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REAL ESTATE | HOUSE CALL

## Gloria and Emilio Estefan Build a Music Empire and a Family Compound

The two musicians met in Miami after escaping Cuba in the '60s

Dec. 1, 2015 11:49 a.m. ET

*Gloria Estefan, 58, and Emilio Estefan, 62, have won 26 Grammy Awards. On Nov. 24, they were awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The Broadway musical "On Your Feet!" is based on their lives. They spoke with Marc Myers.*

**Gloria Estefan:** I was 2 when my family left Cuba for Miami in May 1960, a little over a year after Fidel Castro took power. My father, Jose, went first, buying a round-trip ferry ticket to Miami. My mother, Gloria, and I followed. She bought round-trip plane tickets. My parents assumed that the situation in Cuba was temporary.

**Emilio Estefan:** I left Cuba in 1967 when I was 14. I had been playing the accordion and my parents felt I deserved a better future. My mother, Carmen, didn't want to leave, so my father, Emilio Sr., bought two plane tickets to Spain.

The plan was for us to get U.S. visas in Madrid and fly to Miami. But we wound up waiting in Spain for a year, virtually homeless. In Madrid, I played the accordion at a restaurant so my father and I could eat. When my visa came through first, I flew alone to Miami. My father came four months later.

**GLORIA:** In Miami, my family lived in one room at the home of relatives who had left Cuba before us. But it was too tight, motivating my mother to find a one-bedroom apartment near the Orange Bowl.

**EMILIO:** When I arrived in Miami, I lived with an aunt in a small house with eight cousins. I bought an accordion for \$177 to play at an Italian restaurant. When I'd make



Emilio and Gloria Estefan at their home on Star Island, Miami. PHOTO: OMAR CRUZ

\$6 in tips, I'd go to the 7-Eleven to buy a sandwich.

**GLORIA:** My father took part in the unsuccessful Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 as part of the force recruited by the CIA and spent the next two years in a Cuban prison. After his release in 1963, he returned to Miami and joined the Army as a second lieutenant. We moved to San Antonio, where he was stationed, and then to Columbia, S.C., where our house on the base was near the woods. I loved nature.

When my father was deployed to Vietnam in 1967, my mother, my sister Becky and I moved back to Miami and lived in a small, furnished house. A cabinet filled with 78s by vocalists

inspired me to sing.

**EMILIO:** After my mother's father died in Cuba in 1969, my mother traveled to Mexico City and applied for a visa to the U.S. In 1971, she flew to Miami and I met her at the airport.

Seeing her come off that plane was a feeling—oh my God, I cannot forget that. My mother was crying. So was I. I never thought I'd see her again.

**GLORIA:** I attended a Catholic school in Miami and a group of us sang at Masses. In 1975, my friend Raphael wanted to put together a band. His dad reached out to a sales



Gloria became interested in music while a student. PHOTO: ESTEFAN ENTERPRISES, INC

manager he knew at Bacardi named Emilio who led a band called the Miami Latin Boys. Our church ensemble was at Raphael's house rehearsing when Emilio dropped by with his accordion, wearing teeny-tiny brown shorts.

**EMILIO:** When I first heard Gloria play and sing, I was impressed. Her voice and tone were very warm. I don't believe in love a first sight, but I knew from the start there was something there between us.

**GLORIA:** Three

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months later, my mother dragged me to a wedding. Emilio's band was playing there, and he was having the time of his life with his accordion.

**EMILIO:** I asked Gloria to sit in with the band. She agreed and sang two Cuban standards. Everyone at the wedding loved her. I asked her to join the band.



Emilio Estefan plays the accordion for his mother, Carmen, in Cuba. PHOTO: ESTEFAN ENTERPRISES, INC

**GLORIA:** I told Emilio I'd think about it. I joined soon after but worked at first with the band only on the weekends, so I could keep up

with my studies. Emilio renamed the band the Miami Sound Machine.

**EMILIO:** One night in '76 we had a gig in a bad neighborhood. I didn't want Gloria driving alone so we went together. At some point I slipped and said, "I bet we'd get along great if we got married." We both went silent, but soon we began dating. In 1978, I asked Gloria to marry me. She said yes.

**GLORIA:** Today, we live on Star Island in Miami. We've lived in our two-story, four-bedroom main house since 1988. It sits on an acre with frontage on the bay. In 1991, we bought the acre adjacent to our home and three years later completed three structures—a one-bedroom apartment, library and gym, an entertainment complex with a theater, and a guest cottage.

**EMILIO:** When the 8,000-square-foot villa next door came on the market in 1993, we bought it. Today we use that seven-bedroom house for entertaining.

**GLORIA:** I still have my Pan Am return ticket to Cuba and my Cuban passport with my baby picture. They remind me of my parents and how sure they were they'd return to Cuba.

**EMILIO:** My most treasured item is the small accordion I played as a boy in Cuba. It's hard for me to play it now. The instrument has a signature sound and it's too emotional to hear.

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