

Famous Cuban entertainers: Elena Burke



Elena Burke who was born on February 28, 1928 in Havana, was a revered and popular Cuban singer of boleros and romantic ballads.

She started her career by working in radio in the 1940s. In 1952, pianist and arranger Aida Diestro organized the vocal quartet called Cuarteto d'Aida. The original members were Elena Burke, Moraima Secada, Omara Portuondo and Haydée Portuondo. Cuarteto d'Aida was one of Cuba's most successful singing groups of the 1950s and '60s. The Cuarteto brought a new sensibility to Cuba's pop music with their sophisticated vocals and swing arrangements.

The popularity of Cuarteto d'Aida lifted the four women to international fame. They performed their songs for enthusiastic audiences in South and North America as well as Europe, and recorded with influential Afro-Cuban trumpet player Arturo "Chico" O'Farrill.

All of the women rose from extremely impoverished backgrounds. When they made their first appearances on Cuban television, they wore homemade clothes.

The senior member, Elena Burke had the most previous experience as a performer. Having made her debut, on Havana radio station, CMQ, in 1941, she became a professional actress, a year later, and appeared regularly on the radio and in cabarets.

By the time of the Cuban Revolution she was a top solo artist performing in elegant cabarets in Havana. Her voice seemed to become stronger with age, as her subtle yet sophisticated technique graced every song she sang with an emotional weight.

Over the years she has performed with top Cuban dance bands such as Orquesta Aragón and with highly acclaimed singer-songwriters, including Pablo Milanés. She certainly could "take a sad song and make it better", piercing the emotional veil of her audience with an almost palpable sincerity.

Though she mostly interpreted classic Cuban boleros and Son, her versions were distinct, supported by top-notch musicians and arrangements. She is the mother of Malena Burke and grandmother of Lena, both successful Cuban singers. Elena Burke died on June 9, 2002 in Havana.

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