

## Omar Sosa Trio at CMA (Sept. 10)

By Kevin McLaughlin



Omar Sosa has a way of turning concerts into ceremonies. Before sitting down to play on Wednesday, September 10 at the Cleveland Museum of Art, he invoked Elegguá, the Afro-Cuban deity of the crossroads, snapping the irukére — a Yoruba horsetail whisk — to clear the space, invite protection, and “open the way.” The gesture set a ritual tone, reminding listeners they were at a spiritual gathering as much as at a musical performance.

Sosa brought his new trio, *Outside the Box*, to Gartner Auditorium for its Cleveland debut. The group includes his longtime collaborator Yosvany Terry on saxophones and young drummer Julian Miltenberger, whom Sosa introduced as “a 25-year-old from Philly — the next generation.”

Terry’s early contributions on soprano saxophone were so compelling that he temporarily shifted the group’s center of gravity. With silken tone and fearless virtuosity, his solos rose like cathedrals — from sedate foundations to giddy heights — spurring ecstatic responses from his colleagues and shouts of approval from the hall.

Miltenberger proved just as persuasive on drums. His hands seemed to think for themselves, sticks creating not only rhythm but distinct voices — melody makers in their own band. It was mesmerizing to behold.

Soon enough Sosa asserted himself as the group’s axis. With fervent intensity and playful invention, he led with both muscle and spirit.

The opening group of pieces — *El Bola*, *D2 de Africa*, and the paired *Light in the Sky / A Love Lost* — showed off the trio’s range. *El Bola*, familiar from Sosa’s 2017 duet album *Manos*, became a conversation for three, its theme passed around with playful elasticity. *D2 de Africa* (“dedicated to Africa”) evoked the sub-Sahara with Terry’s vocalized folk riff and corresponding sax solo that built toward Coltrane-like ecstasy. Sosa, apparently

overcome, answered at the climax with spasmodic knuckle tremolos up high, and Miltenberger, similarly possessed, surged with his drum kit.

In *Light in the Sky*, Terry soared with lofty oscillations before dissolving like a despairing lover in *A Love Lost*. As the music quickened, he traded sax for wrapped gourd, adding spice and shaping a fresh narrative — yet another side of his virtuosity.

A new sequence drew the mood inward — “meditative time,” as Sosa announced it. *My Three Notes*, one of his signatures, turned a spare motif into something infinite, repetitions flowering while sampled voices from his MIDI flickered in the background. *Angustia / Angustiado* followed as the dark heart of the evening, its title (“anguish”) matched by Terry’s cries on alto sax and Sosa’s dissonant clusters.

Relief arrived with *Remember Monk*, an oblique homage that winked at Thelonious while staying inside Sosa’s sound world. Terry bent his notes off-center, Sosa delighted in angular chords, and Miltenberger’s crooked rhythms caught Monk’s spirit without obvious imitation.

As an encore, *Muévete en D* (which means something like “move! in D” in English) sent listeners home in a Cuban groove. Omar Sosa’s heartfelt and timely closing appeal to the audience — that we come together as a people, he said, patting his heart — felt like a benediction: “We have to,” By then, the music had already opened the way.

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com September 16, 2025*

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