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Critics' Choice

## New CDs

BUIKA Y CHUCHO

“El Último Trago”

(Casa Limon/Warner Music Latina)

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, cha-cha 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 overflow, 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