

## Buena Vista Social Club (1998)



The musicians: Compay Segundo, Eliades Ochoa, Ry Cooder, Joachim Cooder, Ibrahim Ferrer, Omara Portuondo, Rubén González, Orlando "Cachaíto" López, Amadito Valdéz, Manuel "Guajiro" Mirabal, Barbarito Torres, Pío Leyva, Manuel "Puntillita" Licea, Juan de marcos González.

### FILM REVIEW; A Cuban Band's Testament To the Powers of the Music

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

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The most incandescent moment in Wim Wenders's exhilarating documentary portrait of the Cuban ensemble Buena Vista Social Club is a concert performance of the song "El Cuarto de Tula" filmed last July at Carnegie Hall. Sung by the band's septuagenarian lead singer, Ibrahim Ferrer, who is described as a Cuban Nat (King) Cole, the song is a sexy musical fire alarm alerting the world to a blaze in the bedroom of a woman who forgot to blow out a candle before falling asleep.

Shouted fervently by Mr. Ferrer, who bears a marked resemblance to Nelson Mandela, the song is more than a scintillating erotic metaphor; it is an impassioned assertion of an unquenchable lust for life. The performance is one of many stirring moments in "Buena Vista Social Club," a documentary that mixes music with impressionistic glimpses of urban life in contemporary Cuba. Filmed in Amsterdam and New York, the concert scenes find the stage awash in such intense joy, camaraderie and nationalist pride that you become convinced that making music is a key to longevity and spiritual well-being.

That conviction is underscored in an interview snippet shown moments before the performance in which Mr. Ferrer recalls having given up singing two years before the formation of the Buena Vista Social Club, whose principal musicians come from Cuba's pre-revolutionary musical old guard. Quite a few are in their 70's, 80's and 90's. As the movie makes clear, the assembling of this band by the American guitarist and producer Ry Cooder was a profoundly rejuvenating experience for the members.

Until Mr. Cooder discovered them, most were retired or forgotten. Now, suddenly, they are stars. "The Buena Vista Social Club" (Nonesuch), an album of 14 Cuban mambos, boleros and cha-chas dating as far back as the 1920's, became a phenomeon, selling more than a million copies worldwide. And Nonesuch has just released a solo album by Mr. Ferrer.

As Mr. Cooder recalls, he had originally intended to produce a record mixing Cuban and West African musicians, but at the last minute the Africans were sidetracked in Paris. He forged ahead anyway and recorded an all-Cuban record that won a Grammy Award (for best tropical Latin album) and set off a wave of interest in Cuban music. Before the band was assembled, Mr. Ferrer was shining shoes, and Compay Segundo, a lead guitarist in his early 90's, rolled cigars. Interviewed in the film, Mr. Segundo boasts of being the father of five. He still hopes to sire a sixth child, he confides mischievously, and the energy he effuses suggests that this would not be impossible.

We also meet Ruben Gonzalez, the band's keyboardist, who suggests a white-haired figure from an El Greco painting. Mr. Gonzalez plays the piano with a lean, spiky elegance embellished with classical flourishes that never turn flowery. Another important figure, Barbarito Torres, who is many years younger, tells of the history of his 12-string lutelike instrument known as the laud, which originated in Saudi Arabia. Juxtaposing the songs with shots of Havana's grand but crumbling seaside architecture, the film reinforces the music's evocation of a vanished glittering world of sensual ballroom dancing. That music, which bridges the eras of swing and salsa, sounds timeless. Many of the interviews are conducted in large empty rooms in which the subjects are posed almost like weather-beaten living monuments, reflecting the architecture.

The movie has a fairy tale ending in which Mr. Ferrer, wandering the streets of New York, rhapsodizes about the beauty of midtown Manhattan, a place he never imagined he would visit. Then in the final moments we're back in Havana for a final glimpse of the cityscape and a sign proclaiming "We believe in dreams."

The dreams that Mr. Ferrer and his colleagues have realized, of course, do not reflect the austere collectivist vision of Fidel Castro. They are the echoes of a world that the Communist revolution may have erased in physical fact but not in memory.

### BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB

**Directed by Wim Wenders; director of photography, Jorg Widmer; edited by Brian Johnson; produced by Ry Cooder, Jerry Boys, Ulrich Felsberg and Deepak Nayyar; released by Artisan Entertainment. Running time: 106 minutes. This film is not rated.**

**WITH: Compay Segundo, Eliades Ochoa, Ry Cooder, Joachim Cooder, Ibrahim Ferrer, Ruben Gonzalez, Barbarito Torres and Omara Portuondo.**