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## No Slowing Down for Cuban Diva

By Cathy Rose A. Garcia



Cuban diva Omara Portuondo will perform in Seoul Oct. 3.

Omara Portuondo, the 77-year-old diva of the legendary Buena Vista Social Club, shows no sign of slowing down anytime soon.

Portuondo is celebrating her 60th anniversary as a musician this year, by releasing a new album "Gracias" and going on a world tour which brings her to Seoul Oct. 3.

In an e-mail interview with The Korea Times, Portuondo said she is not yet thinking about retirement. "I guess I will (retire), someday, when the time comes... But it's most certainly not now! I still have yet a lot to sing and a lot to give to my audience," she said.

Portuondo said she gets the strength to keep singing and performing from her family, friends, Cuba, Cuban food and the audience who comes to see her in concert. "From nature, too," she added. "I'm very fortunate to have healthy genes, and therefore, I also have to thank my parents."

Born in Havana, Cuba in 1930, Portuondo started her career as a dancer at the Tropicana Club, and later formed a singing group Cuarteto D'Aida, with her elder sister Haydee and friends Elena Burke and Moraima Secada.

Portuondo is best known around the world as part of the Buena Vista Social Club, which was a popular members-only club in Havana in the 1940s. Interest in the club was revived in the 1990s, as Cuban musician Juan de Marcos Gonzalez and American guitarist Ry Cooder made an album featuring many of the musicians who performed at the club.

For Portuondo, it was a "great coincidence" that led her to join the Buena Vista Social Club.

"I was recording at the Egrem Studio where Juan was also recording with Ry and Nick Gold. I had long known Juan, so he introduced me to Ry and Nick, and invited me to record a song for Buena Vista on the spot. I was really lucky to have been in the same studio on that same day! It was a very lucky coincidence," she said.

The album became an international hit. German director Wim Venders even made a documentary about the Buena Vista Social Club, which only helped raise the group's international profile.

Portuondo, now the group's only surviving member, has wonderful memories performing with the Buena Vista Social Club, especially her old friend Ibrahim Ferrer.

“We had known each other for a long time, but we had drifted apart. It had been long since I had last heard from him. So it was a really touching and beautiful moment when we met again at the studio. Singing ‘Silencio (Silence)’ with Ferrer was the best experience I had with the Buena Vista Social Club. Of course, recording with Ry Cooder and other great musicians has been something really big. Well, what can I say, whenever you make good music with great musicians and colleagues, it becomes an unforgettable experience,” she said.

Her latest album “Gracias,” which means “thank you,” in Spanish, is a way for her to express gratitude to her fans' support in the last 60 years.

“I really wanted to thank my audience by selecting a series of songs that have been really important to me during all these years,” Portuondo said.

Portuondo said all of the songs are very touching and have special personal meaning for her. The album includes “Cachita,” a duet with her granddaughter Rossio; “Nuestro Gran Amor (Our Great Love)” composed by her son Ariel Jimenez; and “Yo Vi (I Saw),” a song about her homeland Cuba.

Portuondo is returning to Seoul for a concert Oct. 3 at the concert hall of the Seoul Arts Center. The Cuban star has nothing but praise for Korea, where she has performed several times.

“I like everything about Korea! The people, the food and the culture — I adore your country. I would go there every year if that were possible. I have many beautiful memories of Korea, but the best thing is the love and the way the Koreans treat me, which is something I'm very grateful of,” she said.

Portuondo promises fans a “magical and unforgettable evening” at the concert.