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World Music CDs Andrew Vine

Ruben Gonzalez: Chanchullo (World Circuit WCD 060).

This new record from the octogenarian Cuban piano wizard is a sheer delight. It's warm, witty, heartfelt, intensely rhythmic and a lot of fun.

It finds Gonzalez surrounded by a crack Cuban band working his magic on 11 tunes in traditional dance forms. The old boy is simply amazing, and gets better with each passing year. His debut album four years ago was astonishing, but *Chanchullo* is even better.

Gonzalez sounds more assertive and more confident than ever. His playing is filled with breathtaking runs, rippling rhythmic figures and that indefinable sense of a player in love with his music. The band responds in kind and packs a real punch. If you haven't made the acquaintance of Ruben Gonzalez yet, you're missing a treat.

★★★★★

Omara Portuondo: Omara Portuondo (World Circuit WCD 059).

Close your eyes while listening to Miss Portuondo's stately readings of Cuban torch songs, and the mellow big-band-with-strings backings, and you might just visualise the sort of tropical nightclub scene of which 1940s' film noir was so fond.

That's the sort of gloriously retro mood that this latest entry from the World Circuit stable of recordings by Cuban veterans



evokes. Portuondo is a seasoned song stylist, and while time has taken its toll on the flexibility of her voice, she remains a canny performer well able to tug the heart-strings.

The tempos are easy-going, the arrangements refreshingly direct, and the mood unashamedly romantic. Portuondo's regal delivery makes the best of the boleros and mambos, with their

lyrics of lost love. It's a warm-hearted album that repays repeated listening.

★★★★★

Cheikh N'Digel Lo: Bambay Gueej (World Circuit WCD 0057).

West African singer Cheikh is a compelling guy to listen to. He can be plaintive or assertive, but his voice is always driven by passion and a fervent religious faith.

This session finds him in the company of former James Brown saxophonist Pee Wee Ellis leading a driving horn section, that, along with a Hammond organ, adds an overlay of funk to a blend of rhythmic influences from Senegal, Zaire, Nigeria and Cuba.

The result is an intoxicating brew that is unlike almost anything else to be found on record. It's intensely powerful music, sometimes hypnotic, often moving and always unpredictable. Well worth a listen.

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