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Review: Omara Portuondo dazzles in S.F. Jazz Festival's opening night

By Jim Harrington Oakland Tribune Posted: 10/21/2009 10:01:57 AM PDT Updated: 10/21/2009 11:26:12 AM PDT

Gracias, Omara.

What a wonderful way to kick off the 27th annual San Francisco Jazz Festival — a night with Omara Portuondo, the first lady of Cuban Jazz, at the intimate Palace of Fine Arts Theatre.

And to think Tuesday's concert nearly didn't happen.

The 78-year-old Havana native was only recently granted a visa to visit this country, allowing her to perform her first shows stateside since 2003. That meant she was a late addition to the festival lineup, which partially accounts for the somewhat small turnout (only 900 in the audience).

The other attendance factor, no doubt, is that Cuban jazz is no longer the hot musical trend. It's been nearly 10 years since the release of Wim Wenders'

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Oscar-nominated documentary "Buena Vista Social Club," which introduced much of the world to the talents and hard lives of Cuban musicians, and which starred Portuondo among its terrific musical cast. Since then, many of the film's original fans have moved on.

That's their loss. Portuondo's most recent solo set, "Gracias," was one of last year's best records, and her 100-minute set in San Francisco showed that she's

an even bigger talent on stage.

Portuondo's looked regal as she took the stage, dressed in a lovely light-colored dress with her hair meticulously styled atop her head, and she moved with undeniable grace. She seemed unapproachable at first, like someone you'd bow to instead of hug, but then she allowed the band's

groove to take over. At that point, she became a cheerleader, coaxing the crowd to dance and constantly leading clap-alongs to the music.

She sang and spoke in Spanish, but it didn't matter if you don't speak the language; Portuondo conveys emotion and sentiment with her warm contralto as well as anyone in the business.

Backed by a formidable quintet, consisting of guitarist Swami Jr., pianist Harold Lopez Nussa, drummer Rodney Barreto, percussionist Andres Coayo and bassist Rodney Barreto, the vocalist opened the show with a fun run through the title track from "Gracias." She stuck to the new album for the next two numbers, the lovely Latin ballad "Yo Vi" and the diverse pleasure that is "Adios Felicidad," which, respectively, served as showcases for the pianist and bassist.

In some instances, she sang off lyric sheets — not an ideal method for Portuondo. She's at her best when she's able to walk about the stage, swaying her hips to the rhythm and working the crowd. She can be extremely engaging in so many different ways, from simple eye

It's impossible to say whether she handles the fast or slow numbers better. Whatever kind of song she's singing at the time is the one that best suits her. She charmed with the lullaby "Drume Negra," an old song that Portuondo said her mother use to sing to her as a young child, and then wowed with the driving "O Que Sera." She melted hearts while accompanied solely by fingerpicked acoustic guitar on "Dos Gardenias" and then got the band back together for the raucous closer "La Siftera."

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CONCERT REVIEW

- WHO: Omara Portuondo, opening the San Francisco Jazz Festival
NEXT SHOW: Omar Sosa Quartet and John Santos Sextet, 7:30 tonight at Herbst Theatre, S.F.
THE FESTIVAL: Concerts run through Nov. 21 at various S.F. venues. For full scheduled and to buy tickets, contact 866-920-5299 or www.sfjazz.org.

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