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## Play it again, or Old-time Cuban Music on the Screen

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A friend of mine, a Cuban film director, writes to me about visiting the Salzburg Festival. [1] After enjoying operas by Berlioz and Mozart, he says, the big surprise was the Festival's closing event, a concert by the Cuban old-timers La Vieja Trova Santiaguera, chosen by the Festival's special guest of the year, the poet Hans Magnus Enzenberger. 'It was tremendous. Austrians in elegant dresses and tuxedos cutting a caper and going crazy with the rhythm of one of the most traditional of our musical styles. Everyone danced and enjoyed themselves till the early hours. I can only tell you,' my friend adds, 'that wherever I go I find this incredible popularity of Cuban music.'

The international popularity of Cuban music is not by any means a new phenomenon. One need only think of the Latin jazz of the 40s, when the Cuban drummer Chano Pozo was Dizzy Gillespie's drummer and George Russell wrote *Cubana Be/Bop* for Gillespie and Charlie Parker; or the rise to fame in 70s throughout Latin America of the singers of the *Nueva Trova* like Silvio Rodriguez and Pablo Milanes; then of Afro-Cuban jazz groups like *Los Irakere* in the 80s, followed by the salsa boom of the 90s. But in the last three years or so, there has been a new twist. Ever since the American guitarist and composer Ry Cooder recorded an album in Havana in 1996 with a bunch of largely forgotten *ancianos* (old folk) and issued it under the title of the Buena Vista Social Club, we have been treated not only to the vibrancy of Afro-Cuban jazz and salsa, but now also to a revival of the pre-revolutionary *son* of the golden period of the 30s and 40s. But this is a revival like no other. These are not young musicians taking up and modernising an old tradition, but the survivors of the original moment, now in their 70s, 80s, or even 90s, who are touring abroad for months at a time, playing venues like Amsterdam, London, New York's Carnegie Hall, and even Miami. The extraordinary sight of these old men, black or moreno, supercharging these diverse audiences, has been captured in two films, the Dutch production *Lagrimas Negras*, directed by Sonia Herman Dolz, and now *Buena Vista Social Club* from Wim Wenders, made at the invitation of Cooder himself, the composer for Wenders' films *Paris, Texas* and *The End of Violence*. The first of these films follows La Vieja Trova Santiaguera from Havana to Europe on their first foreign tour, the latter accompanies Ry Cooder on a return visit to Havana to record a new album with the Buena Vista musicians, and takes us with them to concerts in Amsterdam and New York.

It is not an accident that the reader has very likely heard of, and even seen, the film by Wenders, but probably not the Dutch film. This is not because the one is better than the other, but a straightforward index of the limited marketing power of an independent producer in a small European country compared to a director of international standing with record industry backing. In fact these two music documentaries make a very interesting pair because in many ways they are closely

similar, but in certain respects show significant differences. The similarity comes from the premise shared by the two films – both celebrate the musicians' emergence onto the world stage and offer a portrait of their life back in an impoverished Cuba – and from the way they both go about it by presenting us with the musicians one by one, who introduce themselves by telling us when and where they were born; in the Wenders film, for example, vocalist Ibrahim Ferrer is in his 70s, pianist Rubén González in his 80s, and guitarist-singer Compay Segundo is over 90. In both films the musicians tell us little snippets about themselves, and we visit them at home and see them rehearsing. And of course the mood of both films is also very similar, since both groups play music from the same tradition and repertoire. But there is more to it than that. Both films are powerfully charged by a feeling which is not a primary property of the music but is produced by the image: in a word, nostalgia.

This is not say that music cannot be nostalgic, which of course would be nonsense, but rather that the two films bring to the screen a quality which was sensed by a commentator reviewing the CD of Buena Vista Social Club in the New York Review of Books. The cover photo, writes Alma Guillermoprieto, of a wiry old black man strolling along a dilapidated Havana street in his white cap and shoes, looking a little like Sportin' Life in *Porgy and Bess*, allows us, she says, to decipher the reason for the success of this music: 'When we see it, we feel heart-stopping nostalgia for something we did not realize we had been missing. That something is Cuba.' [2] What is going on here is partly that the music is becoming associated with images of a present-day Cuba which preserves traces of a time long-gone in our own countries, like the 1950s convertibles which have been kept going by loving Cuban drivers, evocative residues of the past on which Wenders, like other documentarists before him (I have taken similar shots myself) allows his camera to linger. These cars have changed their symbolic meaning. Originally they signified Cuba's modernity; then they came to signify its arrested development, as the USA turned its back and the island fell under Soviet tutelage; now they've passed from being quaint to becoming trophies in the retro of postmodernism, sought after by foreign tourists prepared to pay hard dollars for them.

On a symptomatic reading, therefore, what is registered in Guillermoprieto's comment is a change which the image of Cuba has undergone since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Cuba has become a vestige the Cold War, and a clear victim of bullying by its overbearing neighbour. (The details will all be found if you look up 'Helms-Burton' on the internet – indeed Washington has just unveiled a new web site devoted to selling their Cuba policy to web surfers.) This is the point of Wenders' pre-title sequence, in which the Cuban photographer Korda shows him prints of photos from the heroic early days – here is Che Guevara, for example, playing golf with Fidel Castro ('Who won?' – 'Fidel, because Che let him') – which ends up on an image of a demonstration in front of the US embassy which Korda calls 'David and Goliath'. [3] But this is about as political as Wenders gets, and the sequence is entirely disconnected from the rest of the film. It stands as an enigmatic motto which allows Wenders to ignore politics for the remaining hundred minutes. The Dutch film is less coy, and has a whole section of interview about how the Revolution benefited musicians by giving them steady employment and a regular wage. Nevertheless, the Cuba which both films evoke – through both the music and the memories of the musicians – is pre-revolutionary – and that is the real nostalgia.

Alma Guillermoprieto is a serious writer trying to get at a puzzle about the extraordinary success of this anachronistic music which also exercises more popular writers. According to a album reviewer on the internet, Buena Vista Social Club, which has sold more than a million copies around the world, is

the hip hit of the season among the older demographic that I think of as the "midrock" crowd, and which guitarist Ry Cooder, who produced and played on the album, has been known to call the "Jeep Cherokee set." These are affluent, well-educated music buyers in their 30s and 40s who don't often relate to the rap, rock and pop that dominates the youth-driven pop charts. This is an audience more likely to take its cues from NPR than MTV, and whose interests are often piqued by a sense of the exotic. And these days, Afro-Cuban music has become as sweetly seductive as the smoke of a contraband cigar.' [4]

To put this another way, one reason a large number of people, actually of all ages and all sorts of sets, like this music is precisely because it doesn't sound like chart music. It doesn't use drum machines, it doesn't have artificial backing tracks, it isn't electrical (except for Ry Cooder's discreet slide guitar in Buena Vista Social Club), the voices – ah the voices – are unforced, melodious and entirely natural. This is good old acoustic music. And the result is that a music which is not primarily nostalgic, becomes so.

Part of the nostalgia that now attaches to it is directed towards the idea of a music before politics and social angst. Most of the songs are about affairs of the heart, love songs, stories of disappointment and infidelity – some are comic, none are political. But it is also part of this tradition to celebrate music and song itself. In the words of one of the numbers in *Lagrimas Negras*,

*Si canto guaracha, lo hago que con sabor,  
Igual un bolero, como un Son Montuno, como un chachacha.  
Esto que yo tengo yo no lo compre,  
Lo traigo en el sange, se lo juro a Ud.*

When I sing a guaracha, I do it with swing,  
The same with a bolero, a Son Montuno, or a chachacha,  
What I have has not been bought,  
It's in my blood, I swear it.

And this indeed is what people feel in this music. It isn't commercial, it's not a product of the profit motive. This becomes a further cause for nostalgia, productive of associations with a lost age of innocence. Thus, in another review on the internet, discussing Wenders' film:

What is especially charming is that the film is as much a journey for its subjects -- many of whom are in their 70s, 80s and 90s -- as for its audience. Their childlike bliss at having been rediscovered in the twilight years of their lives, the wide-eyed wonder with which they greet their first trip to New York and their profound gratitude at receiving yet another chance to share their beloved music with the world, help create a narrative as emotional and affecting as anything in a mainstream Hollywood offering. [5]

The trip to New York, which provides the film's closing sequence, looks like Wenders intended it to echo the enigmatic opening, David and Goliath in another key, as it were, and with the theme inverted, as the wide-eyed oldsters go window-shopping, and from the top of the Empire State, point out the Statue of Liberty to each other. There is something calculated about this ending, which seems cynically to pander to the American viewer, Cuban or otherwise.

In Cuba itself, apart from a few rural areas and provincial towns where they still dance the traditional *son* and venerate the memory of the Trio Matamoros, nobody remembered these tenacious and jovial old-timers until Ry Cooder rediscovered them. Cooder had previously worked with Hawaiian, Indian and Japanese musicians, and most notably, with Ali Farka Toure on Talking Timbuktu, a collaboration which serves as a benchmark for world fusion music. With Buena Vista Social Club, he has scored the biggest success of his career as an animator of world music, but in Cuba the results of his efforts reveal a politics of music which its foreign reputation hardly registers. As another Cuban friend puts it, "The youth consider them "Something like antediluvian monsters", to use the title of a book of poems by [Roberto Fernández] Retamar, which I think comes from a verse of Mayakovsky's." Ambrosio Fornet writes to me that there are different shades of opinion in Cuba about the international take-off of the '*Vieja Guardia Sonera*' – the 'rearguard of *son*' – and above all, about its consequent resuscitation back home. The common people on the streets are surprised and pleased. But young musicians and some music critics, who often criticise the music programmers on radio and television, are more ambivalent. "They ask whom this praise is directed *against*, given how many people extol the "music of yesteryear" in bad faith, in order indirectly to attack the music of today." This is the charge made in a recent interview by one of today's most popular bandleaders, José Luis Cortés, known as El Tosco (*tosco* means rough, unpolished), who plays the kind of popular dance music known as *timba*, a variant of salsa. Praise is being heaped on the old-timers, he complains, in order to deny the youth their merits, adding that the old-folk deserve it because they are the primogenitors: 'I applaud them and I'd give them a thousand Grammys, but they're being used to shit on the new stuff emerging now.' [6]

The other place where this old-time music raises political pitches is of course Miami, where Wenders' film had its US premiere, and where concerts by musicians from over the water are subjected to vilification and bomb-threats. According, once more, to an account published on the internet, 'the warm response to Wenders' stirring film represents progress of sorts for a community still shaped by the feverish right-wing exile politics that have turned Miami into the nation's most repressive city for artistic free expression.' But now, the report continues, the climate has begun to soften, and 'pulled along by the seductive, irresistible lure of both newer and older forms of Cuban music[, a] younger generation of Cuban-Americans is eager to rediscover its roots and seeks out the music without fear.' [7]

Visually, the two films are rather different. In the Dutch film, the cinematography of Melle van Essen is a model of controlled attentive hand-held shooting, steady even in its many close-ups and detail shots, which we are allowed to watch without any musical backing. In the Wenders film, shot by Jörg Widmer and Robby Müller, the framing is generally looser, the camera rather less steady and controlled (except for a slightly mannered steadycam shot in the recording studio in

which the camera encircles the singers several times). The Dutch film is shot on 16mm, the colour and light are softened, the image not a little romantic; the Wenders is shot in digital video and transferred to celluloid for cinema distribution, with the result that the image is harsh, and the colours distorted by excessive contrast. The result, however, is a representation of Havana which is much closer to the sad and bitter truth. Havana is not like any other Latin American metropolis, with stark contrasts between rich and poor, between centre, suburbs, and shanty towns, in short, the city as a map of the relations of power, ownership and production within dependent capitalism. You wouldn't expect it to be. The problem now is one of upkeep, for which the lack of wherewithal has begun to take its toll. The whole city is crumbling, its variegated architectural expression disappearing behind peeling façades, with gaps where buildings with weakened walls have collapsed. *Lgrimas Negras* shows less of this, because it tends to stay indoors more.

There are other differences in balance between the films – there is much more performance in *Buena Vista Social Club*, and more rehearsal in *Lgrimas Negras*, which makes it musically more interesting. Both films eschew explanations by experts, but Herman Dolz gives us more opportunity to see how the music is put together. Both films also make a point of contrasting age and youth. Wenders includes a particularly delightful sequence in which Rubén González plays the piano in a large hall to accompany children practising gymnastics and dance – you can see here exactly what Cubans mean when they call the old folk *los super-abuelos* ('the super-grandfathers'). [8] But the Dutch film is even better on the subject, for it shows us the children themselves making music, and not childish music but the Afro-Cuban call-and-response that belongs to *santería*. Here we learn that even if the *ancianos* had been forgotten, the music which lies at the root of both old and new has far from disappeared. Old and young, however many the generations which separate them, belong to the same cultural tradition, and have not yet lost touch with their roots. [9]

In the end, however, the most touching feature of both films is what these old musicians represent in the here-and-now, in the flesh, as it were. Contradistinct to the image of the elderly as silent sufferers of every kind of human indignity which keeps impinging on our television screens and filling the columns of our newspapers, these films restore to them and to us the voice and the dignity of old age. It is a quality they possess that they haven't bought or stolen from anyone or anywhere, but which is lent to them by the music and expressed in the joy of the audiences that come to see and hear them. It is a great irony, which underlies both these films, that this restoration of humanity to the aged should issue from a rather small country which has been stigmatised as an affront to democratic freedom and condemned for human rights violations. It is also testimony to the power of music to transcend political barriers, and a reason for believing in human resilience.

#### Notes

1 Personal communication from Julio García Espinosa. Our communications have recently become more frequent thanks to the internet, now that e-mail has been made accessible to a small sector of the population of Havana.

2 Alma Guillermoprieto, 'Cuban Hit Parade', *New York Review of Books*, January 14, 1999, pp.34-5.

3 The film does not identify Korda. I imagine he would find this extremely galling. Korda took the photo of Che which in 1968 became an iconic image throughout the world after it was used by an Italian publisher who paid him not a penny for it. The story of how he took it is recounted in a short Cuban film of 1981 by Pedro Chaskel, *Una foto recorre el mundo* ('A Photo Tours the World'). To add insult to injury, a British television documentary a couple of years ago, which told the whole story of how Korda was ripped off, used clips from Chaskel's film without any identifying indication

4 <http://www.salonmagazine.com/ent/music/feature/1998/07/16feature.html>

5 <http://princess.sentex.net/film37.htm>

6 '*para joder esto nuevo que viene ahora*'. See Jaime Sarusky, 'Jose Luis Cortes: Entre el barrio y Beethoven'. Revista Revolución y Cultura, julio-agosto de 1999, p.17. My thanks to Ambrosio Fornet for his comments and this reference

7 <http://www.salon1999.com/ent/music/feature/1999/03/09feature.html>

8 A dozen years ago, *abuelo* was the term by which an earlier generation of youth referred to Fidel.

9 Children feature in another film about music in Cuba, *Tuning With the Enemy*, directed by Tricia O'Leary & Helen Gallacher, shown in the UK on Channel 4 in August 1998. A much more exceptional, entertaining and political film than the other two, this is the story of Ben Truehaft, a California piano tuner, who defies the US embargo against Cuba in order to take donated pianos and a brigade of piano tuners to Havana. Pianos in Cuba suffer from the humidity; they get eaten by termites, and the strings rust in the salt air. A Cuban conservationist tells us that old Steinways are more resistant, due to their better wood; the Soviet pianos which began to arrive after the Revolution were never designed for such conditions, and the collapse of the Soviet bloc has left the island not only in desperate economic straights but also increasingly bereft of playable pianos. On pianos completely beyond repair, Cubans of every age play everything from Bach, Chopin and Debussy, to their own classic composers of nineteenth century danzón, Lecuona and Cervantes, and contemporary Latin jazz. On instruments with broken hammers and painfully out of tune, they display their impeccable sense of rhythm, and the film becomes an eloquent testimony to the magic of music in circumstances where you might have thought people had more important things to worry about. But as a piano teacher in a popular neighbourhood puts it, comparing playing piano to getting a buzz on rum, the piano 'is our drug, and our drink, and our family'.

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