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New generation keeps Buena Vista kicking

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Buena Vista Social Club moves forward despite deaths of original stars
- New generation of musicians bring their styles to traditional Cuban ensemble
- A documentary and sessions with Ry Cooder brought acclaim in late-1990s
- Buena Vista is booked to the end of the year and starting a European tour

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By Shasta Darlington
CNN

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Havana, CUBA (CNN) -- Sultry voices floated across a leafy park in Havana during an afternoon jam session, punctuated by trumpet blasts and the rhythmic pounding of timbales.



Making beautiful music: The Buena Vista Social Club has a packed calendar.

More than a dozen Cuban musicians sweated it out as people pulled up on bicycles to listen.

They recognized a few of the time-worn faces as members of the legendary Buena Vista Social Club.

But it wasn't exactly the band that sparked a revival in traditional Cuban music in 1997.

Compay Segundo, Ibrahim Ferrer and Ruben Gonzalez, immortalized in Wim Wenders' 1999 documentary, have passed away.

And a new generation of musicians, like Carlos Manuel Calunga, have joined the band.

"Imagine, Ibrahim Ferrer was on that stage and I have to go out there where he was," he said during a break from the recent jam session.

"It's really hard, but you confront it and, well, so far it's working, people like it."

Many of the original stars of Buena Vista Social Club were brought out of retirement for the now legendary recording session with U.S. guitarist Ry Cooder.

The 1997 Grammy-winning album of romantic boleros and hip-swinging songs seemed to evoke the vintage cars and dilapidated buildings of Havana.

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The music reached even more ears and eyes with Wenders' documentary.

In 2003, the group's most famous front man, Compay Segundo, died at the age of 95.

But many of the original band members are still around, playing alongside young talents who have made names for themselves in Cuba and now want to expand their horizons.

Barbarito Torres was with the group from the beginning.

"When Buena Vista started, I was the youngest one, now I'm losing my hair," he said, lifting his cap.

In Cuba, these songs are golden oldies but international audiences can't get enough.

Buena Vista is booked to the end of the year. Some of the oldest stars may be gone, but the irresistible music hasn't changed.

"Every one of us, the young people working on the project, has our own style, but we're always trying to work in the traditional way it was created," said Idania Valdes, a lead singer who is also the daughter of one of the group's founders.

"We contribute something of ourselves but we really respect the style of all of these great artists who aren't with us," she said.

Valdes, sporting wrap-around sunglasses and tight jeans, seems to inject a youthful enthusiasm in the romantic songs.

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There are more than a dozen musicians collaborating on Buena Vista Social Club at any given time with others drifting in and out.

Cuban diva Omara Portuondo has gone solo, but on occasion, she still lends her smoky voice to the band.

On a recent afternoon, the musicians greeted her with kisses and reverence as she pulled a chair up to a microphone and started crooning "Dos gardenias para ti."

"The group continues because really we always had this music and we'll always have it because it's our treasure," she said.

But in recent years, not everyone could hear it. Washington denied Buena Vista Social Club visas when bilateral relations soured.

Portuondo says U.S. President Barack Obama will change that.

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"He already said he'd do it. I hope he does, we hope he does, and we'll be waiting."

In the meantime, they have other gigs to play. Their bags are already packed for a European tour that starts this week.

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