

Music of life

Starring: Compay Segundo, Ibrahim Ferrer, Ruben Gonzalez, Omara Portuondo, Eliades Ochoa, Orlando 'Cachaito' Lopez, Barbarito Torres, Ry Cooder and others

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German filmmaker Wim Wenders calls this remarkable concert film a “musicumentary.” We are taken on a trip to Cuba, where we meet a group of astonishing musicians who let their music speak for them, illuminating their lives and experiences and moving us with their passion, their voices and their rhythms. “I wouldn’t separate their lives and history from the music itself,” said Wenders. “Their music is so emotional and rich and so full of their life stories that you just cannot divide it up.”

The idea for this movie can be traced back to the 1970s, when American guitarist, composer and musicologist Ry Cooder traveled to Havana to listen to some of the music he had first heard on a friend’s tape. He fell in love with it, and was especially moved by the performance of a musician playing the *tres*, a type of Cuban guitar. He described the music as deeply alluring, with seductive and intricate rhythms, concise and lyrical melodies, and having the capacity to succinctly express emotions.

Cooder continued to think about this music, but did not get the opportunity to return until 1996, when British record producer Nick Gold suggested a project combining some West African and Cuban musicians. When the West Africans were unable to make it to Havana, the recording project continued anyway, with Cooder assembling a group of older musicians, many of whose careers had long ago apparently ended.

Out of this trip came the *Buena Vista Social Club*, a CD named for a club in Havana where many of the musicians used to perform decades earlier. The CD became a gigantic international hit, selling 1.5 million copies and winning a Grammy award.

When Wenders, with whom Cooder has worked in films for nearly 20 years, heard the *Buena Vista Social Club* he also became hooked on the music, and suggested that he accompany Cooder to Havana on his next trip. “What came across for me when I heard the record for the first time with no idea yet of who these people were, was a feeling of lightness, of sheer joy and carefree abandon,” said Wenders. “And there was also a deeply felt sense of experience and honesty about it, like no other music I knew.”

The opportunity for Wenders to meet these artists came in 1998, in connection with the production of a CD devoted to Ibrahim Ferrer, a lead vocalist on the 1996 record. The film came out of this 1998 trip.

The movie powerfully evokes the beauty and vitality of Havana, despite the poverty and the impact of the decades-long embargo and isolation. The 53-year-old Wenders, one of the leading figures of the

New German Cinema of the 1970s, is an experienced and talented filmmaker (*Alice in the Cities*; *Kings of the Road*; *The American Friend*; *Paris, Texas*; *Wings of Desire*). The haunting quality of the music is matched by extraordinary images of the city, the waterfront, the ocean. The film’s creators have combined informal interviews with the performers and footage of daily life, rehearsals and performances. The musicians are then shown at a hugely successful concert in Amsterdam, which Wenders explains was expected to be “the one concert the band was ever going to give.” The tremendous popularity of the CD, however, led to an appearance at Carnegie Hall in New York, which is then also included in the film. The result is a very powerful combination which effectively demonstrates what makes the *Buena Vista Social Club* so special.

All 14 songs on the CD are fascinating. They combine Cuban folklore and various song forms, most prominently the Cuban son and bolero, as well as mambo, danzon and tumbao rhythms, and songs influenced by American jazz, gospel and blues.

The power of this music is inseparable from the way it draws upon many different cultures. Afro-Cuban music, based on both African and European forms, has had an enormous influence throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. But these musicians show that they have also learned from the North American products of African and European influences—jazz and blues in particular. Jazz harmonies were introduced into Cuban music beginning in the early 1940s, and many of the *Buena Vista* musicians have been deeply influenced by jazz.

The music is national and international at the same time. It has a universal appeal because it communicates universal experiences—a lifetime of labor and struggle, and a genuinely life-affirming outlook. After working for hours in tobacco fields and sugar plantations, people found time for pleasure and relaxation. The lyrics of these songs speak of everyday human experiences, including loves lost and found.

One of the compositions on the 1996 CD, entitled *El Barretero*, is a type of Cuban blues which is in a style very popular in West Africa. It describes the life of a peasant who yearns for happiness after working many hours.

*I'm going to the crossing
 To unburden my load
 I'm going to the crossing
 To unburden my load
 There I'll reach the end*

*Of my crushing labor.
Ride up on the mountain.
I work without rest
So I can marry
I work without rest
So I can marry
And if I can achieve that
I'll be a happy man.*

Another theme of the film, one which emerges all the more powerfully for the fact that it is never spelled out didactically, is the role of an older generation. The *Buena Vista Social Club* is anchored by 92-year-old Compay Segundo, 80-year-old Ruben Gonzalez and 72-year-old Ibrahim Ferrer. As Ry Cooder stated when he appeared on the Nightline television show several weeks ago, "Even though people are less obsolescent in Cuba than they are here, older people aren't heard from that much... A window can be opened for them to say what they know. They know a lot."

These musicians show by their very presence that history is not something simply disposable, that cultural traditions can be brought alive in the most powerful way if they still have something to say and are given access to an audience. Segundo, Gonzalez and Ferrer work with a younger generation of musicians, in their 40s, 50s and 60s. And Americans Ry Cooder on guitar and his son Joachim on the udu drum and the conga also join and are welcomed by their Cuban brothers and sisters. As Ry Cooder states, "Cuban musicians are unique. They have nurtured this very refined, deeply funky music in an atmosphere sealed off from the fall-out of a hyper-organized world. They have evolved a flawless ensemble concept where the organization of the music is perfectly understood. There's no ego and no jockeying for position, so they play perfectly together."

These amazing musicians relate the story of their lives quite simply, with anecdotes and humor. We meet and hear from Compay Segundo, born Francisco Repilado in 1907. His nickname combines the slang for Compadre along with a reference to his bass harmony second voice.

Cooder describes this nonagenarian as "the last of the best, the oracle, the source, the one who represents where it all flows from." Compay has been performing for almost 80 years. He invented his own instrument, known as the *armonico*. It has seven strings, combining the characteristics of the conventional guitar and the Cuban *tres* by doubling the third string in order to provide more harmony.

Compay grew up in the Cuban countryside working in the tobacco fields during the day and playing and singing with top musicians in the evening. Like many of the other members of the group, he comes from Santiago, in eastern Cuba. He can be heard on the first song of the CD, entitled *Chan Chan*, a Cuban folklore about a peasant's yearning to travel to town so he can be with his love.

While all the musicians have led remarkable lives, we were struck by two others in particular, the lead vocalist Ibrahim Ferrer and pianist Ruben Gonzalez.

Now 72, Ibrahim Ferrer has the vigor and passion of a much younger man. His eyes twinkle and glow as he speaks in his apartment in a run-down Havana building, recalling his family's history. Ferrer was born at a social club dance in 1927, and began singing professionally in 1941 with local groups in Santiago. While no one else in his family became a singer, they all loved to dance. Ibrahim is in perfect form when he sings and dances to the music of *Candela*.

*Oh fire, fire, fire, I'm burning !
Oh fire, fire, fire, I'm burning!*

*A rodent put on a dance for some great amusement
He chose a mouse as his drummer, to play for the whole day
An elegant and amiable cat came along too,
'Good evening my friend'
he said to the drummer
'I can play too,
and you can take a rest'
The mouse left the room half-crazy,
'now I'll go and rest!'
And the cat played a lighthearted danzon in his delightful way...*

Ruben Gonzalez, born in Santa Clara in 1919, was trained as a professional pianist. After graduating from the Cienfuego Conservatoire in 1934, he went to medical school, thinking he would be a doctor by day and musician at night. By 1941, however, he had abandoned his medical studies and moved to Havana, where he quickly became one of the greatest Cuban pianists. Ruben Gonzalez has the ability to mesmerize his listeners. A memorable scene in the film takes place when a group of little ballerinas surround the piano to listen as he practices. Aware of their presence, he begins to increase his tempo, and all the little girls begin to dance.

These are only three of the uniquely talented musicians in this film. One of the "younger" performers, Orlando 'Cachaito' Lopez (he is "only" 66), shows how the African, European and American influences have come together in Cuba. Cachaito grew up in a family which includes the most famous bass players in Cuba. He played classical music with the Orquesta Sinfonica Nacional in the 1960s, often playing in the concert hall and then moving later in the evening to electric bass in a club. He has been deeply influenced by Charlie Mingus, and continues to play Cuban, jazz and classical music with equal devotion.

The only female member of the group, singer Omara Portuondo, has a remarkable voice. She performs a solo bolero composed by Maria Teresa Vera, one of the great figures of Cuban music who died in 1964. The lyrics of the tune could be understood in relation to a theme in the film, as many of the musicians now being heard from had stopped performing or had been forgotten.

*I was your life's desire
One day long ago
Now I'm history
I can't face the change
Now I'm history
I can't face the change.*

The greatness of this music is connected to its utter seriousness about its tradition and its high level of craftsmanship combined with its creativity, freshness and emotional content. Wim Wenders and Ry Cooder have performed a wonderful service in bringing this almost-forgotten musical treasure to an international audience.



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