



→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

# TOTÓ LA MOMPOSINA

The doyenne of Afro-Colombian song is still a force of nature, as Jan Fairley demonstrates

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Totó La Momposina has done many things in her life since her family left their home in Villavicencio for Bogotá, after her father was unjustly imprisoned as part of the fallout from warring between political factions. She's busked in the Paris Métro; studied dance history at the Sorbonne; sung at the Nobel Literature prize winners' ceremony in Stockholm at the invitation of laureate Gabriel García Márquez (author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*); been nominated for a Latin Grammy in 2002; and in 2006 received a coveted WOMEX Lifetime Achievement Award. Yet perhaps the star's greatest satisfaction is to have shown the world the dynamic handing-down of musical heritage within a family through the female side; the passing-on of what it means to be a *cantadora*.

If ever there was proof that music can be a family affair, one need look no further than La Momposina, ambassador for Colombian music, whose group includes son Marco on

*tambor* drum, daughter Euridice and granddaughters María del Mar and Oriana as vocalists and dancers, and grandson Paolo on *bombo* drum, and whose recordings include her mother, sister and nieces.

Born Sonia Bazanta Vides, Totó takes her name 'La Momposina' from the fact that her family village Talaigua is on the island of Mompo, a beautiful colonial town on the Magdalena River. The music of that region is rooted in the music of Colombia's indigenous people, of Africans forcibly brought as slaves and the Spanish and European traditions of the colonisers. Following their flight to Bogotá, a tense year followed with her father effectively in hiding. Arriving in the capital at a time when rural migration was only beginning, La Momposina has clear memories of racism: "My mother had five children of mixed blood and people called us *negritos*. They did not want to accept that Colombians have indigenous and African blood, and occasionally in the street they would spit and

you would hear remarks like '*corazón de burro*' (heart of a donkey) and such like."

Over time the family home, the 'Casa Bazanta' as it was known, gradually became an informal cultural centre for people arriving from the *costa*: a bastion of coastal identity. "Lots of musicians came because my father, who was a shoe maker, delighted in the music of the accordion, the *gaitero* flute and brass bands. My grandfather and great grandfather had played the string *bandola*. On my mother's side there was this passion for Spanish *zarzuelas* and operettas, while another grandfather played clarinet." With her mother Lidia Vides leading a song and dance group, and with input from Talaigua traditional singer Ramona Ruíz, music empowered Totó. Then at the early age of 17 she married a doctor and had three children. The marriage eventually ended. At the special WOMEX session devoted to her in 2006, La Momposina told everyone, with characteristic laughter, how she realised that: "something was lacking in my life, I missed dancing and singing! Maybe I don't look as if I have a family of children and grandchildren. I was never bitter about not being married anymore because what is important is that I have developed as a woman through art!"

In 1989 in France she recorded *Totó La Momposina y sus Tambores* for the Auvidis label and then returned home to Colombia. During the next few years she enriched her knowledge of Caribbean culture with time in Cuba. Having played at the early WOMADs at Mersea Island in Essex and the ICA in London,

Clockwise from above: a recent portrait of the vivacious La Momposina; balancing a goblet of fire with her trademark smile intact on Colombian television; a promotional shot for the Real World label shows the singer in her element; surrounded by the friends and family members who make up her musical troupe



her big break came when she recorded *La Candela Viva* for Peter Gabriel's Real World label in 1992. You only have to hear Totó's passionate songs to feel the truth of her belief that music must have genuine spirit to have meaning. "I don't think of my music as 'folklore,' as to me folklore means something that is dead, in a museum. Traditional music from the old days is very much alive." Her 2009 disc *La Bodega* uses the colonial storehouse, where ships deposited their cargoes for sale and where all sorts of instruments were to be found, as a metaphor for the riches of Colombian music. While every Totó La Momposina disc is exuberant (layers of percussion; rich choruses; brass arrangements lifted regularly by salsa bands), *La Bodega* is a treat, swinging along from the first note.

In 'Yo Me Llamó Cumbia,' La Momposina

personifies Colombia's national dance, seen to great effect in her new DVD recorded at WOMAD. She dances sensually while singing lines that match the physical attributes of a Caribbean woman with Colombia's irresistible rhythms and instruments: *'I'm called cumbia, the Queen of where I am going... my skin is dark like the skin of my tambor drum/my shoulders are a pair of maracas that kiss the sun/I carry in my throat a fine flute... a piano fell in love with me, a saxophone follows me, I hear the clarinet/and a whole orchestra makes a party around me... I am Colombia/Oh beautiful land where I was born!'*

This pairing of the female form with music is classic Latin but with La Momposina there's the difference that these words are sung by a 69-year-old woman who is proud of her body. This generous woman, through the

experience of living a tough life with many ups and downs, composing, performing and taking her music around the world, has formed a philosophy rooted in the creativity of the musical family. "Art is as sacred as the family itself. The table is the temple of the family and everything happens there. To that table comes food and projects: it is where the unity of the family is forged. It is where you learn lessons of life like 'one swallow does not make a summer,' through humility and love; through recognising that you need the unity of all creating together." ●

**REVIEW** *La Bodega* is a Top of the World album in this issue – track 1 on the CD

**ONLINE** You can hear more from Totó La Momposina on the Songlines interactive sampler: [www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/065](http://www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/065)

**Clockwise from above:** At East London's Cargo in September this year, La Momposina's show for the Discovering Latin America charity was dazzling; enjoying herself during a recording session for Real World; looking towards her son Marco and encircled by the other family members with whom she makes music

# BEST... ...ALBUMS



**La Candela Viva** (Real World)  
This captures the generosity

of spirit and exuberant spontaneity of La Momposina and her music, some of it live at a Real World recording week, some of it studio-based. It established a few classics including 'El Pescador,' which tells the story of a fisherman from her home village on the Magdalena River.



**Pacantó** (Nuevos Medios)  
With lots of African flavour,

La Momposina's fruity voice rides over drums and brass creating an irresistible roots sound. Every track is a gem, running the genre gamut from *banda* to *cumbia*. Includes 'Repárala,' her feisty call for macho men to respect their women and 'Acompañale,' composed on the beach under the full moon.



**La Bodega** (Astar)  
Kicking into her 70th year with an album

brimming with the vitality of a seven-year-old, bursting with everything from flute and drum, to brass band sounds, some may feel this is her best album to date. Reviewed in this issue.

## LIKE TOTÓ LA MOMPOSINA? THEN TRY... SUSANA BACA



**Lamento Negro** (Tumi)  
The president of Peru rang Afro-Peruvian singer Susana Baca when he heard she'd won an audience-voted 2002 Latin Grammy with this album, dug out of Cuba's EGREM archive, and licensed by Tumi music. While all Baca's albums for David Byrne's Luaka Bop label are great, *Lamento Negro's* musical settings of key South American poets is the one her fans adore.