

The Record

How to Treat the Queen

by John Radanovich

Every morning, Celia Cruz wakes to the smells of breakfast being brought to her on a tray. For many years, her husband has been responsible for this little luxury. Like all good husbands, he still likes to spoil her a little and romance her as much as possible. After all, she is the Queen of Salsa; somebody's got to do it. Besides, romance is a primary element of Afro-Caribbean dance music, first born in Cuba and now spread throughout the world.

Born in Havana in 1924, Celia Cruz has had a long and impressive career with several ups and downs. None of the downs came from lack of singing ability or the pitfalls of fame but instead were caused by politics and fashion. One of a family of 14, Celia was expected to become a school teacher. But when she won a local radio talent contest, her mother convinced Celia's father that music was his daughter's true calling. He was strict but not foolish; in Cuba, music was as respected as any other professional career.

Cruz first studied piano at the Havana Municipal Conservatory of Music, and soon switched to voice and theory partly because she didn't like the idea of breaking fingernails on piano keys. Now known for flaunting a girlish display of nails and hair, this funny moment foretold her stage persona. But beneath the makeup is one of the greatest singers Cuba has ever produced. And now that her old friend Tito Puente has passed away, she is the most famous face and voice in salsa.

While still in Cuba, Cruz first came to fame with the supergroup La Sonora Matancera. They played all the greatest clubs of the 40s and 50s: Sans Souci, Tropicana, and the mob-owned Montmartre. Her very first 78 sides the Matancera, "Cao Cao Mani Picao" and "Mata Siguaraya" became classics and big hits of the time. The group made many television and movie appearances, and toured widely, including New York in 1957.

When the group defected to the United States in 1960, Castro never forgave them. By then Cruz was a huge star in Latin America, and Castro seemed to resent Cruz most for leaving behind his already oppressive revolution. When her mother died, Cruz was denied a visa to attend the funeral. "What kind of government would do such a thing as that?" her friend and musician Paquito d'Rivera asks. Cruz is not shy about her anger toward the Castro government. No matter what, she says, she will never return as long as Castro holds power. Their loss, our gain.

After the group's defection, La Sonora Matancera never repeated its Cuban success in the States, although one of Cruz' biggest records, Canciones Primiadas de Celia Cruz, was recorded in 1961 on the Seeco/Tropical label. She had entered the US at a time when traditional Latino music was badly promoted and had fallen out of fashion with young Spanish-speaking Americans.

The Record

Through the 60s and 70s, Cruz recorded excellent records with late great Tito Puente on the Tico label, but struggled financially. Her husband, trumpet player for La Sonora Matancera, Pedro Knight, left the group to promote his wife's career (to keep "spoiling" her, as she puts it).

It wasn't until 1973 after Cruz had gone to the infamous Fania record label, the Latino Motown, that her former fame and success—and then some—returned. Fania producers knew they could sell lots of Celia Cruz records to the young Spanish-speaking music buyers in New York and Miami, so they arranged for her to sing the part of Gracia Divina in Hommy. When this barrio version of rock opera Tommy played at Carnegie Hall, Cruz brought the house down. She soon was swept along in a revived interest in Latino music by young Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, and others in the States.

Cruz's star again ascended, and she is more successful every year. There are no other latin jazz singers with even half her vocal abilities. Celia Cruz is a master of nearly all forms of Cuban music; there are perhaps a dozen. Hers is a remarkably flexible contralto, with lots of range and plenty of swinging rhythm: she is skilled at Yoruba religious music, son, mambo, guaracha, ballads. She is also a performer, with kittenish flirts to the boys in the band, and her ultra-feminine nails and blond wigs.

For an introduction to her talents, try 100% Azucar! The Best of Celia Cruz y La Sonora Matancera on Rhino. From her Fania years, there is Celia Cruz: The Fania Legends, and for some of the best salsa dance music ever, try Celia, Johnny and Pete on the Vaya label.

Cruz has had 20-some gold records, a Hollywood star, a statue in the Hollywood wax museum, and a dress in the Smithsonian collection. She has appeared in many feature films, including "The Mambo Kings." Whoopi Goldberg will soon play Cruz in a film about the singer's fascinating life.

Cruz has been playing again backed by Johnny Pacheco's band, and Sunday's show at the NJPAC in Newark is sure to be an unforgettable experience by one of the living masters of salsa. When she comes onstage and yells her trademark Azucar! (Sugar!), you'll forget everything but her voice and the seductive dance music behind her.

Opening for Celia Cruz, La India (born Linda Viera Caballero) is a hot new salsa star who came to the music via a circuitous path. The Puerto Rican-born singer is a former backup singer for hip hop group T.K.A., with a solo dance club hit of her own, "The Lover Who Rocks You." Since changing to latino music, the strikingly pretty La India has recorded with Eddie Palmieri, Tito Puente, Marc Anthony, and Celia Cruz. She calls Celia Cruz one of her greatest influences, and thus her show on Sunday with Cruz is sure to include lots of duets.