



Celia: The Life and Music of Celia Cruz

Even toward the end, with cancer and with time running out, Celia Cruz did not turn bitter. There was still azúcar in her life.

And before she became ill, instead of opting for retirement with her husband, Pedro Knight, at their home in New Jersey, Cruz continued performing, recording, winning awards and earning new generations of fans.

Úrsula Hilaria Celia Caridad Cruz Alfonso, Celia Cruz or simply Celia, who hailed from the humble Havana neighborhood of Santos Suárez, would become one of Latin music's seminal figures, and probably the most recognized Cuban female singer.

A popular off-Broadway musical, *Celia: The Life and Music of Celia Cruz*, celebrates her 60-year career and, after an extended run in New York — scheduled to end in December, the show's success kept it onstage until last month — starts its international tour Wednesday at Miami's Arsht Center, with shows in Spanish and English.

Two actresses, newcomer Anissa Gathers and Selenis Leyva, who played several roles in the New York staging of *Celia*, star as Cruz in this production by Henry Cárdenas and David Maldonado, the duo responsible for *¿Quién Mato a Hector Lavoe? (Who Killed Hector Lavoe?)*, another highly successful musical based on the life of the deceased Puerto Rican salsa giant.

"Celia Cruz was a super woman, and you need two women to tell her story," Gathers said on a conference call along with colleagues Leyva and Modesto Lacén, who reprises in Miami the role of Cruz's longtime husband, Pedro.

"It is difficult for just one person to cover so much music, 26 songs, and act at the same time," Gathers explained. "So that's why we have two actresses. I do the singing and dancing Celia."

"And I play the private Celia, the woman, the wife," Leyva added.

Gathers, of Dominican and Puerto Rican heritage, was the understudy for Xiomara Laugart in the off-Broadway version.

"Here in New York I was at home, and audiences responded in an incredible manner," Gathers said.

"I am nervous about Miami, but New York's Cuban community embraced the play, so I don't see why that shouldn't happen here," she continued. "It is very difficult to interpret someone else, especially when that person is so well known. The singing and the dancing weren't difficult, but I wanted to do more than just imitate her. I watched a lot of videos of her, studied her music and I am happy with what I have achieved."

Achievements were something at which Cruz excelled, in the most unassuming and unpretentious way. After Myrta Silva left *La Sonora Matancera* to return to her native Puerto Rico, Cruz was invited in 1950



to join the famous Cuban band. It was as its lead singer that she met Knight, the group's trumpet player; they married in 1962. Three years later, she launched her solo career. By then, she and her husband had left Cuba and vowed never to return until the island was free from Castro's rule.

Cruz was part of salsa's heyday, collaborating with genre heavyweights Tito Puente and Johnny Pacheco, and joining the legendary Fania All Stars. Then during the '80s and '90s she began to reinvent herself, participating in movies (The Mambo Kings, The Perez Family), touring the world, appearing on TV and recording.

This decade saw Cruz come back with new hits, such as La Negra Tiene Tumbao (The Black Girl Has Rhythm), eye-popping wigs and costumes and lots and lots of iazúcar! — sugar! — her signature expression.

In 2000, renowned music entrepreneur Emilio Estefan produced a song for Cruz and his wife, Gloria, Tres Gotas de Agua Bendita (Three Drops of Holy Water).

"I am very happy with the idea of this musical," Estefan said via e-mail. "I believe it is an excellent way to keep her legacy alive forever. She will always live in our hearts and, for me, it is an honor to see how her story transcends."

"Celia's case is unique, just like her life," said Omer Pardillo, who worked with Cruz for 14 years, acting as her manager for the last seven of her life. "She's been gone for five years and yet, wherever you go, she is as relevant today as when she was alive. It's a very curious thing, as if she were still recording. I think the exhibitions at the Smithsonian and the Bass Museum [a traveling exhibit titled ¡Azúcar! The Life and Music of Celia Cruz] and now this musical have helped in keeping her legacy alive."

Pardillo was not involved in the creation of the musical, nor has he seen it. But he will be there on opening night at the Arsht Center, he said.

"Everyone who has seen the play, including close friends of mine who are quite critical, they all speak very highly of it, and were especially impressed with the music," Pardillo said.

After its Miami run concludes July 6, Celia is scheduled to go on to Spain's Canary Islands, where the singer enjoyed great popularity.

"In Tenerife she was loved very much, and there's even a street with her name there," actor Lacén said. "That's going to be another challenge, just like Miami. I am very aware that Miami audiences adore Celia, so I am anxious to show what we have done, because our work is one of great respect and love toward her. This is a celebration of the love story she had with Pedro Knight, of her music and of her life."