



# Documenting **Celia: The Queen** for posterity

Film stock  
KODAK VISION2 500T 7218 film.

Cameras  
Éclair ACL camera, an ARRI and an Aaton XTRprod

Processing  
Cineworks, Miami

Celia Cruz is widely recognized as the most popular and influential female in the history of Cuban music. When she passed away in 2003, Joe Cardona, Mario de Varona and José Luis Vázquez had already been working on a biographical documentary of Cruz's life for more than five years. Now their project, *Celia: The Queen*, is coming to fruition. The film premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival and there are plans for theatrical distribution.

Vázquez was born in Cuba, raised in New York City and lives in Miami. He had a boyhood interest in photography and graphic arts but a fascination with movement in visuals led him to a job as a promotions cameraman at the Univision network in Miami.

"I realized then that what really fascinated me was the way light affects an emulsion on a frame of film," he says. "That's when I became a cinematographer."

Vázquez started shooting documentaries and independent feature projects. He and Cardona initiated the Cruz project as a television documentary for a local public broadcasting station. Their project began to take off when they gained the cooperation of Cruz and her organization.

"That opened a lot of doors for us," says Vázquez. "We were able to enter her world, which was an amazing gift. We filmed her rehearsing and preparing for her concert tours, and she felt very comfortable with 'the boys from Miami' following her with a camera."

Actor Andy Garcia caught wind of the project and helped arrange funding. "It's been an amazing journey," says Vázquez. "It began as a small project, a labor of love, and it has evolved into a feature film premiering at a prestigious festival."

Their journey took the filmmakers to Havana, Tokyo, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and New York City. "It was a surreal experience, watching Japanese fans in Tokyo dancing and singing to Celia's music," he

says. "Experiences like that reinforced how influential she is and what an important undertaking this is."

Vázquez began the project ten years ago with an Éclair ACL camera and EASTMAN EXR film stocks in the Super 16mm film format. At times he used an ARRI camera, and eventually his own Aaton XTRprod, loaded with KODAK VISION2 500T 7218 film. All the footage was processed and transferred at Cineworks in Miami.

"Shooting film gives me the ability to concentrate on what I'm doing, which is reacting to what I'm seeing in the viewfinder, and crafting the frame and the light," he says. "I am not an engineer. I'm focused on what we're trying to say with the image. I don't have to worry because I know all the ingredients I need are in that film can."

"We always used 500-speed film," he says. "I felt it was easier to stay with a single stock with the latitude for any situation, interior or exterior. Often I relied on natural light through a window, and sometimes there was time to light with one or two lamps. I knew the information was being captured by the film, and that I'd have time to fine tune the image later."

Vázquez used the digital intermediate to blend the various generations of film stocks into a seamless whole. "The HD projections look silky and beautiful," he says. "I was blown away. And we're ready to go to 35mm prints for theatrical release."

Vázquez and his collaborators are conscious of film's superior archival qualities as well. "As Andy Garcia states in the film, 'Celia Cruz is breath to us Cubans,'" he says. "This project deserved to be shot on film. It wouldn't have the same impact in any other medium, but also, there is the longevity of the medium. We know that years from now, future generations will be able to watch the film and enjoy it as much as we did at the premiere."

**1** Actress Christina Christian portrays a young Celia Cruz in the biographical documentary *Celia: The Queen*. Photo courtesy of José Luis Vázquez