

Omara Portuondo on Fidel Castro: 'He Was a Human Being Like Any Other'

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The Buena Vista Social Club singer pays tribute to the late Cuban leader on Cuban TV.

[Omara Portuondo](#), the Cuban singer known around the world as the female voice of the [Buena Vista Social Club](#), paid tribute to Fidel Castro, calling him “a human being like any other.”

Appearing on Cuba’s national television news Monday as part of its special programming after Castro’s death, Portuondo was asked about her memories of the late Cuban leader. The 86-year-old singer responded with an anecdote from her university days.

“I remember once I went on a train to Santiago de Cuba with two friends, one from the university, and his sister,” Portuondo recalled in the TV segment, posted on YouTube. “There was no place to sit. The train was full, we were going to the Carnival in Santiago. Suddenly a man passed by me with a baby bottle full of milk in his hand. And my friend from the university said to me, ‘Look, that’s Fidel...’ Normal like any other person. He was carrying the bottle in his hand, I suppose to his child... he was a human being like any other.”

Portuondo performed at Castro's 90th birthday celebration in August at Havana's Karl Marx Theater, where she joined the children's theater group La Colmenita on stage, and sang "La Era," by Silvio Rodriguez. The renowned bolero singer said the news of Castro's Nov. 25 death was "hard, and sad. And unforgettable, like him." She called Castro "an extraordinary human being."

Over a career that has spanned some 70 years, Portuondo has lived in Cuba. In the 1950s, she became well-known as a member of the all-female vocal quartet Las D'Aida, alongside her older sister Haydee, the smoky voiced singer Elena Burke and Maraima Secada, aunt of Latin pop singer Jon Secada. The group toured internationally, starred at the Tropicana, and once appeared on The Steve Allen Show. Burke emigrated to Miami after Castro came to power, while Portuondo added the socially committed songs of Revolutionary folk singers Rodriguez, Pablo Milanes and Carlos Puebla to her diverse repertoire.

Last month, Portuondo, who has playing to full houses in the United States since the Buena Vista Social Club came to fame in the late 1990s, performed a string of concerts at major venues in New York, Chicago, Miami and other cities. She was nominated for a 2016 Latin Grammy award for Best Children's Album.
