plenty of night life and music, and it was inevitable that Celia would be swept up in its fascinating currents. Unbeknownst to her it was a tide that would carry her to some very distant shores indeed.

Cuban music carries within its complex rhythms the DNA of one of the greatest cultural melting pots on the planet. Once homogeneous with the rest of the Antilles, Cuba's peace was shattered forever when Columbus and his party of nautical Spaniards landed there in 1492, thinking he had found China. This began centuries of Spanish colonization that only ended in 1898. The native Arawak Indians were quickly enslaved, and, after they were used up, the Spanish imported slaves from Africa, and in doing so set a fiery balance to the population as a whole. The resultant music hybrids came thick

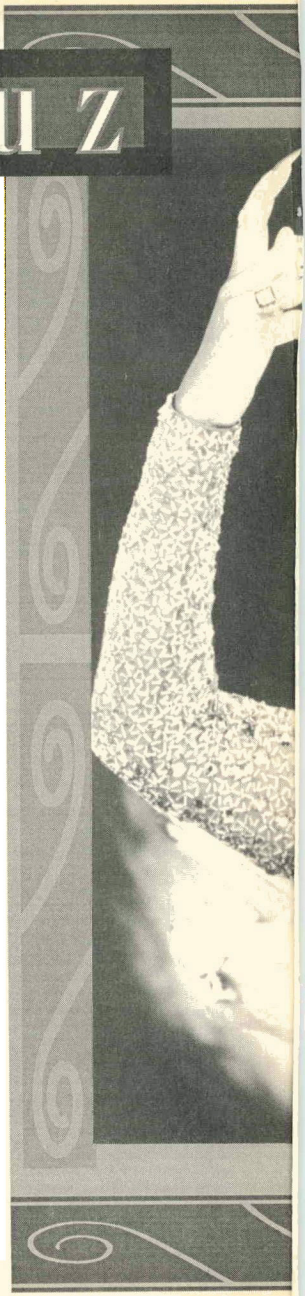

PHOTO BY RICARDO BETANCOURT

Legendary Lady of Latin Music

and fast, and by the turn of the 20th century they had set firm roots. The first recordings by a *sexteto de son* were made in 1918 by the Sexteto Habanero Godinez; by the mid-'20s and the advent of electric recording there was a thriving Cuban recording scene, a heritage that later was not lost on the youthful Celia Cruz. Her father had aspiration for her as a teacher, but Celia's mind was elsewhere. By 1947 she was studying at Cuba's Conservatory of Music.

Up until the '40s the music in Cuba reflected its European heritage in formal structure, its African heritage with drums and rhythm. Early groups like Sexteto National sang of patriotic concerns, other like Sexteto Machin were more audacious lyrically and Isaac Oviedo's Sexteto Matancero was romantic in nature, but even in the '20s the sound of Africa and its deities was loud and clear in the recordings of bands such as the Sexteto Munamar. It is this influence that Celia picked up on the most, especially as by the '40s it had been heavily reinforced by jazz from the States. Cuban bandleaders such as Machito and Mario Bauza had made the journey to New York and were playing alongside jazz giants like Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. The term "Afro-Cuban" had already been coined, echoing the heavily Yoruba-influenced music evolving in Cuba, along with various faiths and practices such as *santería*.

"Yes, Afro-Cuban was the music I was doing then. The music that came down from the slaves that were in Cuba. Within this movement we had many rhythms; we had *dansa*, the *bolero*, the *son*, son montuno and many others. Later Perez Prado would come with the mambo and after that came cha cha cha and salsa; Cuban music has always had these rhythms, only the name changes."

"I did not have much teaching in singing. I went to one instructor and he asked me if I intended to pursue music in my life. When I told him yes he said that I didn't need him to educate my voice because I already had the authentic flavor of Cuban music. Everything I do comes naturally. I know many singers who have studied singing and had training and they tell me that it sounds like I know instinctively all the things they have to be taught."

"My first influence was a singer called Paulina Alvarez, who was the first singer I saw in front of an orchestra doing what I was to do with Sonora Matancera. Even though her voice was quite different I always dreamt of doing what she did for myself."

"In the early days the African side of music was not very popular, even in Cuba. It was often songs of protest and mistreatment, the pain of the slave. I found myself often singing sad songs to the people, and it wasn't very commercial. That's why I changed to the *guaracha*, it was a happier music. "

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Her dreams became reality when the lead singer with Sonora Matancera, one of the most popular outfits, suddenly left the band and she was hired as replacement. Still learning her craft, Celia quickly established herself as a propulsive vocalist and stage presence, staying with them for 15 years and recording some of their greatest hits, starting with "Caocao Mani Picao" and "Mata Siguaraya" in January 1951. She traveled with them during this golden period throughout Latin America and the band became known affectionately as "Cafe Con Leche."

During the '50s Latin music was taking a hold on mainstream America. Tito Puente's career was also taking off at this time, and the nation's tv viewers lapped up the music of Desi Arnaz performing as Ricky Ricardo on "I Love Lucy." While not exactly hardcore Cubano, he did open many doors that would have otherwise remained shut. Simultaneously, the great era of mambo emanating from the Palladium in New York was in full swing, led by Perez Prado, Tito Rodriguez, Tito Puente, Benny More, Mongo Santamaria, Cachao, and even for genteel high society, Xavier Cugat. These and many others stars became household names—and not just in Latin music circles but worldwide. Some still regard this as Cuban music's finest hour, and certainly for the immensely popular Celia Cruz it seemed that things could not get better than they were in the '50s.

In her long career, Celia Cruz has worked with most of Latin music's leading artists. Above, her classic 1974 collaboration with Johnny Pacheco. At right, with Oscar D'Leon, on a 1977 recording; and displaying a gold record on another album cover.

However, there were storm clouds on the political scene that were soon to have dire consequences. Cuba was prosperous but corrupt. Trade with the superpower U.S., just 90 miles away, had flourished even before Cuba provided a watering hole and gambling haven for Americans parched by prohibition in the '20s. Under the dictator Batista the rich got richer and the poorer got poorer until inevitably Fidel Castro, a Communist idealist lawyer, took power "for the people." It took a year for the U.S. to realize he was Communist and then all hell broke loose. Cuba was essentially shut down to the U.S., and Cuban musicians saw the empire they had built crumble to its roots.

In January 1960 Celia and Sonora Matancera were touring in Mexico, watching developments at home with trepidation. They knew the value of freedom of movement, and when U.S./Cuban diplomatic relations were broken off the writing was on the wall.

"I left Cuba with Sonora Matancera in 1960. At the time it was not a conscious decision that I was leaving for good. I was in Mexico from July until November, working and recording an album. We realized that we could not go back to Cuba. It was very sad; it still makes me very sad to think about it." An uncharacteristic pensiveness overcomes Celia. There is a moment's silence. "I don't really want to talk about it," she says quietly, and concludes the subject.

Becoming a permanent U.S. citizen she got a contract to perform at the Hollywood Palladium. "There was a problem with my papers. It was Nov. 20th, which was a national holiday in Mexico, so I got there on the 21st to tell them why I couldn't get there. I left for New York the next day."

During this period she met and married trumpeter Pedro Knight, who dropped his own career to manage his wife's.

"I got a lot of work at the Palladium in New York, and many other clubs besides, but the Palladium was the tops. That was where the mambo started, and where the film *The Mambo Kings* was centered. I didn't take part in any *descargas* (jam sessions) because that was a musician's thing, there was not much singing. But later I was to sing with many people. Especially, I sang with Tito Puente and in 1966 he formed a band for me and we joined up together. We did albums with Tico Records. It was great working with him, in fact I still do. The majority of tours I do, especially in Europe, I do with him. Often we split the show in two, with a jazz section and than we do some of my songs. I love working with Tito Puente."

They did eight records together but even though the musicianship was impeccable sales were less than expected. When Fania bought the catalog Celia joined the sister label Vaya. The golden age of salsa was to center on these labels at this time, with the music tightened up, more electric—even funky. A new cross-pollination was occurring, notably in New York and Miami. Music continued in Cuba of course, but Havana was increasingly out of the loop internationally and the focus shifted to the the urban ghettos of the north.

"I never sang with so many other singers—and some of them were my admirers! When I joined Fania they welcomed me like family, and they were like a family to me. It was a very exciting period I also did a series of duets called "Perfect Combinations" for producer Ralph Mercado with artist like Oscar D'Leon, Cheo Feliciano, Hector Rodriguez and many others. It really was all the same school as the Fania and Tico and Allegre labels."

By the early '70s there was a new, younger audience for salsa and Celia found herself center stage in a new wave of enthusiasm for Latin music. Working with with Fania vice-President Johnny Pacheco she made the classic album *Celia and Johnny* that promptly went gold. She sang with the Fania All-Stars, a most aptly named band that had initially started as a descarga at the Red Garter and then became the backbone of the Fania roster. It redefined the sound of Latin music, featuring an amazing roster

of salsa luminaries including Celia, Bobby Cruz, Ricardo Ray, Ismael Quintana, Johnny Pacheco, Larry Harlow, Hector Lavoe, Ray Barretto, Cheo Feliciano, Yomo Toro, Mongo Santamaria, Willie Colon and many others, all of whom were making major contributions to Latin music in their own right.

"The first engagement I did with the Fania All-Stars was the MIDEM convention in Cannes. Our music was so powerful and we were the most successful band that night, and I do believe that it helped us push through to a wider audience, especially in Europe."

The pop culture, up till then only familiar with Latin music through Carlos Santana and a more rock approach, was starting to take heed of the real thing. Island Records put out a Fania All-Stars album recorded live at Yankee Stadium in New York and Coliseo Roberto Clemente in San Juan, Puerto Rico, that featured Santana and others as guest artists. Celia's nearly 12-minute version of "Bemba Colora" with thousands of rabid fans joining the chorus at the end, is one of the most impassioned and electrifying live recordings ever made.

However, the movement was to stall. It seemed that, especially in America, there were barriers against a true breakthrough onto the popular charts. "I think it is mostly a question of language."Celia reasons, "People like the rhythms, but radio in America doesn't promote salsa much because it isn't in English. It is strange because in Latin American countries and elsewhere in the world American music is played a lot alongside that country's music. In Europe, in France or Germany or Holland people talk to you in four or five languages. Here it is only English; it should be our goal for everyone to learn at least two languages. It would help people learn a lot more in general. Even in England, where I wanted to practice some real English, I had many people come and talk to me in Spanish." She laughs, "Everyone in the restaurant was from Spain!"

Celia continued a heavy work schedule throughout the '70s and '80s, including return trips to Africa, the home of many of the ingredients of Cuban music. Latin rhythms, reintroduced to Africa, had ignited musicians, notably in Senegal, Kenya and Zaire where the rumba helped evolve new styles such as soukous. "It was beautiful in Africa. When I went to Zaire after doing the album with Johnny Pacheco, Cuban music was everywhere. On the radio, in the street. They all knew me. Even when I was at Cannes a lot of Africans had come up to me to say hello. There didn't seem to be any language problem there!"

The interest in fusing African and Cuban music in new forms, such as Africando has done, would seem to lend itself naturally to Celia dueting with someone like Youssou N'Dour or Baaba Maal, but Celia has a slightly different take on it.

"I already have done some things like that. I did some at a church near Florence. I must say that in Africa the music was sounding very electric, very American. I had envisualized a lot more drums and drumming, but it wasn't like that. I have listened to a lot of African music in New York, though. One thing I would like to do would be an album with Babatunde Olatunji."

Recent years have seen new highs: a role in the immensely popular film *The Mambo Kings* that has sparked renewed interest in the whole of Latin and Cuban music, honorary doctorate degrees from Yale, a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and a special appearance with Tito Puente on the Grammy awards show. She has performed in front of 240,000 people in Spain ("More than the Pope"!). It has been quite a trip since her beginnings in Havana.

And what of Cuba? Will the awakening detente change the music of Cuba? Will she want to go back after so many years?

"I hope so. I hope things will get better there because it has really deteriorated. People need an opening and to be able to leave when they want to and not stay away because they have to. Freedom is the word."

"I don't think that the music will change that much. Cuba listens to a lot of different music anyway. My family tells me that they were watching a Brazilian show there recently on television, even Brazilian soap operas. Brazilian music is similar to Cuban music, we share some of the same heritages. Cubans like American music as well. I don't think things would change too much in that respect.

"What I would really like is to be able to return and visit my mother's grave."

With all the fame and accolades, she has no desires for the luxurious trappings of success. For her the greatest reward is being able to do what she does and in the process give a far greater gift to others: "Happiness . . . my music is about being happy. I have always thought that whenever someone comes to see Celia Cruz onstage they can leave their worries and their troubles behind and forget them for a moment. Everyone has their own troubles, but what I would like to do is give happiness and peace.

"When I sing I put everything I have inside me into it, a lot of love. Music is the only gift I have that was given to me by God. Unless he takes it away I will continue to share my gift with everyone. It is what gives me pleasure. It is what brings me happiness, And that is my purpose in life. In a sense I have fulfilled my father's wish to be a teacher, as through my music I teach generations of people about my culture and the happiness that can be found in just living life. As a performer, I want people to feel their hearts sing and their spirits soar."

Celia Cruz's latest album on RMM Records is titled Irrepetible.

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