

## FEATURES

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2008

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[ THE WEEKENDER ]

## ‘The fiancée of feeling’ and the sultans of swing



Celluloid cast a spell on their audience on Friday night at Underworld. PHOTO: RON BROWNLOW, TAIPEI TIMES

BY RON BROWNLOW, DAVID CHEN AND BRADLEY WINTERTON  
STAFF REPORTERS AND CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Omara Portuondo charmed Taiwan with her down-to-earth grace and masterful voice during her concert on Saturday night at the Taipei International Convention Center.

The audience was spellbound the moment she stepped on stage. With the mere wave of her hand, the Cuban diva, dressed in an elegant white robe, had everyone clapping the beat to *Gracias*, the title track of her newly released album. Throughout the evening, she peppered her lyrics and stage banter with well-practiced “thank you’s” in Mandarin.

There was a sense of preciousness to the evening as the 77-year-old sang her signature boleros with both the gusto and fragility that earned her the nickname as the “fiancée of film” [feeling]; she occasionally broke into funky struts and jives on the dance numbers, much to the delight of the audience and her band.

If you went expecting the classic sounds of the Buena Vista Social Club, you might have been disappointed — but only for a moment. Portuondo has kept her sound fresh and engaging by featuring young and up-and-coming talent in her backing band. Pianist Harold Lopez-Nussa is one to watch in the future; the 24-year-old elicited robust applause from the audience with beautifully dissonant, chordal solos that hint at new possibilities for Cuban jazz.

Portuondo mostly sang songs from her new album, but she did oblige Buena Vista fans with a quiet, heartfelt rendition of *Dos Gardenias*, which she dedicated to her friend and fellow singer Ibrahim Ferrer, who died in 2005.

She and her band turned up the heat toward the end of their 90-minute set with *Guantanamera*, which had everyone dancing. Portuondo encouraged the audience to sing along on *Besame Mucho*, but graciously declined a second encore with a curtain call, saying “I’ll be back, maybe someday.”

One certainly hopes so, given moments in the evening such as the bittersweet *Veinte Años*. As Portuondo ended the song with an operatic delivery of the final note, her eyes seemed to glisten with tears — or was it just the reflection of the lights? Either way, the audience had been swept off their feet.

The National Symphony Orchestra has always been very strong in the celebrated soloists it invites in. Last Thursday, Taipei was privileged to hear 23-year-old Spanish violinist Leticia Moreno in a stunning rendition of Sibelius’s Violin Concerto. It was a tour de force on all counts, with both orchestra and soloist excelling. Grandeur, pathos and displays of awesome technique combined ideally together under Gunther Herbig’s assured direction. A bleak Arctic splendor shone out even as expressions of an inner desolation lined up for their turn in the limelight. Of such contradictions great art is made.

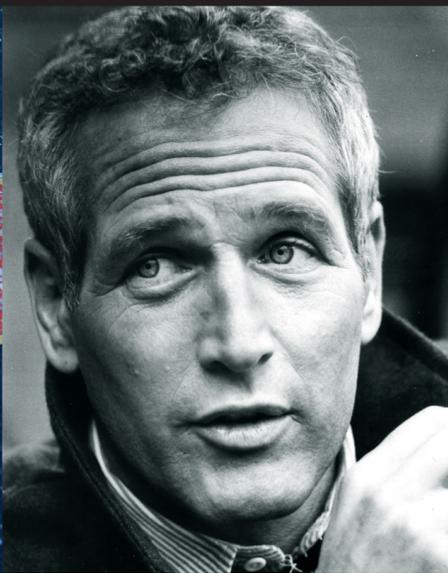
Quite why I didn’t feel as enthusiastic about the rendition of Schubert’s Ninth Symphony that followed is hard to say. Two distinguished musicologists in the audience told me afterwards that Schubert is notoriously hard on musicians who are less than perfect. But the NSO is pretty close to perfect, so what was missing? The work calls for alternations of lyricism and grandeur, and perhaps the two were insufficiently differentiated. A loving lingering over its beauties doesn’t come amiss either, but this isn’t Herbig’s manner. And if Schubert on this occasion eluded him, the Sibelius concerto made up for just about everything.

It was a blast from the past on Friday night at Underworld (地下社會) — and what a blast it was! In a rare appearance, the veteran rockers of Celluloid (賽璐珞) swung into the club and mesmerized their audience with a lengthy set of blues-rock originals, along with a few covers of hits such as Neil Young’s *My My, Hey Hey* and Stevie Ray Vaughan’s *Little Wings*. The covers were good, but even better were the quintet’s own songs, including *It Doesn’t Matter* (無所謂), *Spring Weather* (春天的天氣) and *The First Time* (第一次).

Celluloid has the rich, filled-out sound of a band with chemistry and skilled musicians on the full complement of blues-rock instruments. And frontman A-yi (王信義) — who runs a recording studio and has produced albums for Ladybug (瓢蟲) and Sugar Plum Ferry (甜梅) — is electrifying as a guitar soloist, as he showed with a note-perfect rendition of the solo from Lynard Skynard’s *Free Bird*. Audiences in Taipei invariably request encores, but when the crowd on Friday night asked for one, then another, they really, really meant it.



Right: Actor Paul Newman in a scene from the 1973 film *The Mackintosh Man*. Newman died of cancer on Saturday. Above: Flowers are placed on Newman’s star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in Los Angeles on Saturday.



## Newman’s cool hand

Paul Newman, the Oscar-winning superstar who personified cool as the anti-hero of such films as ‘Hud’ and ‘The Color of Money,’ showed his quality later in life as an activist and philanthropist

BY MANOHLA DARGIS  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Paul Newman always wore his fame lightly, his beauty too. The beauty may have been more difficult to navigate, when he was young in the 1950s and still being called the next Marlon Brando, establishing his bona fides at the Actors Studio and on Broadway.

Yet Newman, who died at his home in Westport, Connecticut, on Friday, never seemed to resent his good looks, as some men did; instead, he shrugged them off without letting them go. He learned to use that flawless face, so we could see the complexities underneath. And later, when age had extracted its price, he learned to use time too, showing us how beauty could be beaten down and nearly used-up.

You see the dangerous side of his beauty in *Hud*, Martin Ritt’s irresistible if disingenuous 1963 drama about a Texas ranching family, in which Newman plays the womanizing son of a cattleman (the Hollywood veteran Melvyn Douglas), who’s hanging onto a fast-fading way of life. The movie traffics in piety: The father refuses to dig for the oil that might change the family’s fortunes because he doesn’t approve of sucking the land dry. Newman plays the son, Hud, and it’s his job to sneer at the old man’s naivete and to play the villain, which he does so persuasively that he ends up being the film’s most enduring strength.

A lot of reviewers clucked about Hud and Newman’s grasping bad-boy ways (the word they used then was materialism), but the camera loves this cowboy Lothario so much — or, rather, the actor playing him — that his father’s high-and-mighty ways don’t stand a chance. Nobody else much does, either: When Hud hits on family housekeeper (a smoky-voiced, smoking Patricia Neal), he sinks back in her bed and, with his nose deep in a daisy, asks with a leer, “What else you good at?” Rarely has the act of smelling a flower seemed as delectably dirty. It’s no wonder that Pauline Kael, who refused to buy just about anything else this movie was selling, gave Newman his due.

There are some men, Kael wrote, who “project such a traditional heroic frankness and sweetness that the audience dotes on them, seeks to protect them from harm or pain.” Newman did that for Kael, enough so that she was inspired to write about her own past and the California town that she “and so many of my friends came out of” — and, here, I think she means girlfriends — “escaping from the swaggering small-town hotshots like Hud.”

What’s striking is that what got Kael going wasn’t the actor or his performance but the man, who, because he seemed to offer up an

intangible part of himself, something genuine and real, something we could take home, became a true movie star.

I don’t think Newman was ever as beautiful as he is in *Hud*. His lean, hard-muscled body seems to slash against the widescreen landscape, evoking the oil derricks to come, and the black-and-white cinematography turns his famous baby blues an eerie shade of gray. The character would be a heartbreaker if he were interested in breaking hearts instead of making time with the bodies that come with them. That’s supposed to make Hud a mean man, but mostly he seems self-interested. No one is tearing him apart, and Newman doesn’t try to plumb the depths with the role, which makes the character and the performance feel more contemporary than many of the head cases of the previous decade. He finds depths in these shallows.

Early in his career, Newman was often mistaken for Brando, so much so that he took to signing the other man’s autograph. Both studied at the Actors Studio and jumped to Hollywood, but there’s not much else to connect them beyond our demand for the Next Big Thing. The resemblance seems hard to grasp now, given their trajectories and how differently the two register onscreen: Brando sizzles, while Newman is as cool as dry ice. And unlike Brando, who at his death was often unkindly remembered for his baroque excesses, Newman seemed immune, bulletproof. (An exception: his support for Eugene McCarthy, which landed him on former US president Richard Nixon’s enemies list.) He had a talent for evasion.

It was a talent that served him well during the 1960s, the decade in which he picked up the mantle of Hollywood stardom that Brando had shrugged off. Newman was one of the dominating male screen figures of that decade, appearing in critical and commercial successes like *Cool Hand Luke*, a 1967 prison movie-cum-religious-allegory, and the 1969 Western *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, in which he found a partner in charm in Robert Redford. These days, 1969 is more often remembered for another buddy movie, *Easy Rider*, but *Butch Cassidy* may have had more lasting impact on the so-called New Hollywood, which struck gold with two photogenic male leads whose easy, breezy rapport helped transform rebellion into a salable, lucrative package.

Newman, who signed a contract with Warner Bros in the 1950s, was a transitional figure between the old Hollywood and the new. Warner foolishly put him in a ludicrous 1954 costume extravaganza called *The Silver Chalice*. He did better as the boxer Rocky Graziano

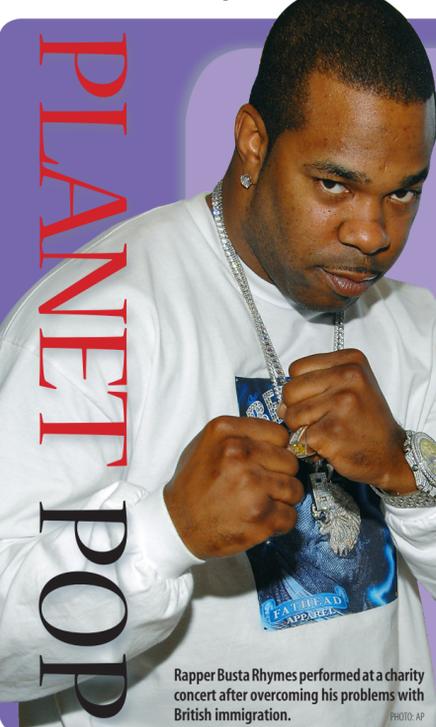
in the 1956 biopic *Somebody Up There Likes Me*. His Lower East Side accent is so thick it could have been served on rye at Katz’s Delicatessen, but he holds the screen with his pretty-boy kisser and an intense, at times wild physical performance that suggests a terrific will behind that impeccable facade. He seems to be hurling himself at the camera, as if desperate to get our attention.

The roles improved, as did the performances, and suddenly he didn’t seem to be trying as hard. He’s silky smooth as a pool shark named Fast Eddie in Robert Rossen’s 1961 high-key drama *The Hustler*, in which Jackie Gleason, Piper Laurie and George C. Scott take turns stealing scenes. At first Newman seems outclassed by his co-stars — the film asks the actor, a nibbler rather than an outright thief, to do too much big acting. But he’s still awfully good. He seduces and repels by turn, pulling you in so you can watch him peel Fast Eddie’s defenses like layers of dead skin. It’s a wonder there was anything left by the time he revived the character 25 years later in *The Color of Money*.

He won an Oscar in 1987 for best actor for resurrecting Fast Eddie in that Martin Scorsese film, a piteously delayed response from his peers, who dangled six such nominations before giving up the prize. (Hedging its bets, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences had tossed Newman an honorary Oscar the year before.) He’s superb in *The Color of Money*, gracefully navigating its slick surfaces and periodically scratching beneath them, playing a variation on what had by then in movies like *The Drowning Pool* (1975), *Slap Shot* (1977) and *The Verdict* (1982) become a defining Newman type: the guy on the hustle who seems to have nothing much left but keeps his motor running, just in case.

The movies are not kind to older actors, and yet Newman walked away from this merciless business seemingly unscathed. During his second and third acts, he kept his dignity partly by playing men who seemed to have relinquished theirs through vanity or foolishness. Some of them were holding onto decency in an indecent world; others had nearly let it slip through their fingers.

Decency seems to have come easily to Newman himself, as evidenced by his philanthropic and political endeavors, which never devolved into self-promotion. It was easy to take his intelligence for granted as well as his talent, which survived even the occasional misstep. At the end of *The Drowning Pool*, a woman wistfully tells Newman, I wish you’d stay awhile. I know how she feels.



Rapper Busta Rhymes performed at a charity concert after overcoming his problems with British immigration.

Rapper **Busta Rhymes** was refused entry into the UK last week, according to the promoter of a Busta Rhymes charity concert.

Rhymes was detained at London City Airport on Thursday by immigration officers, who said their refusal was based on “unresolved convictions” in the US, said Stephen Greene of Orange RockCorps.

The promoter said Rhymes, whose real name is Trevor George Smith Jr, had been allowed into the UK twice before this year. The performer was in custody while RockCorps challenged the decision.

Rhymes performed at the Royal Albert Hall on Friday night after winning a court order allowing him to stay in the country. US rap star **Ludacris**, who had agreed to perform in Rhymes’ place, suffered his own misfortune when a fire destroyed a pool house at his home outside Atlanta on Wednesday night.

Fulton County Fire Department spokesman Gregory Chambers says a relative was in the basement of the main residence when the fire started and was not injured.

Chambers says the fire was put out within 30 minutes but destroyed the pool house, which he says is larger than most homes.

The fire was being investigated but the

cause was not immediately identified.

It’s official: Clay is gay.

Finally confirming what many people already knew, the cover of the latest *People* magazine shows **Clay Aiken** — the former talent show contestant-turned-multi-platinum singer — holding his infant son, Parker Foster Aiken, with the headline: “Yes, I’m Gay.” The cover also has the quote: “I cannot raise a child to lie or hide things.”

The baby’s mother is Aiken’s friend and record producer **Jaymes Foster**.

Aiken, who gained fame as the runner-up on *American Idol* in 2003, rarely addressed the frequent rumors about his sexuality. In an interview with the Associated Press two years ago, he said: “I don’t really feel like I have anybody to answer to but myself and God and the people I love.” Aiken recently released the CD *On My Way Here* and made his Broadway debut this spring in *Monty Python’s Spamalot*.

In other news, **Johnny Cash** will speak to his fans from beyond the grave with a previously unreleased recitation that will be available as part of a new documentary examining Cash’s views on the US.

In *I Am The Nation*, the deep-voiced singer personifies the country with references to important events and



Clay Aiken: “Yes, I’m gay.” PHOTO: REUTERS

people in American history.

The recording was discovered in Cash’s personal belongings after his death. It will be released as part of *Johnny Cash’s America*, a documentary airing Oct. 23 in the US on the Biography Channel. The companion DVD/CD package on Legacy Recordings will be available on Oct. 28.

The documentary features interviews with **Bob Dylan**; **Al Gore**; **Snoop Dogg**; **Sheryl Crow**; **Steve Earle**; **Kris Kristofferson**; **Loretta Lynn**; **Merle Haggard**; US Senator **Lamar Alexander**; **Tim Robbins**; **Vince Gill**; Cash; his sister, **Joanne**; and his children, **John Carter Cash** and **Cindy Cash**.

In the film, Cash, who was outspoken

on social issues, discusses the political process and the two parties.

“The whole film and soundtrack are poignant for what’s going on in the political climate right now,” said Charlie Dougiello, a spokesman for the project.

There must be something in the in the Kununurra water.

Oscar-winning actress **Nicole Kidman** said swimming in Australian Outback waterfalls may promote fertility and might have contributed to her unexpected pregnancy over the past year.

The 41-year-old Aussie, who gave birth to daughter Sunday Rose in July, said she and six other women who swam in the waters of a small Outback town during production of the epic romance *Australia* fell pregnant.

“I never thought that I would get pregnant and give birth to a child, but it happened on this movie,” Kidman told *The Australian Women’s Weekly* in an exclusive interview for the magazine’s 75th anniversary edition, released on Wednesday.

“Seven babies were conceived out of this film and only one was a boy. There is something up there in the Kununurra water because we all went swimming in the waterfalls, so we can call it the fertility waters now.”

—AGENCIES