There's a hole in my soul/
You can see it in my face/
It's a real big place.

Robbie Williams, “Feel”

A ambiciones y anhelos
no renunciaré/
Seguiré insistiendo/
No me rendiré.

Luis Omar, “Venceré”

[Ambitions and yearnings
I will not give up/
I will continue to insist/
I will not give in.]

As national identities and sentiments are being placed and misplaced, defended and crossed over in pan-Caribbean “tropical” musical genres, somewhere in the recesses of a record company’s warehouse, thousands of CDs rest untouched and unplayed. The silence of those CDs mark the unsettling end to the short and footnoted career of Puerto Rican salsa singer Luis Omar, the man who—had it not been for one night in October 2001—would have been anointed as heir to the sexy tropical crooners that populate and copulate the polisexual Caribbean rhythm island.

The then 27-year-old entertainer was poised to enter the attitudinal universe of made-for-salsa suits, sensual posturing, and flamboyant choreography.
His career script was mired in its predictability: Armed with a multinational record distribution deal with Sony, the singer—or so it was predicted—would succeed in procuring airplay, light the musical fires of the Puerto Rican patron saint festival party circuit, secure better contracts, cross over North and South, establish his credentials as a major player as publicized and acclaimed as Marc Anthony, and fantasize about coasting to a Grammy Awards ceremony and winning one or two gramophones himself. It had been done before.

But on October 25, 2001, just months after Luis Omar’s first cut hit the airwaves of his native island, the singer quietly vanished, not as a casualty of celebrity culture, but as an exceptional Houdiniesque survivor of the musical underworld. Gone—perhaps forever, it was then thought—Luis Omar became a celebrity cult, and his invisibility (enhanced by the disappearance of his only musical production from record stores) so confounded the Puerto Rican media that the story of his downfall has never been aired or printed on the island.

When Luis Omar vanished, his body and his presence were being requested by his newfound fans; TV and concert bookings awaited the “salsero for the new century”; websites from Turkey to Italy to Japan peddled his record. But instead of riding the preordained wave to crossover success, he ended up as a fugitive in the most wanted list in several states from California to Florida. No one knew what he had done or where he had gone, but two things are now clear: the criminal past and the penchant for self-sabotage of this prodigal son who will never step on any of the stages he had framed in the exacting dimensions of his desire and ambition. The painstakingly calculated making of a candidate for salsa iconography was thwarted by the secrets that still remain to be uncovered.

The day Luis Omar fled the California house in which he lived with his lover, he had been planning his first promotional tour after one of the songs from his debut CD, Así así, climbed the charts in Puerto Rico and Latin America. He had worked hard for this moment. But the fame-hungry singer also had been lavishly caressed by the marked gods of music. In the summer of 2001, his physique in a dark blue suit and tailored white shirt adorned many of the billboards that surround the strip that welcomes tourists to the Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport in Puerto Rico. His face was a welcoming mat of sorts, as befits an island that promises the enchantments of music and abandon as selling points for the Caribbean pseudo-cultural fantasy of massified tourism.

For the casual passersby, the billboards signaled the nascent career of a salsa hunk who complied with all the basic requirements and attendant accoutrements of a Latin male music megastar: muscle tone, attitude, Euro-style wardrobe, evident metrosexuality, and an unflinching attention to detail, all in a six-foot-two frame. His first album served to promote the singer as a musical wunderkind—he had authored five of the songs of his debut recording, served as co-executive producer, and financially underwritten the enterprise that would launch his career. For his flirtations with stardom, his chameleon-like Mediterranean looks had been packaged for the kill.