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# Omara Portuondo adds star power to the Cubans' showmanship

**World music**  
**Orquesta Buena Vista Social Club**  
**Barcelona**

★★★★☆



Recklessly passionate: Omara Portuondo

Not far from La Rambla, one of the main cinemas in Barcelona was screening *Chico & Rita*, that slightly wooden tale of Cuban musical life. Across town, at L'Auditori, the genuine article was playing to another full house. Fifteen years after the Buena Vista phenomenon first took flight, the latest incarnation of the Havana showband, which begins a British tour tonight, is in rude health.

Time has taken its toll, of course. Ruben González, Ibrahim Ferrer and Compay Segundo are no longer with us, while the veteran guitarist Manuel Galban had to drop out of the line-up at short notice because of health concerns. However, the good news is that the peerless singer Omara Portuondo — now aged 80 — could still summon up the energy to make a brief but pungent guest appearance.

She has not been content to tread water these past few years. An atmospheric studio collaboration with the Brazilian legend Maria Bethânia received only patchy distribution in Britain, but is well worth tracking down, and *Omara and Chucho*, a fine collection of duets with the Cuban jazz pianist Chucho Valdés arrives here shortly.

Portuondo looked frail in this show; she spent some of the time resting on Rolando Luna's piano stool. But her opening rendition of one of her old favourites, *No Me Llores Más*, was almost recklessly passionate. Nor was there any lack of emotion during *Veinte Años*, the ballad that has become her private property. On another standard, *Quizás, Quizás*, she was joined by Kalil Wilson, a versatile, classically trained American jazz/R&B singer whose voice had a hint of Johnny Hartman.

During the rest of the evening the youthful *sonero* Carlos Calunga handled the vocal duties with brisk efficiency, assisted by Idania Valdés. In a vivacious duet with bassist Pedro Pablo, Luna enjoyed his moment in the spotlight, shifting the centre of gravity towards Rio as he toyed with the melody of *Samba de Verão*.

As ever, the charismatic musical director and trombonist Jesús "Aguaje" Ramos added neat footwork of his own elsewhere, although *tres* guitarist Papi Oviedo — usually a sterling showman in his own right — kept a low profile. If the percussion and brass sections occasionally emitted a few creaking noises, the opening bars of *Chan Chan* had their usual electrifying effect on the audience.

**Clive Davis**  
Corn Exchange, Cambridge, tonight;  
British tour dates: [worldcircuit.co.uk](http://worldcircuit.co.uk)