

Celebrating Graciela

The “*Si, Si, No, No*” girl, Graciela Pérez (born August 23, 1915) is still singing at 90. From humble beginnings in the Jesús María district of Havana, Cuba, Graciela’s distinctive musical stylings propelled her to Harlem’s world famous Apollo Theatre. Her sweet vocals and explosive harmonies led jazz critics and fans to refer to her as the Latin equivalent of Sarah Vaughn and Ella Fitzgerald.

Graciela was greatly influenced by her older brother Francisco Grillo (Machito), but it was trovadora María Teresa Vera, who inspired her to become a singer when she was only six. Her professional career began in 1933 when she joined the all-female group Anacaona, which was the beginning of the groundswell of “all-girl” bands. They weren’t the first, but they became the most famous. Under the direction of flautist Alberto Socarras, they toured throughout Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and New York. When the bass player was unable to participate in a scheduled series of shows in Paris, Graciela learned acoustic bass in just three months.

Mario Bauzá (who married Graciela’s sister, Estela) formed Machito and The Afro-Cubans in 1939 in New York. It was the first group to fuse jazz arrangement techniques with Afro-Cuban rhythms. When Machito was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1943, Bauzá asked Graciela to come to New York, and share singing duties with Puerto Rican singer Polito Galíndez.

Graciela continued with the band even after Machito’s return. For over three decades she was a dominant female performer, going beyond the popular mambo era. She and the group played a significant role in the creation of Afro-Cuban jazz and New York City’s Latin music sound. She is especially remembered for her boleros, and for the major hit *Si, Si, No, No* (composed by Blanco Suazo), which became her “signature” song.

In the 1970s Mario Bauzá and Graciela left Machito’s band. In 1986 when Bauzá formed the Afro Cuban Jazz Orchestra, Graciela joined him as the principal vocalist. After Bauzá’s death in 1993 she went into semi-retirement, making occasional public appearances and cameos on various recordings.

Graciela has appeared on over 50 albums throughout her career and is known as the First Lady of Afro-Cuban Jazz. Her most recent recording in 2004, *Candido and Graciela*—Inolvidable joined her with legendary congüero and fellow countryman, Candido Camero, earning them a Grammy nomination. Graciela remains a revered and legendary icon in the world of Latin music.

By Elena Martínez, folklorist