



Chavela Vargas.
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Vargas, Chavela (1919-2012)

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Acclaimed Costa Rican-Mexican performer and singer Chavela Vargas became notorious for the eroticism of her performances and for her open expression of lesbian desire.

Vargas was born Isabel ("Chavela") Vargas Lizano to Herminia Lizano and Francisco Vargas on April 19, 1919 in the province of Santa Bárbara de Heredia, Costa Rica, which is nestled between Nicaragua and Panama.

She grew up in Mexico, in exile, where she associated with leading intellectuals such as Frida Kahlo, with whom she had an affair, Diego Rivera, Agustín Lara, and Juan Rufo, and even befriended political leaders such as Luis Echeverría, who served as President of Mexico from 1970 to 1976.

Vargas's career as a singer commenced in the mid 1950s, under the direction of José Alfredo Jiménez, her producer. Her first recording came a decade later in 1961.

Vargas became famous in the mid-1960s for her hallmark interpretations, frequently melodramatic and heart-wrenching, of sentimental Mexican songs. The originality of her style and the deep pain she was able to communicate marked her as a singular talent.

At the same time, however, she became infamous for her outlandish behavior, which violated a number of Mexican taboos. Not only did she wear trousers and dress as a man, but she also smoked cigars, carried a gun in her pocket, and sported a red poncho in her celebration and vindication of folklore.

A crucial element of her radical performance art was her seduction of women in the audience and her singing *rancheras* written to be sung by a man to a woman.

Vargas came to be known as "the woman with the red poncho," as the Spanish singer Joaquín Sabina dubbed her, as well as "the queen of Mexican song." She shared this latter accolade with Mexico's greatest popular singers: Lola Beltrán, Angélica María, Juan Gabriel, Lucha Reyes, and Rocío Durcal.

For those intimately acquainted with her performances Vargas was known simply as "La Doña" or "La Chabela." These epithets are signs of respect and reverence, which were extended to her despite her "black legend," which included a devastating bout with alcoholism as well as overt lesbianism.

Vargas' life was dedicated to ritual performance that transgresses social, gender, and cultural borders through song. Perhaps because she was afflicted with illness in childhood--including polio and blindness that she claimed were cured by shamans--she declared that she shared the stage with her own gods.

Through her long life, she expressed a bold faith in spirituality and artistic expression--a faith that she relied upon time and time again, especially when she was labeled "other," "queer," and "strange."

After gaining fame in the 1960s, Vargas fell into alcoholism in the 1970s. She retreated from the public

sphere for about twelve years. She attempted comebacks with only modest success, though she did sing in local cabarets, especially those frequented by gay men, who throughout her career constituted a large fraction of her admirers.

In 1981, however, she made a major comeback with stellar performances in the Olympia Theatre of Paris, Carnegie Hall in New York, the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico, and the Palau de la Música in Barcelona.

In the early 1990s she experienced another revival. Gay filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar helped bring her a new audience by incorporating her bold, expressive, and seductive music into his films.

Vargas recorded over eighty albums. Among her most notable and cherished titles and interpretations are "Macorina," "La China," "La Llorona," "Luz De Luna," "Toda Una Vida," "Corazón Corazón," "Quisiera Amarte Menos," and "Volver Volver."

In November of 2000, the President of the Spanish government presented Vargas with "la Cruz de la Orden Isabel Católica," one of the most prestigious awards for artistic production.

This award, the singer declared, was testament to her vexed legacy, one that included her unapologetic persona and creative lesbian aesthetic.

In 2002, she appeared in Julie Traymor's biopic of Frida Kahlo, *Frida*, in which she hauntingly sang "La Llorona," or "The Crier."

Vargas pursued an active working life into her nineties. In 2011, she released a new album of García Lorca's poems and appeared in concerts, singing from her wheelchair.

She died on August 5, 2012 in a hospital in Cuernavaca, where she had been admitted for heart and respiratory problems.

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