

*„musical magic.“
(Miami Herald)*



*„Is there a more
potent voice in the
whole of popular
music?“ (The
Sunday Times)*

Buika

Spain

Spanish-African singer Concha Buika performs songs of love, loss and learning

BY JORDAN LEVIN - Sunday, 11.21.10

The singer Concha Buika worked musical magic on Saturday night, transforming a litany of love's agonies -- loss, loneliness, hurt -- into a triumphant expression of life. "I've lived all my life thinking love was a dangerous cure, and I died so many times," Buika told the adoring, roaringly appreciative crowd that filled the Knight Concert Hall at the Adrienne Arsht Center. "But at the end, dying of love is a lie. There's never an end."

In the three years since she made her U.S. debut at Little Havana's Manuel Artime Theater (presented by the Rhythm Foundation, which co-presented Saturday's concert as well), this Spanish-African singer's musical capacity and ability to captivate an audience have grown enormously. On Saturday she scatted like a jazz singer, howled with earthy blues power and flamenco's torn-from-the-gut rasp, slid effortlessly into soul-rending melodic sweetness and swung like a Cuban sonero.

Backed by a stellar trio of European-based Cuban musicians (the marvelous pianist Ivan "Melon" Lewis, bass player Dany Noel, and drummer Fernando Favier) at one point she even improvised as if she were a fourth instrument, her voice ricocheting in wordless rhythmic and harmonic counterpoint in a way that seemed to stun her band.

But more than her virtuosity, it was Buika's emotional connection to the audience and the music that made the approximately 2,000 person crowd feel as if they were in an intimate cabaret. All the songs she performed Saturday dealt with the tension between the pain of lost love and its irresistible, necessary allure. Though her current U.S. tour (which ended Saturday) is named for her latest album, *El Último Trago*, a tribute to classic Mexican ranchera singer Chavela Vargas, many of the songs Buika performed in Miami were contemporary ones from her previous two CD's, including the title tracks, *Mi Niña Lola* and *Niña de Fuego*.

But all revealed in the vertiginous emotional cliffhangers of romance, a path Buika hurls herself down with spine-tingling verve and intensity. "The years have taught me nothing," she whispered throatily in *Trago*, before exploding with such glorious abandon that she made jumping off an emotional precipice seem irresistible. Also new was Buika's confidence and command of the stage, talking and joking with the audience, even veering from tragedy to comedy and back mid-song. "I forgive you" she sang in *Volverás* (You'll Return), then whispered mockingly "as always."

"I've screwed up a lot of things in my life, but I feel the responsibility to rise above them," she said to introduce *Recuerdos* (Memories). "All life, all music depends on one basic movement -- forward."

Here's hoping Buika keeps exploring musical ecstasy and agony, and taking the rest of us with her.

A Singer From Everywhere Arrives Here

By LARRY ROHTER

THE singer Buika was carrying a Spanish passport when she arrived in the United States last week to begin her first extended tour of North America. But her music, with its roots on four continents, draws on such a wide range of influences, from jazz and flamenco to pop, soul and African polyrhythm, that it sometimes seems as if she is from everywhere at once and nowhere in particular.

"I am the consequence of a particular type of demographic movement, one that has always involved paying a high price," Buika said when that idea was suggested to her. "But I don't know much about styles or genres. I only know notes and chords. I have no preferences, really. I think that at one moment you're apt for one thing, and at the next moment you're apt for something else."

The singer, whose full name is Concha Buika, but who is known professionally by just her surname, performs Friday night at Town Hall in Manhattan. As she acknowledges, hers has been a long



BERNARDO DORAL

The Spanish singer Buika says that her music draws on a wide range of influences.

uphill struggle. A decade ago she was stuck working in Las Vegas casinos as a Tina Turner imitator. But the times seem to have caught up with her catholic taste. Her latest CD, "El Último Trago" ("The Last Drink"), released by Warner Music Latina, has been nominated for a pair of Latin Grammy awards, she will soon appear in a Pedro Almodóvar film, and she has collaborated recently

on recordings with kindred spirits like the Canadian-Portuguese vocalist Nelly Furtado and the Anglo-Nigerian-Brazilian pop singer Seal.

Buika, 38, comes by that eclecticism naturally. She was born on the Spanish Mediterranean resort island of Majorca, where her father, an intel-

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lectual and political figure originally from Equatorial Guinea, and mother, a member of a minority tribe there, had settled after fleeing their homeland, which many human rights groups consider to have the worst dictatorship in Africa, and she grew up hearing her mother nostalgically singing Guinean folk songs.

Outside the house, though, Buika (pronounced BWEE-kah) spent time with the local Gypsies and absorbed their passion for flamenco and the tradition of "cante jondo," or "deep singing." "I identified with their solitude," she explained, speaking Spanish in an accent close to Castilian, "because we were the only black family on the island, and I was the only black kid, which was very difficult for me."

But American music also fascinated her, both jazz and pop. When asked about female singers who influenced her style, notable for its dark and raspy intonation and bent notes, she mentioned not just the flamenco singers Lola Flores and Remedios Amaya but also Bonnie Raitt, Billie Holiday and Nina Simone, whom she probably most resembles. Her favorite male singers include both Michael Jackson and Julio Iglesias, and she said her preferred instrumentalists are John Coltrane and Bill Evans.

"What Buika does is to drink from many sources," said the Spanish record producer and songwriter Javier Limón, who has worked with Buika on three CDs that achieved commercial and critical success in Europe and Latin America. "But even though she sang jazz and has African roots, she's clearly Spanish in the way she feels music and life. She's not really a flamenco singer, because that would require years and years of study. But she has an Andalusian way of phrasing to go with her African sense of rhythm."

Among Buika's most fervent admirers back home is Mr. Almodóvar, the acclaimed director of films like "Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown" and "All About My Mother." He not only created a pair of interludes in his next film, "La Piel Que Habito" ("The Skin I'm In"), for



MICHAEL NAGLE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Buika at the Hudson Hotel in Manhattan last month.

her to sing, but also attends her concerts when he can and has written enthusiastically about those performances on his blog.

"Buika belongs to a lineage of artists that is found very rarely," he wrote after a recent show, before putting her in the same category as Edith Piaf and Judy Garland. "Her voice has an unusual color and a very wide tessitura, gifted for the most intimate caress and for the deafening shriek. Buika only knows how to sing 'with her heart ripped apart.' So young, she makes me tremble because she gives the impression that each performance is the definitive one, the last one."

The idea for "El Último Trago" also came from Mr. Almodóvar, she said. She had performed a version of "Se Me Hizo Fácil" ("It Was Easy for Me") a song associated with the Mexican ranchera singer Chavela Vargas, for a scene in his film, and he liked it so much that he urged Buika to record an entire CD of songs

from the Vargas repertory.

In Latin America, Ms. Vargas, 91, is a legendary, or perhaps notorious, figure, famous for her gender-bending antics onstage and off. In her heyday in the 1950s and '60s she dressed as a man, sometimes packing a pistol or a bullwhip to heighten that macho image and addressed her lyrics to women; in an interview nearly a decade ago she acknowledged that she was a lesbian and implied that the painter Frida Kahlo had been one of her many lovers.

Buika responded enthusiastically to Mr. Almodóvar's request, even though her initial contact with Ms. Vargas had been bruising to her ego. On tour in Mexico a few years ago, Buika met Ms. Vargas, who, as Buika recalls it, said, "Sing something for me, child" and then bluntly commanded "Stop, stop, you're not prepared." And so I was crying.

But because Buika considers Mr. Almodóvar "an astute career

adviser" with "the exquisite taste of a great painter," she persevered and ended up recording "El Último Trago" in Havana last year with a small jazz ensemble that included the Cuban jazz pianist Chucho Valdés (and Mr. Limón in the control booth and on occasional guitar). Ms. Vargas said she heartily approved of the result, and refers to Buika as "my black daughter"; in turn Buika now calls Ms. Vargas "my white mother."

"Buika has really developed as a singer in a truly startling way," Ms. Vargas said in a telephone interview from her home outside Mexico City. "She's added the influence of flamenco and other genres to my songs, but the raspy roughness in her voice when she sings reminds me of myself. She's still young, and has a lot to learn, but I think she has a very promising future, both in music and film."

On her first extended tour of the United States, Buika seems to be aiming for a crossover audience. "It would be easy for her to play just for the family there," Mr. Limón said, referring to the Spanish-speaking population. "But she is not exclusively for Latinos. She's trying to break barriers and become a singer in Spanish for people who don't speak Spanish."

With so many opportunities emerging, Buika said she planned to move to Miami early next year, both to improve her English and to finish a CD of electronica that she has begun at the studio in her home in a farm village outside Madrid. She said she also hoped to study audio engineering. She began her career as a drummer and bassist, turning only to singing only because "in Spain nobody wanted a female drummer, and I got tired of hearing no, no, no," and would like to explore further the rhythmic possibilities the recording studio offers.

But the future in cinema that Ms. Vargas foresees for her seems to hold little interest, at least for now. Asked about the possibility of a parallel film career, Buika laughed uproariously at the notion.

"It has cost me a great deal to become myself," she said. "I don't want to be another person."



Buika: The Voice Of Freedom

by Alice Winkler - November 2, 2010

To be born with a good singing voice is an accident of good genes. But what makes a good voice become a great one? For some singers, the answer is years of training. For others, it's life in a church choir. But this is the story of a singer who says that what you hear in her voice is freedom.

The singer is Buika, born and raised on the Spanish island of Mallorca, as the child of African immigrants. It's a little surprising to meet Buika for the first time. She's beautiful, with high cheekbones, almond eyes and a Lauren Hutton gap between her teeth. But her body seems far too petite to contain such a gigantic voice, and not statuesque enough to have once been a Tina Turner impersonator in Vegas. She says she remembers the audition well.

"Beautiful and amazing girls with long legs and, you know, high shoes, like this, at 11 o'clock in the morning," Buika says. "I found myself a little bit lost."

But Buika was a struggling single mom, and she really needed the job. So she simply conjured Tina Turner, her savior when she was growing up in Spain. As the only black kid in town, she says there was no one else to show her how to do her hair, how to dress or how to be in the world. At the audition in Las Vegas, Buika got the job.



"I'm brave like her," Buika says. "That was what happened, that I was brave. I was like, eh, this job is for me. Sure, I know that I cannot speak in proper English. I know that I can't sing in proper English. I don't care. This job is for me. Because Tina is gonna help me tonight. But I don't need her voice anymore. I got *my* voice."

The story Buika tells of how she got that voice begins before her birth in Equatorial Guinea, a tiny country on the west coast of Africa. Forty years ago, after the country won independence from Spain, Buika's father joined the elected government. But the president became one of the world's most murderous dictators, and Buika's parents fled, settling in Mallorca. They lived in a Roma Gypsy neighborhood where they figured they'd never be found. A couple of years later, Concha Buika was born. Most of the Gypsy kids had never seen a black person before, but they accepted the little girl and taught her flamenco. Buika says that if she'd been born in Africa, her voice would have been entirely different.

"If I were born there, I think that my voice will sound as a prisoner's voice. Like in jail," she says. "Because when you grow in those types of countries, you don't recognize freedom."

And freedom, according to Buika, has become the key to her voice. The political freedom she inherited from her parents, certainly, but also emotional freedom, psychological freedom, even sexual freedom. She is openly bisexual, and once married a man and a woman at the same time.

Taking Freedom

One of the first freedoms Buika won for herself, growing up in Mallorca, was from those who would try to hold her back. The Gypsy children may have embraced her, but others did not.

"They kicked me out of the church when I'm a little girl because they said I'm singing like a dog," she says. "They didn't want me to sing there anymore. Because you hear my voice, obviously it's not very clean. But watch out what happened with me then later."

What happened was that she paid the priests no mind, and as a teenager, started singing in jazz clubs, eventually working with one of Spain's biggest producers. He once called her "the most liberated woman on earth," and the freedoms keep coming. Just last year, Buika worked with the legendary, gun-toting, 91-year-old singer Chavela Vargas. Vargas, she says, unlocked the prison door of loneliness for her — by explaining that women need loneliness to create, without interference.

"So, to me, [it] was like a boom. Like a big boom in my head," Buika says. "Because I was so scared of loneliness. So scared of loneliness. Because when you are alone, you hear yourself. And I didn't want to hear myself."

Buika's voice has an intensity and a power that's hard to define. And it's there whether she's singing flamenco or soul or electronica or the blues. Today, she says she finally feels free to sing whatever she wants.

"We singing from the same places," she says. "We talking about the same needs. And we're talking about the same hopes. And what I feel like when I'm singing, we don't need the hope anymore. Hope is for people who wait. And I don't want to wait no more. I'm not scared anymore. I'm not scared of myself. Of my things. Of my fear. Of absolutely nothing. And that's music."

CULTURE

THE SUNDAY TIMES 18.10.09

BUIKA ★★★★★
El Ultimo Trago
Warners 2564686147

BUIKA EL ÚLTIMO TRAGO
CON LA COLABORACIÓN DE CHUCHO VALDES

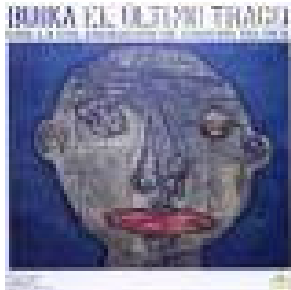


Is there a more potent voice in the whole of popular music? The Spanish singer is an uncategorisable talent whose repertoire

embraces everything from pop to jazz and flamenco to blues and soul. Pedro Almodovar, one of her admirers, provides the liner notes for this haunting tribute to Chavela Vargas, the grand old lady of Latin American song. It's a marvellously nuanced piece of work, with the pianist Chucho Valdes, guiding light of that peerless Afro-Cuban band Irakere, leading the unobtrusive accompaniment. Luz de Luna receives a sleek, jazz-inflected makeover and Las Simples Cosas is quietly authoritative. A slow burner, perhaps, but beautiful nevertheless. **CD**

The New York Times

BUIKA Y CHUCHO - “El Último Trago”



Super-chic even from a distance in its cross-generational, cross-national, cross-stylistic pan-Latinism, “El Último Trago” (“The Last Sip”) is a concept album that transcends its concept. The singer Concha Buika, who is in her late 30s, grew up in Majorca of Guinean ancestry; Chucho Valdés, in his late 60s, is Cuba’s standard-bearing pianist. Here they’re dealing with a half-century-old repertory: songs associated with Chavela Vargas, the Mexican ranchera singer.

Ms. Buika has been an all-rounder, purring over house music tracks and working for a time as a Tina Turner impersonator in Las Vegas. But her three experimental flamenco records made with the Spanish producer and musician Javier Limón since 2006 have steadied her. Ms. Buika has taken the cante jondo singing style of flamenco — dynamic, microtonal, starkly emotional — and added her own elements. She has a husky, layered and imperious voice, something like Nina Simone’s but more flexible and virtuosic.

Ms. Vargas, who is still alive, was a cultural hero of the 1950s and ’60s because of her caustic, combustible singing style and sexual forthrightness. Ms. Vargas transformed the implications of ranchera songs that were meant to be sung by men, and Ms. Buika and Mr. Valdés transform them again, with Cuban and Spanish elements: rumba, chacha and flamenco. Apparently the recording session, in Havana, took only two days. It’s hard to believe, given how thoroughly these songs have been reoriented.

Mr. Valdés plays clean, powerful piano over a skeletal band, with a bassist, two percussionists, occasional trumpet and flamenco guitar; he dictates the harmonic atmosphere of the tune and plays florid but compact solos. Ms. Buika, for her part, is stunning on a line-by-line level. The first three words she sings in “El Andariego” (“The Restless One”), a song of love lost and regretted — “Yo que fui” (“I who left”) — rattle you with their instant momentum and deep swing. Sometimes she opens up her imposing voice until it cracks, as on the choruses of “Se Me Hizo Fácil” (“It Was Easy for Me.”)

There are explosive moments like that all over “El Último Trago,” including on the voice-and-piano-alone title track. Ms. Buika’s singing can get so inflamed that, good as it is, you’re sometimes tempted to stop the record and take a breather. But this is a way of being true to the source: Ms. Vargas’s singing can evoke much the same reaction. What distinguishes Ms. Buika is her discipline, her ability to get close to the brink of the maudlin without falling in. And whenever the songs head toward that kind of emotional overspill, Mr. Valdés’s subtle arrangements work as a buffer. Don’t worry: you’ll make it to the end. It’s worth it.

BEN RATLIFF

Review: Buika & Chucho Valdes - 'El Ultimo Trago'



From Tijana Ilich



The Bottom Line

Concha Buika and Chucho Valdes joint together to celebrate the music of legendary singer Chavela Vargas. Recorded in Havana, *El Ultimo Trago* is a jewel of an album for those who love boleros, a blend of Buika's powerful voice, Valdes' stylish piano and the infusion of swing and jazz elements that make old classics shiny and contemporary.

'El Ultimo Trago'

Known for her eccentricities as well as for her haunting, gravelly voice, Chavela Vargas was born in Costa Rica, moved to Mexico as a child and then spent the next five decades mesmerizing audiences with her interpretation of rancheras and boleros. She turned 90 this year.

A few years ago, Concha Buika met Vargas in Madrid and, after an encounter where Vargas wouldn't let the Majorcan singer get on stage to sing with her, they became fast friends. So when Buika decided to pay tribute to Vargas on this important anniversary, she recruited Cuban pianist and famed Irakere founder Chucho Valdes and director Javier Limon and headed for Havana, where a group of talented local musicians joined the duo in a live recording session that was uninterrupted for nine hours. The result is *El Ultimo Trago*, also the name of one of Vargas' hallmark songs.

The twelve tracks on this album are all songs that Chavela Vargas made famous on disc and prestigious world stages. There's a similarity between the gritty voices of both singers but that's where the similarity ends.

Buika interpretation of these familiar ballads is poignant and soulful, but she redefines them with a jazz or swing edge that does nothing to change the feel of the songs but does add a more contemporary flavor. Chucho Valdes delivers, as always, a distinctive and bravura performance. With a light, jazzy touch on the piano, Valdes' playing is distinctive and classy while never overpowering the singer -- although it's difficult to think of anyone overpowering Buika's strong and potent voice. The local musicians are sparse but tight and Carlos Sarduy's trumpet solo on "Luz de Luna" is a noteworthy addition to the popular tune.

The album includes "Soledad," "Sombras", "Las Simples Cosas," "Somos" and eight other popular, familiar boleros that prove why these classics never get old.

The Root Interview: Singer Buika on Growing Up Black in Spain

The Afro-Spanish singer talks to The Root about her U.S. concert tour, feeling like an outsider in the land of her birth, impersonating Tina Turner and why she finally left Spain for Miami.

By: Valerie Gladstone | Posted: October 17, 2010

MADRID -- Buika wends her way toward a dimly lit corner of the funky bar in the Hotel de las Letras off the boisterous Gran Via, her pretty face lighting up when people stop to compliment her on her recent concerts. On tour now for more than half the year, she cherishes her time at home here, most of which she spends in her recording studio and with her 10-year-old son, Joel, the two cornerstones of her life.



The stage also serves as her home, the place where she lets go all inhibitions. She sings

plaintively of love, loss and joy, her repertoire a combination of her own compositions, Spanish ballads and jazz standards. "I feel safe when I perform," she says. "I can say whatever I want to say. The music makes me feel beautiful."

She talks to audiences as if they are old acquaintances. "How are you doing?" she'll ask them in her husky voice, and she actually listens to the answers. "People come to the theater to be loved," she says. "I want to fulfill their need."

Famous in Europe, Buika sets out to conquer the United States on her upcoming 15-city tour, which runs from Oct. 15 to Nov. 20, kicking off in Chicago, then hitting Cleveland, Denver, Houston, New York, Los Angeles and Miami, among other cities. Though she has performed in New York, most of the country has never seen her before. Now Americans can discover why she wins comparison to icons Billie Holiday and Nina Simone.

In 2007 Jon Pareles wrote in *The New York Times*, "Sad love, crazy love, bad love, joyful love, life-or-death love: those were what Concha Buika sang about in her magnificent New York City debut on Friday night at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. While the lyrics were in Spanish, the emotion was luminous and unmistakable."

Her last two albums earned Latin Grammy nominations, the latest, *El Último Trago*, a tribute to Mexican singer Chavela Vargas with Cuban pianist Chucho Valdés. Famed filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar cast her in his upcoming film, *La Piel que Habito*, starring Antonio Banderas and Marisa Paredes. And last month saw the release of her duet with Seal, "You Get Me," on his CD *Commitment*.

"Concha's a special being," says Vargas. "Since my first encounter with her more than five years ago, I felt she had a special aura. I have seen her grow amazingly as a person and as an artist."

Buika slides into a chair and orders coffee. A small woman, she changes hairstyles according to her mood, today drawing it back from her face with a scarf. She proudly opens galleries of her new book, a rich collection of photographs, poems, songs and reflections, which she compiled over the past two years.

She says she has more to say than she can work into her songs, and she likes to take pictures to catch moments that would be impossible to translate into words. She often brings her camera onstage and shoots into the audience, as if she were in her own living room.



"I wasn't always so comfortable with myself," she says. "When I started out, I felt I had to wear makeup and dress a certain way. But slowly that's all gone. Now I just think of all the information I want to give everyone. We all have so much inside us. We help each other when we're open. We learn from each other's stories -- if we can only be honest."

Her search for openness led to her decision to move to Miami this winter. "I love the United States," she says. "It's much freer than Europe. I also am tired of being stopped for my papers in Spain. Blacks are still outsiders here. I don't want to be an outsider anymore."

Buika, who is 38, has traveled a rough road. The child of political refugees from Spain's African colony, Equatorial Guinea, she was born in and grew up in Majorca, Spain, a beautiful island where her family numbered among the very few blacks. "I could not do anything," she says, "without being judged." She found solace among her "Gypsy friends," Spain's Roma people, learning flamenco in the process.

After her father left the family for a post in his country's new government, her mother cleaned hotels and offices to support Buika and her five brothers and sisters. Without a steady income, they had to move from hotel to hotel. It was always a struggle.

But through all the difficulties, music reigned in her home -- African songs, American R&B and her mother's beloved jazz. By her teens, she had enough gumption to find work in the tourist hotels as a vocalist, soon earning the title "the Spanish Tina Turner" for her talent in R&B and soul.

Hoping to gain a wider audience, Buika moved first to London and then to Las Vegas, where she performed her Tina Turner act in the big hotels for two years and learned English from singing American songs. Her move to another country would have taken guts in any case, but it took even more courage for Buika because by then, she had a 2-year-old son. "I learned by simply living," she says, "by my mistakes and by taking care of my little boy."

On her return to Madrid, Buika began singing in clubs, feeling more confident from her Las Vegas experience but not really sure how to attract a recording company. She's never been one to enjoy hanging out at night or socializing with people in the music industry. She prefers her home, family and friends.

Finally, one evening, the renowned jazz trumpeter Jerry Gonzalez overheard her performing "My One and Only Love" in the club below the one where he was playing and, tremendously moved, began to accompany her. "You can't believe how I felt," she says. "It was as if a hand had reached out for me." Inspired by his belief in her, she started writing songs, coming up with more than 100 in two years. He found her a record company. And in 2006, her song "Mi Niña Lola" soared to the top of every chart in Spain. She was on her way.

Now Buika is on her way to a new life in Miami. "I can't wait," she says. "I'll be near the sea. Immigrants' children never feel like they belong anywhere. I feel rooted through people, not places. I have good friends there to welcome me, and of course Joel. I don't want him to feel like an outsider like I did. That's the least I can give him."