

*música campesina* singer Celina González in 1989, with a group that included [BVSC] *laúd* player Barbarito Torres. Flower knew Nick Gold, who ran World Circuit, and helped Sierra Maestra to release two albums with the label: *¡Dundunbanza!* (1994) and *Tibiri Tabara* (1997).

“Then Marcos had an idea for two Cuban records”, continues Flower. “One would revive the big band traditions inspired by [musician/bandleader] Machito and his Afro-Cuban jazz. The other would focus on old-school *son* and traditions from eastern Cuba.”

Gold and World Circuit had enjoyed success with 1994’s *Talking Timbuktu*, the Grammy-winning album that teamed Ry Cooder with legendary Malian guitarist Ali Farke Touré, and envisaged one of these albums as a Cuba-West Africa collaboration. He arranged for two Malian musicians, guitarist Djelimady Tounkara and *ngoni* player Bassekou Kouyaté, to record in Havana, until competing offers and visa imbroglios meant that, at the eleventh hour, neither African made it.

In March 1996, they booked EGREM, Cuba’s national recording studio. Its vintage 1950s equipment and superior acoustic reputation were ideally suited to traditional *son* and fired the imagination of fabled UK sound engineer Jerry Boys, who set up the larger room with ambient microphones, around which the musicians could sit close together. This would prove key to capturing BVSC’s rich, intimate sound. Cooder was coming into Havana via Mexico, invited by Gold to produce and sprinkle more of the household-name cachet he’d garnered

for his soundtrack to Wim Wenders’ 1984 neo-western masterpiece *Paris, Texas*. *Songlines* and *Times* journalist Nigel Williamson was there, too, invited by Gold to document the recording. He returned the following year, along with all the major UK newspapers, brought over to get a taste of old Havana before writing their dispatches on the album. This was all crucial to an organic but slick marketing campaign that helped shape the project’s mythology.

“Their marketing was absolutely brilliant,” says Durán of a pre-digital era crusade involving commissioned biographies of the artists, lyrics transcribed and translated by poets, informed sleeve notes by Williamson and photos taken across the albums recorded in the tight timespan. “And for non-Cubans, the music was easier on the ears and feet than the dance music of Cuba at the time.”

Albeit a non-Spanish speaker, Cooder had form in Cuba, having previously visited with Irish legends The Chieftains to guest on their 1996 album *Santiago*. This time, he brought his son, Joachim (who played various instruments on the album), and his wife, Susan Titelman, a photographer who would take the vivid shots that became the bedrock of the BVSC visual story. Nevertheless, the Malians’ no-show rattled him; allegedly, on the first night, no one was sure whether Cooder would stick around.

For his part, Marcos had curated the Cuban line-up – a living archive – with knowledge and care, selecting performers with complementary styles, some of

whom had performed together, many of whom had not. “I sat down at home with my wife Glicería and made a list. ‘This bassist, this singer, this old pianist guy...’ People of the generation of my dad, or a bit younger. People able to play the kind of music that I wanted to record.” Singer and guitarist Eliades Ochoa, trumpeter Manuel ‘Guajiro’ Mirabal and percussionists Alberto Valdés, Carlos González and Lázaro Villa were some of the Cuban musicians to join the ensemble. “Then we planned a repertoire in advance for both albums”, adds Marcos.

Cassettes were mailed. Lists were drafted and redrafted. Paper chugged from fax machines in London and Cuba. Given that resources were limited – extra financing would come via a bank loan arranged on the fly by the label – EGREM was secured for a 15-day stint.

“It was all so complicated,” says Gold. “I had to book EGREM in cash, which I sent out via a woman who worked at Ronnie Scott’s Jazz Club and who was visiting Havana. I just had to trust it would get there.”

Gold first heard Cuban music while working as an assistant at a record shop in Kings Cross, London, called Mole Jazz. On joining Arts Worldwide – a promotional organisation founded in 1986 by Ann Hunt and Mary Farquarson to tour non-mainstream international artists, mainly from Africa – he was charged with running their fledgling label World Circuit. After setting about licensing old Arsenio Rodríguez records from BMG, he bought the label and, crucially, for the entire BVSC project, employed a young multilingual Englishwoman named Jenny Adlington as general manager.

“Jenny made a lot of this possible,” says Gold. “She’d studied French and Spanish at university and lived in Colombia and Chile. So, she was fluent in Spanish, very inspirational, very good with people. We’d taken journalists to Mali before [for *Talking Timbuktu*], and it was Jenny who introduced the journalists in Havana to the musicians, and the musicians all loved her.”

With the team in place, recording began at EGREM on both of the proposed albums. “We made the Afro-Cuban All Stars album [*A Toda Cuba le Gusta*] that Marcos meticulously worked out,” says Gold, “and produced and recorded the ‘eastern’ album, which Cooder guested on and produced, and we called it *Buena*

## “BEING IN BUENA VISTA WAS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN MY LIFE”



Susan Titelman



L-R: Compay Segundo outside EGREM; Benito Suárez Magana, Ibrahim Ferrer, Salvador Repilado Labrada, Julio Alberto Fernández, Compay Segundo



Courtesy of Jenny Adlington

## “JOURNALISTS STARTED CALLING THEM THE GRANDDADDIES OF SALSA”

Helping to smooth complications in the male-heavy project were a cohort of women behind the scenes in Cuba and the UK, many unsung and/or underappreciated in BVSC lore. The aforesaid Durán (who interviewed Ruben González for World Circuit), as well as London-Barcelona-based producer/Latin film expert Rosa Bosch, formerly deputy director of the London Film Festival – she made the first contact between World Circuit and Wim Wenders, and was made associate producer of the documentary. Marcos’ wife, Glicería Abreu, organised the feeding of the 20-plus musicians and their extended crew at EGREM – no small feat during Cuba’s famed Special Period, the decade-long economic crisis triggered by the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union, which eliminated 80 per cent of Cuba’s trade.

“As well as opening her address book in Havana to me, Rosa knew how to negotiate the filming side with the Cuban film institute [ICAIC],” says Adlington. “An amazing Cuban woman named Toti Morriña [the late director of the Havana Film Festival] came to New York and was instrumental in organising the Carnegie Hall show. Nicky O’Donnell [Gold’s wife] was key to art direction on many World Circuit albums. Susan Titelman took those amazing photos.”

“Claire McFadden joined World Circuit as distribution manager in 1996,” Adlington continues, “and managed a nearly impossible job of making sure CD orders from the European distributors were fulfilled. The demand was so great just on the Buena Vista albums [and their ensuing related solo projects] that at times our pressing plant was working overtime at maximum capacity.”

Who knew? Not Adlington. “It was just such a joyful experience being with them because playing and being together and performing was what they wanted to do,” she says. In particular, Adlington had a strong bond with Ruben González. “He asked me to marry him,” she laughs. “I loved being with him. He made me laugh. I’ve got lots of handwritten messages from him.”

*Vista Social Club.*” Remarkably, the album was recorded in just six days. Its title was taken from ‘Social Club Buenavista’, a 1940s *danzón* composed by Cuban bassist Israel “Cachao” López, written to honour a Havana social club where he frequently played.

As they still had two days remaining in the studio, they also recorded an album (*Introducing... Ruben González*) by Ruben González, then 76, which was recorded live, with no overdubs. “I’d fallen for Ruben’s playing and wanted him on both albums, but Marcos told me he didn’t play the music of Santiago de Cuba. I said I didn’t care”, remembers Gold. “Then Ry rang me on the phone in the EGREM bar and held up a snippet of this [1979] *Estrellas De Areito* album we’d re-released. He said, ‘There’s this pianist who, whenever he solos, everyone shouts ‘Ruben!’ Can you find him?’” Gold laughs. “I said, ‘He’s actually sitting right next to me.’” Gold had been introduced to Ruben by Marcos. “He told me he knew Arsenio’s pianist. I said ‘What, Lili Martínez?!’ He said, ‘No! The one before!’ Ruben’s fingers weren’t great, and his piano was gone, so Marcos arranged for him to go to Cachaito’s place every single day to practice.

Serendipity often overruled strategy. “After Celina González turned down my invitation to sing on the album because the [Santería] shells had said no, we bumped into Omara Portuondo arriving in the downstairs studio and invited her up to sing with us.”

Top: Jenny Adlington with Ibrahim Ferrer and his wife, Caridad Diaz Surita. Below: Ruben González

With a dramatic tension rarely discussed publicly, Marcos deliberately kept expectations low within official circles; too much early attention might have complicated the flow of revenue in a system where the state had its own interests. Cuban authorities, like most of Cuba, were initially unaware of the project, arguably up until after the album exploded in Britain and Germany.

Gold had an inkling from the get-go: “The feeling in the studio was electric. It was apparent we were creating something important. But we never pushed the age angle; we just thought people would love the personalities. Then journalists started calling them the granddaddies of salsa.”

The film and its star director simplified the story, and the world leaned in. In a sort of riposte to the youth-obsessed industry, here were octogenarians stepping back into the spotlight, their dignity intact, their humour undimmed. The optics even felt radical: Cuban veterans standing before an ecstatic New York audience. A moment charged with cultural symbolism after decades of political estrangement between Cuba and the US. Music accomplishing what diplomacy could not.

Of course, cinema needs protagonists. Real life is messier. BVSC has been criticised for presenting a sanitised image of Cuba’s pre-revolutionary culture – a time when Havana, as Ava Gardner reportedly described it in 1951, was an ‘American playground’. Many scholars argue that BVSC retains this notion of a pre-Castro Cuba that romanticises the down-at-heel abodes and lives of BVSC’s musicians. Those who had been pushing Cuban music at the time, styles such as *timba* that reflected contemporary culture on the island, were being ignored; record companies and booking agents were firmly interested in traditional styles like *son*, and copycat BVSC bands sprang up everywhere. There were also copyright wrangles between publishers’ and composers’ estates – all of which have now been resolved.

More recent criticism has scrutinised the portrayal of Cooder – a white American – as chief protagonist in a story about Afro-Cubans. The documentary was mostly guilty of this conceit; its final scene was not of the musical ensemble, but of Cooder bowing and exiting the Carnegie Hall stage alone. Race law ▶