

Almost 80, and in Club paradise

REVIEW | Cubans thrill at Ravinia

BY LAURA EMERICK
lemerick@suntimes.com

The saga of Cuba's Buena Vista Social Club continues to unfold like a fairy tale. Fifteen years ago, a dozen elderly musicians rose from relative obscurity to global stardom after producer Ry Cooder asked them to join his one-off project exploring the roots of Cuban *son*.

That disc became a worldwide phenomenon, and although some stalwarts have gone on to that great *descarga* in the sky, the group lives on. Redubbed the Orquesta Buena Vista Social Club, with younger members bolstering its ranks, the band gave a joyous, life-affirming set Saturday at Ravinia.

Though the newcomers reveled in solo turns, the older guard, including Papi Oviedo on *tres*, Manuel Galban on guitar, Barbarito Torres on *laud* and Guajiro Mirabal on trumpet, lifted the two-hour concert into the realm of the extraordinary.

But "*la diva, la reina and la chica mas sexy*" Omara Portuondo blew away all comers. Now 79, she remains one of the greatest Cuban vocal stylists, investing each



Omara Portuondo (pictured in 2009) stole the show.

song with the passionate conviction that comes only from life experience.

Whether swinging the beat on "No Me Llores Mas" or crooning delicately on "Silencio," she burrowed into every corner of the heart. Music director Jesus Aguaje Ramos stepped in ably on BVSC's signature duets, but at their close, Portuondo saluted her late partner: the great *sonero* Ibrahim Ferrer.

Putting the accent on personality, she dominated the stage even as the band ramped up the rhythms on *descargas* (jams) like "El Quarteto de Tula." This tour marks the Buena Vistas' first U.S. dates since 2003. Let's hope it's not another seven years before they return.

