

Beyond a Feeling

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There was something special about José Antonio Méndez's voice. His poor *tessitura* or evidently defective tone was of little importance. His accentuated raspiness did not stop him from singing dozens of songs that left an indelible mark on the musical geography of Cuba and much of the world.

He wasn't really a singer, if we accept the most precise definition possible to describe this kind of endeavor, yet when it came time to communicate his musical metaphors and create an awe-inspired atmosphere for those who were listening to him, there was no doubt about his indisputable talent. Using one, single, harmonic design marked by a recurrent use of dissonances and other intruding techniques taken from U.S. jazz, José Antonio Méndez was one of the creators of the musical genre that came to be known as *feeling*. It cropped up in Havana at the end of the 1940s. Some critics prefer to say that said musical movement lacked many of the necessary attributes to call it a true genre, yet it left its mark on the artistic work of that precise moment. The traditional mold of the *bolero* was smashed to make way

for new structures, and mixed the intimate tone of romantic lyrics with aspects of the traditional ballad and influence from U.S. jazz—a genre in which names like Ella Fitzgerald, Sara Vaughan, Glenn Miller, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and Cab Calloway, and a host of others, are royalty.

José Antonio Méndez managed to successfully avoid the limitations of not having had academic training. Jam sessions with friends, learning from the Bohemian lifestyle he was living, and the sublime act of sharing personal and unknown stories, and turning them into songs with a powerful and yet simple way of transmitting feelings, reveal the nature of a musician whose ego was never too big—while he was living—and never showed any sign of being affected by his fame. He was an affable, humble, and not ambitious, except when it came to needing to create a new song with the ability to inspire hope, recall an old, personal story, revive a dying love, or simply sensitize his audience to some issue perhaps lost in the din of everyday life. It was brought back as an unforgettable lesson in a particular song. These

new singer-songwriters did not really see this as a rupture; they were simply searching for new ways to express themselves.

If we take time to analyze the origin of each one of this movement's members, we would see that most of them came from poor neighborhoods. Save an occasional professional in their midst, they were generally humble. It was their desire to expand on a model that sprang from perspicacity, spontaneity, a belief in their *avant-garde* ideas about expanding the horizons of popular music, and an honest impulse to create their own, uninhibited style. They wanted their lyrics to get closer to soulful, pure language, than to the theoretical rigor of academia.

When it started, critics labeled those who began to sing in this particular way as having foreign tendencies, as deforming the aesthetic panorama of contemporary popular musical art on the island. They were seen as transgressors who wanted to depose the *bolero* from its unquestionable position at the top.

José Antonio Méndez went to Mexico in 1949. There he had a long sojourn working at many different radio stations and nightclubs. He also recorded a few records, in which he revealed his revolutionary way of singing a love song. Ten years later, he was back in Cuba. Unlike other *feeling* singers, he made his songs different, with a melody more sober, as well as containing the abrupt harmonic disruptions so characteristic of this ballad tradition. His songs enjoy great popularity in the 1960s and 70s, with help from notable performers like Elena Burke, the Las D'Aida quartet, Pacho Alonso, the Roberto Faz band, Fernando Álvarez, and Pablo Milanés. The lyrics to these songs are interpreted with high quality vocals, extraordinary for their register and timber—as in the case of the young Elena Burke; the Las D'Aida, of one the best female quartets in Cuban history; Pacho Alonso's efficient, inter-



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pretative elegance; and, Pablo Milanés' excellent, contrasting voice, one that is superbly able to construct a complex sense of emotions and feelings.

Some of José Antonio Méndez's best compositions include "Novia mía," "La gloria eres tú," "Si me comprendieras," "Ayer la vi llorar," and "Me faltabas tú." In their simplicity and intuitiveness, the lyrics for each of these songs reveal a colloquial language that manages to evoke a story directly and stylishly, which turns them into exponents of a widely popular, musical rhetoric, even outside of Cuba.

Born in 1927, this icon of romantic music was faithful to his social and artistic origins, right up until his death in 1989, when he was hit by a bus in central Havana. He never lost his sense of modesty, even though he was considered the king of *feeling*. His is the image of a man who never amassed wealth, but did garner applause from a grateful public, after he 'gave' them some of his songs. A simple dresser, he was always attentive to those who recognized him on the streets of Havana. José Antonio Méndez is not a that can or should be lost to oblivion. His musical legacy is indelible.

Even younger singers often defend his work. This man—once baptized *El Ronco de Oro* [Raspy Gold]—distinguished himself among other important interpreters of *feeling*—César Portillo de la Luz, Tania Castellanos, Marta Valdés, and Ángel Díaz.

It is not the case that the songs of any one of these *feeling* creators—emblematic as they were—was more or less intense, original, or

far-reaching. José Antonio Méndez’s stature and talent measured up equally. This double gift ceded him a unique privilege in this constellation of stars, who with a guitar and sometime limited vocal talents, were able to create songs capable of surviving the test of time, and remaining in the hearts and minds of millions both in Cuba and abroad.

Editor’s Note: On July 12th, 2010, exiled Cuban singer Olga Guillot, died of a heart attack, in Miami, Florida. She was known as “La Reina del Bolero” [The Queen of Bolero], and perhaps the most famous singer of “La gloria eres tú,” which she recorded with Machito and his orchestra in 1947.