

# An exchange on the Wim Wenders film *Buena Vista Social Club*

4 August 1999

*The following is a letter from a WWSW reader in response to the July 9 article "Music of life—Buena Vista Social Club " and a reply by Fred Mazelis, for the WWSW editorial board.*

I thank you for your recent review of Wim Wenders's new film "Buena Vista Social Club." I, too, saw this film and enjoyed it tremendously. The music was infectious, and Wenders made the smart (and humane) decision to allow the musicians to speak for themselves, at length. The film's most strongly communicated message of the enormous vitality that the "old folks" still maintain, and will share, if one is only willing to communicate with them on something like their own terms.

Naturally any documentary of this sort disguises a great deal of manipulation and intervention, but Wenders does allow certain ambiguities and problems to linger. The trouble I had with the film is that it does not work hard enough to provide a context in which such problems can be understood, let alone resolved. The film is not dishonorable, but its political reticence has allowed for a wave of misrepresentation in the press. *Buena Vista Social Club* emphasizes the music over politics, but that does not mean the movie is not a political object itself.

At one point singer Ibrahim Ferrer states, with great sincerity and dignity, that Cubans gain strength in their rejection of US-style materialism. But shortly thereafter Wenders's camera lingers tracks along the decaying pre-revolutionary architecture of Havana, pointedly catching a group of men finally disposing of a 1950s-era refrigerator. It is not clear whether this scene is meant to reinforce or simply contradict Ferrer's argument. The film also lingers on—even fetishizes—rows of American cars, also from the 1950s or earlier. One gets the feeling that Wenders and his collaborator Ry Cooder, finds this obsolescence quaint and alluring. Even a hotel named for Karl Marx is in charming disrepair, the "R" in Marx having long since fallen off the marquee.

Indeed the movie projects an ambivalence about poverty and decay. On the one hand, some musicians are allowed to relate stories of their impoverishment after their performing careers dried up. But in visual terms (certainly the terms by which most information is communicated in a film), the impoverishment of a nation is conveyed with affection. Aged but dignified musicians are seen being interviewed in decrepit old bars and hotels which retain a dusty grandeur. The connection is emotionally and aesthetically resonant, but not meaningful politically.

There are notable exceptions to this romanticizing/depoliticizing of poverty and decay. One scene you mentioned, in which pianist Ruben Gonzalez plays to an audience of delighted young ballerinas, takes place in a beautifully restored gymnasium in which children are quietly learning fencing, gymnastics, etc. The pride that Cubans take in their culture, and in their young, is in evidence here.

The one aspect of this film that seems most underdeveloped, to me, is the relationship of these aged musicians (and the varied musical traditions they represent) to the cultural-political life of post-Revolutionary Cuba. On several occasions it is noted that the son and Cuban big-band traditions had been largely forgotten—and their practitioners left out of work. Seventy, 80, even 90-year-old musicians express their thanks to Cooder

and company that they are once again able to play the music they love to appreciative audiences all over the world. But just as folklorists in the 60s and 70s romanticized the rural Southern culture of the 1920s when they "rediscovered" banjo players like Dock Boggs and bluesmen like John Hurt, Cooder and Wenders come dangerously close to enshrining the pre-1959 era as one of abundance and respect for all. To the contrary, the poverty of many Cubans was much more dire in this period, and a brutal series of Jim Crow laws ensured that playing music was one of the very few vocations open to a dark-skinned man like Ibrahim Ferrer.

For Ferrer, his radiant joy at being in New York suggests not so much a lust for the sheen and abundance of American society (and its supposed analogue in the Batista era), but a fitting culmination to his career as an itinerant musician. But one can easily miss this given the movie's refusal to interrogate the substance of Cuban-American relations. While I don't doubt the emotions being displayed in *Buena Vista Social Club*, many reviewers stirred by these emotions have understandably drawn the wrong conclusions.

In a January *New York Times Magazine* article, a prominent Cuban musician says that "They [meaning Castro's regime] tried to take away the son and impose on us trova." The thrust of this article is that in ushering in a new political order, Castro was eager to sweep aside the cultural remnants of the Batista era. Thus the musicians of the Buena Vista Social Club are cast as silent victims of Communism. Articles such as these paint a picture of a revolutionary generation disrespectful of their forerunners. When tied in with all the mercenary front-page speculation as to Cuba's future after Castro, one can conclude that "Buena Vista Social Club" itself represents a harbinger of the end of the revolutionary project. I have read numerous articles—in music industry magazines, in the alternative press, in the big dailies—to that effect. But in reality only some of these musicians have been forgotten, and the reasons behind that lie in the logic of shifting tastes and fashions. Many blues and jazz musicians have suffered similar fates in this country. Just think of the bitterness of Skip James, rediscovered by John Fahey in his 60s, dying of cancer and long since disillusioned about the staying power of his own music. Changing fashions can be devastating for artists, and this should be the inspiration for increasing government sponsorship of the arts. In Cuba, for those older musicians that have neither retired nor been forgotten, there have been opportunities to perform everywhere except the US, and the Cuban government offers rewards for its cultural ambassadors, some of whom represent the "son" tradition. After the revolution, music programs in Cuban universities were changed to place more emphasis on indigenous, Afro-Cuban and other traditions. Arguably, the "son" and other pre-Revolutionary musics have more official recognition and sponsorship now than they had under Batista. One would not gather this from *Buena Vista Social Club*.

To sum up, the dangers of making an avowedly "apolitical" (or terminally ambivalent) documentary about a subject rife with political implications include being misrepresented and used in the press by the reactionary or the merely ignorant. What was, in all likelihood, intended

as a paean to the cultural vivacity of Cuba has been used as a item of argument against revolution. Because of this, we have a right to ask more of our documentarists. We should ask them to provide context as well as excitement and emotion. So I suggest that in reviewing movies, even documentaries in which the politics of cinema are meant to be invisible, we look at not just *what* is being celebrated but *how* it is being celebrated.

JH, Chicago

Dear JH,

Your letter raises very important issues, among them the relationship between art and politics, as well as the nature of the Cuban Revolution and the role of Castroism. We welcome this opportunity to discuss these matters.

*Buena Vista Social Club* presents, in documentary form, the traditional music of Cuba as it lives today in a group of professional musicians, some in their 80s and 90s, who are distinguished by their vitality, their devotion to their art, and their love of life. We believe that the film was extremely successful in telling this story. It was truthful, obviously made with great care and love for its subject, and was both emotionally moving and also thought-provoking in dealing both with the music and with some broader social and historical issues.

You acknowledge being moved by the film, but your entire letter is then devoted to a very strong and I think misguided criticism of the movie as politically inadequate, as “apolitical” or “terminally ambivalent,” to use your words.

Your criticism is not directed at various critics who have made tendentious comments seeking to blame “communism” or the Cuban government for all the past difficulties experienced by the Buena Vista musicians. Instead you charge that the filmmakers, because of their “political reticence,” have opened the door to reactionary attacks.

Let me first take up the issue of your approach to this film. Of course countless editing and other decisions went into the finished product, and I would not suggest that a different decision could not have been made here or there. That is not, however, what your criticism is amounts to. You propose a completely different approach to the subject.

You fault the movie, for example, for lingering “on the decaying pre-revolutionary architecture of Havana, pointedly catching a group of men finally disposing of a 1950s-era refrigerator.” You write that the film “fetishizes ... rows of American cars, also from the 1950s and earlier.” “One gets the feeling that Wenders and his collaborator Ry Cooder finds this obsolescence quaint and alluring,” you write. “The impoverishment of a nation is conveyed with affection.”

I would submit that these comments reflect your own feelings, and have little to do with what is actually portrayed in this film. It is not impoverishment that is conveyed with affection, but affection for the Cuban people who are struggling under difficult conditions. What is wrong with showing Havana's architecture, with both its grandeur and decay? What is wrong with showing street scenes which indicate the problems facing the Cuban people today?

Later you contrast to the above scenes the one with the young ballerinas. You are obviously concerned that the filmmakers have shown too much poverty and not enough of what you call “the pride that Cubans take in their culture, and in their young.” But why does one exclude the other? The scenes of poverty also show Cubans taking pride in their culture, their families, their lives.

You write that the movie “emphasizes the music over politics, but that does not mean the movie is not a political object itself.” But this is a movie about music and musicians. It is not a film about the politics of the Cuban Revolution. That does not mean that it does not make the viewer think about broader social and political issues, but that comes out of the way in which it carefully treats the subject at hand.

By demanding a kind of political litmus test you are inadvertently echoing the worst elements of “socialist realism,” the reactionary doctrine

imposed on Soviet culture in the 1930s by the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The revolutionary Soviet government of the early 1920s had no fear of experimentation in art and no fear of telling the truth about its economic, social and cultural problems. Lenin spoke many times about the backwardness of the young workers' state.

The Stalinist regime, on the other hand, decreed that only “positive” and “uplifting” themes could be treated in literature, art, film or music. Socialist realism was a left-sounding travesty of Marxism and Marxist aesthetics. Its purpose was to ensure that the ruling bureaucracy was presented in the best possible light. Bolshevism had nothing to fear from the airing of contradictions, but the Stalinist regime had everything to fear. The brutal repression of intellectual and artistic freedom went hand in hand with the ruling bureaucracy's nationalism and its destruction of all the rights of the working class.

What is the task of a work of art, such as this documentary on Cuban music? It cannot be conceived only in political terms, with a political message imposed on the work itself. Wenders called this film a “musicumentary,” by which he means a documentary on music. You insist, however, that “we have a right to ask more of our documentarists.” Why not ask more of the musicians as well? That is certainly consistent with your comments. Why not demand that their songs deal with the content and history of the Cuban Revolution?

I think this demonstrates the falsity of your position, as well as a certain inconsistency. The power of the movie consists in the way it “allows the musicians to speak for themselves, at length,” as you yourself point out. Any attempt to turn this concert film into a political statement, whatever the intentions, would have failed miserably and gravely weakened if not entirely destroyed it. Wenders was quite right, especially given that he is not someone able to make a sociological investigation of Cuba, to restrict himself to the images he chose. Let the viewer investigate the issues raised by the movie.

On the subject of the history of Cuban music, and the reasons for the fact that some of these musicians have been forgotten, you raise some issues which are certainly legitimate points for discussion. Ry Cooder has himself made the comparison to blues and jazz musicians in the US. There are several factors undoubtedly involved in the danger of losing a vital musical tradition. I don't think, however, that we can demand that a film exhaustively analyze or resolve these issues in order to be a valid and, indeed, moving work. And when you say that the filmmakers “come dangerously close to enshrining the pre-1959 era as one of abundance and respect for all,” I think you are completely mistaken. Once again you are imposing your own preconceptions and suspicions. This is no more a case of “enshrining” than the fond reminiscences of American jazz musicians about their own past. They are not nostalgic for Jim Crow, but for what they accomplished in spite of it.

Your fear of misunderstanding, your insistence that every political explanation be telegraphed clearly in a film such as this betrays a lack of confidence on your part in the power of the story itself. By letting the music and musicians speak for themselves, the filmmakers have presented something which is quite favorable to the Cuban people, their aspirations and their struggles. Perhaps that is why some of the critics have felt it necessary to introduce their own “political corrections.” I think you should ponder the significance of the fact that your criticism is echoed, from the other side, by a critic who argued in the *New York Times* that the filmmakers' political “evasions” had covered up the alleged role of the Cuban government in the neglect of these artists.

Finally there is the subject of the nature of the Cuban Revolution itself. In your reference to the “revolutionary project” in Cuba and numerous other comments, it appears that you consider the Castro government to be a socialist model for workers in Latin American and elsewhere, and your concern stems from your fear that the film will portray Castroism in a bad light.

I want to make it clear that even if that were the case—if Cuba had made great strides towards the building of a socialist society—that would not make your criticisms of this film any more correct. Since you raised these issues, however, it is necessary to clarify them. We do not agree with your apparent enthusiasm for Castro.

The Castro leadership is a nationalist tendency, based on a layer of the middle class, and similar to many other regimes which have come to power in the former colonial and semi-colonial countries in the post-World War II period. Many of these nationalist leaders, balancing between the capitalist world and the Soviet bloc, called themselves socialist to win support among the masses of workers and the urban and rural poor. Some attempted to implement social reforms as a further means of strengthening their base of support.

There is no fundamental difference in class or political terms between the Castro leadership and that of Mandela, Arafat and many other nationalist leaders. The main distinction is that the Cuban government, 90 miles from the US and facing the violent hostility of American imperialism, felt itself obliged nearly 40 years ago to turn to the Stalinist regime in Moscow for its survival. As a means of self-preservation the Cuban government took steps against foreign and domestic capital. Castro never based himself on the working class, however, in Cuba or anywhere else in the world. State control of the economy based on continued dependence on the sugar crop has nothing to do with the building of socialism, which can only be the most advanced technique and economic life, and the product of an international orientation and an international struggle.

Castro does not have the slightest interest in such a course. He has headed a left-nationalist regime for 40 years. For 30 years a huge subsidy from the USSR flowed to Havana. The current crisis is the result of the disappearance of that subsidy. This state of affairs has revealed, not only the reactionary role of American imperialism, but also the complete bankruptcy of Castroism.

Thank you for your correspondence, and we hope that you will give this reply your serious consideration. I know that you have been following the regular postings on the WSWWS, but I wonder whether you have seen other parts of the web site, including our literature, and the section headed “About the ICFI.” Here you will find some of the lectures given at the International School of the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1998. One of the lectures is entitled “Castroism and the Politics of Petty-Bourgeois Nationalism.” It deals in far greater detail with some of the issues raised in your letter.

Sincerely,

Fred Mazelis, for the WSWWS



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**