

CRUZ, CELIA (1924–2003)

Legendary figure in Afro-Cuban music, salsa music, and Latin music internationally, epithets such as the Queen of Salsa, la Guarachera de Oriente, and la Reina Rumba reflect the central role that Celia Cruz played as an iconic representative of Latin music. A talented vocalist and sonera (improviser), Cruz' career spanned over fifty years. From humble beginnings in her native Cuba, Cruz used her singing talent to support her family. Her first break came as lead singer for a touring dance group, Las Mulatas de Fuego, but it would be the orchestra la Sonora Matancera that helped Cruz become the embodiment of Afro-Cuban music. Along with members of this group, Cruz exiled into the U.S. and in 1962 married Pedro Knight in New York initiating the most important phase of her career and of the Latin music industry in the city. Cruz' donation of a traditional Cuban rumba dress, a blonde wig, and a pair of her stage shoes to the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian attest to her contributions to the Latin music world, now an official part of U.S. history. She served as a role model for women salsa singers, such as La India and Albita. She was not only a female pioneer in a male-dominated musical industry, but also a legend by virtue of her powerful voice, talent, vitality, and charisma.