PROGRAM: OMARA PORTUONDO FROM THE BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB® 85 TOUR
OCTOBER 1 / 7:30 PM
BING CONCERT HALL

ARTISTS
Omara Portuondo, vocals

With special guests:
Roberto Fonseca, piano
Anat Cohen, clarinet and saxophone
Regina Carter, violin

PROGRAM
This evening's program will be announced from the stage.

KORET FOUNDATION

This program was generously funded by the Koret Foundation. The Koret Jazz Project is a multiyear initiative to support, expand, and celebrate the role of jazz in the artistic and educational programming of Stanford Live.

At 6:30 pm, join the National Jazz Museum in Harlem’s Loren Schoenberg for a conversation with Roberto Fonseca about his genre-crossing style and about the legacy of Cuban jazz today.

PROGRAM SUBJECT TO CHANGE. Please be considerate of others and turn off all phones, pagers, and watch alarms, and unwrap all lozenges prior to the performance. Photography and recording of any kind are not permitted. Thank you.
OMARA PORTUONDO
While other much-loved Buena Vista stars like Rubén González and Ibrahim Ferrer were lured out of retirement, Omara Portuondo never stopped—she has been continually performing in public since the age of 15, a legendary singer whose voice reflects a long creative life of passion and music. She has been singing professionally for an incredible 70 years, and while revolutions and wars shook the globe, she has carried on, with indomitable elegance. Portuondo was born in the barrio of Cayo Hueso, in Havana, Cuba, known for its musicality. There was some scandal in the family. Her mother, Esperanza Peláez, came from a wealthy family of Spanish ancestry who assumed she would marry a rich, white man with a high social position. In fact, she ran away with a tall, handsome, black baseball player named Bartolo Portuondo. For years they could not walk down the street in public, but the marriage endured. Bartolo was a friend of the national poet Nicolás Guillén and a lover of music, and the house, lacking a gramophone, was filled with singing.

As a shy 15-year-old, she broke into the lush, sequinned world of cabaret, and following in the chorus-line shoes of her sister Haydee, she became a dancer at the Tropicana, the glamorous club that still continues in Havana, a frozen relic of the decadent prerevolutionary days. But singing was her forte, and she would spend weekends singing American jazz with the blind pianist Frank Emilio in his band, Loquibambia Swing.

She sang in the all-girl Orquesta Anacaona in 1952 and, with Haydee, in another female group—Cuarteto d’Aida—a 1950s Cuban Spice Girls directed by and named after pianist Aida Diestro. Things began to really move for Portuondo, and the group was signed to RCA Victor, toured the United States, and backed up some of the biggest stars of the moment like Benny Moré (“the Barbarian of Rhythm”), Edith Piaf, Bola de Nieve, and Nat King Cole at the Tropicana. This was at the peak of the glamour (some say kitsch) of the famous nightclub.

As a soloist, Omara Portuondo accompanied some of the great innovators like Arsenio Rodríguez and Isolina Carillo. Her first solo album was not, as with other Buena Vista Social Club members, after the release of that groundbreaking album but was way back in 1959, entitled Black Magic.

After the revolution that year, Portuondo carried on touring the States until things reached a crisis point with the Missile Crisis and Cuban-American relations were broken off. She and the Cuarteto d’Aida were in Miami when her sister, along with many other Cuban performers, decided to stay. Portuondo returned to Cuba and in a way filled a gap left by the departure of so many musicians from Cuba, and her career flourished—at first with a reformed Cuarteto d’Aida and then, from 1967 on, as a solo artist. For a while she appeared in vocal events in the socialist world and sang revolutionary songs and songs about Che Guevara and, later, Salvador Allende.

The United States was off limits, but she toured with Orquesta Aragon in Europe and in Africa, where they still have a huge following. “Omara is a legend in Cuba, and it’s safe to say there’s no one of my age who didn’t grow up under her influence,” Cuban-born ballet dancer Carlos Acosta says. “When I was a kid I’d see her all the time on television, singing the kinds of songs my parents liked.” She was a versatile performer, but her speciality was a heart-rending romantic bolero—she was often compared to Billie Holiday or Edith Piaf. She married and divorced and her son became her manager. Omara, a documentary film about her career, won a prize at Cannes in 1986.

In 1997, just when she had hit typical retirement age and might be expected to slow down, the Buena Vista Social Club project boosted her profile throughout the world. Ry Cooder had heard her in the mid-1990s, and she happened to be recording at Egrem, the national record label of Cuba, when an aborted Afro-Cuban project opened up some studio time. She was due to tour Vietnam but immediately recognized the importance of reviving the old-school music and became the only female member of the gang.

The album ricocheted round the world and novelist Salman Rushdie called 1998 “that Buena Vista summer.” Wim Wenders’ stylish film added rocket fuel to sales of the album. Portuondo and Ibrahim Ferrer recorded “Silencio,” and she had another gorgeous duet drenched in nostalgia with Compad Segundo with “Veinte años,” a song she had recorded before and had originally learned from her parents.

Her solo album in 2000 picked up a Grammy and was followed by the Brazilian-tinged Flor de Amor in 2004, which featured a song with family resonance called “Tabú” about interracial love. Other recordings and tours followed—a 60th-anniversary album, Gracias, and stellar collaborations with Cuban jazz pianist Chucho Valdés. She was the first Cuban woman to be an International Ambassador for the Red Cross. In recent years, she has sung everywhere from the Royal Opera House in London to the Latin Passion Festival in Hong Kong.

The best way to celebrate Omara Portuondo’s 85th year and 70 years of performing professionally? A very special worldwide tour which will include some exceptional invited guests. The great Cuban diva and artistic ambassador of her country wants to celebrate with a grand fiesta which represents the impressive sweep of her career—on every stop meeting old friends and new to perform much-loved Cuban classics from “Bésame mucho” to “Veinte años” together. The tour will reflect different aspects of her long career, from her younger years and her continuing love of elegant cabaret, from the Buena Vista days, and right up to the present with different tastes and flavors—a musical feast, full of piquant sabrosura.

—Peter Culshaw