

# Singer Martha Jean-Claude Dead at 82

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Haitian singer and actress Martha Jean-Claude, whose engaged music inspired Haitians struggling against dictatorship for decades, died at age 82 on Nov. 14 in Havana.

Known as "the daughter of two islands," she was a symbol of the fraternity between Haiti and Cuba, where she lived most of her life and raised four children.

Martha Jean-Claude, known affectionately as Mamita, came to fame in Haiti during the 1940s, most notably during Port-au-Prince's bicentennial festivities in 1949. As a child, she sang at the Port-au-Prince Cathedral and, in 1942, began her professional career with folkloric concerts at the Rex Theatre, where she was often accompanied by fellow singer-dancer Emérantes Despradines.

In 1952, she was imprisoned for publishing a play, "Avrinette," which the regime of President Paul Magloire found subversive. She fled to Cuba on Dec. 20, 1952.

"I left Haiti after spending several months in prison while pregnant," she recalled in an interview. "I gave birth two days after getting out. One month after leaving prison -- my husband was in Cuba - - I left to join him." She had married Cuban journalist Victor Mirabal, whom she met after one of her shows. A few months later, they married in Venezuela.

Together they had four children: Linda, an opera singer in Madrid; Sandra, a musician living in Amsterdam; Magdalena, a doctor living in Cuba; and Richard Mirabal, a musician and director of the Martha Jean-Claude Foundation, based in Pétionville, Haïti.

In Cuba, she quickly became a star on the stage, radio, and television, playing with different orchestras and in many clubs, including the famous "Tropicana." In 1957, she spent a year working in Mexico, where her "Afro Cabaret" was very popular on television.

When she returned to Cuba in 1958, the country was in upheaval and she sided with the revolutionaries. After the Batista dictatorship fell in 1959, she became something of an ambassador for the Cuban Revolution, Haitian culture, and the anti-Duvalierist struggle, bringing her concerts to many socialist countries as well as playing at schools, Army bases, and official receptions in Cuba. She even travelled with the Cuban Army to Angola in the 1970s. She also toured Paris, Montreal, New York, Panama, Mexico, and Spain.

In 1971, she starred in the anti-Duvalierist film *Si m pa rele*, produced in Cuba.

"It's natural that I struggle for social justice," Martha said in an interview explaining the political character of many of her 50 songs and 8 albums. "To sing the song of the peasants, that's what is in my heart. I lean toward these people. My songs are what one calls protest ballads."

After 34 years in exile, she returned to Haiti in 1986, after the fall of Jean-Claude Duvalier, and held a triumphant concert. She performed again in Port-au-Prince in 1991 with Mackandal, a musical group she formed in 1978 with her children Richard and Sandra.

Several of Martha's grandchildren accompanied her to a concert in her honor with Despradines and Cuban singer Celia Cruz at the Sylvio Cator stadium in Port-au-Prince in July 1996.

The same year, President René Préval honored her with Haiti's highest medal of honor. "With her children born in Cuba, she created the Martha Jean-Claude Foundation with the goal of perfecting the artistic formation of youth and to allow better cultural relations between Haiti and Cuba," a Haitian government press release explained after her death.

Last year, Richard Mirabal, working with Cuban television, produced a one-hour documentary on her life and music entitled "Fanm 2 zile" (Woman of Two Islands).

Her last public appearance was at a reception in the Palace of the Revolution in Havana on Jul. 17 on the occasion of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's state visit to Cuba. Although in a wheelchair, Martha bantered cheerfully with Fidel Castro and Aristide.

Born in Port-au-Prince on Mar. 21, 1919, Martha suffered in recent years from diabetes and other ailments and spent her final month in a Cuban hospital. Her family was all on hand for her death. Her funeral, attended by former Haitian president René Préval, was held in Havana on Nov. 15.

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