

Dear María Elena,

Madrid, January 2010

As I began writing, I realised I was not very clear on how to address you. Protocol dictates that one should address a lady of your stature with reverence, but knowing how much us artists struggle with formalities, I was fearing my being formulaic might come across as cold, and distant. That is when I remembered the time we met in 1999 during the Argentinean Author's Society award ceremony, an award which I was handed by yourself, and Ariel Ramirez, and so I went fishing for photographs of that occasion. What I found, those photographs, the "still life" of our existence, reminded me of how affectionate our encounter had been. As such I have decided that using a more familiar tone with you can't be too bad, so here I go... If I'm wrong in doing that, please forgive me, and feel free to put me back in my place with a reply.

So then came the investigation on how I could get this letter over to you. I sent an S.O.S. to my contacts in Argentina and I found out you'd been admitted to hospital. I don't know if I got the whole thing right, and I'm sorry if I'm wrong, but the child in me is devastated that the "Reina Batata" may not be in good health. I'm hoping your stay in hospital is only temporary, and that you'll be back home soon.

To the point: In 1999, a couple of days after the award thing, the producers from García Ferré called me up to find out whether I was interested in recording your song, *Manuelita*, for the film that was nearly wrapping up production back then. I went into the recording studios, and I did record my part as asked, but they eventually picked a female voice as an alternative, as it was apparently more appropriate for the mind of a child. I remembered your words when you gave me the books with your songs back at that ceremony and yes, it does surprise me too, that the majority of children's songs are sung by women. That's why, since that anecdote with the people from García Ferré, until now, I was chased by the obsession of turning your dream into reality: to record those children's songs, but with the voice of a dad. And I managed to do it: I'm writing this to tell you that I've finished recording 32 of your "little gems" a few weeks ago.

When I got into your scores (which I hadn't done before given that we'd all been sharing your songs from one generation to the next only by ear), I learnt things like the fact that *Manuelita* is a habanera, not a ballad: it's so much more beautiful when played with such a sensual rhythm! I also discovered that the *Canción del estornudo*, *La familia polillal* or *Perro salchicha show*, are musical theatre in its purest form —and so on and so forth with all of your songs. I told, Giulio, my pianist, that if we ourselves didn't have fun, then neither would the children listening; and if we ourselves didn't cry (you don't know how hard it was for me to record *La pájara Pinta* without my voice breaking), then the children wouldn't cry. That's how it was, and that's how we did it —laughing and crying— and they came out beautiful. I chose to sing them in rather low tonalities so that the warmth of a deeper voice could perhaps send some vibrations into the soul of the children listening. We also simplified the instrumentation down to its essence, that of the piano, as in the original scores of the songs. It's kind of unbelievable how you focus on the purity of the words, and the sweetness of the melody, when there are no unnecessary distractions! So now we're in the delicate process of turning this beautifully recorded material into a product (sorry for using such a horrible word) that can reach the children of today, who are so hardened by all things electronic, with the same strength with which they reached me, and all of those in my generation, so many years ago. By the way, thank you for that, for having nannied us.

I'm not sure when we'll release this to the public, I'm not in a hurry —it took me a lot of years to mature the project— but I wanted you to know of its existence with my gratitude, and affection.

With admiration,
José Cura

N.B: we finished editing and mixing the songs in 2011. María Elena passed away in January that year. I was never able to see her receive this letter, nor the recording. That sadness will only be remedied once I know that many children, aged zero to a hundred years old, will be enjoying this record, which I so love.