

## MARÍA TERESA VERA: THE MOTHER OF CUBAN SONG<sup>1</sup>

By Armando López

Who has not wanted to be a singer? Perhaps we don't have the voice to sing *O Sole Mio*, but who has not sung, "What does it matter to you if I love you, if you no longer love me...?" Well, we owe this conversational melody, without any high notes, a melody we can all sing, to a woman who was the granddaughter of slaves. She lived through the difficult birth of a nation, and she never made concessions, not in her way of singing, nor in her way of composing or in the way she lived. She sang as she pleased...she lived... as she could, given the circumstances. Her name: María Teresa Vera

María Teresa was 16 when she met the composer Manuel Corona. He was 20 years older than she and an inveterate bohemian. He would wake up singing and then go off to work to roll cigars, to earn his daily pittance.

Corona had heard of the cute mulatto<sup>2</sup> girl who sang beautifully. He put his guitar into her hands...and he taught her his song, *Mercedes*.

A few days later, on May 18, 1911, María Teresa Vera, accompanied by Manuel Corona, in a tribute to the comedian Arquímedes Pous, debuted with *Mercedes* to a full house at the Politeama Grande Theater, in the Manzana de Gómez center.

When the teenager who sang with a hint of sadness intoned "Mercedes, who endlessly consoles my soul ..." the applause was so great that she was forced to sing six more songs. Manuel Corona had found his voice, and the nascent Cuban song tradition, its interpreter.

[LINK to *Aurora*] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TG80pi7BBM>

Just like in the movies, let's travel back to the past, to the end of the 19th century...

To Guanajay, a town with a band that used to play in the gazebo in the park, surrounded by sugar mills and military encampments, where the troops that Spain used to send to combat the Cubans would go to get acclimated. It was in Guanajay where, on the eve of the outbreak of the War of Independence, María Teresa Vera was born on February 6, 1895, on San Fernando Street at the corner of San José.

Her mother was Rita Vera, a black daughter of slaves, who was the cook for the well-off Aramburu family. Her father was a Spanish soldier who fled the approaching war. (Although they told the young girl something else. They told her he had traveled to Spain to see his mother, and when he returned to see his young daughter, he got sick and they threw his body into the

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<sup>1</sup> Presented via streaming by the Cuban Cultural Center of New York on Tuesday March 31, 2020, in celebration of Women's History Month. Co-sponsored by Instituto Cervantes.

<sup>2</sup> Translator's note: The term mulatto refers to a person of mixed black and white ancestry. It is commonly used in Cuban cultural context and is in no way pejorative.

sea.) What really happened? The girl was baptized with her mother's last name at the San Hilarión Parish in Guanajay. She would grow up as María Teresa Vera.

María Teresa was five when the Aramburu family moved to 27th Street in the new El Vedado neighborhood in Havana, which at the time was more weeds than anything else. They enrolled her in a school run by nuns, so she could learn to sew and embroider. But they kicked her out! "That girl doesn't pray. She spends the whole time singing, in a language we don't understand," the nuns protested.

María Teresa was singing the songs her mother Rita used to sing to her to put her to sleep. These were Yoruba songs her mother had heard from Jacoba, her slave grandmother, who worked for the Veras, owners of a sugar mill. María Teresa's grandmother had heard these songs from her African ancestors.

On May 20, 1902, Don Tomás Estrada Palma raised the Cuban flag at el Morro. It was the birth of the Republic. For Rita, life didn't change. She continued cooking, doing other people's wash, doing whatever it took to get by... And moving when they didn't have enough money for the rent. They lived at San Rafael and Campanario, later at San José and Escobar. Pablo, a half-brother, brought home his wife, who gave birth to six kids. And then they had to move again.

María Teresa turned 12 at the Maravillas tenement house, on 201 San Lázaro Street. No sooner had the huge family folded their beds in their small room than Rita was asking for help with the chores, and María Teresa started singing. She would mark the beat on a cauldron, or on whatever might turn up.

Until she learned to play the guitar with José Díaz, a family friend, whom people called The Black Guy. And he was a real nice guy. He was such a nice guy that he would lend her his guitar whenever she needed it.

Composer Manuel Corona would teach her the secrets of the guitar and composition. As for love... no one had to teach her; she learned by herself.

Her first composition? *Esta vez tocó perder* (This time I had to lose)

[LINK to *Esta vez tocó perder*] [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nI3Vlm0A\\_-w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nI3Vlm0A_-w)

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Havana was filled with composers with a guitar on their backs. Most came from Santiago de Cuba, although there were some from Camagüey, Caibarién, and Santi Spíritus. They came to the capital in search of better fortune, because the War of Independence had decimated the island's provinces. They would sing their love poems set to music in cafés and bars, where misfortunes and love stories were interspersed with rum and cheap liquor. And the guitar being a street instrument, they weren't that well looked upon, to put it mildly.

The well-off preferred European music. In the Payret and Irojoa theaters, there were seasons with Italian opera and Spanish zarzuelas. As early as 1908, Guillermo Tomás founded a

symphonic orchestra. It was the time of player pianos, the ideal instrument for young ladies of class, because the keys moved by themselves, and they could impress their potential boyfriends with their soprano-like voices, although, behind their parents' backs, they would sing the spicy guarachas from the Alhambra Theater.

In the clubs of whites, mulattoes, and refined blacks—all separate, because these groups did not mix—people would dance that offspring of the French contredanse and the black conga or bantú, the danzón. The Cuban census of 1907 scared the authorities. Too many black people! Whitening the island became official policy. With the massive arrival of Spaniards from the Canary Islands and Galicia, new neighborhoods sprung up in Havana. And with them came thousands of cars, which the Cubans used to call “three kicks,” because with three kicks, you could get them started.

In 1914, WWI broke out. President Mario García Menocal, not wanting to be outdone by Wilson in the U.S., declared war on Germany in 1917, approved the draft for single men and those who were cohabitating (unmarried)... And you can't imagine the chaos that ensued! Manuel Corona took advantage of the uproar, composing a racy guaracha that he called *El Servicio Obligatorio* (The Draft), recorded, of course, by María Teresa, who was his voice. And one could walk through Havana hearing, “Some want to die, others want to commit suicide, and most want to marry, so as not to have to serve.”

[LINK to *El Servicio Obligatorio*] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ZYHmTqi9G4>

At the birthday celebration for the old singer songwriter Ramón García, María Teresa met Rafael Zequeira, a good-looking mulatto, who sang tenor. Since by that time, Teté (as she was affectionately called), was Manuel Corona's singer, Zequeira had no choice but to join her as second voice. The duo became fashionable in social clubs, trade unions, lodges, and even in movie theaters.

They were singing at the Esmeralda Cinema, near Cuatro Caminos Plaza, when a young man handed María Teresa a card. Being bohemian and somewhat eccentric, she didn't even make the effort to read it. Some days later, the same young man approached her: “Why didn't you respond to my proposal?” he asked. He was the representative of the Victor record label. Time was of the essence.

In 1918, María Teresa and Rafael Zequeira set sail for New York, to record. At the time, recordings were made acoustically. An exposed horn acoustical record player, functioning in reverse, made the recording. The singers' and instruments' sounds were all directed towards a funnel-like metal horn that took it all in. María Teresa and Rafael recorded more than 200 songs: criollas, guarachas, rumbas, bambucos, whatever they were asked.

And they played in the Latino halls of Upper Manhattan and the Bronx, (yes, there was already a Latin presence here). Upon returning to the island, to celebrate, Manuel Corona greeted them at the Las Maravillas tenement house, with a gift. Barely off, María Teresa Vera, accompanied by Corona's guitar, premiered one of the most beautiful songs of the Cuban songbook:

[LINK to *Longina*] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCEdAG533iA>

Was Corona in love with Longina, Longina O'Farrill? No, no, no, far from it. The only one Corona truly loved was Mercedes...

By that time, Manuel Corona had already composed a seemingly endless list of boleros, criollas and guarachas: *Dónde está el dinero*, *Lo jugué*, *Arrollar en carnaval*, *Linda Mulata*. He had managed to get a songbook printed with the scores of his songs, thanks to the help of a friend who knew music, and saw to the musical notation of his most popular melodies.

Around this time, people began to forgive the guitar for its humble origins, when Eusebio Delfin, married to a Bacardí, played his beautiful song *La Guinda* on the guitar in the most exclusive clubs of Havana.

And these street singers, who had been discriminated against up to then, now became known as troubadours. Their songs were played in the living rooms of families of means, and even in families that were on the skids. The prostitutes in the bars at the port – there were many bars at the port – would play the songs on the Victor talking machines to attract potential clients.

A few songs by Corona and Villalón, who did know music and even got to conduct the small orchestra that played in the Alhambra Theater, made it into the theaters.

Trova fans could be divided into two groups: those who favored Corona and those who preferred Sindo. And... long live inspiration! Because neither of the two, neither Sindo nor Corona, wrote music. This artistic rivalry at times ended up in musical tit for tats. Patricio Ballagas or Rosendo Ruiz would come out with a new song, and Corona would come back with another. And of course, María Teresa would sing them.

It was a happy time. Sugar was going for 23 cents a pound.

It was around that time that Oscar Hernández composed *Ella y yo* (She and I), Rafael Gómez, a.k.a. Teofilito, wrote those marvelous lyrics “Thought, tell Fragrance that I love her, that I can’t forget her.” And Jaime Prats came out with that magnificent melody, which we all know too well, “Absence means oblivion...”

[LINK to *Ausencia*] [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GdUJy\\_ze4z0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GdUJy_ze4z0)

In 1919, the island produced more than four tons of sugar. And the Alhambra Theater, always on the lookout for new opportunities, staged *The Dance of the Millions*. In the El Vedado and La Víbora neighborhoods, beautiful mansions were built. Luxurious Packards rode down the newly built avenues. And when Macorina, a woman who had many men, drove a Packard down the streets of Havana, a scandal broke out. And... just to be on the safe side...the first stop light was installed at the corner of Consulado and Neptuno.

The National Theater, operating out the Palacio del Centro Gallego, signed the tenor Enrico Caruso at 10,000 pesos a show, which at the time was an astronomical sum. Caruso was singing *Aida*, while the men in tails and the women with furs began to shed their skin in the Havana heat,

when a bomb went off in the orchestra pit. Caruso ran down Prado, in full makeup. Alejo Carpentier recounts that he was taken away by the police for being a *fairy* (I don't think he was).

At the time, young girls were swooning under the masculine charm of Rudolph Valentino. Meanwhile, María Teresa continued to live in a tenement house. And she perfected her mastery of the guitar with Patricio Ballagas, from whom she learned his counterpoint Nena.

[LINK to Nena] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kANnNpIr-jo>

In 1922, María Teresa returned a New York to record. Zequeira had no choice but to share a room on the ship with Manuel Corona, because, of course, they were going to record the composer's songs. And of course, the duo, enriched by Corona's guitar, had been hired exclusively by Victor, the monster record label of the time.

Victor recorded the records, manufactured record players, and would sell both records and record players through its own stores. (In Havana, the Victor store was at the corner of Consulado and San Rafael.)

Of course, Victor had its ears cocked throughout the world.

Cristóbal Díaz Ayala tells us that, in the 1923 Victor catalog, Cuba appeared with 147 numbers, among which were 90 danzones and comic skits from the Alhambra Theater. For Victor, the rumba, the conga, the danzón and the contagious son were a gold mine.

Although Victor Records did make mistakes. When María Teresa offered the label the opportunity to record a song she knew was going to be a hit, they weren't interested. She had to record it for free. She lost the \$30 they paid per record. She had, however, promised the blind troubadour from Santi Spiritus that she would record it for him. And she kept her promise!

*Mujer Perjura* (Perjurious Woman) became a hit. 25,000 copies sold just in Cuba. The saddest part was that its author, Miguelito Campanioni, didn't get a cent, because he had not registered his composition. Victor refused to give him the royalties.

[LINK to *Mujer perjura*] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCaQvuCNVEk>

In 1924, Rafael Zequeira went sight-seeing in New York, and the snow finished him off. When he returned, he was bedridden in the small apartment where María Teresa was living at the time, at Paula #54, between Habana and Compostela, until he departed, very quietly, as if he were sleeping. María Teresa did not cry for him. She went for days without talking. And two weeks later, she began to sing alone.

But she was missing a second voice. After Zequeira, she sang with Aurelio, with Alfredo, with Quirino (the six-string guitar player), with Mariatu, the mulatto singer from Colón, and with Miguelito García, who was the guy who got the Dances in White gig at the Tropical. Those dances were packed, but the envious used to say that María Teresa would pay for people to applaud. She, however, knew that they loved her. But she also knew that the party couldn't go on forever.

Two guitars couldn't compete with the sound of the son groups from the eastern province of Oriente who were already invading Havana. And to compete with them, she founded the Sexteto Occidente, with Ignacio Piñeiro the rumbero on the double bass, Manolo Reynoso on the bongos, Julio Viart on the six-string guitar called the tres, Francisco Sánchez on the maracas, and she put the faithful Miguelito García as group leader, out of respect, because those abakuá were not easy, she used to say.

María Teresa thought that she was going out of style, that that trip to New York would be her last, that she wouldn't be hired again. But she was wrong. She went on stage again, this time at no less than the legendary Apollo Theater on 125<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan. And to earn more money, she cheated. The Sexteto Occidente was supposed to record exclusively for Columbia, but using different names, they recorded for Brunswick, Odeon and RCA. And the musicians? As long as the money flowed in...they kept silent.

As the only woman in the Sexteto Occidente, María Teresa had her little tricks to get her way. Things got tense when Ignacio Piñeiro, María Teresa's eternal sweetheart, allowed her to sing his ñáñigo songs. These songs were composed by the Abakuá, a mutual aid society of African origin, whose members were exclusively male.

Piñeiro, a member of the Eforí Erikomo Abakuá group, knew full well that abakuá chants could only be sung by men. In 1925, a Havana Police report indicated that in the Jesús María neighborhood, in the district known as Los Barracones, there were more whites than blacks among the Abakuá.

The secret fraternity, born in the ports, had extended throughout the island. María Teresa recorded four chants "in the language" as a duo with Miguelito García. One of those chants was offensive not just to the Abakuá. It was the first time songs in the ñáñigo vernacular were heard on Cuban radio, and sung by a woman, no less.

[LINK to *En la alta sociedad*] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdbDYpqjTqM>

The 1926 cyclone caught María Teresa in New York, where boastful Cubans (is there any Cuban who isn't?) used to say that the tidal wave had sunk Havana. Nevertheless, when the Sexteto's ship pulled into port, Havana was there, shaken up, cut open, but unsinkable. Sindo Garay dedicated his composition *El Huracán* (The Hurricane) and *La Palma* (The Palm Tree) to the cyclone.

They were calling for María Teresa at the Aires Libres in the Hotel Pasaje, when unexpectedly, she sold the Sextet, which now became known as the Sexteto Nacional, to Ignacio Piñeiro, and stopped performing. What brought about this reaction in a woman who lived to sing?

Jorge Calderón, María Teresa's biographer, asserts that she put Ochún on her head, and that, in the itá, or saint's letter, it was revealed that she should give up performing. But Miguelito García maintains that the Abakuá societies punished her for having taken excessive liberties, for believing she was a man and for daring to record male songs. The fact is that Teté shut herself in her room at the Las Maravillas tenement house and stopped singing.

She spent her time reading serial novels, drinking cognac and smoking cigars. One day followed another, with María Teresa reading novels with her nephew in her arms. Until she was taken before a judge for not paying the rent. She had no choice but to sing again, this time with the Justa García quartet, where she was just another member of the group. But everything is for the best. In the quartet, she met Lorenzo Hierrezuelo, the second voice she had always been seeking, and what a guitar player this mulatto musician from Caney was!

The macabre congo tango by Alberto Villalón, with vocals by Hierrezuelo and María Teresa, was sung even in the cemeteries.

[LINK to *Boda Negra*] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HdAzk2Aix9w>

The Cubans didn't stop singing and dancing even in the Great Depression. The 30s were years of empty stomachs but big hits for Cuban music. Moisés Simons triumphed in Paris as Mistinguet's lover. Antonio María Romeu took the danzón worldwide with *Tres Lindas Cubanas* (Three Pretty Cuban Girls), Miguel Matamoros exhilarated New York's Latino community with his guaracha *El Paralítico* (The Paralytic).

Ernesto Lecuona premiered one zarzuela after the other: *María la O*, *El Cafetal*, *Niña Rita*. Rodrigo Prats overwhelmed the Payret with *María Belén Chacón*. Rita Montaner triumphed in París con *Mamá Inés* by Eliseo Grenet. And Bola de Nieve made it his own, so no one else could sing it. But it was Gonzalo Roig who made history with *Cecilia Valdés*.

In 1930 Cuba had 61 radio stations, 43 of which were in Havana. And Radio Suaritos had the largest audience because of its scandalous advertising. Laureano Suárez, the owner, used to say on air: "You like them big, fat, and hairy? Then buy Antex towels, which caress you as they dry."

And it was on Radio Suaritos that María Teresa and Hierrezuelo had their program "Songs of Yesteryear". They would record at midnight. But it was worth it.

[LINK to *Eso no es na'*] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HdAzk2Aix9w>

It was in 1940 that Ma. Teresa's sister got sick. She prayed for her children not to have a stepmother. "I hand you over all my children so you can raise them," she told María Teresa. And María Teresa, who never gave birth, became a mother, and a grandmother. In old age, her voice got hoarse. "Ay, Our Lady of Charity," she prayed, "how is it possible that today, when I have to stand before an audience, I have this hoarseness? You can't do this to me!" And she would buy butter, and she would eat a whole piece of it, then she would take an egg, with a cup of very strong coffee, and without eating, she would go to the theater. And that was the day she sang best.

With Hierrezuelo, she got hired by CMQ TV station. They presented her as the Mother of the Old Cuban Ballad, the Ambassador of the Songs of Yesteryear.

In Mérida, México, Manolete the bullfighter would run after María Teresa every evening: he wanted her to sing for him, over and over, the bolero entitled *Doble Inconsciencia* (Double Thoughtlessness). He had heard it in a Mexican film by María Antonieta Pons, with the title *Falsaria* (Liar) and a Mexican author. And he had later read in the press that it had been stolen. He had heard that the real author was Manuel Corona. María Teresa had recorded it in 1918, as a duo with Floro Zorilla. And she never stopped singing it.

[Link to *Doble Inconsciencia*] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLquLo3maTw>

At the end of the 50s, María Teresa was tired. She had sung so much! She witnessed the birth of the mambo, the chachachá, rock and roll, of flashing jukeboxes, and telephones without operators. On the television she had on the little table in her living room, when her nephews and nieces would allow it, she would fall asleep with the soap opera “Historia de Tres Hermanas” (A History of Three Sisters).

Yes, she was tired. At times she didn’t want to get up. Hierrezuelo had no choice but to join up with Francisco Repilado to form the Dúo Los Compadres. But he didn’t abandon María Teresa. The two were hired by Radio Álvarez, a small radio station. The pay wasn’t much, or what’s worse, they were owed various weeks’ salary. More than once, the judge forced her to move. She didn’t give up, however, and between July and August of 1957, she composed *Sufrir y Esperar* (To Suffer and Wait), *Ya no te quiero* (I Don’t Love You Anymore), *Te digo Adiós* (I’m Saying Good-bye).

In the 60s, Havana was swept up in the genre called *filin*. Too many notes, María Teresa said. She got called upon to compose a song for cutting the sugar cane. But she excused herself. She continued doing her thing, with her love songs for women she never met, or never talked about, with her old sonos and guarachas.

María Teresa felt like she was travelling through time. She outlived her friends Manuel Corona, Rafael Zequeira and Alberto Villalón. Patricio Ballagas collapsed and died in the street, while singing. She never ran into Rosendo. Sindo was already 93.

She was exhausted, worn out, but when she was given a tribute in the Amphitheater in the Avenida del Puerto and the audience gave her a standing ovation, she sang eight songs during the encore. Guanajay bestowed upon her the title of Favorite Daughter.

She was invited to appear on the hit TV variety show, *Casino de la Alegría* (Casino of Happiness). As soon as she reached Studio 19 at the Focsa, she sat down. But on camera, she sang standing up, accompanied by her guitar. She sang the song she had made her anthem, that she had recorded for Columbia Records in 1923, written by her dear Manuel Corona, *Santa Cecilia* (Saint Cecilia)... Beny Moré was in the studio, and tears came to his eyes.

[LINK to *Santa Cecilia*] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55f-n87TIX8>

On November 19, 1961, at the Payret Theater, as part of a tribute to Pepe Sánchez, the Father of the Cuban Ballad, she sang this beautiful song by Pepe Sánchez, his *Rosa No. 2*. Perhaps... that night... she missed Manuel Corona more than ever, because she gave it her all. She sang his *Santa Cecilia*, and she put her hand on her heart when she sang the verses penned by Nena Aramburu for which she had written the melody *Veinte Años* (Twenty Years). It would be her last performance.

When she got sick, she told her nephews: “Keep playing with me, because even after I die, you’ll still be mentioning my name. And she was right. And here we are, far from home, seeking her out in our nostalgia, and finding Cuba in her voice.

Her voice, that could wound, that could heal, that emerged from the earth itself, from her ancestors, from Africa and Spain, the voice of a woman surrounded by men, by troubadours who composed the most beautiful of songs for her to sing, who pampered her and escorted her, because they knew that when she departed, they would become orphans.

María Teresa Vera, the Mother of Cuban Song, left us on December 17, 1965.

—Translated from the Spanish by Daniel Sherr

[LINK to *Veinte Años*] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ja0HBp2hL-Q>

## TWENTY YEARS

Guillermina Aramburu / María Teresa Vera

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What does it matter to you if I love you  
if you no longer love me;  
A love that has passed  
should not be remembered.

I was the dream of your life  
on a day now distant;  
Now I represent the past,  
and I can’t accept that.

If we could get the things we want,  
you would love me now the same  
way you did 20 years ago.

How sadly we watch  
a love that pulls away from us;  
it is a piece of our soul  
that is pitilessly ripped out.

If we could get the things we want,  
you would love me now the same  
way you did 20 years ago.

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a love that pulls away from us;  
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