



Havana Carbo 🌸 New School Bolero

Singer Havana Carbo prefers singing in hushed tones, but her voice rises when she mentions one Spanish-language song that has become a standard on English-speaking stages.

"If I hear 'Besame Mucho' one more time, I'll vomit," Carbo said. "It's like pretending that 'Georgia On My Mind' is the only American song ever written. There are myriad songs, and so many different levels of feeling."

Carbo does more than just rebuke. On her recent disc, *Through A Window ... Like A Dream* (MODL), she demonstrates how Latin American ballads, like boleros, comprise a deeper songbook than this country usually hears.

For Carbo, collecting these songs started innately, as she spent her early childhood in Cuba and continued listening to her parents sing them at home after the family moved to New York in 1946. As she grew up appreciating jazz stylists Chet Baker and Johnny Hartman, Carbo committed herself to adding new ideas to this repertoire. *Through A Window* features her version of the 100-year-old "Los Ojos Negros," which was a Cuban hit for Arturo Guerra in 1939. Carbo made changes so the song would reflect the American voices she admired.

"My mother used to play that song on the piano and my father would sing it," Carbo said.

"But for me to do that *son*, I had to present it in a musical format that suited how I felt harmonically. I notated and rewrote the whole song so you wouldn't know it was written that long ago."

Some of Carbo's tweaks to these time-honored tunes take the form of subtle gestures, like when pianist Dario Eskenazi infuses the Argentine bolero "Pecado" with another dance form called the milonga. The word "milonga" has a particularly relevant double meaning.

"Milonga also means 'sin,' and the song is about the sin of a love affair that's not supposed to happen," Carbo said. "A romance forbidden under the laws of God. How much more dramatic can you get?"

From her home in New Jersey, Carbo knows that interest in Latin music is growing in this country. But pop dominates, rather than the classics she has spent her life reinterpreting.

"This music must not be lost," Carbo said. "You must always start from a historical perspective and you can't break the rules until you've learned them."

Carbo feels as strongly that while she infuses traditional Latin ballads with new musical meanings, this transformation does not stretch out to changing lyrics. She frowns on the American hits that resulted from such changes.



"A lot of translations are so abysmal, it's not even funny," she said. "'What A Difference A Day Makes' has nothing to do with the original song by María Grever. She was writing about her lover while she was married to somebody else, so that English line about 'What a difference a day makes, 24 little hours,' sounds trite compared to what the song is about."

Still, Carbo does not rule out singing a translated version of an American standard herself.

"If I did 'Chattanooga Choo-Choo' in Spanish," she said, "I would do it tongue in cheek."

—Aaron Cohen