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The Buena Vista Social Club

Director's cut of article by Bob Hershon

Excerpts of Interviews

Ry Cooder & Wim Wenders

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When Director [Wim Wenders](#), who had fallen in love with The 1997 recording of The Buena Vista Social Club, learned that his friend [Ry Cooder](#), was returning to Havana to produce an album by singer Ibrahim Ferrer (Nonesuch), he immediately packed his bags. Working independently, he also grabbed a soundman and Jorg Widmer, a cameraman/cinematographer, who worked on "Schindlers' List" to help him capture footage in Havana.

Traveling light worked to Wenders' advantage. "It's unlikely that many intimate moments will unfold in front of you when you're following someone around with 10 trucks and a crane. All I had was a sound man and a cameraman," says Wenders about the production of Buena Vista Social Club (Artisan Entertainment). "We were winging it. But with a world class cameraman like Jorg, who can dance with a steadicam for four hours without a break, you're ready to catch anything. "

Upon his arrival in Cuba, Wenders found that the acclaim that the artists had achieved worldwide with the release of the grammy-winning CD had not yet reached Havana. So, as Wender's film begins, we are witness to the transformation the band members underwent, as the band journeyed from Havana, to Amsterdam and finally New York City, receiving along the way, the recognition they yearned for and so richly deserved.

Wenders' film reaches beyond the realm of a normal documentary, capturing the visually striking nature of life in Havana and the rich but unglamorous life of the band members. The scene of a woman with her wash, breaking into song with the bands' vocalist Omara Portuondo, as she strolls down the street seems straight out of a 40's Hollywood musical.

Or the magical sequence with pianist Ruben Gonzalez which begins in the park, with Wenders focused on Ruben's great wrinkled hands as they accompany his description of first meeting with Arsenio Rodriguez, his next door neighbor. And how the Arsenio (Rodriguez), the legendary bandleader, Ruben's blind friend, changed the course of his life. The scene suddenly shifts to a grand hall, where Ruben seated at a piano, is surrounded by

a bevy of little ballerinas, who erupt in dance around him as he sends notes echoing off the vaulted ceilings of a Rococo palacio which has been converted to a school for gymnastics and dance.

The scene is all the more poignant when you realize that Ruben, a world class talent and once household name, had spent the last decade alone in his little house with a lifetime of music stored up in him with no one to play for and no piano to play on. "In Cuba, as everywhere else older people fall through the cracks," Ry Cooder pointed out. "Ruben didn't have a piano and hadn't played on ten years, Ibrahim Ferrer was walking the streets, had nothing to do. In two years time these people have careers and are touring Europe. They have a connection with the public which is what musicians always want. All Ruben wants to do now is perform. He does not want to sit in his little house and be forgotten and ignored."

"A lot of people think this film was scripted. It wasn't. It was just a lot of vivid, fascinating people in a vivid, fascinating place," Cooder says. "There's no holding back with these people, no shrouds to pull away."

The film often charts the development of a specific tune, cutting seamlessly from recording studio to the concert stage. "We were able to cut from Omara or Ibrahim singing in the street or in the studio directly to the concert stage in Amsterdam or Carnegie Hall, and they'd be in the same key and same meter," Cooder adds. "They are a living, breathing example of what it is to be a musician in the atomic sense. They're made up of these sounds and rhythms."

Quite early on the members of The Buena Vista Social Club realized that Ry Cooder and Wim Wenders, who followed later, had not come to Havana to take the music and run. As a result, the band members, with an amazing lack of self-consciousness, talk to the camera, like they are speaking to a friend or some angel sitting right off their shoulder. Choosing not to handcuff this film with a script or any preconceived notions, director Wenders let this film become a story which told itself. Like all great improvisers, Wenders' used his ability to listen, react and create on the spot. And out of the eighty hours of film he shot, Wenders pieced together a couple of magic, moving, coherent hours that are sure to live on in the hearts of those who view it.

Ry Comments:

" There is none of
that detachment
from the music with
these musicians.
This is what they

love to do. With narrative music you can't beat experience that singers like Billie Holiday brought to her art. It enables the singer to illuminate and even enact the words and the music. It's not on the conveyor belt of consumerism. "

"If you are open to this it has power. It's good. It's humanistic. They are transforming themselves everytime. They're not up on stage saying, 'I used to do this or this was my hit. I'm going to run it for you for the thousandth time.' Compay Segundo has been playing this since world war one. I've never seen anyone so fanatically involved in what he's doing. Radiant with contentment and a foxy look in his eye. He is always himself there is no act for the camera. He is the same in front of a camera in New York City as he is on the streets in Havana. He has a childlike joy of discovery. None of this self-conscious how do you like me now."

"The key for me was to get close to these folks. Which you never can on a record which is a bit opaque. They are not stuck in a time warp. "

Discovering the unknown classic singer like Ibrahim, how many times does that happen? Not at all. If you're dealing with someone who was famous. You have to deal with their past, who they were and who they are now. With Ibrahim that's not the case. It's fresh, it's sudden, it's a tremendous experience. His story is unique even among the people in the movie. When you make a film it's a lot like making a record, something will happen or not. You can't plan something like this.

Alot of people think this film was scripted, it wasn't. Just a lot of vivid fascinating people in a vivid fascinating place. The visual component down there is intense. Life down there is *really* intense. There is a really dramatic surreal quality about

everything. Which is really good for the camera. In the middle of all this, you have Ibrahim, Zen-like very still and inward looking. None of this horrible career plotting that's so prevalent in this culture.

To support Ibrahim, Ry Cooder painstakingly went about building a distinctive band sound, as he pointed out. "To rehash old tunes is dumb, especially in Cuba where the old tunes and records are not just great but classic. Because these genres are not mixed up down there, we tried drawing two sides of the Bolero timeline together, blending under one roof the Los Zafiros and Arsenio Rodriguez thing."

"Producer Nick Gold unearthed former Zafiros guitarist Manuel Galban, a twanging Cuban Duane Eddy, who plays these traditional tres parts on his Fender His sound and rhythmic approach is unique even in his homeland.

Adding in Demertreo Muniz with his horns and 80 year old Generoso Jimenez, Benny More's arranger, we started to build our own sound." The elements of Ravel Magnifies the juke box aesthetic into something epic."

" We were blessed by the the willingness of these musicians (Ruben, Ibrahim etc.) and good luck. And I have had bad luck so I know the difference in recording and professional pursuits. Me I'm doing this because I like to. I'm 52 and I'm determined to do things I like to do. What else are you going to do as a musician. We stumbled into this. It could easily have not have happened.

The idea of an embargo a policy against a people and nation, the idea of turning these people, against their government, after how we exploited Cuba, is ridiculous. Empowering a series of satanic dictators like Bautista, gone in a second with a little push like Humpty Dumpty. All it does is make people suffer and want for things like thermometers and incubators. Money is king. Corporations will find a way to end the

embargo, not music but it's money that makes the difference.

Wim's Quotes

Until you go there you aren't aware of how apolitical they are and how much they suffer from an old anachronistic and obsolete and barbarous decision that makes no sense anymore. You never see a beggar or hear them complain. They still love America and are very fatalistic about things. They made a decision to stay. You are afraid as with the fall of the Berlin Wall, when Cuba is opened up, these people lose the carpet under their feet.

" They (BVSC) have the enthusiasm and the stamina to acknowledge that this is the time of their lives. They stand at the pinnacle of their careers in the eighties. Who is able to say at 80 wow this is what I've been waiting for for 80 years. I realized during the shoot Ibrahim was turning into our main character. After being a sideman all his life, the grace and modesty with which he assumed his role was very touching, referring to all the good things that happened to him to his mother."
We had 3 days of incredible rehearsals when the band prepared for it's first live performance. They had never played anywhere together but the studio or this fabulous jam session in the boondocks of New Jersey. Which was the one highlight I wish we could have included. My

favorite moment is after the band performed performed Silencio and Omara started crying and Ibrahim wiped her tears off on stage..Sometimes you have to cut your favorite stuff to make the whole work. Something I know all to well. I made the decision to produce my own films with final cut, the disadvantage is you spend a lot of time being a lawyer, an accountant doing things you dislike.

"I will always produce my own films and avoid finding myself at the distributor's mercy. You must become a producer if you want any control over the fate of your work. Hollywood filmmaking has become more and more about power and control. It's really not about telling stories. That's just a pretense. But ironically, the fundamental difference between making films in Europe versus America is in how the screenplay is dealt with. From my experiences in Germany and France, the script is something that is constantly scrutinized by the film and made from it. Americans are far more practical. For them, the screenplay is a blueprint and it must be adhered to rigidly in fear of the whole house falling down. In a sense, all of the creative energy goes into the screenplay so one could say that the film already exists before the film even begins shooting. You lose spontaneity. But in Germany and France, I think that filmmaking is regarded as an adventure in itself."

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