

EVERY CUBAN SONG HAS A STORY TO TELL

STEP INSIDE THE MUSIC OF

BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB

A NEW BROADWAY MUSICAL

LETTER FROM
JUAN DE MARCOS

Musician, Producer and Bandleader



Hello, friend,

My name is Juan de Marcos and I had the privilege of working as artist & repertoire and musical director on the legendary album that you're about to experience in this show. If we haven't crossed paths yet, trust me, we will soon.

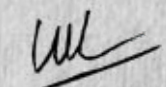
You're about to go on a journey to my home, the beautiful island of Cuba. Open your heart. Feel the music. If you're anything like me, it will seep into your soul and leave you wanting more.

I made this book for you in case you become curious and want to learn more about these songs. In the pages that follow, you'll find yourself traveling alongside me through the legendary Buena Vista Social Club songbook.

These songs aren't from just one band or even one genre of music—they come from a century of stories and people: some truths, some legends. All of it, woven together, makes up a musical world like no other. And to brighten your way, our very own onstage flutist Hery Paz has sprinkled in his beautiful illustrations. You see, in Cuba, we all wear many hats, and Hery is no different!

Savor this book or set it aside, it is not required reading. Remember: the music speaks for itself and comes straight from the heart. Enjoy every moment!

Un abrazo fuerte *(a big hug)*,



Juan de Marcos



"I LIVE WELL OFF THE LAND BECAUSE THE COUNTRY SIDE IS PARADISE THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PLACE ON EARTH."

EL CARRETERO

1967 COMPOSED BY GUILLERMO PORTABALES

El Carretero *(The Cart Driver)* is a tribute to the life of a traveler who spends a lot of time on the road. A working man who dreams of getting ahead and someday getting married. Who better to bring this song to life in the show than the Buena Vista Social Club's own trovador (troubadour), Eliades Ochoa. Eliades grew up in the quiet hills of Santiago, and when he sings "El Carretero," you can smell the sticky sweetness of fresh cut sugarcane. You feel the sweat on your brow as the country sun shines down on you.

"YOU ARE TOO OLD AND TOO DULL TO GET CAUGHT UP IN LOVE AFFAIRS, THAT CHICKADEE AT YOUR SIDE HAS MADE YOU LOSE YOURSELF."

DE CAMINO A LA VEREDA

1950s COMPOSED BY IBRAHIM FERRER

Don't leave the straight and narrow path for a crooked one. Sometimes your compadre or bandmate loses his way with the ladies, and you have to set them straight. Ibrahim Ferrer's song **De Camino a la Vereda** *(Off the Road, Onto the Trail)* is straight talk for a friend who keeps leaving his women for the next young thing. The song was originally written by Ibrahim in the 1950s when he toured Cuba as a backup singer, but it was not recorded until four decades later at Egrem Studios as part of the original Buena Vista Social Club album.



Compay jams with the band at Egrem Studios.

VEINTE AÑOS

"IF EVERYTHING WE DESIRE COULD BE OURS, YOU WOULD LOVE ME THE SAME AS YOU DID TWENTY YEARS AGO."

1935
MUSIC BY MARÍA TERESA VERA
LYRICS BY GUILLERMINA ARAMBURU

Veinte Años is a song with a secret. It's 1935 when singer and composer María Teresa Vera gets a phone call from a socialite friend. She asked Vera to put to music a poem she had written about a long-ago love affair, presumably one she didn't want the world to know about. Promising to keep the secret, María Teresa crafts the poem into the song "Veinte Años" (*Twenty Years*), which went on to become one of the greatest boleros in the Cuban songbook. True to her word, María Teresa never revealed the identity of her poet friend.

When her friend died years later, María Teresa insisted that they play "Veinte Años" at her funeral, and it was then revealed for the first time that the lyrics were written by Guillermina Aramburu.

"Veinte Años" is also the first song that Omara Portuondo remembers learning to sing with her father Bartolome as she sat on his lap as a precocious four-year-old. Sixty years later, she sang it in her famous duet with Compay Segundo.





EL CUMBANCHERO

1943
COMPOSED BY
RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ MARÍN

Though the composer wasn't Cuban, **El Cumbanchero** (*The Reveler*) is so widely known in Cuba as a "party" song that a person who lives for the nightlife is often referred to as a "cumbanchero." "El Cumbanchero" became a big hit in 1947 when it was covered by a Cuban immigrant you might have heard of: Desi Arnaz. Arnaz introduced conga lines to the U.S. and created such a frenzy that there was even a club called La Conga in New York City, bringing Tropicana-style verve to American nightlife.

The stakes are high for the Portuondo Sisters as they prepare for their New Year's Eve performance at the Tropicana.



QUE BUENO BAILA USTED

Young Compay and the band introduce us to the Buena Vista Social Club– a hangout for Afro-Cubans who were not welcome at Havana's high society clubs.

1957 COMPOSED BY BENY MORÉ

Beny More, "El Barbaro del Ritmo" ("The King of Rhythm"), was larger than life: he had the swagger of Frank Sinatra and the sweet voice of Bing Crosby. According to Beny's mother, he made his first instrument out of a stick and a sardine can. Later, as a young man, he honed his craft with *pregonando*, the art of singing catchy songs to hawk the bruised fruits and vegetables he sold in the streets of Havana. Like a character in a rags-to-riches story, his career took off when he won a singing contest at a local radio station, and the rest is history.

Marrying the sound of the older boleros and the more modern mambos, El Beny's hit song **Que Bueno Baila Usted** (*How Well You Dance*) exploded in popularity on and off the Island.

Young Ibrahim sings at the Buena Vista Social Club and something inside Young Omara is unlocked.

In 1937, the then unknown 25-year-old Arsenio Rodríguez composed **Bruca Maniguá,** an Afro-son that became his first worldwide hit. The song is written in the Bozal language of first-generation slaves, Spanish with African words woven in or, as Arsenio once described it, "the Congo language of our ancestors." "Bruca Maniguá" was a bolt of lightning and a complete turning point in Cuban music. Imagine a slave's cry for humanity becoming the song that changed the course of music history. Within a year, the song was being performed by the top white Cuban orchestras in New York.





"A QUIET WHISPER HEARD
IN THE SILENCE OF A BLUE NIGHT.
IT'S THE SOUND OF TWO LOVERS,
ENCHANTED, WHO DELIGHT IN THEIR LOVE."

MURMULLO

1930s COMPOSED BY ELECTO ROSELL "CHEPÍN"

When you hear Ibrahim Ferrer perform **Murmullo** (*Murmur*), you feel every blush and caress of young love under bright moonlight. It's easy to understand, then, why it was one of the songs that catapulted Ibrahim from obscurity to international stardom with the release of the Buena Vista Social Club album. Ibrahim was 72 years old when he won the Latin Grammy Award for Best New Artist. "I've been singing for sixty odd years with the same voice. Then, one day someone came by and hired me and then, suddenly, my name is known around the world." – *Ibrahim Ferrer*

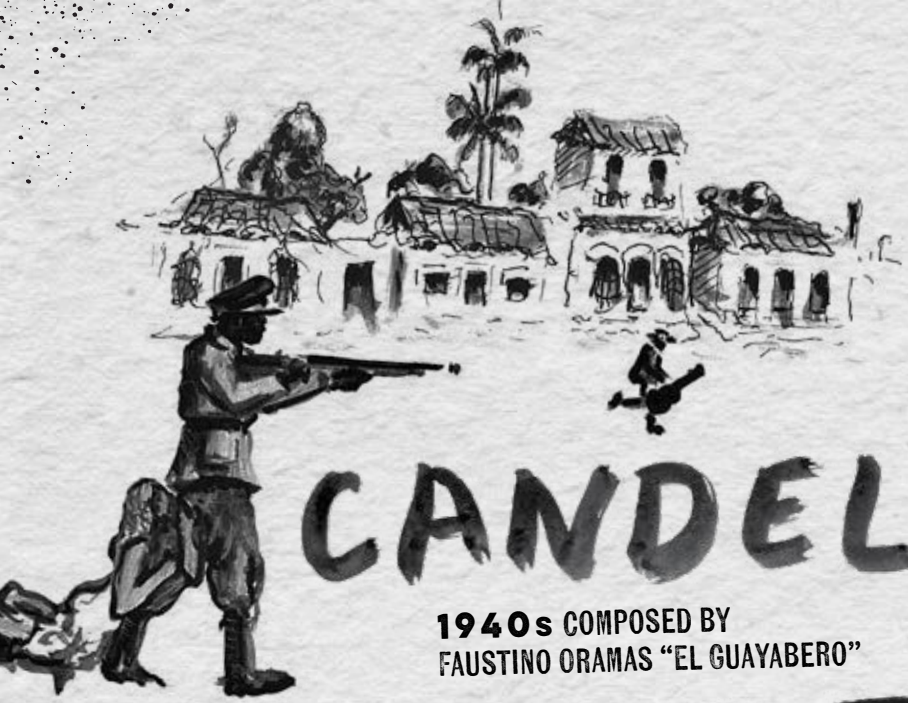
1942 COMPOSED BY ERNESTO GRENET

DRUME NEGRITA

In the 1940s, an Afrocubanismo movement was bringing African culture into Cuba's mainstream. **Drume Negrita** (*Sleep My Little Black Baby*) is a lullaby to a baby who refuses to rest, sung by a caretaker while the baby's mother works in the fields. The Cuban icon Miguelito Valdés first recorded "Drume Negrita," and Omara Portuondo has been charming audiences all over the world with her take on it ever since.



Young Omara shares a lullaby with Young Ibrahim on the Malecón.



CANDELA

1940s COMPOSED BY
FAUSTINO ORAMAS "EL GUAYABERO"

At Egrem Studios, Juan de Marcos auditions his arrangements for Omara.

It was a century ago when the composer and troubadour Faustino Oramas took to the small sugar towns to eke out a few cents by entertaining workers with his music. In one such town called Guayabo, he fell in love with a beautiful barmaid. When her husband, a decorated military officer, found out about his wife's affair, he wanted Faustino dead. Luckily, Faustino was tipped off in time to escape; he even changed his name to El Guayabero, to make sure he would never be found. But El Guayabero (Faustino) was never able to keep his mind off the ladies. Nowhere is that clearer than in the song **Candela** (*Fire*), which explodes with double meanings in sexy syncopation.

DOS GARDENIAS

1945 COMPOSED BY ISOLINA CARRILLO

"There's no one that doesn't love boleros and those who listen to boleros are lovers. There are those songwriters whose hearts have been broken but I don't need to feel heartbreak to write music. My songs are all love."
– Isolina Carrillo, Cuban composer, singer, and performer



Nowhere is Carrillo's flair for romance more evident than in **Dos Gardenias** (*Two Gardenias*), the height of romantic melodrama. One lover gives the other two gardenias that will be a reminder of the great love between them. If the gardenias die, it's because the flowers know that one lover has been betrayed by another. The song became an anthem for tortured lovers all over Latin America. In Venezuela, a young couple met every day in a café and played "Dos Gardenias" on the Victrola. But one day, she left him. The next day, he went back to the café alone, played "Dos Gardenias," and shot himself.

Omara sings the same song at Egrem that she sang with Young Ibrahim long ago.

El Cuarto de Tula (*Tula's Room*) is a song that demands to be riffed on every time it's performed, true to the song's *descarga* (Cuban jam style) origins. The song is one long dirty joke about Tula getting hot and bothered. When the song really gets cooking, members of the band will take turns burning each other with improvised lyrics, a homegrown tradition from the eastern city of Santiago, the cradle of Cuban son music.

EL CUARTO DE TULA

1940s COMPOSED BY SERGIO SIABA



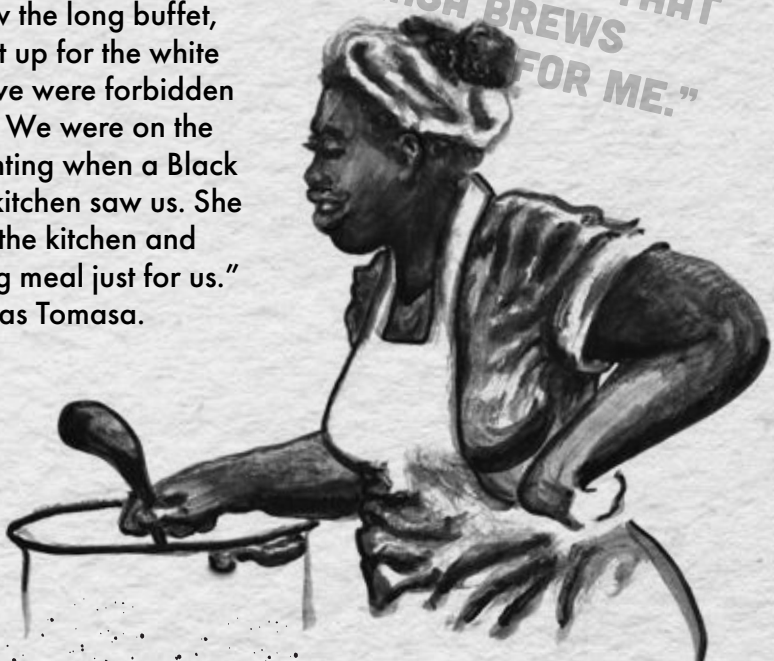
1937 COMPOSED BY GUILLERMO RODRÍGUEZ FIFFE

LA NEGRA TOMASA

When Guillermo Rodríguez Fiffe was asked if **La Negra Tomasa** (*Tomasa, the Black Girl*) was based on a real woman, he told this tale:

"Many years ago, a rich family threw a party at their home, and they hired my band to liven up the evening. Back then, we made so little money playing music that when we arrived to perform, we hadn't eaten all day. We saw the long buffet, with food set up for the white guests, but we were forbidden from eating. We were on the verge of fainting when a Black cook in the kitchen saw us. She took us into the kitchen and cooked a big meal just for us." Her name was Tomasa.

"I'M SO IN LOVE WITH TOMASA, THAT I GET SAD WHEN SHE LEAVES THE HOUSE. I ONLY LIKE THE FOOD THAT TOMASA MAKES ME. I ONLY LIKE THE COFFEE THAT TOMASA BREWS FOR ME."



CHAN CHAN

1985 COMPOSED BY COMPAY SEGUNDO



Chan Chan took the world by storm in 1997 when the original *Buena Vista Social Club* album came out, but the story of the song began years earlier. In the mid '80s, Eliades Ochoa was making a name for himself as a sonero. One day, he was introduced to an older gentleman named Compay Segundo. At the time, Compay was rolling cigars to make a living, and he handed Eliades a cassette tape and said, "These are my songs. I need someone on a label to record these so that I can make some money off the publishing." One of the songs on the tape was a piece Compay was calling "Chan Chan." Eliades went home to listen, and as soon as he heard those famous four notes, he was in.

"I didn't write 'Chan Chan,'" Compay said. "I dreamed it. Sometimes I wake up with a melody in my head. I hear all of the instruments clear as can be. I look out the window at the street and I don't see anyone, but it sounds like the song is being played all around me. One day I woke up hearing those four simple notes, and set lyrics to them inspired by a fairy tale from my youth, 'Juanica y Chan Chan.' And now it's sung all over the world."





"I DON'T WANT THE FLOWERS TO KNOW HOW LIFE TORMENTS ME. IF THEY KNEW THAT I WAS SUFFERING, THEY TOO WOULD CRY."

SILENCIO

1932 COMPOSED BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ MARÍN

Silencio (*Silence*) is a heartbreaking song filled with emotion. It was written by the Puerto Rican composer Rafael Hernández Marín, a *jibarito* (country boy) with the soul of a poet.

There is so much that remains unspoken between Omara and Ibrahim as they consider their future in an uncertain world.

"Ibrahim Ferrer asked me to sing 'Silencio' with him, and for me that was a highlight of my life. I felt so much watching him sing to me and seeing the emotion pour out of him. We had worked together in the past but to find ourselves together again, after so many years, was a big thing. It was impossible for me to keep back the tears and when Ibrahim got out his handkerchief…at that moment we looked at each other and I can't describe in words what we felt. That was a magical moment, unforgettable!"
– *Omara Portuondo*

"YOU WANT TO LEAVE ME.
I DON'T WANT TO SUFFER,
BUT I AM GOING WITH YOU, MY DARLING,
EVEN IF I DIE."

LÁGRIMAS NEGRAS

1930 COMPOSED BY MIGUEL MATAMOROS



Have you ever looked for love in the wrong place? Have you ever loved someone so much you couldn't let them go, even when you knew it was the right thing to do? **Lágrimas Negras** (*Black Tears*) is all about running your life into the ground for love. Composer Miguel Matamoros was inspired by his neighbor who, after a lifetime of marriage, had her heart broken. She would stop by Miguel's house in tears lamenting that her husband, giving no excuse, had abandoned her.

When Young Omara makes her first record, only one song can express the pain in her heart.



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