

# *Two Decades After Her Death, Celia Cruz Lives On for Her Fans*

Whether minted on a U.S. coin, captured as a bobblehead or painted in a new Miami mural, the late “Queen of Salsa” continues to draw attention to her musical legacy 100 years after her birth.



**By Johnny Diaz**

Reporting from Miami

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Celia Cruz reigned for decades as the “Queen of Salsa,” with her signature shout of “¡Azúúucar!” expressing in Spanish her music’s brand of joy and optimism. Twenty-two years after her death, the Cuban powerhouse singer still captivates her fans.

The petite woman with a raspy voice wore tight, glittering dresses and colorful wigs and danced in high heels while singing her hit Spanish-language songs such as “La negra tiene tumbao” and “Ríe y llora.”

Born Oct. 21, 1925, Ms. Cruz began her career in Cuba in 1940 and continued it in exile, producing more than 70 international albums and winning multiple Grammy Awards and Latin Grammys.

She moved to New York in 1961, and brought her musical Cuban roots and mixed them with Puerto Rican and later Dominican rhythms, helping to usher the birth of salsa as a popular Latino genre in the United States.

“When people hear me sing,” she said in an interview with The New York Times in 1985, “I want them to be happy, happy, happy. I don’t want them thinking about when there’s not any money, or when there’s fighting at home. My message is always ‘felicidad’ — happiness.”

Ms. Cruz died in 2003 at her longtime home in Fort Lee, N.J., from complications after a surgery for a brain tumor. She was 77. Following a tour of her coffin in Miami, masses of fans honored her at a public viewing in New York City.

More than two decades later, her message still resonates, and she remains relevant in what would have been her birth's centennial this year. She has remained specially visible in Miami, where many Cuban exiles and their children revere her, and the sound of bongo drums are heard in private and public celebrations.

"I see Celia Cruz not only as a legendary performer but as an enduring symbol of cultural memory, resilience and diasporic pride," Karen S. Veloz, a Cuban American music professor at Florida International University in Miami, said in an interview. "She stands as a cultural icon whose music traverses generations, political borders and languages."

And beyond Miami, Ms. Cruz has maintained a digital audience too, with more than 6 million monthly listeners on Spotify and her official YouTube channel garnering about 493,000 subscribers.

Here are some of the different ways that the grande dame of salsa, also referred to simply as Celia by her fans, has been honored recently.

Miami Marlins

## The Celia Bobblehead

For a home baseball game on May 14, the Miami Marlins gave away 8,000 bobbleheads of Celia Cruz as part of the organization's annual Cuban Heritage Day. The doll featured a smiling Ms. Cruz holding a microphone and wearing a blue

ruffled dress. As part of the ticket package, the team sold commemorative baseball jerseys with her image that were designed by a Miami artist known as Disem305.

The team also hosted Lucrecia, a Celia Cruz tribute singer, who threw the ceremonial first pitch and performed her songs.

## **A New Mural in Miami**

Artwork in the Little Havana neighborhood of Miami captures Ms. Cruz's incandescent smile and her joie de vivre, with two portraits set to a backdrop in teal and pink.

"As an artist and a huge salsa and Celia Cruz fan, this is a huge honor for me," its creator, Disem305, said of the mural, which measures 11-feet high and 45-feet wide.

"On the right side of the wall, there's a younger Celia with the Freedom Tower standing tall behind her to represent the Cuban community here in Miami," he said, referring to the Miami landmark where many Cuban refugees arrived in the 1960s and '70s. "On the left side, there's a portrait of an older, more mature Celia — the one that comes to mind when most of us hear her name — with her huge, contagious smile."

He said he was commissioned by the Marlins to design the mural and the commemorative jersey.



Quarter coins featuring Celia Cruz's likeness as part of the U.S. Mint's American Women Quarters Program. Matias J. Ocnor/Miami Herald, via Getty Images

## A Commemorative Coin

Ms. Cruz became the first Afro-Latina to appear on American quarters as part of the 2024 U.S. Mint's American Woman Quarters collection, which honored a diverse group of notable American women in a variety of fields.

The U.S. Mint described Ms. Cruz as a “cultural icon, and one of the most popular Latin artists of the 20th century.”

The quarter's tail shows her dazzling smile as she performs in a rumba-style dress. “¡Azúcar!” — which means “Sugar!” — is inscribed on the right.



The Latin music performers Olga Tañón, La India and Ivy Queen onstage during a Celia Cruz tribute in Miami in April. John Parra/Telemundo, via Getty Images

## A Posthumous Award

In April, Ms. Cruz was posthumously honored with a “Legend Award” at the Billboard Latin Women in Music gala in Miami.

A montage highlighted her early days in Cuba as she broke gender barriers in a male-dominated industry, eventually elevating Afro-Cuban sounds on global stages.



“Celia Cruz made her life a carnival with a voice that seemed out of this world,” the singer Joya said on the show.

The Puerto Rican performers Ivy Queen, La India and Olga Tañón paid tribute to Ms. Cruz by singing a medley of her songs.

“¡Qué viva la reina!” La India shouted to the audience and viewers.

Miami Dade College’s Museum

## **Celia on Exhibit**

From January to February, the Museum of Art and Design at Miami Dade College celebrated the singer with the exhibit “Celia Cruz: Work.”

On its opening night, the exhibit, which included videos, posters and Ms. Cruz’s wigs and gowns, drew more than 400 people to the Hialeah campus, museum officials said.

Pinecrest Gardens, a lush botanical oasis south of Miami, also remembered Ms. Cruz in January with a celebration that included a concert series featuring musicians.

As part of the reopening after restoration of the Freedom Tower, which is operated by Miami Dade College, officials will host a Freedom Tower Family Day on Oct. 11 for visitors “to experience Celia’s story” through readings, art activities and performances.

“She is not only a global icon,” María Carla Chicuéñ, a college spokeswoman, said in a statement, “but a cherished figure in Miami, whose life and legacy are deeply intertwined with the history of the Freedom Tower.”

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