

Cuban diva looks back on 60 years

By David Chen

From her days as a pioneer of Cuban jazz music in the 1940s to her legendary appearances with the Buena Vista Social Club in the late 1990s and her following artistic revival, singer Omara Portuondo has good reason to celebrate.

And this is what the 77-year-old Cuban diva has done with her new album, *Gracias*, which was officially released yesterday. Portuondo visits Taipei International Convention Center tomorrow as part of a tour of Asia and Europe.

“At this time, I am celebrating 60 years of an artistic career and that is an important reason for making this new album,” said Portuondo in an e-mail interview last week with the Taipei Times, translated from Spanish.

“I believe that the repertoire is going to touch many hearts, and for me the disc is very personal and special,” she said.

In *Gracias*, Portuondo pays tribute to performers and songwriters that she has admired over the years, recording what she considers “important” songs: the album begins with *Yo vi*, a Spanish-language adaptation of a song by the French crooner Henri Salvador, which she says “speaks of our island [Cuba].” The album includes a rendition of Cuban composer Ela O’Farrill’s *Adios Felicidad*, which Portuondo says has “lyrics that make me very excited. The music is very intense, just like me.” She also sings a duet with Chico Buarque, the renowned Brazilian songwriter-turned-novelist.

The new album features fresh talent as well. Portuondo says she was pleased to work with the Uruguayan pop composer Jorger Drexler, who wrote the album’s title track. She sings duets with her granddaughter Rossio Jimenez and son Ariel Jimenez on several tracks; flirts with more modern jazz sensibilities in collaboration with bassist Avashai Cohen; and salutes African music with Cameroonian musician Richard Bona, a vocalist and bassist perhaps best known for his work with Pat Metheny.

The album also sees Portuondo’s continuing collaboration with two Brazilians, producer Ale Siquiera and guitarist and musical director Swami Jr, both of whom brought a subtle, contemporary touch to her 2004 release *Flor de Amour*.

As Portuondo looks back at a long and accomplished career, it’s hard not to notice that a decade has passed since Buena Vista Social Club became a worldwide sensation and propelled her to international stardom.

She still fondly recalls the ensemble’s legendary concert in 1998 at New York’s Carnegie Hall, which will be released on CD next month.

“For me Carnegie Hall is a very special place ... It was very exciting for everyone who was there ... at that moment no one saw it as an opportunity or the beginning of anything,” she said.

“When I got on the stage and encountered the audience applauding, shouting, waving the Cuban flag, I quickly went back inside ... I was afraid at that moment to feel so many emotions. Juan de Marcos [Gonzalez, the band’s musical director] had to tell me to get [back on stage]. I cried several times during the concert ... Many people cried during that magical night.”

When she last appeared in Taipei in 2005, Portuondo impressed audiences with her grace and an onstage verve that defied her advancing years and tough touring schedule. What keeps her going?

“I love my work deeply. Every concert I do fills me with energy and, moreover, I try to take care of myself as much as possible: I don’t drink; I don’t smoke; I eat healthily; and I exercise. I like to walk a lot and to get to know the cities I visit. Music is my inspiration and being able to give myself to my public in every concert is something that makes me feel very lucky,” she said.

Joining Portuondo on stage tomorrow night are guitarist Swami Jr, bassist Felipe Cabrera, pianist Harold Lopez-Nussa and percussionists Rodney Barreto and Andres Coayo.