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Ela Troyano's *La Lupe*: *Queen of Latin Soul* A “Whole” Story

by Mirasol Riojas

DURING a Q & A session that followed the screening of *La Lupe: Queen of Latin Soul*, independent filmmaker, Ela Troyano, mentioned that her film is not like traditional documentaries, particularly those that are thematically oriented. Anyone in the audience familiar with either Troyano's work or the musical performances of Cuban songstress, Lupe Yoli (aka La Lupe and La Yi Yi Yi), had to know that when they sat down to watch the film, they would be watching something characteristically unconventional. Both La Lupe (who was known for her outrageous performances) and Troyano's films—particularly *Latin Boys Go to Hell* (1997)—have developed cult followings over the years, and *La Lupe* is a testament as to the many reasons why this is so.

An international star, La Lupe was one of the most celebrated Latin performers of the 1960s and 70s. While her music continues to be some of the best selling of the era and her status as an icon among

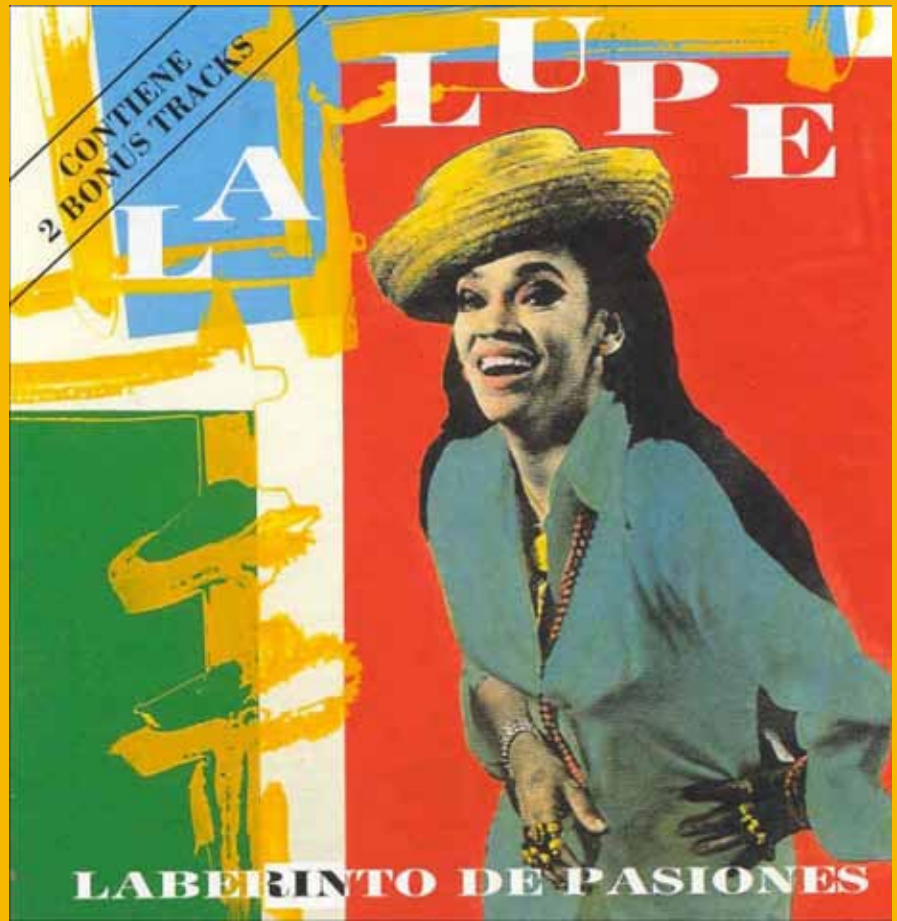


Latino communities is undeniable, La Lupe is not nearly as well-known among the general public as many of her contemporaries, such as Tito Puente or Celia Cruz. Troyano notes that we have only begun to learn about the Latin musicians of this era. In making this film, her goal was to gather as much information as possible about La Lupe and



to tell her story. In doing so, she has created an important historical document and shed light on a generation from which we still have much to learn.

Troyano's interest in La Lupe surfaced in 1987, years after the peak of the singer's career. At the time, Troyano was involved with Maria Irene Forné's playwright's lab at the New York-based Latino theater, INTAR. Forné's attention to detail and the vibrancy of her writing inspired Troyano to carry a tape recorder around with her at all times. Troyano describes herself as being something like Andy Warhol at this moment in her life, "recording everything." It was at this point that she stumbled upon La Lupe. In 1987, she found her sharing stories about her life with an audience at a church on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. La Lupe made it clear that she did not want to be videotaped, which was a relief



La Lupe (*above*) was known for her outrageous performances. Troyano (*left*) is an award-winning filmmaker known particularly for *Latin Boys Go to Hell*.

to Troyano, since all she wanted to do was use an audiotape recorder to document the event. She remembers, “I went up to the altar to be blessed by [La Lupe], hiding the little blinking red light.” Troyano instantly became fascinated by the figure and the woman known as La Lupe. She did not understand just who the woman was, but says she knew that she had to know more. Troyano later embarked on the film project, and it was her resourcefulness, as exhibited in this initial meeting with La Lupe, that would be the key to seeing the film through to completion.

La Lupe: Queen of Latin Soul was a long time in the making. Troyano explains, “In 1993 I tried to raise funds for a film but no one seemed interested until 2000.” She was able to piece the funding together and eventually secured a contract for a one-hour documentary. The film was

made for ITVS and aired on the PBS series, *Independent Lens*. Of course, filmmakers always have to make decisions about what to include and what to leave out of their films, but because she was strictly bound to produce a one-hour long film, Troyano faced a difficult challenge and was forced to leave out much of the information she had worked so hard to gather.

As she conducted research for the film, Troyano found that documentation of La Lupe’s life, and surprisingly, even her performances, were not easy to find. Troyano incorporated rare footage of La Lupe into the film, including a vibrant performance on the Dick Cavett show, and a short clip with Tito Puente (with whom she performed for years), recorded at Madison Square Garden in 1976. Troyano says she spent an enormous amount of time “being like a copyright/

consultant type person. But you know, in order to tell the story, and in order to get things, you just had to do it. There was no other way.”

More than the archival footage, however, the numerous personal anecdotes from La Lupe’s family, friends, and peers truly sets this documentary apart. Troyano placed oral histories at the center of her project, and interviewed some of the most influential Latinos from the Cuban music scene, such as musicologist Helio Orovio and percussionist Mongo Santamaria. In the case of Santamaria, Troyano had particular foresight in that, as soon as she learned she had the opportunity to interview him, she purchased a small camera to videotape the event. The footage is a treasure, as this meeting represents the last opportunity Troyano had to interview the legendary musician. Both he and Orovio have

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since died. The film is notable, then, not only because it brings to light the life of a multifaceted woman who was much more than her legendary wild and irreverent stage persona, but also because the film stands as a tribute to many musicians who have remained too long under the radar.

There has been a recent increase in attention to many of the most influential musicians of the time. For example, like La Lupe, Cuban singer Benny Moré has also been the subject of documentary films, as well as a recent biopic, *El Benny* (2006). Puerto Rican *salsero* Hector Lavoe received much due publicity with the release of the Jennifer Lopez/Marc Anthony vehicle *El Cantante* in 2006. Rather than highlight the tragedy and the tumultuous relationships that were a part of La Lupe's life, in the way the aforementioned films tend to emphasize the musicians' personal demons and their respective struggles with alcohol and drugs, Troyano approached her film from a more holistic perspective. This is in part due, of course, to the fact that Troyano's film is a documentary and not a dramatization. There is much more to it than that, however. One of the most striking

things about this film is that Troyano constructs a story that depicts La Lupe as a complex woman, and more importantly, whole. She never attempts to tell the "whole" story or to present the definitive "facts." Instead, Troyano shows different facets of La Lupe's life, none of which viewers are led to believe defined her. Troyano begins putting the pieces of La Lupe's life together and reminds us that there are many stories to be told.

Conscious that any "'message' usually dates fairly quickly on film" and also that some aspects of La Lupe's story are quite delicate, Troyano's address is subtle, yet effective. For example, when she uses a map to discuss La Lupe's background, Troyano makes a conscious effort to show her hometown, Santiago, in relation to Jamaica and Haiti, where her family was from, rather than in relation to the rest of Cuba. She says this decision was an effort to "position [La Lupe] as Caribbean." Troyano further explains that depicting La Lupe's involvement with Santeria was difficult. She says that the different belief systems and the secretive nature of Santeria made it hard to address. About the choices she made, she explains:

...La Lupe disavowed her religious belief in Santeria and converted at the end of her life, giving testimonials in church. There are some who believe that the Santeros were responsible for La Lupe's downfall and Santeros who believe she lost her power when she left Santeria. It is a complicated issue... the inclusion of Afro-Cuban culture in discussing her childhood in Santiago de Cuba. This was followed later on by anecdotes of La Lupe as a Santera, with different or conflicting points of view: of her musical style as possession; of her style as theatrical -- not Santeria -- but with the inclusion of traditional Afro-Cuban songs at the end of a set; with her favorite music engineer and producer, Fred Weinberg describing the alienation he felt once she became a Santera, explaining that he used to kiss and hug her to say hello and now he couldn't go near her, you couldn't touch her.

Another example of Troyano's subtlety is in the way she addressed La Lupe's iconic status among the gay Latino community. Troyano connects La Lupe to queer culture by identifying her style as over the top and including

footage of Orovio describing La Lupe as both macho and feminine, and very much irreverent. Troyano says, "You've got to remember that the gay world was and is irreverent; it meant being against the social norms." There is brief mention in the film of the drag performers El Lupo and El Yiyiyo, who were well known for their impersonations of La Lupe after her split from Tito Puente, but there is no direct address of the huge following within the gay community that La Lupe continues to have to this day. With regard to La Lupe's significance within queer culture, however, Troyano says, "I think the information is there."

Troyano rarely intellectualizes her decisions about how to focus her films, but rather, she prefers "going on gut instinct." As the filmmaker explains, La Lupe's "story dealt with issues of race, class, gender, sexual preference, immigration, music, aggressive sexual persona, hybrid Caribbean culture." La Lupe was not only a dynamic and controversial performer, but there was, and still is, a lot to learn about the many dimensions of her life. She says she knew she wanted to tell the story of La Lupe as an immigrant, and Troya-

no was certain that she "really did want to see her changing," as the film progressed. Yet the film is not only the story of an immigrant. Nor is it simply about the rise and fall of La Lupe's career. One of the most intriguing things about this film is that La Lupe emerges as a whole person. She was one of many mysteries, to be sure, but in *La Lupe: Queen of Latin Soul*, she does emerge as whole.

As scholars, our tendency is to deconstruct most everything we see and read. Certainly, the approach has value. As filmmakers, our tendency is often to focus on the sensational parts of people's lives, which makes sense. It makes for a good story. There is something refreshing, however, about Troyano's ability both as a researcher and a storyteller, to keep La Lupe whole. That is refreshing, indeed.

A special free screening of *La Lupe, Queen of Latin Soul* (2007) with filmmaker Ela Troyano, on November 12, 2008, at UCLA was cosponsored by the Center for the Study of Women, Chicano Studies Research Center and the Latin American Institute.

Mirasol Riojas is a Ph.D. candidate in the Cinema and Media Studies Program at UCLA. She is also the coordinator for this year's *Thinking Gender* conference and one of the presenters at the plenary session.

Thinking Gender PLENARY SESSION

Changing the (his)story WOMEN IN FILM AND TELEVISION

Mis-Remembering Lucille Kallen: The Erased Career of *Your Show of Shows'* Lone Woman Writer

FELICIA D. HENDERSON,
CINEMA AND MEDIA STUDIES, UCLA

Collaborative Film Authorship: Writing Latinas into the Picture

MIRASOL RIOJAS, CINEMA AND MEDIA STUDIES, UCLA

Making the Cut: Female Editors and Representation in the Film and Media Industry

JULIA WRIGHT, CINEMA AND MEDIA STUDIES, UCLA

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12:30 PM, UCLA FACULTY CENTER**