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War Rock Card

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Buika's unifying mix of the muses

By John Timpane
Inquirer Staff Writer

Buika's smoky, throaty voice rises up from her superb new album, *El Último Trago* (*The Last Drink*), and the names of other incredible singers pass through your mind.

Nina Simone. Miriam Makeba. Cesaria Evora. Mercedes Sosa. Amalia Rodrigues. Omara Portuondo. Buika, who comes to the Kimmel Center Tuesday, is like none - and has taken all on board.

In *Trago*, the flexible, singular voice of María Concepción Balboa Buika combines elements of Afro-Cuban, flamenco, pan-American, and even Arabic music in a set of emotional songs played live in the studio with an all-star lineup of world musicians. She both pays tribute to a personal idol and remakes the songs in her own spiritual and bodily image. Buika is from a world generation of musical totalizers who embrace all the musics in their heads, making words like *fusion* or *crossover* seem of-course and old-timey.

Trago is a gorgeous album, recorded with revered Cuban pianist Chucho Valdés and a trim, expressive band, with Spanish producer/guitarist Javier Limón. According to Limón, the entire recording took 11 straight hours for 14 tunes.

Buika, speaking by phone from her hotel in New York, says that "it was being in the right place at the right time and saying, 'Yes! This is the secret of life!' (Let it be said, she is one demonstrative woman, speaking with such passion and drama that her helpers are worried she'll blow her concert voice.) "It is magical!"

An understatement. Around only a few years, she has already garnered two Spanish Music Awards, two Latin Grammy nominations (for her third album, 2008's *Niña de Fuego* or *Girl of Fire*), and an avalanche of devotional reviews. Despite her short career, she's been included, rightly, in the much-listened-to NPR series "50 Great Voices," rubbing sonic waves with Ella Fitzgerald, Carlos Gardel, and Howlin' Wolf.

Partly, it's her voice, more like a separate, gritty, nervy person than a bodily attribute; part is her wondrous interpretations (although she swears "I never think what I do when I do it, I just do it - if I think it, it dies"), which wrench unexpected depths from words and music; and part, surely, is the exquisite taste and historical awareness she shows in the tunes she selects. To love her music, you don't need to know Spanish; you don't need to know anything, you just need to know life.

Trago is a tribute album to far-worshipped singer Chavela Vargas on her 90th birthday. Born in Costa Rica, Chavela made her name in Mexico, singing *rancheras* and other kinds of popular song; her songs are known to almost anyone who speaks Spanish. The choice of Chavela says as much about Buika's own astonishing life as it does about Chavela's.

"Chavela to me was someone magical," Buika says. "When I was little, my dad left, he went right out the front door, and never came back. For 20 years, my mom would play Chavela's music and she was crying - she was crying for my father, but she didn't want to cry in front of us. So she made it seem like it was the music. And now I can give back something to this wonderful Chavela and all the composers of these songs of my life."

What a life. Buika was born in 1972 in Palma de Mallorca, Spain. Her parents settled there after fleeing the repressive regime in Equatorial Guinea in Africa. She grew up in the only black family anywhere, with Roma and European neighbors.

"We were the unique black family all around for many years," she says, "which was tough sometimes and a lot of fun sometimes. You feel strange because you are the only girl like you in the cinema, the supermarket, the school. When I was a little girl, I didn't know if I was beautiful or not. What is my hair? What is my color? Tina Turner, that's why she helped me a lot, like a big sister. She was in my room with me alone. And Whitney, too."

This daughter of African parents grew up speaking Spanish, listening to coplas, flamenco, bolero, ranchera, Roma music, Latin American folk, Cuban jazz, Pat Metheny, and American pop. Somehow, she became a Tina Turner impersonator in Las Vegas, got discovered, and here we are.

When she sings, she snaps a sinuous whip of notes, reaching back through flamenco for its Arabo-Spanish origins. To her, however, this isn't mixing musics or crossing any boundaries. She's a totalizer, generation 2010: All music is music.

"No," she says to genres. "If you listen to different styles of music - jazz, blues, rock, Spanish, American traditional - always it's talking about the same thing: 'I want to be loved, I want you to understand, I want to show you my interior.'"

These are time-honored songs with the poetic intensity of tradition. In the title tune, by composer José Alfredo Jiménez Sandoval, the "Woody Guthrie of Mexican music," a lover drinks with a stranger to forget a lost love:

How hard to have to forget you

Without thinking you no longer love me



BERNARDO DORAL

To admire the music of Buika, who transcends cultures, one need not know Spanish. One need only know life.

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The years have taught me nothing
Always I fall into the same mistakes
Again toasting with strangers
And crying over the same griefs

The fabulous "Ciudades" ("Cities"), also by Sandoval, bristles with unexpected images:

I tried to love you
and your love was not fire, was not light;
distances separate cities,

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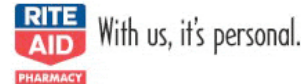
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