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Once more with 'the girlfriend of feeling'

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They're in bed together on the cover of their latest collaboration, Omara & Chucho, but Chucho Valdes, the brilliant Cuban musician once rated in the top five jazz pianists in the world, had designs on such an outcome more than 50 years before Omara Portuondo relented – and he wasn't thinking about publicity shots.

Now a world-renowned singing star, Portuondo was a chorus girl in Havana at the time and Valdes was a teenage protégé who was already leading his own jazz trio. He'd gone along with his father to see the show Portuondo was starring in and having taken a shine to her, he decided to go back, this time armed with a bunch of roses and an invitation to dinner.

The flowers were accepted but the dinner invitation was turned down, although Portuondo's laughing rejection – she was ten years older than her suitor and secretly already spoken for – didn't prevent the pair becoming friends.

"Actually, we'd already done some concerts together by then, so I knew that he was a musician, and a very good one at that," says Portuondo. "We went on to work together again often over the years and I always liked to listen to his new recordings. So just like when we recorded our previous album, *Desafios*, in 1997, I knew that there would be a very important dimension – risk – involved and that I could trust Chucho to take risks with me and that they would work to our advantage."

Portuondo knows all about taking risks. The daughter of a well-to-do family with a mother of Spanish descent, she risked giving up everything to marry a handsome black member of the Cuban national baseball team. She kept this a secret because, at the time, mixed marriages were frowned upon in Cuba.

Growing up in the 1930s, she'd had an early introduction to music. Despite the family's relative prosperity, there was no radio or gramophone in the house. So her parents sang to Omara and her siblings and some of the songs they sang have stayed with her as she's progressed from chorus girl to singing with Nat King Cole at the Tropicana in Havana during the 1950s, touring the world as a cultural representative with one of Cuba's most important orchestras, l'Orchestra Aragón and on to her iconic status as the female voice of the phenomenally successful Buena Vista Social Club.

Before all that, however, Portuondo was a dancer and she was a dance teacher at l'Escuela de Instructores de Arte in Havana for a period. Her sister Haydee was a member of the Tropicana cabaret dance troupe and two days before the opening night of a big new show in 1945, one of the dancers dropped out. Omara had watched Haydee rehearsing and knew the steps by heart. So she was offered the job.

"It was a very classy cabaret," she says, "but I was a shy girl and I was embarrassed at showing my legs."

Her mother talked her out of her embarrassment, convincing her that this was too good an opportunity to miss, and a career that continued into the 1960s, when she had a dancing partnership with Rolando Espinosa that became legendary in Cuba, had begun.

As well as being a good dancer, Sister Haydee, like Omara, sang well and in the early 1950s, after appearing in a group called Los Loquibambala, during whose radio debut Omara was introduced as "Miss Omara Brown, the girlfriend of feeling" (reflecting the blue notes brought to the music by jazz influences), they teamed up with two other young women in a quartet directed by pianist Aida Diestro. Omara remained known in Cuba as "the girlfriend of feeling" as Quarteto Las d'Aida took America by storm, a spell of success that was brought to an end by the Cuban Missile Crisis, which led to a long period of cultural isolation.



By this time Omara had released her first album under her own name, *Magia Negra*, and in 1967 she decided to concentrate all her energies on singing. "So many singers had left the island that there was a gap that needed filling," she says, and with Cuban culture taking on a new lease of life with through the appearance of different schools of art and music producing great numbers of musicians, she had a ready supply of first rate accompanists. One of these, when time allowed, was the young man with the bunch of roses.

Valdes had progressed from his teenage jazz trio to leading a band that presented a new form of Cuban music during the 1960s. He was busy, hence the irregularity of his musical meetings with Portuondo, and when he further developed the new Cuban style with *Irakere*, which is credited with being the most important group in Cuban musical history, he was busier still. Valdes was ranked alongside Bill Evans, Oscar Peterson, Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea in terms of jazz piano talent.

When Valdes and Portuondo finally found time to record an album together in 1997, the singer had just contributed a popular old-time bolero, *Veinte Anos*, to an album featuring a group of Havana's veteran musicians. She wasn't to know that this album, *Buena Vista Social Club*, was about to make world stars of them all. "It's been a very important project, a way of being in touch with our roots, and showing the world our traditional music," she says of the phenomenon that gave this already successful artist a massive late career fillip. "Personally, it has been very important and motivating. Since the album and the film's release, we haven't stopped touring and recording."

Which is why it took another 14 years for *Desafios*'s successor to appear. When Valdes accompanied Portuondo on the track *Nuestro Gran Amor* from her most recent solo album, *Gracias*, two years ago, they both realised how much of a thrill they got from working together and determined that they should work an album of duets into their schedules.

The result, *Omara & Chucho*, is a sublime collection, with Wynton Marsalis managing to guest on trumpet on one track without intruding on the intimate mood. Emotionally bare, at times it sounds like singer and pianist are performing the musical equivalent of a high-wire act with no net.

"The element of risk adds an important dimension whether you're recording or playing live," she says. "But Chucho is such an excellent piano player, and a connoisseur of all styles, which is why we have a little Beethoven and Rachmaninov in there – because the legacy of classical music is also the legacy of Chucho. As a singer, it's a pleasure to work with such a knowledgeable pianist, to move from a danzon cha to a tango to a piece based on traditional Cuban rhythms. It's really easy to

work with him because he truly understands music. That's why I'm looking forward to the live shows we're going to do later in the year. I'm so excited - I feel like a kid with a new present."

Omara & Chucho is released on World Village Records this Monday

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