

## Querida Celia,

The last time we spoke, we were both mourning the death of Tito Puente. We were sad, but we still managed to laugh, remembering Tito's antics and boyish charm. You still called him "el nene," even at 77, when he passed.

As we listened to your voice from my stereo singing "Las Caras Lindas" recently, Ismael "Maelo" Rivera and I realized that the composer of that mega-hit, and more than 2,000 others, was Catalino "Tite" Curet Alonso who also recently passed (August 5).

That took me back to 1978, to the 8" x 10" black-and-white photo Maelo had of the two of you. You were both so young and beautiful in 1958, when you toured Puerto Rico. Remember, Celia? You told me you were very fond of him but added that you never took him seriously because he made passes at every skirt that came his way. Smart looking out, Celia, even then.

That's why you always wanted to be a teacher, until your own instructor told you that you would earn more money in one day than she would in a month. So you stuck to singing—singing in a style that tells timeless stories without the benefit of lesson plans. Singing in a style that is reserved for men, a style that centers on the lead singer belting out several melodic phrases prefaced by percussive rhythms that pave the foundation of the polyrhythmic beat. The vocalist is driven to a spontaneous creation of words while chiseling the body of the song with tonal range and melodic phrasing. Among the masters of this form, you are Queen.

Yet for all your successes, your heart was Pedro. You shared 41 years with this Knight who stepped back from his own career to handle your calling. Many were the times I saw Pedro carry you from the stage after you left your life force there.

I remember how happy you were for me when I was pregnant with Abie, whom you called "our son." We promised to visit when we last spoke, but we never did. Forgive me for that, Celia.

Forgive me for never telling you how much I hold your lessons of life in my heart. You always told me never to believe the press releases, always be original, always better myself and learn new things, and, finally, find the good while recognizing the bad. You taught lessons to everyone.

Your funeral was a lesson to the mainstream American media which, were it not for that Fifth Avenue procession, would hardly have noticed that little black girl from Cuba who came to the U.S. during the civil rights movement, making a name for herself without ever speaking English. Thousands stood in the street, in torrential rain, holding bags of sugar in your honor. ¡Vaya!

You must know how you raised the bar for people of color, for Latinos, for women. And that last CD of yours—well, Celia, when I heard you singing, "Ríe, lora, vive tu vida y gózala ahora," I broke down and wept. I know you didn't want tears, but I knew your ups and downs; and although you were always positive, sharing joy wherever you went, I know it wasn't always easy for you.

The Cuban public wrote letters to the radio station demanding your replacement when you began with La Sonora Matancera in 1950. Fifteen years later, you recorded tunes like "Bemba colorá" with Tito Puente but sales slumped, sending your career into a tailspin until Larry Harlow asked you to perform the role of Gracia Divina in his Latin music opera, *Hommy*. That appearance at Carnegie Hall, in March 1973, sealed your fate as Culture

Queen. You signed with Fania the following year, successfully recording with Johnny Pacheco. But even this signing held controversy. The Queen of Soul, La Lupe, was on her way out and publicly blamed you for being pushed aside. You didn't retaliate, saying that you would never criticize another artist. "The key to being a woman in this business," you said, "is to have elegance and respect for yourself so others could respond in turn."

By the late '70s, the Fania All-Stars put out an album that featured the Tite Curet tune composed in honor of the diva of modern dance, Isadora Duncan. You made "Isadora" yours, as you did every tune, until the Kiwani/Calle Ocho organizers banned you from the Miami Festivities because, they claimed, you were singing about a communist. You defended yourself on Radio WADO, righteously proclaiming your innocence, only to publicly apologize shortly thereafter, never singing "Isadora" again. Isn't it ironic that, years later, they named a street near Calle Ocho after you, Celia? During the 1990s, they criticized you for endorsing a psychic hotline. Then there were those who swore you were a *santera*, even when you always proclaimed your devout Catholic faith. It wasn't easy for you, Celia.

But what broke my heart was when they booed you in April 2000, in Puerto Rico. The crowd was angry over your criticism of Andy Montañez for hugging Silvio Rodríguez, Cuba's balladeer, at the airport. Andy's Miami performances were cancelled, his records burned at Calle Ocho. Was so hurt when he told me about this. "Ay bendito," I said. "Forgive Celia." He understood.

Just like Ralph Mercado understood when you left his management office after 27 years based on friendship—not a contract. He burst out of his office one day, yelling to a gossiping staff, "Celia is my friend. The reason she left this office is between her and me. I don't want anyone saying anything bad about her." Did you know that, Celia?

So now I ask you, Celia, to forgive those who criticized you, those who said you should retire, who booed and threw paper cups and ice at you while you stood there hurt and vulnerable and thanked Puerto Rico for always loving you. This *boricua* knows your heart, knows that you always included a *bomba* and a *plena* in many of your recordings, knows how much you truly loved all people. You always said that you would not return to Cuba until it was free, and we respect you for that, knowing your love of humanity.

You always said that politics and entertainment don't mix. I believe that as I believe you said "adiós" to everyone on your last CD. Celia, you are timeless, you will never be out of style, and your songs will always taste like *azúcar*.

In *clave*, Aurora



Celia Cruz and Aurora Flores in 1981 at the RMM office in New York.



Aurora Flores is a journalist, educator, artist and activist. She is a former Latin music correspondent to *Billboard* magazine. Email: [aurora@aurora-communications.com](mailto:aurora@aurora-communications.com).