



Chan Chan Changed Everything

Thirty years since an illustrious team of Cuban musicians were assembled to record an album of “old-school *son* and traditions from eastern Cuba”, *Jane Cornwell* unpicks the sepia mythology of **Buena Vista Social Club** to reveal a story of chance, politics and marketing, turning a Havana recording session into a cultural phenomenon

A ripple of strings – unhurried, almost conversational – before a voice enters, intimate and timeworn. The vocals of a storyteller, a *trovador*. ‘*De Alto Cedro voy para Marcané, llego a Cueto, voy para Macari,*’ sings Compay Segundo, transporting us to the life and culture of the *guajiro* in rural eastern Cuba. ‘*From Alto Cedro I go to Marcané, I arrive in Cueto, I go to Mayari...*’

Even now, three decades later, the opening bars of ‘Chan Chan’, a four-chord *son*, feel less like a tune than a memory floating in unannounced. Dreamy nostalgia was always Buena Vista Social Club’s USP, but listen afresh to this most glorious of studio recordings and the sense of revelation remains. When the eponymous album landed

in 1997, seemingly out of the ether, on the UK’s World Circuit label, it came accompanied by a back story that fired the imagination of millions of listeners.

Here was an ensemble of elderly Cuban maestros that time had apparently forgotten, their instruments battered or borrowed, their songs preserved out of earshot of the West.

It was the stuff of miracles, of innumerable newspaper columns: folks in their seventies and eighties finally getting their dues. A lost musical culture restored overnight by outsiders. Two years later, the narrative was entrenched by the *Buena Vista Social Club* documentary, helmed by European auteur Wim Wenders. Who, short of smearing Vaseline onto

David Bither

his lens, wielded all the tropes: shots of American slide guitarist Ry Cooder and his percussionist son Joachim riding the streets of Havana on a Soviet-era motorbike with a sidecar.

There is footage of the elders in concert from their only live shows as the original ensemble, which began with two nights at Amsterdam's Royal Theatre Carré, and culminated in their celebrated Carnegie Hall performance. I was at the first of these; the vibe was upbeat, expectant, everyone there knew there was something extraordinary taking place. Wenders captured that – close-ups of veined hands and arthritic fingers playing loping *tres* and rhythmic piano; of Omara Portuondo wiping away a tear from the eye of Ibrahim Ferrer during their dreamy duet of 'Los Gardenias'. In the documentary, he linked the show to dreamlike scenes of Havana – faded facades, fifties cars and children playing in the streets – and the musicians in New York for their performance, lined faces staring in wonder from atop the Empire State Building like ancient, previously cloistered ingenues.

Romantic? Very. But like much of the lore with Cuba – embargoed and mysterious to the West – the myths surrounding these maestros felt as irresistible as the music itself.

Time, then, for some checking of facts. For stories told from *inside* the Grammy-winning project. For some herstory as well as history. For a look at the different strands – not the single tidy narrative – that entwined to make Buena Vista Social Club the social phenomenon it remains today.

I first met Juan de Marcos González in Havana Vieja [Old Havana] in 1997, the year after the seminal BVSC recording session and before it had become a global phenomenon. For González, a musician and bandleader, the story began long before the cameras started rolling. He should know. As the unofficial frontman of Sierra Maestra, a group founded in 1976 with the aim of reviving 1920s *son cubano*, the rural urban fusion that shaped much of 20th-century Cuban music, Marcos – the name by which everyone knows him – was the BVSC's chief founder and architect.

Marcos had long nurtured a mission to honour the musicians of his father's generation. He wanted to prove that the music he grew up with, dismissed



Christen Jaspars; Donata Wanders; Nick Gold

“FOR NON-CUBANS, THE MUSIC WAS EASIER ON THE EARS AND FEET THAN THE DANCE MUSIC OF CUBA AT THE TIME”

as passé by a younger generation dancing to high-energy *timba*, still had resonance and bite. “My dad, Marcos González, who passed away in 1990, was a singer and percussionist and part of the generation shaped by bandleaders like Arsenio Rodríguez”.

“Our house was a place for rehearsals, where musicians dropped by and instruments waited to be played,” he continues. “Our neighbour was Compay Segundo [the writer/singer of ‘Chan Chan’]; our balconies were so close they almost touched. He sold me my first guitar for 40 pesos.”

While BVSC promotes a story of a ‘lost’ music, the golden age of the 40s and 50s never went away, Marcos says. But as its practitioners aged and opportunities to perform narrowed, it faded from view. Some players (Segundo, double bassist

Cachaito López) found work in hotel bars. Others took odd jobs – crooner Ibrahim Ferrer survived partly through running an informal lottery scheme, and partly by shining shoes. They were active but marginalised, respected but underpaid. A few, like Ruben González – his piano destroyed by termites – had stopped performing altogether.

The traditional repertoire was there. But it needed resuscitating.

The first seeds for the ensemble that would become BVSC came through London-based ethnomusicologist, broadcaster and producer Lucy Durán, who’d grown up immersed in the likes of Celia Cruz and Celina González (Durán’s Spanish diplomat father, the musician/composer Gustavo Durán, was stationed in Havana for three years) and became an advocate for Cuban music. Durán met Marcos at a festival in Cancun, helping him bring Sierra Maestra to European audiences in 1992. This was the same year the group began working with UK promoter David Flower and his live-music agency SASA Music.

“I toured Sierra Maestra for the next 25 years,” says Flower, who’d already worked with the aforementioned ▶

Opposite: recording BVSC in EGREM. Above (clockwise from top-left): Ruben González at the piano; Omara Portuondo and Ibrahim Ferrer; Ibrahim Ferrer, Nick Gold, Eliades Ochoa, Barbarito Torres and Ry Cooder; Compay Segundo and Ry Cooder