

## Biography

### Omara Portuondo

**Omara Portuondo** is the grand dame of classic Cuban song. At her 92 years young, Omara is in top vocal form. A true lover of life and song, she remains a beloved chanteuse and celebrated entertainer. Cuba's legendary diva has been a driving force in Afro-Cuban music for over half a century. In the face of racism, misogyny, revolution, and political controversies, Omara has used her music to connect with fans around the world in profound and sometimes unexpected ways, transcending borders while celebrating the soul of her beloved Cuba. In 2019, Omara was awarded a **Latin Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award** for her contributions to Latin American and world music.

Currently, Omara is preparing to tour the world for the last time. The farewell tour, entitled “**VIDA**”, will be a retrospective of her **LIFE** in music.

Throughout the 60s and well into the 90s, Omara performed and recorded mostly in Cuba. In 1996, fate would intervene and lead her to one of the most commercially successful encounters in the international world music scene with **Buena Vista Social Club**. As the story has been told, American guitarist Ry Cooder was in Havana with Nick Gold from World Circuit Records for what they called the Buena Vista sessions. Omara happened to be working and recording in the same studios. Juan de Marcos González invited her to sing and she chose the anthem “**Veinte Años**”. She sang the song as a duo with Compay Segundo. It later became the centerpiece of the album **Buena Vista Social Club** that went on to win the **1998 Grammy Award for Best Traditional Tropical Album and Tropical / Salsa Album of the Year** as well as the **Best Documentary Feature at the 2000 Academy Awards**.

**Buena Vista Social Club** has performed throughout the world and the recording, to date, has sold over 8 million copies. Omara remains its central figure.

In 2000, World Circuit released a solo album entitled **Buena Vista Social Club presents...Omara Portuondo**, the third release in the series and an album that finally put her expressive voice where it belonged: CENTER STAGE. This project was recorded with a dream band that included Buena Vista musicians such as Rubén González, Orlando 'Cachaito' Lopez, Luis Manuel 'Guajiro' Mirabal and Jesús 'Aguaje' Ramos, as well as guests such as Eliades Ochoa, Compay Segundo, Manuel Galban and Ibrahim Ferrer. The album received critical acclaim and led Omara to tour the world in 2000-2001 as well as earning a nomination at the 43rd Annual Grammy Awards in the category of Best Traditional Tropical Music Album.

Omara is known today with monikers such as **The Cubanísima Omara Portuondo**, or **The Diva of Buena Vista**. She is a genuine symbol of her country's deep and enduring culture. She has graced the great stages of the world as one of the principal ambassadors of Cuban music.

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As most epic stories go, there was an auspicious start for Omara Portuondo. Born in Havana on October 29, 1930, Omara was surrounded by a family that loved music, theatre, and art. This fertile environment is where she began her immersion in traditional Cuban music. Her first influences include Ernesto Lecuona, Isolina Carrillo, Arsenio Rodríguez, and many other iconic performers. By the time she was a high school student, she had become proficient in typing, shorthand, and the English language, as well as singing and music. She later studied dance and theatre which helped her immensely in her long and illustrious career in the performing arts.

Omara's professional debut as a singer came at the age of 17 with the **Loquibambia** group, directed by Maestro Frank Emilio Flynn. Soon after, she sang and danced with the famed female group **Anacaonas** and the Orlando de la Rosa Quartet alongside well-known vocalists such as Elena Burque, Adalberto del Río and Roberto Barceló.

Critics and public alike have marveled at the quality and purity of Omara's prodigious voice. Her versatility and ability allowed her to move from one style to another with complete and subtle mastery. From feeling to jazz and nueva trova, Cuban traditional music, son, danzón and bolero...there didn't seem to be anything Omara Portuondo could not sing.

She was a founding member of the **D'Aida Quartet** in 1951 that went on to have much success. Omara established herself as a musical force and became known for her *interpretative quality*. Alongside Elena Burque, Moraima Secada and Hayee Portuondo, they managed to fuse their voices impeccably, achieving great success in Cuba and overseas in what we now describe as "girl groups". The group had considerable success, touring the United States, performing with Nat King Cole at the Tropicana, and recording a 1957 album for RCA Victor.

Omara's associations, awards and accomplishments are numerous spanning 70 years. Some of the highlights include:

In 1959, while still working with the D'Aida, she recorded her first solo album, **Magia Negra** (Black Magic). On this album she mixed Cuban music and jazz and included versions of Harold Arlen's **That Old Black Magic** and **Caravan** by Duke Ellington.

In 2007, while Omara was touring in Brazil, she contacted one of the legends of Brazilian popular music: singer Maria Bethânia. With Bethânia, she recorded in Rio de Janeiro, supported by musicians from both Brazil and Cuba. 2008 began with a tour with Bethânia and continued with the recording of **Gracias**— the album with which the Cuban singer celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of her career. On **Gracias**, Omara sang the themes that had moved her the most and worked with songwriters she admired such as Silvio Rodríguez, Pablo Milanés and Jorge Drexler. The cast also included the great

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Chucho Valdés, the sensational African musician Richard Bona and the Brazilian maestro Chico Buarque.

The album's release was followed by an extensive world tour including Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. Six years later, Portuondo travelled to the US to perform in San Francisco and in Los Angeles. In 2009, the album **Gracias** was awarded the **2009 Latin Grammy for Best Contemporary Tropical Album**. It was also nominated in the category of **Best Tropical Album**. Grammy night was a very special night for not only was Omara present at the ceremony, but she also made history as the first Cuban-based artist to present an award on a grammy stage.

Her extensive discography continued in 2011 with the release of the album: **Omara & Chucho** and later, **Reír y Cantar** which is an album of children's songs. Reir y Cantar was **nominated for the Latin GRAMMY Award** in the category of **Best Children's Album**.

In 2014, she was part of an extensive 2-year tour of the Buena Vista Social Club Farewell Project—a tour that covered almost every continent. That same year, she also released a reissue of her first album, **Magia Negra**, and was honored by the Cartagena City Council. Spain with the prestigious **La Mar de Músicas Lifetime Achievement Award**.

In 2015, the album **Lost and Found** was released. It was a recovery of lost tapes and alternate cuts performed by the main artists of the project **Buena Vista Social Club** which includes 2 songs by Omara.

In 2016, Omara was again nominated for a **Latin Grammy** for her performances on that album **Canciones del Cri-Cri El Grillito Cantor** in the **Best Latin Music Album for Children Category**.

After 17 years as the central figure of **Buena Vista Social Club**, the legendary association ended at a farewell concert at the Karl Marx Theater in Havana, Cuba on May 16, 2016, which then was followed by an invitation to the White House by **President Obama** to participate in the Closing Ceremony of the **Día de la Hispanidad**. Post farewell, beginning in the summer of 2016, Omara then toured the United States with **Eliades Ochoa**—a founding member of BVSC. She also toured in Europe joining the flamenco singer's **Diego La Cigala** and then the United States with the talented young pianist **Roberto Fonseca** that very same year.

Omara has participated in a plethora of projects, tours, and recordings in the span of her career. Highlights include: tours with **Silvio Rodriguez; Francisco Cespedes; Alain Perez** for her album **Omara Siempre** (2017); tours of **Japan Blue Notes** (2018); US Tour (2018) to Seattle, Portland, Berkeley, Los Angeles New York; 2018 Symphony dates include: **Kennedy Center** conducted by maestro **Arturo O'Farrill** and pianist

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**Roberto Fonseca, Lincoln Center, Medellin, Colombia Philharmonic Hall, NHK Hall, Shibuya Tokyo, Hollywood Bowl** with the **Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra** conducted by maestro **Gustavo Dúdamel**.

2019 was a big year for touring in the United States, Europe, Asia, Mexico, with the show **Yo Soy Cuba** with Roberto Fonseca's quartet and her band. In 2021, in a post pandemic mini tour, Omara gave 5 concerts in Europe closing at **Teatro Greg** in Barcelona. 2022 found Omara in concert in Dubai performing along with Roberto Fonseca and his Band for their 10 years anniversary as well as **Carnegie Hall** with **Natalia Laforcade** and **Oslo Festival** in October of 2022.

Meanwhile, her story was being documented and told by documentary film director, Hugo Perez. The resulting documentary entitled, Omara, is touring film festivals and theatres worldwide and it's its premiere in New York on November 13, 2021

### **DISTINCTIONS AND RECOGNITIONS**

- Awarded the highest decoration in Cuban Culture, laureate of the Félix Varela Order
- Raúl Gómez García, 2000
- For the National Culture, 2011
- August 23 FMC, 1999
- Alejo Carpentier, 1999
- 30th Anniversary of the CTC Ché Guevara, 2010
- For the Collaboration with the City, 1998
- Adolfo Guzmán Distinction, 1998
- Distinctive Service (Machete de Maceo), 1984
- 50th Anniversary CTC, 2011
- 60th anniversary CTC Lázaro Peña, 2013
- Lázaro Peña Medal First Degree, 2015
- UNEAC Music Award, 2010
- Emeritus Member of UNEAC, 1988
- Master Key of the National Hotel of Cuba, 1994
- Teacher of Youth by the Hermanos Saiz Association, 2014
- Illustrious Daughter of Guantánamo, 2015 Shield of the City
- Illustrious Daughter of Holguín Year, 2015 Shield of the City
- Illustrious Daughter of Cienfuegos, 2015 Shield of the City
- Illustrious Daughter of Matanzas and Shield of the City. 2014, 2019
- Illustrious Daughter of the City of Havana, 2015 Shield of the City
- Illustrious Daughter of Camagüey, Shield of the City
- Illustrious Daughter of San Clara, 2018 Shield of the City
- Illustrious Daughter of Santiago de Cuba, 2018

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- Shield of the City of Havana, 2016, 2017
- Title of Doctor Honoris Causa and the Ibero-American Medal Mexico
- Illustrious Guest of Granma, 2015, Illustrious Daughter 2018
- Title of Doctor Honoris Causa of Art at the ISA University 2018
- Shield of the City of Santiago de Cuba and Illustrious Daughter, 2013, 2018
- Prize "Gran Teatro de la Habana" for her Collaboration with the Cuban National Ballet
- Work Heroine of the Republic of Cuba 2020

### **INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITIONS**

- Ambassador of the International Red Cross (Switzerland) 2004
- Certified by APE (Global Project) 2005
- California Senate Recognition for Culture 2005
- Four Lunas Awards of the National Auditorium of Mexico 2004, 2006, 2008 2010, 2018
- Billboard Latin Music Award 2015
- Recognition of the Argentine Parliament for Culture 2016
- Recognition of the National Institute of Culture of Panama 2016
- Charity concert with the Audrey Hepburn Children's Foundation, founded by Unicef. Invited by the director, son, and president of this foundation, Sean Hepburn Ferrer, raising funds for the children of the World in 2004.
- Six Nominations for the Grammy Latino Academy 1998 1999 2001 2002 2004 2005
- Presentation of the Grammy Americano and Latino Disco Buena Vista Social Club 1999.
- Two Latin Grammy Awards 2004, 2009
- Guest of Honor of the city of Cali Colombia 2015
- Recognition for participating in the 2nd International Congress of the 21st Century Women in Mexico City. 2014
- Nominated for a Latin Grammy Award for children's song album twice. 2016
- "La Mar de Música" Festival Award in Cartagena, Spain. 2015
- Official Medal of Arts, awarded by the French Embassy. 2017
- Title "Doctor Honoris Causa", awarded by the National Honoris Causa Faculty in association with the Anthropological University of Guadalajara, Mexico. 2018
- Title "Doctor Honoris Causa", from the University of the Arts (ISA) for her prolific career in favor of Cuban music. 2018
- Nominated for a Latin Grammy Award for her most recent album "Omara Siempre" in the category of Best Traditional Tropical Album. 2018
- Presentation with the La Failde Group in Cuba and Mexico 2018

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- Recording and Presentation of the album Omara Portuondo And Orquesta Failde 2018
- World tour Omara is Cuba with Roberto Fonseca and his group 2019
- Honored by the Japanese Government and the Roseta Emperor of The Golden Wings of the Rising Sun July 2019-10-03
- Honorary Grammy 2019 Latin Grammy / Lifetime Achievement
- Nomination for Latin Grammy Omara Portuondo album Mariposa Best Contemporary Album Fusion Tropical 2020
- Gold Medal of Merit for Spanish Fine Arts Year 2021
- Nomination for Latin Grammy 2021 song Bolero a la Vida with Gabi Moreno