

María Teresa Vera: An Icon of the Traditional Ballad

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Forty-seven years after her death, the echoes of her voice mingling with chords are still alive in Cuban musical memory. Her artistic merit became a proven fact when she erupted on the ballad troubadour scene in the early twentieth century. Her youth was not an obstacle for the beginning and consolidation of a career that only the ailments of old age slowed down.

While her vocal range was not broad, nor was her guitar technique extraordinary, she managed to dazzle thousands of people with her performances—and not only in Cuba.

Rather than write her own songs, she preferred creating beautiful harmonies to make the most of *boleros*, *habaneras* and *guarachas* penned by others, as happened with *Veinte años*, by Guillermina Aramburu, which Vera made an undeniable success of the traditional ballad genre. Other Aramburu compositions, like *Porque me siento triste* and *No me sabes querer*, also become part of her repertoire.

The success achieved by Vera, who shattered the male monopoly on a genre that emerged spontaneously in eastern Cuba and was quickly accepted in Havana, had to do with the exceptional talent of librettist Nena Núñez, a *mestizo* woman from a neighboring

area of Havana, Los Sitios. She wrote the lyrics for the vast majority of songs that made Vera famous, like *Esta vez tocó perder*, *Yo quiero que tú sepas*, *Es mi venganza*, *El último es el mejor* and *Es mi sentencia*. All these songs set precedents for the era.

María Teresa Vera's musical vocation began to develop when her family moved to Havana from Guanajay, where she was born on February 6, 1895. She received her first guitar lessons from cigar maker José "El Negro" Díaz and troubadours Manuel Corona, Graciano Gómez and Patricio Ballagas. After that, her style began to emerge: it combined sobriety, elegance and feeling, and revealed an indisputable, formal perfection.

Upon hearing any of her numerous recordings on vinyl, tapes or re-mastered CDs, one can still appreciate the melodic freshness still present in our minds.

With her simplicity, María Teresa Vera was able to establish herself as a model of how to transmit feelings. Her recordings have not lost this enchanting quality, even after the passing of so many years of turbulence and forgetfulness.

A brief examination of her work will confirm the uselessness of harmonic satura-



tion as a way to make an impact, or of using high register vocal projections and tonalities too much. With her clear, sharp and intelligently textured voice, Vera became a legend without trying to. Singing was her *raison d'être*.

Her work as a soloist is not the only thing outstanding about her production. She also sang with sextets, quartets, trios, and in a duo with troubadour Lorenzo Hierrezuelo that lasted 27 years. It was to this musical project that she devoted the most time.

While she worked in genres as different as the *bolero*, *habanera* and *guaracha*, it is important to note that she also tried her hand at the *bambuco*, of Colombian origin. It was brought to Cuba by Cuban émigrés during the 1895-98 War, and became quite popular in Cuba in the early twentieth century.

María Teresa Vera is an artist who deserves to be remembered for her musical contributions. Today, they serve to inspire and stimulate the development of new generations of musicians. It would be good to promote

the dissemination of what has been salvaged of her musical legacy. It is not enough that she be acknowledged only for her interpretation of *Veinte años*.

There are still other memorable songs in the archives; they are waiting for someone to create interpretations or versions that honor the role played by a woman who lived and died faithful to her voice, guitar and listeners. That public rewarded her by demonstrating its satisfaction from its seats, seated in front of radios, or before a black and white television screen.

She never studied at a musical conservatory. She did not need to and always somehow knew with mysterious exactitude where to insert the best chords in her creative process. "María Teresa's last, public presentations took place in 1961. When a number of illnesses made it impossible for her to sing, no one lamented it more than she, as she had entirely given herself to Cuban song."¹

She took leave of us on December 17th, 1965. The fruits of her labor persist in the memory of innumerable musicians, intellectuals and common people, all of whom are expecting new tributes to ensure that one of Cuban music's greatest luminaries is not forgotten.

Note:

1- "A Love That Leaves Us," *Extramuros* 3 (June 2000): 18. Interview with María Teresa Vera conducted by writer Sigfried Ariel.