

MARIA GREVER

1894 – 1951

“Woman of the Americas”

Although her name is rarely recognized these days in the United States, this busy songwriter composed over 800 songs in her lifetime, many of which are still well known in Mexico, Spain and much of Latin America. Mention ‘Maria Grever’ in these countries, and it’s as if you’ve brought up the name ‘Irving Berlin’.

Popular legend has it that Maria Grever was born onboard the ship that carried her mother from her native Mexico to join her husband in Spain. It’s probably only a romantic tale – but befitting for the woman who united European and homegrown American music in her work. Maria Grever spent her musical career moving between continental orchestration and light opera and the folk melodies she loved and learned at her mother’s knee.

She started composing songs at age six, and as a youth studied with Claude Debussy and Franz Lenhard in France. She was reportedly passionate about music, about opera, about singing, about love, about life. At age 18 she published her first song “**A Una Ola**” (“**To a Wave**”) which sold a fantastic 3 million copies.

At the age of twenty-two, she met and married Leo A. Grever, an American oil company executive, who was best man in her sister’s wedding. In true Maria Grever fashion, it was love at first sight. They were married four days after they met. Leo Grever brought her to New York, and it was here that her international career was launched. Her music was heard live in many of New York City’s concert halls and she also toured in Latin America and Europe.

She loved to perform, and staged many concerts featuring her soprano voice but also was happy to share the spotlight with fellow composers whom she mentored, such as Agustin Lara, the beloved Mexican poet-composer. In her own words, it was her *“desire and ambition...to present native melodies and rhythms authentically, but with the flexibility necessary to call to the universal ear”*.

Her romantic songs popularized the bolero tradition of Latin America. “**Jurame**” was often performed by Enrico Caruso, and more recently, Placido Domingo and Andrea Bocelli. She seemed to be an endless fount of material for films, dance programs, Broadway and revues. “**Volvere**”, “**Asi**”, “**Yo No Se**”, “**Magic is the Moonlight**”,

“**Lamento Gitano**”, “**My First, My Last, My Only**” all enjoyed great popularity with Big Bands of the era, as did a nonsense song called “**Ti-Pi-Tin**” which was a big hit for the Andrews Sisters, among others.

In 1934 she wrote a bolero called “**Cuando Vuelva a tu Lado**” with a gorgeous, unforgettable melody that was recorded as an instrumental by Benny Goodman. Later the Dorsey Brothers (with Bob Crosby on vocals) recorded a new version of the song with an English lyric and title provided by lyricist Stanley Adams, with whom Maria often collaborated. “**What a Difference a Day Made**” was a hit in the 30’s, but it was Dinah Washington’s rendition of this song in 1959 that gave Maria Grever her most memorable, if posthumous, hit. Dinah won a Grammy that year for her recording, and this version was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1998.

Maria Grever was threatened with the loss of her eyesight in the 1950’s, which caused her to become active in raising money for the education of the Blind in Latin America. These efforts were applauded by the United Way of America, who named her “Woman of the Americas” at a banquet in her honor. She is truly that, as her songs live on through American jazz and even more so in Mexico, where she is still revered, sung and recorded year after year.

Just as there is a dramatic tale spun around her birth, legend has it that upon hearing her friend and fellow singer Nestor Chayres interpret her song “**Vida Mia**” at Carnegie Hall in 1948, she was so overcome she suffered a brain hemorrhage which led to her death. Maria Grever passed away in New York at the age of 57 on December 15, 1951.

Performer, mentor, teacher, humanitarian. Maria Grever was an inspiration indeed, but her strongest legacy is in her songs – over 800 of them published in many languages and countries. Quoting Bill Zeitung’s liner notes from “**Songs of Maria Grever**” (RCA, 1956) “(Her music) is on every hand, yet the name is only familiar to a few”.

Sources:

Notable Hispanic American Women, Diane Telgen, Jim Kamp, 1993

A History of Popular Music in America, Sigmund Spaeth, Random House, 1962.

"Songs of Maria Grever," RCA record album, 1956.

Suggested Listening:

“**Jurame**”– Andrea Bocelli, Placido Domingo. Here’s a youtube link with Placido Domingo playing piano and singing this lush song:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dETCzYOSQsk>

My friend Mariano De Leon alerted me to a 1954 film biography of Maria Grever: “**Cuando Me Vaya (When I leave)**” starring the well known Argentine singer/actress Libertad Lamarque. This film, alas is not yet available with English sub-titles.

“**Ti-pi-tin**” – Andrews Sisters. But don’t overlook Tony Randall singing this with the Muppets!

“**Canciones de Maria Grever**”, Libertad Lamarque (great version of “Ti-pi-tin”)

“**What a Diff’rence a Day Made**” - Dinah Washington, Barbara Morrison