

THE REJUVENATING POWER OF THE BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB¹

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»I hope I die on stage...« (Ibrahím Ferrer, Newcastle, UK, May 12th 2005).

»This is my dream come true — a young man's dream in an old man's body. If you had told me three years ago this was going to happen I would have said to you were crazy. I retired once. Now I never want to stop. Singing has given me a reason to live again« (Ibrahím Ferrer).

Introduction

Manchester, 2001 and I have taken my elderly parents to see Cuba's Buena Vista Social Club (referenced as BVSC for the rest of this paper) at Manchester's Bridgewater Hall. As my mother was in a wheel chair courtesy of the promoter we were sitting right on the front row. Having travelled with them and interviewed members of the BVSC and visited several of them in their Havana homes, notably while making a radio series with the late Kirsty McColl, several times members of the group, spying us in the audience,

1 The seeds of this paper come from »Que vista da la Buena Vista?«, an unpublished paper presented at the international colloquium »Musicología y Globalización«, Cuba (Fairley 1999a). This article is based on that paper and on interviews, research, observation and travel with the musicians of the BVSC in the UK, Spain, Mexico and Cuba between 1997 and 2009. I am grateful to late commentary by Alexandrine Fournier, Robin Moore and Peter Manuel. This paper does not pretend to be a definitive statement on the subject of the BVSC. It was written specifically for a presentation at the conference »... alles hat seine Zeit — Alter(n) in der populären Musik (All things have their season. Age and Ageing in Popular Music)«, the 19th Conference of the Arbeitskreis Studium Populärer Musik (ASPM, the German Association for the Study of Popular Music) and it maintains that music and age perspective.

acknowledged our presence with a smile or small wave. This act of unexpected friendliness especially towards my parents seemed to me typical of their openness and approachability. The hall was full of people of all ages, from the very young to the very old and the BVSC's performance like many I had witnessed generated a special feeling of communal pleasure and inclusion.

At the end of this as with almost every concert they played, Ibrahím Ferrer and Rubén González in particular came forward and shook hands with members of the audience. There was an atmosphere of mutual gratification of the coming together of musicians and audiences which so often marks a memorable night, at the pleasure everyone was experiencing at the concert's success. This night, the last of a tour, was no exception. Backstage afterwards we greeted some of the musicians, notably pianist Rubén González and singers Omara Portuondo and Ibrahím Ferrer. Sitting with his wife in his dressing room Ferrer chatted about returning to Havana. He commented that what had happened to him and the BVSC was, »more than a miracle«. When I joked that a miracle was a miracle and that »more than a miracle« was not possible, Ferrer laughed saying that you could and they and he were the proof of it! It was not merely that they had become so famous and were earning good money so they could change the life style of their families; it was also that they were enjoying themselves so much playing to such enthusiastic sell-out audiences wherever they went. The pleasure was tangible.

Four years later in Newcastle on May 12th 2005 backstage after a concert replete with Cuban boleros (the material for what became *Mi Sueño*, his posthumous disc), a frail Ferrer intimated he had no intention of giving up until he had to, inferring he would be happy if he died on stage. He missed pianist Rubén González who had died in 2003. Indeed the Manchester concert had been González' last appearance in the UK. Yet Ferrer and bassist Cachaíto López had formed a strong relationship with talented young pianist Roberto Fonseca who had understudied and then taken over from González when he stopped playing a year or so prior to his death. Ferrer and Fonseca were working on his new disc together in Havana (Fairley 2007: 20-21). Ferrer had just turned in a striking performance, although he had needed to be helped on and off stage as he was feeling slightly disorientated if not a little unwell. With some time back home in Cuba that year Ferrer continued to tour until 2nd August when he felt ill on stage in the South of France. He flew home the next day and was taken straight to hospital where he died on 6th August. Ferrer had certainly spent his last hours of his life on his feet on stage. This was how he wanted it to be.

The phenomenon of the collective of Cuban musicians who became known as The Buena Vista Social Club has been discussed in various books and articles published latterly on Cuban music.² There has also been a wealth of articles written about them in the press, in popular and specialist publications in many countries of the world (cf. Fairley 1999b, 1999c, 1999d, 1999e, 1999f, 2001b, 2001c, 2001d, 2007, 2009; Irwin 2002, Williamson 1999a, 1999b, 2006). This group led by veteran musicians broke late 20th early 21st century international music industry expectations by gaining international recognition by recording music associated with Cuba's pre-1959 Revolutionary period. Their eponymous and associated discs starring González, Ferrer, Portuondo, López, Mirabal and Díaz have sold in excess of 8 million copies worldwide.³ Of any musical genre this makes them a major recording industry success, all the more extraordinary when you consider that their record company World Circuit is a small independent affair headed by one man, Nick Gold, in East London.

One of the interesting facts about the BVSC and other veteran Cuban musicians who became popular during the 1990s outside Cuba (and that fact cannot be stressed enough for their popularity has always been off not on the island) was a fetishism with age and the trope of ›lost‹ and ›forgotten‹ musical heroes. Even though most of the musicians had had reasonable musical careers none of them had been ›stars‹ in the past save Portuondo. Their social capital was that they had played with key orchestras and were exemplars of the popular music of a ›golden age‹ of Cuban music.⁴ By no means all the musicians of the BVSC were ›retired‹ veterans but those who were (Ferrer, González, López, with Portuondo a veteran but due to her status not officially retired), had played with key groups in the 1940s and '50s.

This fascination with age and musical experience was notable prior to the popularity of the BVSC with another Cuban group, the Vieja Trova San-

2 In English by Foehr 2001, Fairley 2004, Perna 2005, Moore 2006. There is ethnocentricity in this paper in its focus on material written in English. Ariana Hernandez-Reguant has also written the unpublished paper ›The Nostalgia of Buena Vista Social Club. Cuban Music and ›World‹ Marketing‹, presented at the ›Exporting the Local, Importing the Global. Cuban Music at the Crossroads‹-panel of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music Meeting ›Musical Intersections‹ in Toronto in November 2000. I was unaware of this paper when I first presented in Germany. There is some overlap in material between this paper and that of Hernandez-Reguant.

3 These figures vary and are supplied by World Circuit Records. They do not cover any CD piracy. For BVSC records see discography.

4 The exception was the only women involved Omara Portuondo who had a long and exceptionally successful career in Cuban terms and who continues to sing.

tiaguera who toured Europe out of Spain. At the same time Compay Segundo, who, having pre-signed to a major record company in Spain *prior* his involvement with BVSC, also toured Spain with his own group Los Muchachos *prior* to BVSC.⁵

A key factor in the success of the BVSC and their music which contributed to fetishism about their age was that they had played music live to different audiences at home and abroad for pretty much the whole of the 20th century with many of them performing publicly since their pre-teens (Failey 1999b: 24-32). While some of them knew each other and had even on occasion played together, they had never played together as whole group. And while many of them had other ›day‹ jobs, apart from Portuondo they had never been high earners. In the decade following the 1959 Revolution (notably after 1962) under new government cultural policy, they were salaried by the Cuban government to play in various groups to a broad age-range of audiences on the island, with some touring overseas. It was only in the 1990s during the devastating Cuban economic crisis officially called the ›Special Period in Time of Peace‹ that Ferrer and González retired officially to make way for new blood in the groups in which they played. Like their counterparts in other countries they received a small, if modest state pension. Like many Cubans in the hard-pressed economic crisis of the 1990s when the island had to reinvent its economy after the end of dependency on the USSR, they had to be ›inventive‹ to make ends meet (Fairley 2004).

The cultural capital of their years of live performance cannot be underestimated when considering the success of the group. A central myth of the BVSC is that it took the arrival of North American guitarist Ry Cooder to Cuba to discover and recover back to life these old musicians, lost and living in penury, and thereby to bring to the world decent Cuban music. It is worth re-capping elements of the BVSC story and the eponymous Academy award nominated documentary made by German film director Wim Wenders two years after the original disc in considering the role of this mythology. It has been referred to as, »the ideology of revival, with its constant calls to cultural authenticity, [which] needs to root itself in an idealized image of the past« (Perna 2005: 246).

5 Segundo, a key feature of the BVSC record and Wenders film, actually performed with BVSC rarely as he was signed to Warner Spain and had his own touring group. He did not feature on subsequent World Circuit discs.

The Buena Vista Story

»From the commercial point of view it's always convenient to create a myth... the impact has been enormous. Totally unexpected. You have to give it to Cooder, he intuitively knew what would please that European-American audience. The whole idea was Nick Gold's. He financed it and pushed it. But yes, many of the musicians were in place because were already there working on the *A Todo Cuba Le Gusta* project the first Afro Cuban All Stars project. I knew which of the other veteran musicians were around and how to get hold of them« (Juan de Marcos González as quoted in Foehr 2001: 158).

The BVSC recording made in 1996 was released on 17th September 1997, a pivotal year for Cuban music in many ways (Fairley 2009). A set of serendipitous coincidences resulted in a group of musicians being invited to record for UK independent record company World Circuit. The group included veteran musicians who came out of retirement at the behest of Nick Gold of the UK company World Circuit Records and maverick US guitarist Ry Cooder, brokered by Cuban band leader and musician Juan de Marcos González, founder member of the 1980s revival group Sierra Maestra, and founder leader of The Afro-Cuban All Stars.

Cooder's involvement came relatively late on and was originally for a different recording. He only knew that things had changed immediately prior to his arrival in Havana in March 1996.⁶ The gestation of the actual project was more complex and involved a network of people.⁷ Juan de Marcos González had founded the Cuban group Sierra Maestra, whose repertoire included reviving the innovative work of Cuba's blind tres player and band leader Arsenio Rodríguez, who had left Cuba for the US in the 1950s and died in relative obscurity in 1970 in Los Angeles. British ethnomusicologist and Cubophile Lucy Durán, archivist at the UK the National Sound Archive, had introduced de Marcos to World Circuit's Nick Gold in London, a meeting which eventually resulted in World Circuit offering a recording contract to Sierra Maestra.⁸

6 Telephone interview with Nick Gold, March 2009,

7 Fairley 2001a: 272-288. As Jason Toynbee has written in *Making Popular Music* (2000) on ›social authorship‹: music makers are creative agents enmeshed in social networks of collaboration, competition and economic exploitation.

8 Durán had a cosmopolitan upbringing. Travelling to Cuba several times in the 1980s and 1990s in an official capacity, she lead an in-depth music trip of key international journalists, broadcasters, promoters and others to the island at Easter 1989. A key member of formal and informal European world music networks she is linked to a myriad of people: promoters Arts Worldwide for whom

As well as Sierra Maestra, Juan de Marcos had the idea of recording music of the 1940s and '50s Big Band era using retired musicians working alongside the next two generations. This was possibly inspired by the ground breaking 1979 Estrellas de Areito project by Egrem, the Cuban state recording company which brought together a legion of top musicians in Havana to make recordings full of improvisation and verve. Gold eventually booked Egrem's old studios in down town Havana, available for reasonable fees and where foreign companies could work with their own engineers relatively free from time pressures and the bureaucracy of the Cuban state. In Cuba they were relatively unused as they had been superseded by the state-of-the-art Abdala Studios, new uptown Egrem and modernised ICAIC studios. This meant they could be used for rehearsal as well as recording. These studios had already been used by UK resident US record producer Joe Boyd of Hannibal Records working with engineer Jerry Boys, who was to become key part of the BVSC recordings.

Gold was simultaneously considering another project bringing together West African and Cuban country guitarists, for which he had approached US guitarist Ry Cooder, who Gold knew through recording him with Malian guitarist Ali Farka Touré. Gold decided to run these two projects together and record them sequentially.

Each protagonist has his own view but as Juan de Marcos recalls it:

»I had the idea to make an album bringing together old guys, the old generation of musician, with the punchy big band sound of the late 1950s in Cuba. They hadn't recorded in a long time... He [Gold] agreed to make the album with the old guys and at the same time he wanted to make a fusion album using African musicians to play the typical sound of eastern Cuban son, Nick suggested we call in Ry Cooder to work on that album... I looked for Eliades Ochoa and Compay Segundo especially for that album. Originally I was looking for Renaldo Rey and Compay Segundo, because Renaldo is the really, really well-known star. Compay Segundo is very well known right now but was completely unknown before. ... Ry arrived to work with the Africans on the planned disc of eastern country music. Unfortunately the Africans couldn't come because of visa problems« (Foehr 2001: 158).⁹

For Nick Gold the news the West African musicians would not make it was, as a colleague described it, a »nail-biting« situation with little time to or-

Gold established the company that became World Circuit; Corason, Hannibal, Globestyle record companies; numerous artists from Cuba, Spain and West Africa.

9 While this is a flawed account in some details it captures the less guarded approach taken by de Marcos when previously talking to UK journalists.

ganise a viable alternative project that would satisfy all concerned.¹⁰ This was the era of faxes rather than mobile phones and indeed calling from Cuba to the outside world has never been easy or cheap, with lines routed around the world because of the U.S. embargo. Things were in flux. In practice they already had a studio full of musicians for the Afro-Cuban All Stars recording to which were added Eliades Ochoa, Cuban country music singer and tres guitarist from Santiago de Cuba (leader of Cuarteto Patria); and his one-time colleague Compay Segundo, who had been part of Cuarteto Patria and now lead his own group Los Muchachos who by then had a Spanish recording contract.

Cooder's subsequent interviews mention his respect for old Cuban musicians and at least one person there at the time remembers that musicians were invited to play in a subtle selection process that left a group of musicians whose play and demeanour would correspond to Cooder's aesthetic. Cooder had been previously to Cuba in the 1970s, then again notably with Paddy Maloney and the Chieftains for the 1995-6 *Santiago* project. Cooder later spoke of the 1979 Cuban Egrem recording *Estrellas De Areito* as a benchmark:

»That's how I knew about Ruben González although I didn't know if he was still alive. Compay Segundo we also knew about and there were other people we asked for who weren't around. We wanted Tata Güines but he was in Venezuela. I wanted Niño Rivera the *tres* player of *Estrellas* but he had died. A lot of them were still around like Cachaito and Amadito Valdés, and I guess that became the core« (Cooder as cited in Williamson 1999a: 23).¹¹

Cooder and Gold were obviously looking for a line up to distinguish their disc from the Afro-Cuban All Stars disc already recorded: singers as well as guitarists and repertoire would be the obvious way. They were recording without knowing exactly what they would end up with and what market it might reach but they knew it was special.¹²

10 Passports for visas may have been sent to Ouagadougou, Burkino Faso and either got lost, did not arrive in time, or were not sent at all. They may have had visas via Paris but from Cuba would have to return to Mali rather than Europe, and would not be eligible for European visas for a period afterwards. They may have received an invitation from a local patron they could not refuse.

11 Amadito Valdés did not play although he toured later with BVSC. Babarito Torres was involved and Cooder may have got Valdés and Torres muddled in his memory on this occasion.

12 Gold interview 2009 *ibid*.

The Musicians and the Repertoire

These Cuban musicians worked within an oral tradition, knowing music by heart, their prodigious, adaptable memories fuelled by years of playing live. Memory and improvisation is primary to Cuban musicians even if they can read music because there has always been a lack of musical scores on the island where everything material is in short supply. They had spent a lifetime performing a broad repertoire with different orchestrations and instrumental formats and the music recorded was already known by the musicians involved. They were all familiar with son, country music, big band and classic orchestral repertoires and key members – Ferrer, Segundo, Ochoa, came from Santiago de Cuba, the crucible of Cuban son.

Ferrer recalled the sessions as follows:

»When I got to the studio Rubén González and Compay and all my old friends were there. Rubén began playing ›Candela‹ and so I joined in. It seemed a natural thing to do. Ry was in the booth and he heard the song and opened the mike and asked me if I would like to record that as well. Then I sang ›De Camino A La Vereda‹ which was my own composition and he wanted that put on record too... We were having a break and Rubén was messing about on the piano and so I joined him and started singing. That was ›Dos Gardenias‹. I didn't even know Ry was recording it. The first I knew was when I came to London to hear it. No one even told me it was on the record.«¹³

Analysis of what was recorded shows evergreen songs associated with specific musicians were worked up as pieces for all to play.¹⁴ The prominence of Compay Segundo's ›Chan Chan‹ which had been recorded before with Cuarteto Patria for Mexico's Corason label as well as ›El Cuarto De Tula‹ and ›El Carretero‹ suggest that the Ochoa and Segundo repertoire that might have featured on the planned West African-Cuban guitar disc were among the first considered. The need was to use studio time to the maximum and record without too much fuss. CD sleeve photos show Cooder at Segundo's house working on pieces. Gold has subsequently outlined what have been dubbed his ›trade secrets‹. Even though given in hindsight ten years later they are revealing (Williamson 2006: 39).

The inclusion of Omara Portuondo as the only women invited onto the project once it had begun, came from the happenstance of de Marcos no-

13 This is a recollection with hindsight. Ferrer did not know who Cooder was at the time or remember his name until later. His contact was Juan de Marcos.

14 Gold 2009 interview *ibid*.

ticing that she was actually recording in another studio in the Egrem building. Unlike the others Portuondo was and remains a recognised star in Cuba with long musical pedigree with a rich career that was still vital at the time. Her on the spot agreement to sing María Teresa Vera's classic »Veinte Años«, was recalled later, »A rare calm descended in the studio as she dictated tempo and arrangement and in just two hours *Veinte años* was recorded with backing from Segundo, Torres, López, Valdés.«¹⁵ The later version of »Dos Gardenias« sung by Portuondo and Ferrer made famous by the Wenders film was recorded for Ferrer's solo album. Ferrer sang »Dos Gardenias« alone for the original BVSC album.

According to many accounts Ferrer needed to be persuaded to come along. In many ways Ferrer was a Cooder discovery because on BVSC album as well as up-tempo songs, Ferrer sang boleros, the ubiquitous songs of unfulfilled desire and impossible love extremely popular with Cuban and Latin American people since the mid 20th century. Early operatic and bel canto influences the aesthetic of bolero singers when performing these songs rich in romantic melodrama. This performance style often gets interpreted as indulgent and is found too over-the-top even histrionic by non-Latin audiences unfamiliar with the aesthetic and unable to understand the lyrics. In this mode Ferrer fitted the aesthetic of authenticity which surround the Buena Vista album emanating from Cooder. As Cooder recalled:

»I remember sitting there on day three of recording of Buena Vista and my mind was in a state because we did not have singers. I asked de Marcos if he could think of anyone who could sing this stuff, not a *sonero* with that flamenco style but someone with that lifting quality. He said he knew maybe one guy if he could find him. He came back two hours later with this weird looking cat. I knew when I saw him that he had something. I thought I don't know what this guy does but get him to a microphone because you could tell that he had this inner quality. He was the guy with the voice but he hadn't recorded much and he wasn't famous so he was like a brand new old man. It's amazing he's kept his voice as long as he has. He's 72 and he says his voice is screwed up now but what he has lost in top end and clarity you gain in emotional range« (Cooder as cited in Williamson 1999a: 21).¹⁶

Ferrer recalled:

»Juan de Marcos came to see me and said they wanted me to sing. I said no, I had retired. But he insisted and Cubans can't say not to anything for very

¹⁵ BVSC CD sleeve notes; Portuondo interview; Gold interview *ibid*.

¹⁶ Cooder later dubbed Ferrer, »Cuba's Nat King Cole« (in Williamson 1999b: 28) although it has to be said his voice and Cole's, which is more that of a romantic crooner, are very different.

long. I only agreed because he said they wanted me for just that one song« (Ferrer as cited in Fairley 1999c, p.78)

Ferrer ended up singing four tracks and providing backing vocals for most of the rest of the album. He also added vocals to »María Caracoles«, a track recorded for the ACAS album to which Juan de Marcos was to add vocals but then decided to ask Ferrer to do so instead.¹⁷

Naming the Buena Vista Social Club

The project took its name (finally decided after the recording) from an eponymous piece of music played by Ruben González for the album, originally composed by Israel López, the uncle of bass player Cachaito López. In itself the piece was inspired by the actual Buena Vista Social Club, a club for black Cubans in Marianao, Havana, where Israel López and Cachaito's father and others had played in their time. González played the piece in the studio explaining to Cooder it had been the signature tune of the old club and Cooder felt it summed up the recording atmosphere: »It was a kind of club by then. Everybody was hanging out and we had rum and coffee around two in the afternoon. It felt like a club, so let's call it that. That's what gave it a handle« (Cooder in Arcos 2000). To name a recording after a social club whose members were black Cubans was symbolic of the social apartheid many of the musicians had suffered before the 1959 Revolution and significant in itself.

Yet the music recorded by the BVSC also offers potent and contradictory images of late 20th and 21st century Cuba. It was music of a pre-revolutionary generation offering a historical and cultural message that froze out any consideration of contemporary revolutionary Cuba. In this way it overcame problematic issues particularly in the USA which had maintained a harsh economic blockade of the island since soon after 1959, with little acceptance that anything of cultural value had come out of Cuba during the revolutionary years. It was to obscure and displace other music coming from Cuba into the international market, notably timba music which was vibrantly expressive of the difficult social and economic times Cuba was living through, thereby contradicting idealised pro and contra revolutionary tropes.

17 Gold, *ibid.*

The Place: The Egrem studios and UK Engineer, Jerry Boys

The BVSC musicians became a key link between two golden eras of Cuban music, the 1940s and 50s and late 90s. An essential part of his link was the use of the old-fashioned down town Egrem studios: the ›authentic‹ trope of BVSC could arguably be said to have been born there because it was familiar to all the musicians who had recorded there before. The studios have a long history and the slightly run-down atmosphere fitted the aesthetic of the disc in ways uptown modern studios never could. Even the conditions and the fact that practically everything had to be brought in, even food, contributed to the family social club feel of the disc. The pragmatics were that De Marcos (described as the A&R man) suggested musicians and went out to find them. He wrote arrangements (overnight). His wife Glicería Abreu took care of production necessities as well as other fundamentals like bringing in food, there being no restaurant in the studios, and it being the norm during that period in Cuba with food shortages and few food outlets outside hotels for food to be supplied from home kitchens.

Veteran engineer Jerry Boys was familiar with the studios, describing them as, »Spartan... take your own toilet paper, go fully prepared... there was no sticky tape or pens at that time« (Irwin 2002: 35). Boys had first worked at Egrem with Hannibal Records' Joe Boy recording trumpeter Jesús Alemañy's *Cubanismo* album. Boys' familiarity with recording developments and techniques from the mid 1960s, working with four up to thirty-six track desks and with his own North London Livingstone Studios made him ideal. As a record producer, sound engineer and tape operator Boys has strong pedigree, recording a host of names from The Beatles to Baaba Maal. Boys started working with Gold recording Ali Farka Touré in Mali which marked the beginning of a long creative relationship that has had huge impact in the world music world, with the two working on every World Circuit BVSC (and many other) albums together.

They used the classic Egrem analogue machines bringing in their own tape and materials for on the spot repairs as there were no spare parts or any recording material available in Cuba.¹⁸ Boys set up ambient mikes brought from the UK. The practice was to rehearse and then record with as few takes as possible.

¹⁸ At one point during the recording they were held up for 24 hours waiting for a spare part (Gold Interview 2009).

»Obviously you can't have things too rough, but you got to know when to stop. That's where both Ry and Nick are really good. They want people to play and sing together as much as possible and get as early a take as possible. Ry is actually quite manic about that! But it's what makes working with him and Nick so enjoyable. You are recording performances by people who sweat and work and get angry and happy and it has emotion. That's what it is all about, isn't it?« (Irwin 2002: 37).

Of *Buena Vista* recording, Boys has recalled:

»What made it magic for me was the fact that these guys had virtually been cut off from the world and any modern music so the way that they performed was still very authentic of the era. They did it the way they always had done it and one of the reasons it was so successful was that it made it a genuine piece of history yet it was some 30 or 40 years after the music was contemporary. They hadn't spent the last 30 years listening to rock music or soul music and were then trying to recreate what they had before. They just did it the way they'd always done it« (Irwin 2002: 35).

The BVSC Sound

The CD booklet photos show the musicians with Cooder rehearsing sitting in a circle on old fashioned Cuban hand made solid wooden and leather straight backed chairs. They capture the informality and friendliness of what was going on as do shots of Cooder dancing during recording.

Cooder's unique contribution aided by Gold and Boys was the sound, the sound which, with the mythology, sold the disc. Various pairs of ears were involved: those of Ry Cooder; Nick Gold (whom Omara Portuondo has referred to as having not only ears but ›the nose‹ for what works and will be successful); engineer Jerry Boys; Juan de Marcos González; and those of the musicians themselves responding to each other in rehearsal and during recording. The situation required flexibility and open, on-the-spot decision making processes during a ten day period (although most of the music was recorded in six days). As Jerry Boys recalled,

»It was all done in a couple of weeks and I was worked off my feet so I didn't really have time to think about what it was we were creating. I mean I knew it was a good record, but none of us ever imagined it would go on to do what it did« (Irwin 2002: 35).

The Producer: Ry Cooder

A key appeal of the BVSC recordings have been certain perceptions about the music: leisurely time and pace, a ›real‹ ›old‹ aesthetic, and a notion of both the musicians and the music as the treasure found by a music archaeologist, part of a post-modern quest for authenticity.¹⁹ Also as we know from what Boys has said, a much discussed aspect has been the actual sound quality and manner of recording. Technically according to Cooder, »If you are listening to Buena Vista you are hearing a huge fat low end and plenty of inter-modular distortion which is partly what makes it good« (Williamson 1999a: 23). For de Marcos Cooder follows a »Rock 'n' roll aesthetic«, a live approach that caught the spirit of the performance without overdubs.

»So we spend at least a day or more per song getting it right. And he [Cooder] likes the musicians to interpret ›suavecito‹ – gently, delicately – which is quite difficult with Cuban brass. The old wood panelled Egrem studios have that natural reverb and a ›brilliant‹ acoustic and he brings it out. And he doesn't like changing original arrangements. When I'm producing I don't record unless I can give it my own arrangement but Cooder's different. He says, ›If it's good already, why change it?« (de Marcos in Fairley 1999c: 78).

Recording whole songs a few times and then using one single take was unusual for Cubans.

»To book a studio and see what happens, it's too expensive. When we get into a studio we have to know what is happening and be ready with what we can and if there are errors we over-dub. Cubans have the most superb and demanding system of education and our musicians are tremendously well schooled. Wrong notes are noticed« (ibid.).

The defining sound fits a world music crossed with folk and rock aesthetic. As de Marcos said,

»Ry looked for a sound that I would never have thought of making, like the 1930s, a very dirty sound and very rough, almost no mix. Buena Vista Social Club sounds like a recorded rehearsal with non-professional mics. That's the sound, and that is very attractive, I think, for the people of the First World. People of the First World are very involved in the technological psyche, and they need space to relax in. Buena Vista Social Club gives that space to relax« (de Marcos as cited in Foehr 2001: 159).

19 Perna *ibid.*, p. 245.

The recording has been written of as, »Archaic, pre-technological, a sort of acoustic authenticity... [a] nostalgic filter – a form of pre-modern, pre-technological art emphatically opposed to today's music« (Perna 2005: 245). Cooder was clear about what he did not want, making a key comment later when he critiqued taking part in the recording of Eliades Ochoa's 1999 *Sublime Ilusión* disc in Los Angeles:

»We went down to where they were recording in LA and it's a very hard and brittle studio. It's very chancy for acoustic guitar music and you are liable to get a very glassy sound. I told them how to mike the room but they didn't know what I was talking about. The engineer was a pop guy so you've got an Eliades pop record. It sounds good but it has no dynamic range or texture« (Williamson 1999a: 23).

Changes in the Cuban Music Industry: Precedents and connections concerning the US, Mexico, and Spain

The record could never have been made without changes in the music industry in Cuba. The deep economic crisis of the 1990s »Special period« lead to radical shifts in Cuban ideology, politics, economics and religious freedom. The Cuban music industry changed which allowed in foreign companies like World Circuit to manage their own projects (Fairley 2004; Moore 2006; Perna 2005).

There were a number of key precedents to BVSC which shows that the idea of recording veteran musicians was already current. So BVSC was not the first such disc, but part of a phenomenon that had already begun. Indeed British involvement linked directly to the UK World Music scene notably through ethnomusicologist Lucy Durán.²⁰ Gold and others were all familiar with the work of Spanish and Mexican record companies, directly and through WOMEX, the international world music industry meeting. Precedents linked to BVSC begin with the 1989 appearance of Cuarteto Patria, lead by Eliades Ochoa, with Compay Segundo. They were part of a showcase of Cuban music traditions put together by Cuban musicologist Danilo Orozco González (born like Ochoa and Segundo in the region of Santaigo de Cuba) as part of, »The Caribbean: Cultural Encounters in the New World«, at the Smithsonian Institute Festival of American folk life in Washington DC (cf. *Cuba in Washington* 1997).

²⁰ I am grateful to Alexandrine Fournier for comment here.

Mexican company Corason had recorded Eliades Ochoa and Cuarteto Patria in Santiago de Cuba including repertoire later recorded by BVSC (cf. *Los Jubilados* 1998). Corason, run by Mexican producer Eduardo Llerenas and his British partner Mary Farquharson, recorded a number of key discs by Santiago artists in Santiago's Egrem Areíto Studios. They also set the ›veteran‹ precedent recording *Cero Farandulero* by Los Jubilados (The Pensioners), veteran retired musicians who were playing at Santiago's Casa de la Trova and other venues in the city. Corason's Llerenas and Farquharson went on to license the ACAS record, and tour the ACAS with core members of the BVSC in Mexico.

The strongest precedent came from renewed Spanish presence in Cuba beginning in the ›Special Period‹ when Spain's ex-colonial ties with Cuba were re-forged through life-saving trade and investment matched by cultural exchange between the two countries. In 1994 Manuel Domínguez' pioneer owner of Madrid based label Nube Negra label recorded the Vieja Trova Santiaguera (VTS) at Santiago's Casa de la Trova as well as other artists. They travelled to Madrid from where they toured throughout Spain and Europe paving the way for the BVSC.²¹

A significant precedent was the 1994-5 visit to Seville of 88-year-old Compay Segundo and his quartet Los Muchachos for a series of concerts under the flamenco-son rubric organised by the local government. Travelling on to Madrid to record for national radio and perform in jazz clubs, led to Segundo being signed to East West by Alfonso Pérez under the artistic direction of Santiago Auserón, leader of cutting edge Spanish rock group Radio Futura. Three discs emerged: *Lo Mejor De La Vida*, *Calle Salud* and *Las Flores De La Vida* (cf. Segundo 1998). It has been said that Cooder heard Segundo's early *Antología* CD and that it became the corner stone of BVSC repertory. Certainly BVSC includes Segundo playing and singing ›Chan Chan‹ as well as ›Y Tú Que Has Hecho?‹, ›Orgullecido‹, and ›Veinte Años‹ with Omara Portuondo. He also plays guitar on ›De Camino A La Vereda‹, and performs ›Amor De Loca Juventud‹ with Los Muchachos with Ferrer on bongos and Joachim and Ry Cooder on slide guitar and dumbek.

The Film

In various ways the Wim Wenders Academy Award nominated documentary film which gave the record new impetus taking it to a world wide audience

²¹ Guitarist Manuel Galbán who joined VTS later joined the touring BVSC. In 2003 he and Cooder recorded *Mambo Sinuendo*, an electric guitar duo album.

was tricky for the musicians. It brought together footage from various moments in time. Filmed in March 1998 two years after the original project at the time of the recording of Ibrahím Ferrer's first solo disc in the Egrem Studios, it included film of two special concerts organised especially at Amsterdam's Le Carré Theatre. It included footage in New York when the BVSC appeared at Carnegie Hall with key scenes filmed there. It ended with a nationalistic moment as a Cuban flag given by a members of the Cuban diaspora in the audience, was unfurled on stage, an iconic moment given the unrelenting US economic embargo.²²

The film came under criticism for the sharp contrast between dilapidated Old Havana and the New York scenes. In fact the film with an almost canny eye to US-Cuban relations and the possibilities of it being shown in the US, follows a rose tinted glasses backwards narrative, as if the life of these musicians has been caught in a time warp since 1959. It is as if they have been frozen in time like the princess who pricked her finger on the musical spinning wheel, waiting for the »prince« in the guise of Cooder and son Joachim to arrive on a (hired) motor bike with a side car to rescue them and bring them into the »life« of the world. Indeed Cooder's arrival at the Egrem studios can be seen as a metaphor for the advance party of an army coming to ransack Cuba's ›hidden‹ riches, symbolic of the many small international companies who were doing just that, licesing everything they could from the Egrem archives. In Christopher Columbus colonial explorer mode Cooder arrives to ›discover‹ and ›prize‹ the discarded riches of Cuban music for the world.

While undoubtedly the film enhanced the worldwide exposure of the BVSC, with its constant re-appearance along with tours of the orchestra helping maintain the record as a best seller for over ten years, the musicians did not like all they saw of themselves, particularly the scenes in New York when they are pictured naively like innocents abroad. Yet they could not bite the hand that fed them.²³

According to de Marcos, »Both the record [which won Tropical Latin Grammy] and the film have brought benefits to Cuban music which outflank any prejudice anyone might have« (Fairley 1999d: 18-19). Yet, for De Marcos the message was wrong:

»Wim Wenders is an existentialist film-maker so he has a very grey vision of the world. Everything is sad. He's German. They lost a couple of Wars and that's normal that sadness for Germans. He used the kind of visual planes

22 Cooder had challenged this embargo by working in Cuba for which he was eventually fined.

23 De Marcos interview, Mexico 1999.

and shots and focuses that show a gray and sad Cuba. Cuba is a poor country. We have nothing but we have the music. We are proud of the music. We are proud to be Cubans. And this is a very happy country even if we are completely fucked over. We are Latins and half African, so we can make a joke about our problems. It's normal to find a lot of jokes in the streets about our own problems. In the film you see a very grey Cuba. All the shots are of very bad buildings. It's a massive destructive vision of Cuban reality. Cuba is sunny... It's a surrealist vision of the Caribbean. But at the same time the film was excellent to promote the album. After the film came out we sold more albums. But the film does not show the reality of Cuban society« (De Marcos as cited in Foehr 2001: 160).

There are many Havanas and the film chose mostly to focus on the Old Havana beloved of tourists, whose main streets have been slowly restored under the guidance of city historian Eusebio Leal through a percentage of tourist dollars of coming into Cuba since the 1990s. Indeed Old Havana colonial tropes matched the ›old world‹ sound of the music. Still as anyone who has visited Havana knows, every scene, particularly the street scenes, are real enough: there is nothing faked. It may be that some Cubans challenged by its images spend little time in Old Havana themselves, living or staying uptown. The film has a pre-amble showing photos of Fidel visiting Washington soon after the 1959 revolution, yet it ignores any awareness of a culture voicing the complexity and challenges of Cuba from 1959 onwards, particularly the tough 1990s. No mention is made of the corruption and injustice that lead to the revolution or the tough economic embargo from the US since 1962. Thus like the music, the film activates colonial tropes.

In addition Cooder gives the impression this pre-revolutionary music is the only music worth listening to, thereby asking anyone listening to him to suspend the existence of forty years of Cuban music history, to ignore anything created since the revolution happened.²⁴ This however made it a film

24 US scholar Robin Moore notes the cool response the project received in Cuba and critique of the documentary when it appeared in 1999, reporting that some people derided Cooder because of his ignorance of Cuba, its history and the Spanish language, considering him a poor choice as the film's central figure. Others expressed concern over the lack of political reference to the work and the fact that no one mentioned the negative impact of the U.S. embargo on artists and the public. Filmmakers attacked it as dishonest, shallow and ›semi-otically vulgar‹ (Rufo as cited in Moore 2006: 132). Moore also quotes US scholar Ariana Hernández-Reguant offering a critique noting ›imperial nostalgia‹ for pre-revolutionary Cuba; ›the recreation of a colonial past devoid of political and economic inequalities and the role of the United States in perpetuating them. Focus on selective aspects of Cuban history contributes to an image of the island that North Americans choose to remember: not one of right

that could be shown in the US and nominated for an Academy Award. And as this was the difficult 1990s when many felt the Revolution had failed and it was only a matter of time before Fidel Castro and his government fell, which would allow the US back in again to rescue a lot more than old music and old musicians, but a whole population. Indeed part of its appeals could be seen as the way it confirmed prejudices people might have in the US. However unintentional, the film then on certain levels had unfortunate negative messages and implications for the Cubans involved. In Cuba the reaction to the whole phenomenon of BVSC has been one of puzzlement with the film coming in for the most criticism. Indeed the vast majority of the Cuban population in general did not hear the disc or see the film until long afterwards and even then distribution for the most part through private and tourist channels has been minimal.²⁵

The Fame: More than a Miracle

The musicians involved had no inkling what would happen to the recording particularly due to the use of what seemed to be outmoded recording techniques. They had no prior knowledge of Cooder nor Gold, who did not speak Spanish and whose bearing, clothes and manner were very low key. At the time Cuba seemed to be full of foreigners coming in to license back Egrem catalogue and record artists. Significantly most of the musicians involved were paid cash for what they did. It was a bonus in those difficult times to get paid for performing music they already knew and had been singing for a lifetime. As Cooder said in the film, »I've been making records for 35 years and I can tell you, you never know what the public will go for.«²⁶

wing dictatorships, US weapons, the mafia and bloodshed in favour of big of smiles, music, *mulatas* and cigar smoking peasants« (ibid.).

25 A parallel film *The Afro-Cuban All-Stars at the Salon of Dreams*, shown in the UK in 1998 on the influential ITV network Sunday Night South Bank Show introduced by Cultural commentator Melvyn Bragg, used the ›dream trope‹ while placing the musicians firmly within Cuba's pre and post revolutionary music history. Acknowledging the key role of de Marcos (while BVSC gave him a minor role) while it incorporates tropes of discovery in old age, glosses certain issues and tells little of the music created within the revolution. It shows modern Havana, mentions the role of religion and insists that it was the outside world that has ignored Cuban music rather than vice versa. It notes the implications of the US embargo on Cuba and the resentment of the blockade by the BVSC musicians on behalf of their country. It finishes celebrating the fact that their success could not have happened without the revolution supporting them as musicians.

26 *Buena Vista Social Club*, Wim Wenders 1999.

With popularity of the records came fame and adoring audiences of all ages in many countries. For the musicians this was an unexpected new lease of life no one could ever have foreseen. When you were with them their joy was tangible as if they were constantly ›pinching themselves‹ at the fact it was happening. They started to lead healthier life styles, giving up smoking and drinking and making sure they got as much sleep as they could. Many of them toured until they could travel no more. The final BVSC performances of the last of the core veterans, bassist Orlando ›Cachaíto‹ López at Edinburgh Playhouse in May 2008 is a good example. ›Cachaíto‹ looked frail when he was led on stage, yet once his hands were clasped round the body of his bass his musical memory moved straight into gear, his hands moving fluently. Afterwards as he walked slowly up the steep incline of the alleyway at the side of the theatre to the band's tour bus, he was greeted by legions of fans. As he shook hands and signed autographs he told people, ›I'm having the time of my life.‹ He died in Havana on February 9th 2009.

Ferrer's story was effectively ›rags to riches‹ in old age as in the space of a few years he moved from living in an old Havana flat on a small pension, which he was eking out with cleaning shoes, to become a millionaire living in a comfortable uptown house with a BMW in the garage. Musically he went from a second singer in a middling group to world stardom at the age of 73, winning a Grammy for an album put together in less than a week. In 2001 Ferrer sang ›Latin Simone (Que Pasa Contigo)‹ on UK rock star Damon Albarn's *Gorillaz* album. The story of each musician is different, but Rubén González, Orlando ›Cachaíto‹ López, Compay Segundo all became world stars. For González to do this while well retired was extraordinary as he no longer had a piano and yet playing piano was the only thing that had made sense to him all his life. His comeback was total pleasure.

The Brand

Apart from Omara Portuondo and trumpeter Guajiro Mirabal, the core names associated with the BVSC album are now dead. Yet in February 2009 newspaper adverts appeared for 2009 UK tour of The Orquesta Buena Vista Social Club, promising, ›Thirteen piece band direct from Havana, featuring legends of Cuban music from the Buena Vista Social Club album and film‹. The BVSC have become a brand, a collective of musicians who can be replaced, drawn from a seam of Cuban music so deep it can be renewed continually and they play for a public still hungry to see them. Many enjoy the music without knowing or noticing the core musicians are no longer present.

Since 1997 those involved had always toured under the rubric, »The Buena Vista Social Club Presents«, followed by the name of a featured musician: Rubén González, Ibrahím Ferrer, Orlando ›Cachaíto‹ López, Omara Portuondo, and ›Guajiro‹ Mirabal. In 2009 they became simply the Orquesta Buena Vista Social Club to cover the fact apart from Mirabal, the musicians had played in the touring bands (and some on the records) of the original core group.

Cuban response

The BVSC album was unavailable officially in Cuba for many years until it turned up for sale mostly in tourist shops yet remains officially not easily available. The response on the island where there is no market for this retro music live, on radio or on record, has been complex, from amazement at old musicians capturing the world's imagination to talk of theme parks to the memory of Compay Segundo. While no one doubts the beauty of the music itself, the negative effect of the popular revival of Buena Vista sounds for audiences outside Cuba is that tourists arrive on the island expecting all Cuban musicians to be ›old‹ and to hear »Chan Chan« everywhere. Indeed »Chan Chan« has replaced »Guantanamera« as the Cuban iconic hymn. In Old Havana bars and hotels it has become de rigeur for any band to play »Chan Chan« and other music associated with the BVSC with the complicity of the state music industry itself. Cuban musicians puzzle as to why retro-romantic, pre-revolutionary music sung by a bunch of veterans appeals to a worldwide audience, while Cubans themselves enjoy more vital styles created by La Charanga Habanera, Los Van Van, NG La Banda, Candido Fabré, Manolito y su Trabuco, Haila and a host of others, never mind rappers like Los Aldeanos, whose up-to-the-minute lyrics embedded in everyday life has got them into trouble. So BVSC had respectful but mostly negative response in Cuba itself. Leading innovator Carlos Alfonso, founder of Sintesis, who first fused Afro-Cuban ritual melodies and rhythms and chants with experimental rock, jazz and other forms has said:

»Now we have the Buena Vista Social Club wave... It's mediocre music. I have to be fair with what I say. There is traditional Cuban music with its values, but this Buena Vista Social Club music was used in hotels, restaurants. It was never used on stage. This Buena Vista Social Club type of music... it's a way of denying the reality of present day Cuba and the issues we face. This old romantic sentiment is a safe way to look at Cuba« (Foehr 2001: 157).

As Alfonso says, the BVSC has presented a ›safe‹ pre-revolutionary picture of Cuba to the world, highly political in its total denial of the achievements of the revolution itself, of contemporary life in Cuba and contemporary music. It's a picture that those who are against anything positive coming from the Cuban Revolution can embrace wholeheartedly.

Conclusion

This discussion of the mythology surrounding the BVSC, largely although not entirely from a British standpoint, discusses how tropes of ›authenticity‹ and revival permeate their image. BVSC use classic evergreen repertoire already in the collective unconscious since the 1940s and 50s, and already re-established in the international market through Spain and Mexico. What was different between BVSC and other recordings were the particular circumstances of the recording, the special group of musicians, the aesthetics of their sound, the recording methods, the approach in the classic Egrem Studios, and the presence of Ry Cooder as broker of the music to the world. The age of the core musicians, the music of the BVSC (largely but not all from the pre-revolutionary period), and the existential focus of Wim Wenders' eponymous film, implicitly and explicitly gave the message that anything that had happened in Cuba musically since the revolution was not worth considering in comparison. It inferred that by not valuing these particular old musicians the island did not value its own cultural heritage. While nothing could be further from the truth given Cuban cultural policy, this perspective as brokered by Cooder and Wenders appealed to many outside Cuba, particularly in the US. This was because it enabled (and still enables) them to suspend the reality of the complex situation of the island vis-à-vis the corrupt politics of pre-revolutionary Cuba, the position of the harsh US embargo in place since 1962, and the crisis period of 1990s, in favour of a nostalgic view of an island where time has stood still.

Internationally the group became the musicians of choice, with their feel-good sounds so saturating the media that they eclipsed other more socially relevant vital contemporary sounds being created in Cuba which might have come more forcefully into international markets. At the same time the BVSC generated economic return for Cuba and undoubtedly help boost tourism. In the international market the BVSC shifted the balance from Cuban-Latin sounds coming from the USA mediated by the Latin diaspora to music coming directly from Cuba itself, displacing the New York Latin salsa music scene in international markets. In the words of Juan de Marcos:

»Here in Cuba, the album itself is not that famous, because it is completely normal. It's the music that we have on our streets. You can find 35, 40... I don't know... Buena Vista Social Clubs playing in Havana. But it was something important for Cuban music. It marked the point of [a] return to the position we had before. Before the 1960s we were the best sellers of tropical Cuban music in the world. Even in America we Cubans were quite famous, with people like Machito, Desi Arnaz, Chico O'Farrill, who were performing in New York and writing films for Hollywood« (De Marcos as cited in Foehr 2001: 160).

Despite all its paradoxes, Buena Vista Social Club re-juvenated the musicians, their music, the world music industry, and in essence a particular Cuba for the larger world.

In Memoriam

Manuel ›Puntillita‹ Liceo Lamot: singer, b. 1927, d. Havana aged 73, 4 December 2000.

Pedro Depestre González: violinist, b. 1945, d. Geneva aged 56, 8 April 2001 (PDG dies off stage during concert of Cachaito López tour. Not an original member of the BVSC, he was a member of the Estrellas de Areíto).

Compay Segundo: guitarist, vocalist, composer, b. 1907, d. Havana, aged 95, 13 July 2003.

Rubén González: pianist, b. 1919, d. Havana aged 84, 8 December 2003 (RG stopped touring 2 years earlier due to memory loss and ill health).

Ibrahím Ferrer: singer, b. 1927, d. Havana aged 78, 6th August 2005.

Pío Leyva (Wilfredo Pascal): singer, b. 1917, d. Havana aged 89, 23 March 2006.

Miguel ›Angá‹ Díaz: conguero, b 1961, d. Barcelona aged 45, 9 August 2006.

Orlando ›Cachaíto‹ López: double bassist, b. 1933, d. Havana aged 76, 9 February 2009.

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