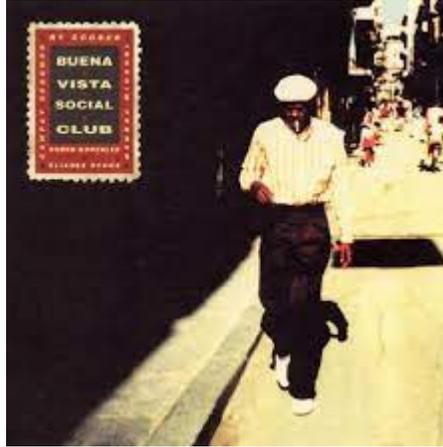


“Buena Vista Social Club” (1997)

Added to the National Registry: 2022

Essay by Fred Metting (guest post)*



That “Buena Vista Social Club” was deemed worthy of inclusion in The Library of Congress’ National Recording Registry should come as no surprise. It’s been written that “BVSC” collapsed the Cold War wall between Cuba and the West,” “conquered the planet,” and “launched a thousand salsa classes.” The album won a Grammy in 1998 for the best tropical Latin performance. Shortly after the recording of the album in 1996, the critical praise began. “Buena Vista Social Club” was called “utterly beautiful,” “a stylistic milestone,” “a real treasure,” “effortlessly elegant,” “nothing short of magic,” “a blend of frivolity and more sober reflections on an island,” and “a boisterous glimpse into the sounds...of Cuba.” The record’s impact was immediate (it resurrected musical careers, spawned concert tours and further recordings, and was the basis for an award-winning documentary film) and long lasting (it is still one of the best-selling albums in the “world music” genre with over 10 million copies sold).

In retrospect, this phenomenal success should come as no surprise either if we focus for a time on the exploratory career of American musician Ry Cooder who said of his work on “BVSC”: “I felt that I had trained all my life for this... Music is a treasure hunt. You dig and dig and sometimes you find something.”

The life of musical archaeologist Ryland Cooder began in Los Angeles, California, in 1947. Cooder’s parents had music “everywhere in the house,” and his father played guitar. Cooder’s parents were politically liberal and listened to folk music that made a political statement, so Cooder was drawn early to the music of Woody Guthrie and Blind Alfred Reed. Cooder said “of course, once I heard these records, I was fascinated, because I could tell this music was strange, from some other place, and that was why I liked it.” Cooder listened to these exotic sounds and he said “I wanted to get out. You know, where should I go?” He wanted to explore the world through music and, he said, “I’m still on that road.”

As his skills on guitar and other stringed instruments grew, he was drawn to a variety of African American finger pickers and slide guitarists including Blind Blake, Etta Baker, and Blind Willie Johnson. Cooder frequented local guitar shops, folk clubs, and soaked up sounds from

recordings. Cooder said he was getting “a feeling for what kind of energy” was in this music. As he grew as a musician, Cooder would not limit his interest to the roots music of the continental United States.

One of the first musicians that drew Cooder’s intense interest outside our land borders was the Bahamian guitarist Joseph Spence. Cooder said of Spence’s playing “there was a tremendous force being exerted to get these little delicate tunes to come out so weird and heavy.” Cooder was drawn to Spence’s use of alternate guitar tunings and to Spence’s wonderful bass runs. “It all started with Joseph Spence,” said Cooder, “he was one of my all-time great inspirations.” Spence’s rudimentary sophistication, his innovative use of island hymns, and his utterly unique guitar style were lessons for Cooder.

Cooder next explored music from another group of islands, Hawaii, and the guitar style of Gabby Pahinui. Cooder was establishing his credentials as a musical explorer looking for sounds to excavate and use. Cooder said “you hear something different and say, ‘I want to do this.’... It’s all a matter of attitude... What’s the groove here, what’s the dominant aura.” Cooder would find an attractive sound and attempt to integrate into that music. With Hawaiian music Cooder could see “something really spectacular. It’s sweet sounding, it’s soft, and it has a real full sound... The music has really strong, earthly qualities.” Pahinui and other island guitarists would use open/alternate/”slack” tunings on the guitar (like the Bahamian Spence) and they adapted island chants, hymns, and dances to their guitar instrumentals. To play with these island musicians Cooder found he had to “calm way down. It’s not a verbal thing... just listen and you’ll know.”

In Cooder’s 1976 album “Chicken Skin Music” he incorporated the sounds of Hawaiian slack key guitar and sounds from another “world music” source, Tex-Mex or *conjunto* music. The Spanish term *conjunto* means a combination or joining together. *Conjunto* music is the bringing together of the sounds of Mexico (Norteño) and the music of Texas (Tejano). This borderland music of ballads and traditional dances was changed dramatically at the turn of the 20th century when German immigrants came to the region seeking jobs as miners, brewers, and ranchers; these new settlers brought with them the accordion. Cooder found himself drawn to this borderland music and the sounds of accordionist Flaco Jimenez. Cooder heard these accordion bands and went “crazy.” “I like it... I know I can use this stuff. It’s not just a pipe dream. There’s room for me in this, and there’s room for it in what I do.”

At this point Cooder would say of his music, “The style that I have been working on...has come to be a kind of Joseph Spence/slack key/Mexican...style--it’s nothing more than that.” Cooder gathered Hawaiian and Tex-Mex musicians along with African American gospel vocalists and formed his most eclectic (and electrifying!) ensemble, The Chicken Skin Revue, in the late 1970s. When Cooder first brought these diverse musicians together, they were somewhat skeptical. “Trust me,” Cooder said. As they toured and recorded the music “sounded fantastic just like I knew it would,” Cooder said.

As Cooder was exploring these far-flung sounds, many small London-based record labels were having trouble marketing their releases of music from Latin America, Africa, and other locations. The term “world music” was coined in the late 1980s to help label this broad range of exciting

music. Cooder, whose explorations had been crossing borders and boundaries for years, continued his music-based archaeology by recording with musicians from India and Africa. These “digs” or “excavations” in the 1990s would set the stage for his presentation of Cuban music in “Buena Vista Social Club.”

In 1993, Cooder recorded the Grammy award-winning album “A Meeting By The River” with Indian musician V.M. Bhatt. The musical traditions in India are ancient, going back to Vedic chants and continuing for centuries. Bhatt is a classically trained musician from north India who began playing on sitar and then adapted ragas to the guitar. Bhatt said, “My producer suggested that we [Cooder and Bhatt] make this together.... I enjoy experimenting with things like that. So I said, ‘OK, let’s see what happens’.” Cooder, of course, was making a career of such experimentation. “Being a musician,” Cooder said, “either you get drawn to a project, or you’re not.” He was pleasantly surprised by the success of “River”: “The next thing you know, everybody loves it.”

Very early in his career, Cooder was drawn to American blues music which drew much power from the African musical traditions brought to this country by slaves. In an “unbroken circle” of sorts, Cooder, later in his career, turned to the music of Africa and the Malian guitarist Ali Farka Toure. Toure’s music is deep and rich; Toure says “for some people, when you say ‘Timbuktu,’ it is like the end of the world, but that is not true. I am from Timbuktu and I can tell you we are right in the heart of the world.” Enriched by the Moorish migration from Spain across the Sahara, Ali’s music has roots in the Songhai and Tuareg cultures. Toure’s music predates and informs the blues. Cooder said Toure’s music is “non-linear...he knows about energy” and also his music is “spiritual, meant to evoke or invoke spirits....” Of course Cooder would be drawn to a collaboration like this. Cooder sensed “good will and mutuality.” Toure first encountered Cooder’s music through British record producer Nick Gold. When the collaboration took place Cooder wanted “to make a real basic, fundamental, energetic kind of record” to show what Toure’s music is and does. “It’s very simple and direct,” Cooder said, “you go with him and back him up. I’m a good accompanist. I think that’s the best way to approach things, to feel and listen.... The more you listen, the less you assert.” “Ali Farka Toure is not a guy you manage and manipulate musically,” said Cooder, “he’s very powerful.... I want to serve this...in any way I can.” The resulting album, 1994’s “Talking Timbuktu,” became the first record ever to debut at number one on “Billboard’s” world music chart. The Mali-Malibu collaboration won universal critical praise.

Ry Cooder was more than prepared for the Cuba project. The idea for this exploration began with Nick Gold, the British record producer enamored of world music, who wanted to explore the historical and musical connection between West Africa (Nigeria, Cameroon, Benin, Congo...) and Cuba where, by the middle of the 19th century, half of the population was of African descent. “Nick thought this would be a good thing to explore,” said Cooder. “He was enthusiastic and called me about it. I said ‘Good God, yes. Now is the time.’”

The African musicians had visa problems and were not allowed to make the trip. “So what do we do?” asked Gold. Cooder said, “I’d like to do something. We’re here. Let’s dig it and pick up on it.”

Cooder, so skillful by now at being a musical archaeologist, had first travelled to Cuba in the 1970s. He had been enchanted by Cuban music through recordings and once on the island “saw the music was such a big part of their daily lives.” Cuba had given the world rhumba, mambo, habanera, cha-cha-cha...music vital, physical, insanely rhythmic, and fully integrated into daily life through dance and the topicality of the lyrics. So Cooder thought that he would return to the island some day.

Twenty years later, in late March of 1996, Cooder returned and worked with Gold and Cuban bandleader Juan de Marcos González. González had been playing rock and roll but his musical focus had turned to more traditional Cuban music so he was an important resource for “BVSC.” Gold had booked EGREM/Areito studios in Havana where much music had been recorded in Cuba’s golden era of music, the late 1940s and 1950s. González assembled a group of largely older Cuban musicians, many of whom had given up their musical careers. Vocalist Ibrahim Ferrer (born in 1927 at a dance!) was shining shoes. Rubén González, a pioneer of Afro-Cuban piano styles, was without a piano. Compay Segundo was the oldest member in his late 80s.

Juan de Marcos González, like Gold and Cooder, decided to make the best of the situation (the inability of the African musicians to get to Cuba). “We Cuban musicians,” said González, “went ahead anyway.” González “had known of Ry and his music for a long time.... I have always admired Ry as a musician and for the many varied influences in his music.”

Cooder simplified the situation by saying, “What we wanted to do is make some music, record some songs.” He wanted to “try to get this blend going and a group thing going.” The Cuban musicians had their differences, but they had all grown out of the same rich musical tradition. They’d gone in different directions--some toward dance, some toward the older ballads, some toward night club music--but, as Cooder pointed out, “They share more than they don’t share.” Cooder saw the success of the project as a blending of what “had just never happened before.”

Cooder saw a situation ripe with “many good components.” His job was to get musicians “out of their habitual ways of thinking,” to help them to not rely on automatic responses, to not repeat the old classic recordings. “Somehow,” said Cooder, “this had to turn into something that hopefully would give everybody a fresh spontaneity....” Cooder was trying to “very slowly reshape things.... I didn’t do too much directing.” The elements began to fall into place. “If you have talent like this,” said Cooder, “well, I’m not going to say it’s easy, but it is not a struggle.” Simply put, said Cooder, “We’re trying to get the sound that enlarges the music and lets the music speak.”

The music on “BVSC” DID speak. “For me,” said Cooder, “I feel like finally we got there. This sound, this vibe, and the level of artistry here is so compelling and so rich and mysterious.” Knowing the music spoke, Cooder was still a bit mystified by the critical and popular success of “BVSC”: “There’s no logic. It’s just that it’s great and everybody picked up on it.”

As part of the legacy of this project, and as a telling coda to our exploration of Ry Cooder and “BVSC,” we end by looking briefly at one result of the recording. Cooder took the musicians from the project to the United Nations for a lunch hour concert in the Security Council room.

The audience consisted of career diplomats on their lunch break. “The people went nuts,” said Cooder, “I tell you there was not a dry eye in the place.”

“Buena Vista Social Club’s” inclusion in our National Recording Registry testifies to its power as a bridge, its role in diplomacy, and to its ability to connect.

Fred Metting taught American literature and American music at the University of New Hampshire for decades. He has published scholarship in the fields of New England culture, nature writing, and literary folklore. He has written two books on American music including “The Unbroken Circle: Tradition and Innovation in the Music of Ry Cooder and Taj Mahal” (2000).

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.