



ST SUCCESS: Spanish singer Concha Buika, who has seen her career soar since her visit to Miami last year, was nominated for a Grammy last week. ANTONIO REDRUELLO



girl on fire

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Success in pop music can do strange things to people, as anyone who has watched the breakdown of stars from Britney to Alejandro Sanz can testify. But for **Concha Buika**, the Spanish singer with the spine-tingling soul who ravished a Little Havana audience in her U.S. debut last October, success has only made her more confident in her music and her resolutely free-spirited self.

"What I did was, in the first place, live, then tell about it, and then record," Buika says from her Madrid apartment, where her 9-year-old son answers the phone with a sweet voiced "¿Sí?"

"But what happens after that I don't know anything about."

For all her self-assurance, Buika found herself overwhelmed last Wednesday, when she received a Latin Grammy nomina-

TURN TO BUIKA, 2E

tion for Album of the Year for her latest recording, *Niña de Fuego*, and found herself in tears. "I never thought this would happen," she said from the Los Angeles press conference where the nominees were announced. "Everyone was saying such nice things, and I'm not used to this. I thought 'I just want to go home.' Everyone was asking how I feel, and I don't know how I feel. I feel wonderful but very strange."

Her nomination in the awards' top category could

bring life changing attention to this unconventional artist, little known outside Spain and world music and jazz circles.

Her producer, Javier Limón, an admired figure in Spain's new flamenco and jazz scene who also produced the world music hit *Lgrimas Negras* with Cuban pianist Bebo Valdés and flamenco singer Diego El Cigala, says that thus far, success has been good for Buika.

"For 99 percent of people, success changes them for the worse. With her, it's changed her for the better," says Limón, who was nominated for Producer of the Year in part for his work on *Niña de Fuego*, from Madrid. "It makes me profoundly happy that she's had so much success, because it suits her so well. I don't know why. I know so many artists for whom success has removed them from reality. Instead for Buika it has put her in a better humor, with more desire to do things, to make music."

Even in the throes of emotion at the Latin Grammy recognition, Buika was level-headed about what it meant for her own life. "Whether it changes my life or not, it's the same to me," she said. "I'm someone who is OK with today. I don't want to change my life, I'm fine. We artists have a lovely life, we're fine, our families are fine. I want to change the lives of children, of people who are having a hard time, of women who suffer."

"What is important is the message in our songs. And when more people hear you, your message is more powerful."

Buika's message is one of uninhibited emotion and belief in oneself, created, sometimes painfully, from the capacity for feeling that powers her music and her

very unusual life.

LIFE ON THE MOVE

The daughter of political refugees from the African nation of Equatorial Guinea, Buika grew up in a gypsy neighborhood on the Spanish island of Mallorca, in the only black family on the island. Her father left when she was a young girl. She started singing in a hotel bar as a teenager because the pay was good, and did a stint as a Tina Turner impersonator in Las Vegas. While she was married to her son's father, she arranged for the two of them to marry a woman.

Now, at 36, she has come to terms with herself. "Oh, how I like maturity," Buika says. "Oh, how I like it when a 'yes' sounds just like yes, and when a no is really a no when it comes out of my mouth. This is what maturity has brought me. Of course maturity has been a super boost for my art. To mature in life is to mature in the art you practice."

Her music is a unique blend of copla, an old-fashioned Spanish song style, flamenco, jazz, Cuban music, soul and blues, brought to searing life by Buika's capacity to channel emotion and music. She is transformed on stage. "It's as if I were sleeping in one place and I wake up in another, as if I were sleeping in another universe. Each time I return to the stage, I tell you it's like I return to my tribe, to my people, to myself, to my other self."

After her luminous Miami performance last fall, Buika went on to her New York debut, garnering a rare rave from *The New York Times*, which called it "magnificent ... the rare fusion that honors all its sources."

In Spain she has captured the country's cultural imagi-



nation. As a singer, she embodies the wrenching, soul-baring expression so beloved in traditional flamenco and Spanish song.

But she also fuses musical styles and cultures in a way that speaks to an increasingly mixed country with increasingly global tastes. She is at the center of a cutting edge Madrid music scene of flamenco, jazz and expatriate Cuban musicians. Her African roots and looks are exotic, but her voice and music are quintessentially Spanish. And her liberated attitudes about women, sexuality and life resonate in a progressive moment in Spain, which has elected a socialist prime minister and now allows gays to marry.

Her impact is not measured in sales, although her second, breakthrough recording, 2006's *La Niña Lola*, has garnered two gold records (100,000 copies sold) in Spain. Her latest, *Niña de Fuego*, released in May, already has sold almost half that. When director Pedro Almodovar was asked whom he wanted to perform in a special concert celebration of his films, he named Buika — who has never recorded for any of them.

She has been open about her sensual connection to women. *Mentiroso* (Liar), one of two songs by Buika on *Niña de Fuego*, was inspired by her former female partner with her ex-husband. But she rejects any labels about her sexuality, or anything else.

"The truth is in the skin," she says. "Don't get caught in these learned concepts, don't get caught in the idea that you're heterosexual, that you're this or that. We are not a category of being. We are what we are living each day."

Limón admiringly calls

her "an extra-terrestrial" and "the most liberated woman on Earth." Her openness is at the root of her talent, he says, allowing her to soar in improvisation or in performance, and to absorb many styles of music and make them her own.

"She's an example of where the world is going, more mixed all the time," he says. "But she never loses her roots or her essence."

"This freedom she has already, mixed with good taste, means that she can get to places quickly, as much in the studio as on stage. Her improvisations are as good as other people's compositions. She has a great imaginative gift, and she has found a way to put it in practice."

In her life as well as in her music, Buika keeps finding new ways to celebrate her vision.

SAYING 'I DO'

The names of her muses — her great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, aunt, sisters and nieces — are tattooed on her arm. And soon she will stage a ceremony to marry herself. "I want to put myself in front of my family and my friends, and swear that I'm going to love me and respect me in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, until love carries me away. All women on the planet should do this."

But she has also kept her sense of humor.

One of her favorite new projects is a book of erotic photographs of women, which she is shooting, but not appearing in. "No, no, no, no," Buika says, laughing. "I'm no good as a model, I'm too skinny, you can't tell my front from the back." So why does she appear nude on the cover of *Niña de Fuego*? "I'm not nude," she says, in mock

indignation. "I just don't have any clothes on. It's not the same."

