



Film 'Celia the Queen' on Celia Cruz screens at Miami International Film Festival

In her waning years, Celia Cruz had the most improbable of comebacks. Hit songs in tune with younger audiences, wildly colorful wigs and eye-popping gowns brought her legions of new fans and restored her relevance.

But in the midst of the two eras that bookended her career — the early years in Cuba, with the band La Sonora Matancera, and the hits she recorded in her 70s, *La Vida Es Un Carnaval* and *La Negra Tiene Tumbao* — there was another Celia Cruz, one crucial to the development of tropical music in this country: the Celia Cruz of Fania Records.

Her reign as the queen of salsa, surrounded by some of the most important 1970s-era figures of the genre, is the identity that Cuban-American directors Joe Cardona and Mario de Varona intended to rediscover by making *Celia the Queen*.

The 86-minute documentary, which presents Cruz as far more than the cliché of the lively performer who never missed a chance to yell out "¡Azúcar!" — "Sugar!" — makes its South Florida debut Saturday as part of the Miami International Film Festival.

"One of the things we did not want to do was a didactic tribute," said Cardona from his Coral Gables offices. "We wanted something with more of a European vibe. [*Celia the Queen*] is really an art movie.

"We wanted to find out what was this vortex of which she was the center. It was a great opportunity to put in context her musical legacy."

With an approach that recognizes the uniqueness and legitimacy of salsa, and its exponents, particularly Cruz, as extraordinary musicians, Cardona and de Varona embarked in 1998 on what would become the cinematic adventure of their lives.

The film was finished a decade later, debuted last April at New York's Tribeca Film Festival and went on to be featured in other festivals around the world.

Funded mostly by Antonio Gijón, the producer whom Cardona refers to as "our guardian angel," the subtitled English- and Spanish-language documentary features interviews with heavyweights of the music industry — among them Quincy Jones, David Byrne, Wyclef Jean, Willie Colón, Gloria Estefan and Johnny Pacheco — as well as with people from all walks of life who, in one way or another, were touched by Cruz's music.

Not everything in the production, however, went smoothly.

Over the years Cardona faced numerous difficulties: de Varona's exit to pursue other projects, lack of funds, Cruz's death in 2003. With the star's passing, Cardona even considered shelving the whole thing.



"When she died, it affected me personally," said the 41-year-old filmmaker, who was born in Puerto Rico to Cuban parents. "For the next two years I did nothing else with the documentary."

That is, until the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., sought out Cardona to help with the visuals of a retrospective exhibit they were putting together on Cruz, set to open in 2005. Cardona went back to see the footage he had, stored in film cans at a warehouse in Miami.

When his work was complete on the exhibition that would become "¡Azúcar! The Life and Music of Celia Cruz," Cardona and de Varona joined forces once more.

Celia the Queen awaited them.

"It was as if we had just seen each other yesterday," remembers Cardona. "I said to him, 'Mario, we began this together, and together we're going to finish it.'"

If you go

Celia the Queen screens as part of the Miami International Film Festival at 7 p.m. Saturday and 9:30 p.m. March 9 at the Tower Theatre, 1508 SW Eighth St., Miami; 9:30 p.m. March 11 at the Colony Theatre, 1040 Lincoln Road, Miami Beach; and 4 p.m. March 15 at the Regal Cinemas South Beach 18, 1120 Lincoln Road. Tickets \$7-\$12; 305-405-6433 or miamifilmfestival.com