

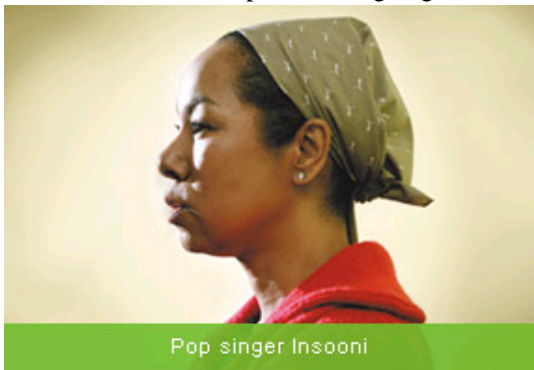
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Pop Diva Insooni: "I believed in my dreams."
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photo



news

Insooni, born Kim In-soon, marks the 30th anniversary of her debut this year. She began her singing career in 1978 as a member of the "Hee Sisters," which debuted with the song "Weeping Willow." Back then she was haunted by the "stigma" of being biracial. Things have since changed a lot. But it was truly tough for a girl with dark skin and curly hair to get along in Korean society at the time. Though "abandoned and tattered," Insooni never gave up her dreams. She believed in her dreams. Now a towering diva, she confesses that she once identified herself with the goose in her hit song, "A Goose's Dream," a soulful reflection of her life.

I met Insooni in her office in Dogok-dong, Seoul on March 13. She picked "My Dear Friend," instead of "A Goose's Dream," as a song that inspired her to be born again. She recorded "My Dear Friend" with a young male singer named JoPD. She said, "I no longer want my name to be overlapped with such feelings as pity and compassion. I want to be seen as the gorgeous, passionate singer, Insooni."

Starting at the Sejong Center for the Performing Arts on April 3-4, Insooni will embark on a cross-country concert tour to celebrate her 30th year in the pop music world. Some 20 shows are scheduled, including one on May 15 on Mt. Kumgang. It will be the first ever concert by a South Korean pop singer in the North Korean mountain resort. She will soon release an album, entitled "Legend," her first in four years.

Q. Do you think you are a legend?

A. I was always envious of foreign singers whose concerts were labeled a “legend.” I don't mean I'm a legend. But I want to be one sometime in the future. I still have a long way to go. It is a title that shows me there's another dream — another world.

Q. The name Insooni is always linked to a touching story of success.

A. I know I'm still known mostly as a singer who has overcome the sad legacy of mixed blood. But there's much more than that about me. It seems such feelings as pity and compassion keep trailing me all the time. I want to overcome it once and for all. I'm actually a dynamic, gorgeous and passionate singer, which is constantly suppressed by the so-called success story. Please look at me as I am. Only then will I be able to show the gorgeous, and at times even sexy, Insooni. I want to be called a beautiful and passionate singer. (She laughs.)

Q. The recent soap opera, "Insooni Is Beautiful," was the talk of the town.

A. I loved watching the lead actress Kim Hyun-joo sing “A Goose's Dream” from beginning to end. At first I was very curious why they put my name in the title of the drama. But I could see it was a simple fiction. I think I'm beautiful. I love myself. I have a million-dollar smile. I love my large, blissful-looking nose. I love myself, so I'm beautiful.

Q. “A Goose's Dream” touched so my people.

A. I had seldom sung slow-tempo songs before. Given my own sad background I tended to avoid such songs. Then, about two years ago, I happened to rediscover the song in the course of looking for a final piece for a concert and sang it once on TV. And it hit the jackpot. I wanted to deliver a message of hope to young singers and my audience, who, in turn, shared my feelings. I sang as if I was talking and talked as if I was singing. And people wanted to watch me sing the song over and over. So I released it as a single record some time afterwards.

Q. Why was the song so popular?

A. Maybe because we all live in a tough time. Not only young people agonizing over finding a job or school admissions but many in their 40s and 50s, who had to give up their dreams, listened to my song and wept their hearts out. They applauded saying that Insooni, among all singers, was qualified to sing the song. And they gained hopes they could also overcome all difficulties just as I did.

Q. "My Dear Friend" is particularly impressive in that it shows Insooni who never seems to get old.

A. Before I sang "Again" I had wanted to become a spectacular diva like Patti Kim. But producer Park Jin-young set me in a totally different direction. With "Again" he took out the latent sense of R&B and soul inside me. That was a great motivation. Then I took interest in young singers' songs and finally sang "My Dear Friend" with JoPD. It's a strong soul tune. Songwriter Park Geun-tae helped me rediscover myself once again. At first I just wanted to do the recording. But singing the song on TV several times, I could see the audience was responding enthusiastically. It's a song for young people and why should I care about my age? So I decided to put on hot pants and tank tops, and had my hair puffed up. I never minded I was 20 years older than JoPD. With a closed mind you can never see a new world. I didn't care I was being led by a younger person. I am now working with another young composer (Lee Hyeon-seung).

Q. KBS TV's "Open Concert" has left the image of Insooni as a great singer deeply engraved in people's minds.

A. I was in a slump for six or seven years from the late 1980s. I was afraid I was being edged out by those young singers with academic backgrounds who won awards at campus song festivals. I monitored every music program on TV very carefully, thinking what I would do if I was on the stage. I did the same watching the "Open Concert" every week. Then, I was given a chance at last. In my first appearance I sang "La Bamba" and "My Love Far Away" and when I was about to exit, the audience shouted encore so feverishly that even the MC got embarrassed. So, with no sheet music for accompaniment, I had to sing a few old folk songs on my own. Those songs were a great success again. After this first appearance I was invited to perform at the concert every other week. It was a sheer luck. I worked very hard so my repertory wouldn't run out and I was a regular performer for over 10 years. I was the one who sang trot-style songs for the first time at the "Open Concert." It helped me come out of my slump. It helped me get closer to stage.

Q. You have terrific charisma on stage.

A. Middle-aged men respond interestingly to my performance. When I start to sing, I find them look uninterested, watching me indifferently with their arms folded. But eventually these men would stand up and dance before women. We all dance together and have fun together until we get completely lost. Once I felt a whiff of warm energy wrapping myself as I went up to stage. I was surprised myself. I think I experienced the so-called *gi* energy. I get the energy from my audience and return it to them through my song. I want to make my audience explode with such energy.

Q. You met former U.S. President Bush.

A. I performed in front of former U.S. President Bush on March 12. I was the only singer invited to that occasion. I was a little nervous and my knees trembled a bit but I sang alright and heard compliments from the top leaders of Korea and the United States. Mr. Bush said to me, "I've heard you are Korea's national singer. I'm proud of you." When he visited here, former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell said to me, "I'm glad to see the Korean people love you so much." Those were the moments I felt I was paid for my hard work. At a very young age I had to choose the course of my life. I made up my mind that I would live with my mom and would be buried in this country. I couldn't run away. I had to face my fate. And I've never regretted my choice. There's no reason I shouldn't feel proud of my origin.

Q. What are you going to show in your upcoming concert?

A. I'm going to show that my concert can be as colorful as any fashion show. I'll probably begin the show with a trot-style song because I debuted with a song in the style. But I have to think a lot because I have fans in a wide range of age groups. It has to be oldies but goodies, and youngish but not too rash at all. It's certainly a huge challenge. And that's what people want from me. It's tough, indeed. But what should I do? It's the fate I chose for myself.

● Who is Insooni?

Insooni was born in April 1957 to a Korean mother and an African- American father who served in the U.S. military in South Korea. She did not finish secondary school but carved a singing career that has made her an R&B diva with a wide range of fans. Since her debut in 1978 she has released 19 albums and is one of the few

singers who performed at Carnegie Hall in New York. She is distinguished by her rich, throaty voice and dynamic performing style.

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