

Cleveland Museum of Art: Omara Portuondo (Nov. 1)

by Kevin McLaughlin



At 93, the great Cuban vocalist Omara Portuondo knows a few things. She knows the value of her own experience, though she defies her age in stamina and enduring vocal ability. By now physically frail, on November 1 in Gartner Auditorium she was led to her high-backed wicker chair where she ensconced herself to offer a distillation of a lifetime of music-making.

Her quartet of skilled players — José Portillo, piano, Ramses Rodriguez, drums, Lino Piquero, bass, and Degenis Bofill, Latin percussion — were mindful of the honor, though none was old enough to hear the

Cuarteto d’Aida from her Tropicana days, or her Batista-era LPs sold to tourists on the Plaza de Armas in Havana. Even the Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon of the 1990s, boosting her fame and leading to a Latin Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, was likely best known to them through YouTube.

The miracle of this night — and maybe of every concert on their “Vida” tour — was Lady Omara and the quartet’s ability to present songs 30 and 40 years old as fresh, and not as relics of the past.

The near-capacity crowd, helplessly in Omara’s thrall, also knew the importance and joy of the moment as they stood, danced, and clapped along. They also had singing duties, as they acceded to the grand lady’s signal to participate, not only in the familiar *Besame Mucho*, *Silencio*, *Oye Mi Ritmo*, and *Quizas, Quizas, Quizas*, but also in songs less well known. If there were silences or unsure moments she would admonish us (in Spanish): “Don’t you know this one?” — and by inference: “What’s wrong with you?” The pressure was on.

Other than brief asides by Omara, all announcing was done by the pianist, Portillo — also in Spanish. If you didn't understand the language, it was your loss. Bofill attempted and then abandoned English translation, but to no harm. Omara was such an elegant and convincing communicator of sad and beautiful love songs that any translating would have distracted, not illuminated.

Cleveland City Council Member Elizabeth Roman appeared onstage after an initial wave of applause to honor Omara with a Resolution of Recognition from the City of Cleveland for her contribution to the arts. But we knew the honor was all ours.

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