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The Buena Vista Phenomenon: Constructions of Cuban Musical Identity

Oliver Reavell

**A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of MA Music by Research**

The University of Huddersfield

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SYNOPSIS

Cuba is a fascinating Caribbean island that has succeeded in leaving an important musical legacy, the Buena Vista Social Club being one of the most successful exports of the last twenty years. This thesis will consider the impact of the 1996 recording project, Buena Vista Social Club, on the global perception of Cuban identity. It serves as a vehicle to explore the cultural formation of identity in Cuban music, which will apply the ideas of globalisation, transnationalism as well as critically engaging with concepts of nostalgia, political ideology and racial identity in music. I will present a wide spectrum of perspectives on Cuban music, using a range of source material in order to produce a balanced and informative document on Cuban musical identity

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I would like to thank Sophie, my parents Jeremy and Virginia, Alice, and my tutor Dr Catherine Haworth for their generosity, advice and most of all, patience. Also, I would like to acknowledge those that I met during my time in Cuba for their kindness, hospitality, dedication to their art and their attempts to teach me to salsa dance.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTIONS

1.1 PREFACE- UN BUEN ROLLO EN BRIGHTON

It is Saturday 4 April 2015 at the Brighton Dome Theatre, the second UK date of what will be the *Adiós* tour of the Orquesta Buena Vista Social Club, a final encore for this renowned Cuban music collective which, for the best part of twenty years, has been exciting audiences across the globe. Their nostalgic blend of Cuban *son*, *bolero* and *guajira*, amongst other traditional styles, transports the listener to a pre-Revolution sonic landscape largely neglected by the current generation of Cubans and almost forgotten by the rest of the world.

First to the stage is the pianist Rolando Luna, opening with a delicate but playful *bolero* solo piece 'Como Siento Yo'. The song was played in homage to its composer, Rubén González, who was the original pianist of the BVSC project before his passing in 2003.

Figure 1: Orquesta Buena Vista at the Royal Albert Hall, London. 5 April 2015.



The rest of the band then files on to stage, met by suitably eager applause. All arrive dressed in smart, elegant attire though the two decidedly dapper members stood out for this writer, the band leader and trombonist Jesus "Aguaje" Ramos in his red velvet suit jacket with cravat, and the singer Carlos Calunga, dressed in an all silver suit and flat cap (See above, Fig.1).

The set list includes many more songs dedicated to deceased musicians involved with Buena Vista, including the latin jazz *descarga* track 'Tumbao #5' by the late double bassist Orlando "Cachaíto" López which was inspired by Charles Mingus. The *son* track 'Macusa', composed by the late Francisco "Compay Segundo" Repilado, tells a story of a former love interest he had as a boy back in the 1930s.

After half an hour, the 84 year old matriarch of the band, Omara Portuondo comes onto the stage, initially unsteady on her feet she is soon at the front of the stage dancing with her partner , Papi Oviedo, the *tres* player of the tour. This is not the only family unit on stage, the principal trumpet player Luis Manuel “Guajiro” Mirabal is joined by his grandson Luis “Guajirito” Mirabal.

The band is eager for audience participation. At one point Calunga attempts to lead the audience in a syncopated clapping rhythm, the *clave*, which Cuban audiences would customarily participate in. Here with the un-initiated British audience this gesture fell flat within 5 bars. However, gradually throughout the concert as both band and audience warms up, many people are up out of their chairs and into the aisles to have a dance. For the upbeat *Cha-cha-chá* encore track ‘Quizás Quizás’ Omara has everyone shouting a call of ‘¡Quizás! ¡Quizás! ¡Quizás!’ to which she responds with the translation ‘Perhaps! Perhaps! Perhaps!’.

All in all, the band gave a vivacious performance despite the advancing years of a number of their members. They hosted that night a fantastic celebration of traditional Cuban music which payed tribute to their late Buena Vista colleagues.

My very first exposure to Cuban music was in 1997 listening to my parents’ copy of the Buena Vista Social Club self-titled album. During this time, Cuban artists that succeeded in reaching out to international audiences were few and far between, owing to the economic austerity and political landscape of Fidel Castro’s Cuba. Now, two decades later as a student of Spanish language and Music, I have had the privilege to see the remaining original artists involved in the Buena Vista Social Club project tour for the last time, drawing to a close their important contribution to Cuban popular music and to the world music circuit as a whole. I believe that as Buena Vista Social Club’s musical journey is concluding it is the ideal time to conduct a musicological study into their music and its impact on the construction of Cuban musical identity. Furthermore, Cuba is currently under the international media spotlight with the thawing of diplomatic tensions between Cuba and Barack Obama’s US administration. This represents a renewed potential for economic change amongst the new generation of Cubans and reconciliation between Cubans living in the USA and those in socialist Cuba. I believe that the Buena Vista Social Club is a relevant and fascinating case study by which to explore the unique interplay of politics, culture and music in Cuba.

1.2 THESIS OVERVIEW

Cuba is a fascinating Caribbean island that has succeeded in leaving an important musical legacy, both in Latin America and across the globe. From *mambo* and *son montuno*, to *changüí* and *cha-cha-chá*, music is undoubtedly one of the Caribbean island state's most highly prized commodities, with names like Los Van Van, Celia Cruz and the Buena Vista Social Club having gained international fame. Cuban musical traditions have formed the basis for the development of many music and dance movements such as the New York *salsa* scene and West African afrobeat.

This thesis will consider the impact of the 1996 recording project, Buena Vista Social Club on the construction of Cuban musical identity. I will present a wide spectrum of perspectives on Cuban music, using a large variety of source material in order to produce a balanced and informative document on Cuban musical identity. I will critically engage with the writings of key scholarship in Cuban and Caribbean studies in conjunction with other analytical material from cultural studies and anthropology scholars. Furthermore, I shall refer to a selection of journalistic sources, online video and social media, the first-hand accounts of musicians and those involved in the Cuban music industry. I have given particular importance to using texts that contain first-hand accounts and interviews with people directly involved in the Buena Vista Social Club project (Also herein referred to as BVSC), notably Juan de Marcos González, Ry Cooder and Nick Gold. Finally, I will include anecdotal material drawing upon my own experiences of Cuban music. I was fortunate enough to experience this country and their musical culture first hand myself in a trip to Havana in March 2015, in which I attended the '*Fiesta del Tambor*' Havana Rhythm and Dance Festival (2015). The festival revealed to me a face of Cuban music not typically viewed by tourists who visit the island, insight into Cuban music commerciality but above all how immensely proud Cubans are of their musical heritage. I will principally refer to the festival in Chapter 5- Brand and Reception.

The inclusion of both academic and non-academic material is a purposeful decision in order to avoid being cornered into a specific school of thought, again with the objective of creating a balanced and thoroughly considered study that I hope can be used as a first port of call in informing distinct research avenues of Cuban musicology, especially for individuals with a limited prior knowledge of the field.

The methodologies employed will be a combination of textual analysis and cultural studies. The group Buena Vista Social Club presents itself as an exciting central case study which will serve as a vehicle to explore the cultural constructions of identity in Cuban music, which will apply the ideas of

globalisation, transnationalism as well as calling upon notions of nostalgia, political ideology and racial identity in music. In the discussions throughout this thesis, notably I shall be looking at Cuban music through a critical lens of post-colonialism, narrating and analysing the coloniser-colonised relationships that have shaped Cuban society and culture.

I firmly acknowledge that this thesis could have taken any of these above concepts as a standalone study; however I believe that the process of collaging these different strands of study provides the opportunity to reveal distinct points of reference on texts that have limited the scope of their study by their chosen methodology. A text that I have taken inspiration from is Tanya Katerí Hernández' 'The Buena Vista Social Club: The Racial Politics of Nostalgia' (2002), which is a thoroughly well researched discussion of the way that popular culture can shape political discourse, encompassing the themes of post-colonialism and racism. An example of a Cuban studies text that would have benefitted from a similar approach is Peter Manuel's 'Rock music and cultural ideology in revolutionary Cuba' (1989), which analyses the Cuban population's relationship with transnational rock music in the 1980s but lacks any engagement with African cultural heritage. The numerous rock bands of this period who integrated Afro Cuban cultural products with their music are absent from the discussion, groups such as *Síntesis*, who created rock fusion music based upon traditional *santería* compositions.

Chapter 2 will trace Cuba's musical developments in a timeline starting from its colonisation in the early 16th century to the present day. I will identify the prominence of musical transculturation in Cuba, a term coined by the scholar Fernando Ortiz (1995). Also, the interface between the island's economic and political activity and its music developments will be discussed, including the notable binary of Cuba-USA relations in terms of the nations' ideological differences and music developments. This is an important thread to cover within a Cuban identity study, given that there are more Cubans living in the USA than any other Cuban diasporic settlement in the world. In 2011 the Cuban Research Institute, Florida International University (CRI, 2011), reported that there were 1,785,547 Cubans living in the United States, with over half of these pertaining to Florida, followed by New York.

Chapter 3 will place my case study, Buena Vista Social Club, within a textual analysis of Cuban musical identity. This will involve relevant strands of critical discussion on the themes of musical nostalgia, political ideology, globalisation and transnationalism and their application to BVSC and the wider Cuban music sphere. It will include discussion on the hegemonic struggle between Cuban

socialism and the USA's western culture, which is inextricably bound to the constructions of identity in Cuban music.

Chapter 4 is an in-depth exploration of the eponymous 1997 Buena Vista Social Club album. I shall analyse the musical styles contained within, examine the arrangements, instrumentation and lyrical content. The chapter features a case study of the album's opening signature track, 'Chan Chan'. These analyses, combined with first-hand accounts from those involved in the recording process, allow me to make an informed judgement of BVSC's stylistic identity. Subchapter 4.4 calls into question the musical autonomy of the Cuban musicians on the record and examines to what extent, if at all we can deem the album culturally appropriated.

Chapter 5 will concern the reception of Buena Vista Social Club both in Cuba and internationally, exploring its identity as a global brand and component of the world music market at large. This will begin by looking into BVSC's globalisation following the album release and what exactly is understood by the term world music itself. Subchapter 5.2 will address the present day relationship between mass internet culture, social media and the Cuban music experience. It will also make reference to the discussions detailed in Chapter 3. Lastly, subchapter 5.3 returns to the domestic Cuban environment's representation of the BVSC brand as a tool for the tourist economy.

1.3 THE BUENA VISTA NARRATIVE

The story of how the Buena Vista Social Club project took shape is often presented inaccurately and often without consideration of all parties involved. Tanya Katerí Hernández, in her study *The Buena Vista Social Club: The Racial Politics of Nostalgia* (2002) highlights a certain ethnocentric bias when it comes to the portrayal of the Buena Vista project's history by the western media. Commonly in the media the focus is placed on American Ry Cooder and his musical treasure hunt to the modest Cuban slums.

The project in fact came about as a result of discussions between two individuals, the British producer and director of the World Circuit music label, Nick Gold, and Cuban musician and composer Juan de Marcos González. Juan de Marcos was first introduced to Gold in London in the early 90s when he was touring with his 1920s *son* revival group Sierra Maestra. Gold was a great lover of the repertoire from what has come to be known as the golden age of traditional Cuban music, the 1920s-50s, and so decided to release an album with Sierra Maestra named *Dundunbanza* (1994). Following its success, Juan De Marcos suggested that for further projects, he could source retired musicians who were active in the 1950s Cuban music scene.

In an interview with Steven Foehr, Juan de Marcos is very direct in saying he was the one who instigated the whole thing 'I had the idea to make an album bringing in the old generation of Cuban musicians'. It was a family affair, he explains that he returned to Havana after a stint in London and began looking for all the old musicians with his wife. 'She was the mom of Buena Vista Social Club, because she took care of all the details.' (Foehr, 2001, p.159).

They booked recording time at central Havana's state run EGREM studio for two weeks in 1996. They decided to record three records, one of Juan De Marcos' *son* group, Afro Cuban All Stars, a solo album of the pianist Rubén Gonzales and finally an Afro Cuban fusion record featuring Malian musicians and Cuban golden age veterans. Nick suggested that Ry Cooder be asked to participate due to his love of Cuban music and his good reputation for collaborating with world music artists. He won a Grammy award for his album *Talking Timbuktu* (1994) with acclaimed Malian musician Ali Farka Touré. Unfortunately, due to visa issues the African musicians never made it to Havana, so at the last minute they decided to record an album featuring eastern Cuban influences and less big band sound to differentiate it from the All Stars record. Ry and his son Joaquin would still feature in order to give an element of transatlantic fusion. The Buena Vista Social Club album was born.

1.4 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB

The members of the group have travelled a long way from their humble roots. The stage in Brighton is over 4600 miles from the bustling *barrios* of Central Havana, with its crumbling colonial architecture. It is further away still from the sugar cane pastures of Santiago de Cuba, a city on the eastern tip of Cuba where the archetypal popular genre, *son*, was first conceived. Here, the Orquesta is greeted by a sell-out audience of people eager to take the rare opportunity to witness a celebration of authentic Cuban music. The opportunities for global audiences to engage with Cuban cultural products have been relatively scarce over the last 50 years, owing to the country's political and economic isolation under the Castro regime, a socialist republic dedicated to national reform in the spirit of Marxist-Leninist ideals, which therefore heavily scrutinises its cultural exports. Tight travel restrictions until recently had been imposed whereby travel permits to perform abroad were only granted to a privileged few. Indeed, the Orquesta BVSC has been more privileged than most; since the group began touring in 2008 they have given over 1000 concerts and on this tour alone they have visited more than 100 cities over 4 continents (Orquesta BVSC, n.d.). Through this exposure, the members of the group take on not only the role of entertainers, but of global cultural ambassadors to their homeland. They do so knowingly; Omara Portuondo, claims in an interview

with Channel 4 (2015) that the most important feature of their country is their culture, with the BVSC being a massive testimony to that culture, 'it's iconic', she says.

The Orquesta Buena Vista that is currently touring is only one recent facet of what is in fact a highly successful brand comprising of 12 distinct music releases involving over 30 different musicians. The original 1997 album was awarded a Grammy the following year for 'Best Tropical Latin Performance'. In 1999 the Buena Vista Social Club project was also the subject of an Academy Award nominated documentary by acclaimed German director, Wim Wenders.

The music of Buena Vista Social Club caught my attention with its innate danceability, bright virtuosic brass melodies soaring over driving Afro Cuban cross-rhythms and intricate jazz influenced finger picking guitar parts.

An intriguing aspect of Buena Vista that further attracted my interest in them was the fact that it was named after a real social club that existed in the *Marianao* neighbourhood of Havana in the 1930s and 40s, in which the type of music that BVSC showcase was performed. However, few musicians involved in this musical project had any knowledge of its existence, with only the pianist Rubén Gonzalez ever having set foot in there. Naming the group this was the decision of the UK producer Nick Gold. The notion of the Buena Vista Social Club framing perceptions of what is deemed Cuban music is quite problematic, seeing as at its core it is a collaborative musical project developed and marketed by a multinational team, rather than what I had in the past assumed to be a grass roots venture by a club of Cuban musicians.

The self-titled BVSC album has sold over 8 million copies worldwide. Baker (2011, p.2) claims that due to the popularity of the group, the music of Buena Vista Social Club has framed perceptions and discussions of Cuban music since the late 1990s. He goes on to say that musicians and commentators 'keep returning to mine it for musical and intellectual reference points'. The study of Buena Vista provides a dynamic platform from which I can discuss ideas of Cuban identity.

CHAPTER 2: CUBAN MUSIC, HISTORY AND POLITICS

The musical output of Cuba, from its colonisation in the early 16th century to the present day, has been shaped by a unique combination of circumstances; this introductory chapter will give a brief account of what is understood by Cuban music, its key genres as well as the interface between the island's economic and political activity and its music scene.

2.1 COLONISATION

Christopher Columbus first arrived in 1492 which led to the formal colonisation of the island in 1512, led by the military force of Diego Velásquez. The Spanish settlers rapidly overwhelmed the indigenous *Taino* and *Siboney* peoples who were put to work in mines and on tobacco, sugar and other agricultural plantations which would lead to Cuba becoming an important trading outpost of the Spanish empire. Very little is known today about the music of Cuba's indigenous tribes, however, a few artefacts of their culture have persisted; Robin Moore (2010) indicated that in the *Taino* communal song and dance gatherings known as *areítos*, shaker and notched gourd percussion items formed the basis for the modern day *maracas* and *güiro* instruments which are present in the majority of Cuban contemporary popular music.

The shrinking of the indigenous community to near extinction by the start of the 17th century led the Spaniards to acquisition masses of African slaves brought in by British, Dutch and Portuguese traffickers (but not the Spanish themselves). The Spanish were liberal in their treatment of slave labour. They established *Cabildos*, ethnic associations that granted African slaves a platform to practise religious and musical traditions from their place of origin, for example the *Lucumi Cabildo* served the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria and the *Congo Cabildo* hosted the Bantu peoples from Angola. The Colonisers felt that by allowing the slaves to retain their distinct identities, they were less likely to unite and revolt against their oppressors.

The flow of slaves into the country continued until abolition in 1886, quite a bit longer than the majority of New World nations such as the USA, who stopped receiving slaves in 1807. By the time Cuba became independent in 1898, there were approximately 4 million individuals of African descent. (Sublette, 2004a) This sizeable demographic, combined with the conservation of their distinct musical traditions, resulted in a high degree of African representation alongside the

European traditions of white Cubans. Rafael Rojas (2008, p.2), a prominent Cuban historiographer, adds that due to the corporally weak condition of the Spaniards' councils and courts, there was a lack of 'legal metanarrative concerning castes'. This allowed for a rapid cultural union of nationality between races. For further reading into themes contained in this chapter I recommend Robin Moore's *Music in the Hispanic Caribbean* (2010) and Ned Sublette's *Cuba and its Music* (2004a). The former contains insightful knowledge of how Cuba's musical development compares and contrasts against other Caribbean nations with a similar colonial heritage. The latter is by a seasoned producer and scholar of Cuban music whose book is a comprehensive record of Cuba's colonial past through to the modern day.

2.2 TRANSCULTURAL MUSIC MAKING

The convergence of distinct cultural backgrounds is the essence of Cuban popular music construction. Raul A Fernandez (2006, p.7), a leading voice in Cuban musicology and historiography, asserts that an important aspect of Cuban music is its capacity to easily absorb elements from other music and create new fusions. This process can be referred to as a kind of musical 'transculturation'. This term was coined by the late Cuban anthropologist, Fernando Ortiz (1995), as a way of describing the transformation and merging of different cultures. Transculturation goes beyond the actions of acculturation or deculturation. It is not simply one culture shifting into another, or a group adopting the behaviours of a new group, it involves the production of new phenomena. Rojas (2008, p.4), demonstrates this in his explanation that no cultural agent in Cuba's history, whether they be black, white, Spanish, Russian, Catholic or of Yoruba origin, has succeeded in keeping its homogeneity intact during the process of cultural coexistence, nor has it fully assimilated to the form of the other.

The late 19th Century gave rise to *Son*, an archetype of popular Cuban music and prime example of musical transculturation in Cuba. This creolized form of dance music is a foundation stone upon which many different Cuban popular styles of music have been constructed. It was developed with a basis in the Spanish *canción*, featuring Spanish colonisers' greatest chordophone gift to Cuba, the modern classical guitar. The rhythmic element of *son* consists of African Bantu origin percussion instruments and rhythms. A typical *son cubano* ensemble consists of guitar, *tres* (a Cuban guitar variation with 3 sets of 2 strings), claves, bongos, marímbula or botija, and maracas. It is customary for the *tres* to play a *guajeo* motif, an ostinato usually consisting of arpeggiating triads usually following the clave rhythm (detailed in table 1 below).

Early exponents of *son* were the *trova* musicians; travelling Cuban troubadours who first appeared in the late 19th century in the eastern Santiago de Cuba province but soon spread their music across the country. They would play poetic ballads, in a *Son* or *Bolero* style, typically consisting of voice with guitar accompaniment and occasional *maracas* or *claves*. Among the principal figures in *trova* are Faustino Oramas, Compay Segundo and Trio Matamoros, who travelled to New York to record 10 full albums of their repertoire in 1928, including their classic track ‘Lágrimas Negras’ (1928). Numerous future artists would go on to reproduce this track including Omara Portuondo for BVSC and pianist Bebo Valdés with flamenco singer Diego el Cigala, gaining them a Latin Grammy award in 2004, firmly placing it in history as one of the great Cuban *son* compositions.

An integral component to *son* and to Cuban music as a whole is the *clave*, meaning ‘key’ in Spanish. It refers to both a percussion instrument and a rhythmic pattern. The percussion instrument consists of a robust hardwood baton which is struck by another smaller baton. Interestingly, its design does not identifiably inherit any characteristics from either Spanish or African percussion traditions that came before it; the Clave in fact was developed collectively in the ports of colonial Havana from ship building pegs. Its innovators were workers and traders who were a mixture of Spanish individuals and Africans, both of the slave variety and of the free working variety, known as *negros curros*, who used the clave as rhythmic accompaniment during musical gatherings. Thus, an identifiably and authentically Cuban musical artefact was born.

Figure 2: The Clave



Musical example 1: 2-3 Son Clave & 2-3 Rumba Clave Patterns



The clave rhythm comes in two forms; the Son and Rumba clave, which differ in the three note bar known as the *tresillo*. They can be played in reverse order 3-2 clave and also come in 6/8 or 12/8 triple meter variations. It is a simple pattern with a simple concept, two rhythmically opposing cells,

one antecedent and moving and the other consequent and grounded, the expansion and contraction of these two poles creates the itching rhythmic drive that Cuban music thrives on. Clave is often embellished and played on or implied by various instruments in an ensemble as a central rhythmic anchor.

The longer pause between the second and third notes of the tresillo in the Rumba create even more of a sense of urgency to the rhythm. Rumba also refers to a Bantu derived Afro Cuban song and dance that developed in Cuba in the late 19th century around the same time as the Son.

The *danzón* music and dance form is another example of musical transculturation in Cuba. Stylistically, *danzón* derives certain musical features from the *son* tree, such as the clave rhythm. However, one of its key musical building blocks is the influence of creolised French *contredanse*. The origins of this lie in influx of Haitian exiles and their slaves to Cuba following the Haitian revolution in the early 19th century. Haiti is the next island to the south of Cuba, which was colonised by the French. The style features the *cinquillo* variation of the *tresillo* rhythm, which is danced to in partners. It is a dance that inspired further Cuban popular music developments; Fernandez (2006) comments that *cha-cha-chá* was invented by Enrique Jorrín in the early 1950s as a direct result of observing the way that people moved to his earlier *danzón* compositions. His first *cha-cha-chá* single was the record label Panart's bestselling single, 'La Engañadora' (1953).

The 1950s was a decidedly thriving period of musical activity in Cuba, referred to by scholars as 'The Golden Age' of Cuban music (Miller, 2014; Moore, 2006). Among the influential artists of the time was Benny Moré, the Cuban tenor whom in his earlier years had toured with leading *trova* group, Trio Matamoros. The 50s was a time of great contrast, musicians were earning good money in the urban centres and tourists flocked from the USA to spend money in casinos and clubs where they could see 'exotic' Cuban music being performed. The USA had more investment in Cuba than any other of its trading partners, which was welcomed by the government of the time yet came at the cost of the people's welfare. Around 75% of sugar cane crop was exported to the USA, leaving many Cubans starving. The health service was failing to care for the most needy as many services were reserved for the rich. A change of leadership was due.

2.3 A NEW ORDER- VIVA LA REVOLUCIÓN

The Cuban Revolution officially overthrew the U.S supported regime of Fulgencio Batista on 1 January 1959, after 6 years of armed conflict and campaigning. Fidel and his men paraded through the streets in their military clothing to a jubilant public, as seen in figure 3. The Revolution was welcomed especially by the neglected lower classes, who were calling out for reform in healthcare and industry.

Figure 3: Fidel's rebel army is welcomed in Havana, Jan 1959.



Fidel's vision for a new Cuba was something of a social experiment; it involved a total economic and ideological overhaul of the island. The Revolution strived for self-dependency and a reinvigorated sense of national pride and dignity. It would no longer put the needs of foreign investors and the wealthy before the needs of the Cuban working classes.

The new order that the Revolution instated can be described as a uni-democratic state-capitalist republic, with a basis in Marxist Leninist ideologies. This mouthful translates as a government with only one political party, which presides over all commercial economic activity. Key reforms that the Revolution implemented included free education for all in order to eradicate illiteracy and a free health and social care service. The latter has been one of the greatest legacies of the regime. Current life expectancy, at approximately 78, is very close to being on par with the USA. Furthermore, Cuban medical diplomacy has served to strengthen socialist consciousness, the regime dedicated lots of time to international medical collaboration and aid efforts. Another major policy was land reform and asset recovery. In 1959 around three quarters of the most fertile agricultural land was owned by foreign investors, mainly North American. This land was swiftly expropriated and nationalised by the government. Private businesses and property belonging to US nationals, other foreigners and middle and upper class Cubans was seized, along with all religious property, in a move to secularise the country.

There were however some Cuban business owners who chose to leave the country to set up new roots in diasporic communities rather than stay to effectively become state employees in their own companies. Musicians with opposing ideologies to the new regime left too, who would popularize Cuban music with distinct styles and lyrical content to those that stayed behind. Artists who left

Cuba included the popular group Sonora Matancera and composer Eduardo Davidson, who wrote the lively song 'La Pachanga' (1959) which inspired the musical movement of the same name. *Pachanga*, characterised by an energetic merging of *son montuno* and *merengue* genres, would be developed and popularised by a community of Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, among others in New York, which was establishing itself as a premier creative hotspot of Latin music activity. Both Davidson and Sonora Matancera remained based there for the rest of their professional careers. For the Cubans that stayed behind, there were certain perks in the form of a regular state income for working musicians, and the implementation of free music education. However, they were subjected to the nationalisation of the record industry. Panart, (the label that released Davidsons 'La Pachanga') was absorbed into the new national Recordings and Musical Editions Enterprise, otherwise known as EGREM, which would hold a monopoly on Cuban music releases until the late 1980s. Also, the political and foreign alliances that the Revolution cultivated in turn determined the international engagements of the artists that stayed in Cuba. Both Ibrahim Ferrer and Omara Portuondo of Buena Vista fame performed in Russia and Poland during the peak of Cuba-Soviet relations.

In 1960, as a reaction to the threat of radical communist activity, the USA ceased diplomatic relations with Cuba and imposed a trade embargo which has isolated Cubans economically, financially and commercially from their northern neighbours for over fifty years. The Spanish named the embargo *El Bloqueo* or *Bloque*. The tension between the

Figure 4: Government Billboard. *Bloque*- 'The largest genocide of history'



two nations was further exacerbated in 1961 when U.S and anti- Castro Cuban exile forces mounted an armed invasion in an attempt to overthrow the Revolution, known as the "Bay of Pigs Invasion". However, within three days of landing, the attackers were defeated.

The economic sanctions imposed by the USA, diplomatic tensions and armed conflicts between the two countries served to strengthen the Cuban state's political position. It provided them with the pretence on which it could channel its blame and economic woes. Fidel (1961) declared that 'I find capitalism repugnant. It is filthy, it is gross, it is alienating... because it causes war, hypocrisy and competition'. The U.S.A was an evil capitalist force that Cuba could measure itself against.

The transition to a revolutionary government had major implications in terms of the construction of Cuban identity. Doreen Massey (2012) believes that when a culture is under threat, they will construct archaeology in search of their origins and what was essential and authentic to that cultural formation. During the cultural upheaval of revolutionary Cuba, any concept of identity that the new regime sought was to be found only within the island of Cuba.

Crucial to the nationalistic cultural archaeology of the Revolution was the narrative of a free Cuba, in opposition to the colonialist forces in its history, namely USA and Spain. Baker (2011, p.103) confirms that 'the very notion of resistance lies at the heart of revolutionary national ideology'. Fidel believed in racial equality and a sense of solidarity with the oppressed and vulnerable. Astley (2012) writes that 'The Revolution sought to delineate the space of Africa within its nation's identity', indicating that the regime is keen to establish its roots but did not allow for a contemporary link to African culture within Cuba. For example, the practice of *santería*, an African derived religion was actively discouraged. Furthermore, when Fidel came to power the *Sociedades de Negros* were shut down with immediate effect. These social clubs, such the Havana namesake of the popular Cuban ensemble Buena Vista Social Club, were key institutions of Cuba's Golden Age music scenes where many popular ensembles would entertain locals, such as the influential Arsenio Rodriguez *Y Su Conjunto*. Arsenio developed *son montuno*, the richly orchestrated and textured extension of *Son*. His music contained critical discussion of slavery and of the country's legacy of racism, which had been equally prevalent in Cuba as in other Latin American countries, despite the government's official denial that racism existed within its society. As scholars have discussed (Astley, 2012; Fernandes, 2007; Godfried, 2000), the Revolution considers it unpatriotic to define oneself in terms of race, rather than identify simply as Cuban. This effectively robbed people of African descent living in Cuba of their right to a 'significant identity marker' (Astley, 2012), instead they would be referred to as '*Negros Cubanos*', or '*Negros Españoles Cubanos*'.

2.4 NEW GENERATIONS

The musical activity of Cuba from the 1960s onwards has been highly influenced by the government in the form of censorship and nationalisation of the recording industry. However, there existed, and still exists to this day, a real drive amongst the new generation of Cubans to engage in highly internationalised forms of popular music such as rock, jazz and hip hop.

Nueva canción was a transnational trend across Latin America of intimate, politically conscious music inspired by the romantic *fllin* movement of the 1950s. *Nueva trova* was Cuba's unique manifestation of this movement first appearing in the late 60s, with high advocacy from the Revolution. It brought the traditional *trova* folk music a new lease of life with politicised lyrical content covering the subjects of socialism, sexism, racism and injustice alongside chord picking guitar accompaniment. The two foremost exponents of *nueva trova* are Pablo Milanés and Silvio Rodríguez, who are still active musicians today.

During the 1970s and 80s in Cuba, media infrastructure was developing to the point where most households had radios and televisions. As the state had full control of programming, the Cuban youth were being drip fed material that reflected revolutionary values; propaganda and socialist dogma was a part of their daily lives. Despite this, distinct forms of music managed to break through into national consciousness. Peter Manuel (1989, p.163) informs that in a survey taken in 1982 of 100 Cuban student's music tastes; rock was more or less equal in popularity to Cuban dance music.

Despite the government's attempts to control national culture, airplay of certain rock and other foreign pop music began to be introduced in the mid-70s on Cuban radio due to the competition from Miami based stations transmitting to Cuba such as Voice of America. A kind of cultural skirmish was forming inside Cuba between the government and anyone it deemed as being antisocial, which included *los frikis*, the term given to people engaging in rock, metal and punk subculture. In the eyes of the government those that were listening to rock music were listening to the music of their enemy, i.e. capitalism i.e. the USA. However, it was not only the government that had their objections. Manuel (1989, p.164) observes that Enrique Jorrín, objected to the replacement of a *cha-cha-chá* radio show in favour of a rock show, reflecting a nationalistic viewpoint held by many, which was that internationalised music was usurping home-grown authentic Cuban music. Jorrín of course *would* object, as he invented *cha-cha-chá*, yet his fear was still valid, that the threat of new raucous uninhibited electric distorted guitar music from the likes of Jimi Hendrix or of Led Zeppelin could serve to alienate Cubans from what was deemed their national culture. Similarly in the USA, there are objections to Cuban music receiving airplay on US stations, especially amongst the exile community who do not want to hear music which has been presided over by a regime that they do not identify with. Yet, this attitude perpetuates oppositional relationships of musical culture, rather than seeking ways to reconcile collective ideas of identity between Cuba and its diaspora.

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, who was until then Cuba's most supportive economic and political ally, brought about a deep depression during the 1990s. The Soviet bloc had accounted for 85% of Cuba's foreign trade and, in addition, supplied 90% of Cuba's oil requirement. This was a

miserable period of austerity that the government opted to term Cuba's 'Special Period in Peacetime' (Calder & Hatchwell, 1999). At this time *nueva trova*, with its socialist narrative, largely fell out of favour with the Cuban public, evidently reflecting a certain level of disenchantment with the government that was failing them.

In response to the bleak outlook of the Special Period arose *timba*, Cuba's answer to the Puerto Rican or New York *Salsa* scene. It was originally referred to as *salsa cubano* however the African derived name *timba* came into wider usage in order to differentiate itself from the other Latin dance music scenes. Artists involved in this movement such as NG La Banda, La Charanga Habanera, Los Van Van and Isaac Delgado lyrically pushed the

Figure 5: Los Van Van in concert, Karl Marx Theatre, June 2007.



boundaries of what was deemed appropriate in revolutionary Cuba, covering topics such as crime, sex and the effects of tourism on the island, with clever use of double-entendre and street slang. Los Van Van recorded their album *¡Ay Dios, Ampárame!* (1996) with Caribe records, a newly established independent record label available to Cuban musicians, that allowed groups to release music without state interference. Stylistically, the music is an energetic, almost aggressive sounding genre that combines musical elements from folkloric Cuban styles like *rumba* and *batá* drumming with popular styles like jazz and pop. Raul Fernandez describes NG La Banda's *timba* style as 'irresistibly funky and impossibly complex' (2006, p.82). A modern drum kit is used rather than the percussion setup favoured by Puerto Rican *salseros*, and no *timba* group would be complete without a keyboard synthesizer playing an agitated *son montuno* style *guajeo* ostinato pattern. These *timba* groups often employ subversive lyrics and create fusions with transnational styles associated with their political rival, the USA. Although the Castro regime was not initially supportive of *timba* at its outset (Moore, 2006), it has now become tolerant of *timba* music as it identifies it as a considerable revenue generator. The Havana Rhythm and Dance Festival, which is primarily orientated around this style of music is now in its 12th year thanks to government subsidy.

Through the music of innovative groups like these *timba* artists, Cubans had the opportunity to renegotiate ideas of Cuban identity, often in opposition to the socialist ideologies of the governing power.

2.5 REBUILDING THE BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER

In December 2014 President Barack Obama announced his desire to normalise US - Cuba relations. Obama's government realised that the outdated embargo had failed in its attempts to transition Cuba to democracy, the president said in a recent press conference that 'You don't have to be imprisoned by the past... When something isn't working, we can and will change' (Scott, 2015). Although the legislation of the embargo can be only be fully lifted with the support of US Congress, the bilateral talks between Obama and current Cuban president Raúl Castro, Fidel's brother, have been fruitful. The talks have led to the ease of travel restrictions, release of political prisoners held in their respective countries and the reopening of official embassies on 20th July 2015. A handful of ferry operators have been approved between Miami and Havana which will allow for greater people-to-people interactions cheaper transport of people and goods, which will be especially useful for Cuban families with relatives living in the US.

In addition, in May 2015 the Minnesota Orchestra became the first US orchestra to visit Cuba since 1999. During their stay they held master classes in local schools and also rehearsed alongside Cuba's national youth orchestra, playing pieces by universally known composers such as Tchaikovsky and Borodin as well as a composition by their host Guido López-Gavilán, the director of the *Escuela Nacional de Arte*. The Minnesota Orchestra's musical director, Osmo Vänskä, indicated that the vital element of the trip, psychologically speaking, was working together with the Cuban people and building a lasting connection (Kerr, 2015).

These new developments could have great implications for cultural exchange between the USA and Cuba. Parallel developments in popular music circles either side of the Straits of Florida could be brought together in a more intensely convergent musical exchange and sense of musical awareness, bringing about a new realm of Cuban music transculturation.

CHAPTER 3: CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS ON CUBAN MUSIC

3.1 MEMORIES OF A TROPICAL PLAYGROUND

Perhaps the most prominent topic of debate when it comes to BVSC is the subject of nostalgia. Running through the very core of the Buena Vista's self-titled album is a romanticised view of pre-revolution Cuba, a sonic re-imagining of the elderly bandmates' golden years. A New York Times concert review talked of a sound 'rich with tenderness and nostalgia, suggesting a world of tropical ease and pre-Revolutionary innocence' (Pareles, 1998). However, as we know the pre-Fidel era was not quite so innocent, 1950s Havana under Fulgencio Batista's control was widely considered a hedonistic tropical playground in which the entertainment industry was dominated by the interests of foreign tourists and investors, including members of the US Mafia. Music acts playing at bars and casinos would be treated as the exotic other, an attitude which echoes the cultural imperialism of Cuba's colonial period.

It can be argued that the Buena Vista Social Club album can be considered to be a misleading selective presentation of history, music and culture. García (2006, p.144) applauds BVSC success and that it puts Cuban folkloric music back into the mainstream of world music however argues that BVSC's music is not satisfactorily representative of the era that it is trying to present. Furthermore, he goes on to highlight that in fixating on pre-revolutionary musical styles, BVSC isolates itself from the kind of social narrative driven by popular Afro Cuban dance groups on the island and manages to skim over the historical narrative of racial discrimination and segregation that necessitated the need for the black social clubs of the 1940s in the first place. Hernández (2002, p.65) also points to Buena Vista Social Club's isolation within the popular sphere of Cuban music, claiming the unspoiled colonial fantasy that they portray is incompatible with the politicized content of contemporary Afro Cuban dance groups. Carlos Alfonso, of the Afro Cuban group Síntesis asserts her reasoning:

This Buena Vista type of music, saying they found an old musician shining shoes, it's a show. It's a way to deny the reality of present day Cuba and the issues we face. This old romantic sentiment is a safe way to look at Cuba. (Foehr, 2001, p.157)

Hernández argues that the demand for this pre-revolutionary era music in world music market is a present day manifestation of residual imperialist attitudes towards Cuba; various European

countries and the USA are vying for a stake in this exotic market of music which echoes back to a time of territorial dispute of the New World (2002, p.65). Ry Cooder himself inadvertently projects a sense of cultural imperialism, in the sleeve notes of the BVSC album he describes the procurement of the musicians involved in the project as a musical 'treasure hunt' (BVSC, 1997, p.3).

There are also those who oppose this notion. In James Ferguson's paper on transnational Cuban culture (2003), he regards the album as a kind of 'humanistic reclamation project'; humanistic in the sense that it portrays the Cuban musicians involved in a valued and dignified way. In chapter 4 subjects of agency of the BVSC musicians and musical reclamation is analysed in further detail.

The Buena Vista Social Club brand itself is keen to stake its claim that whilst its music represents a revival of traditional Cuban genres into the mainstream of world music, fundamentally it functions as a separate node in the timeline of Cuban music, rather than simply a glorified golden age tribute act. On the BVSC website the final line of the project description reads "'Buena Vista Social Club"™has a timeless quality. This is a music that transcends the vagaries of mere fashion and an album which is destined to be regarded as a classic for years to come.' So whilst the music does not resemble the work of prevailing Afro Cuban pop groups like Havana D'Primera or NG La Banda, there is the expectation that the BVSC music will continue to appeal in the future regardless of the trends of Cuban popular music.

Clive Davis (2015) in his review of the Orquesta BVSC's Brighton Dome concert, prescribes to this way of thinking, 'One of the sillier charges made against the Buena Vista phenomenon by some world music cognoscenti is that it is merely an exercise in pre-revolutionary era nostalgia. How wrong can you be? Timeless music is simply timeless music'.

Buena Vista's reimagining of pre-revolutionary music and its reluctance to identify both the issues of Afro Cuban racial discrimination and cultural imperialism during the golden years could begin to be explained by what George Lipsitz' refers to as 'strategic anti-essentialism' (1994, p.62). Lipsitz uses this term to describe the process of an artist taking on a disguise in order to shield or express indirectly a facet of their identity, so as to not to offend or threaten the relationship with their audience. If revealed directly, the relationship that the artist has with its audience could be damaged. In the case of Buena Vista, a direct engagement with issues of race by the musicians could potentially fray the relationship between the artists and the Cuban authorities, who give them a great deal of support. Due to the government's ideology it is deemed unconstitutional to define oneself in terms of race, rather than identify simply as Cuban.

3.2 POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND MUSICAL CULTURE

As highlighted in my introductory chapter, the unique political conditions that cast their net over the island have carried a great influence in the formation, or the reshaping of music culture, arguably more so than in any other Latin American nation. Thus it would be a useful exercise to explore further the interface between political ideology and music culture in Cuba.

The state's approach to dealing with music culture in Cuba can be summed up in the following quote from Fidel Castro (1961), '*Dentro de la revolución, todo; contra la revolución, nada.*' 'Inside the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing'. Geoffrey Baker (2011, p. 99) states that the regime employs two methods, censorship or assimilation.

Philip Sweeney (2001) writes that when the Revolution came to be in 1959, despite the ransacking of the casinos and the upheaval of the entertainment industry, the regime itself 'posed no ideological threat' to the country's music scene; Che Guevara was insistent that the state of things to come would be 'Socialism with *pachanga*'. However, Sweeney fails to address that the Revolution's hard-line socialist reforms and the resulting US trade embargo would, in fact, create a rift in the vibrant music exchange between artists in Cuba and other Latino artists and Cuban diaspora based in the USA. As we know, *Pachanga* is the lively dance music form which resulted from the convergence of *Son Montuno* and *Merengue* styles. Although it began life on the island in 1959 its centre of development was shifted to New York in the early 1960s to be popularised by a young generation of musicians and entrepreneurs, many of them Cuban immigrants. This thriving New York Latin dance community was now a scene that was out of reach by the newly isolated Cuban population. This geographic shift of musical development is equally present in the case of *mambo*, which had seen a period of great success in Cuba in the 1950s.

A Radiolab podcast entitled *Los Frikis* (Trelles, 2015) interviews a Florida resident, Vladimir, a man who grew up in Havana during the 1970s but left to start a new life in the United States. He described his own personal musical awakening which began when a friend showed him a video (clandestinely circulated) of Led Zeppelin performing their song 'Kashmir'. This transnational style of music for him represented a sense of liberalism and freedom that he had not experienced with the domestic music of this time. In Tom Astley's book concerning the renegotiations of left-wing identity in Cuban music, *Outside the Revolution; Everything* (2012), musician Giraldo Piloto lends his thoughts on the domestic music scene in question. He says, 'In Cuba, singing a "problematic" song in public, in theory, is not forbidden. What happens, rather, is that the media, by banning specific songs and

marginalising certain artists on the airwaves, pressurizes musicians into self-censorship.’ (Astley, 2012, p. 26). In recognising this reality, Vladimir was inspired to escape the island to play music abroad in a cultural setting that did not restrict his creativity.

Astley (2012) points out that a key discourse in determining Cuban musical identity lies in the study of the USA- Cuba binary. The way in which Buena Vista Social Club has been affected and influenced by the Revolution and its rocky relationship with the USA is not an immediately visible interplay. It is however, a relevant discussion in order to understand the success of the group. As a high profile Cuban music project jointly led by Ry Cooder, a US national, BVSC finds itself open to injury from the ongoing political and cultural struggles between the two nations. Yet, it has been well received by audiences on both sides of the Florida Straits.

JH, a regular poster to the World Socialist Website (1999) makes a relevant point in his discussion of the Wim Wenders’ 1999 Buena Vista Social Club documentary. He says that the complexities of the political circumstances in Cuba are not adequately addressed by the filmmakers or by the interviewees, nor have they addressed the impact that the conflicting ideologies of Cuba and the USA have had on the native musicians’ careers. He believes that the political context that surrounds the project is something that is very relevant in order to understand the musical trajectory of the group. This misrepresentation that JH describes reveals a certain naivety on the part of the album’s creators to entirely sidestep the narrative of deep societal impact that the US trade embargo has had on Cuba. However the apolitical nature of the Buena Vista Social Club documentary, and of their music releases at large, can be justified again by Lipsitz’ strategic anti-essentialism (1994), which is described as a calculated withholding of a facet of identity in order to thrive. In this case the people of BVSC opt for self-censorship of political rhetoric and any critical discussion on the economic issues they face as Cuban musicians. In the documentary the cameras frequently linger on the crumbling colonial architecture of Havana’s old quarter and strolls through deprived central Havana neighbourhoods. However there is no critical engagement into why swathes of the city still lie in ruins for decades with no implication of Castro’s government and its failings. The ageing musicians talk of the good old days of their childhood, the highs and lows of their careers, their hopes and dreams, and the wonder and amazement of seeing present day New York. Ibrahim Ferrer remarks that he hopes his wife and children could someday witness for themselves the buzz of NYC (Wenders, 1999). Yet, their career hardships are not elaborated upon and the USA’s blockade is not directly referred to. Although it is true that the Cuban members have dealt with many hardships and austerity exacerbated by the trade embargo, in the documentary they are treated with a great deal of humanity and dignity. Wenders focuses on their love for Cuba’s musical heritage and

succeeds in portraying them in a way that endears them to the exile community, one that focused on their art, non-provocative and hopeful for reconciliation. Ry Cooder in a Time magazine article (D'Adarrio, 2014) remarked 'Music—it's the bridge you cross immediately. Any threats, reprisals, hideous bureaucracy, flag-waving—it all dissolves.' The fact that Buena Vista's music is enjoyed by Cubans either side of the straits, Cubans that live under political systems with opposing ideologies, presents opportunities for reconciliation. In a Channel 4 interview (2015), the BVSC guitarist/vocalist Eliades Ochoa responds only in terms of musical exchange to Matt Frei's comment about a 'new Cuba' with its increasing modernity and economic opportunity. He says that it would be beautiful to see a group of Cuban musicians playing in a square in the USA and likewise for a group of American musicians to be playing in a square in Cuba, this is the missing link. The non-provocative nature of BVSC's music and lack of engagement in political narrative could inspire open negotiation of the ideas of *cubanía*, between the Cuban islanders and Cuban exiles.

Negative interactions have frequently arisen between the Cuban exile community in the USA and artists from the island who choose to narrate alternative socio-political ideas and values at the forefront of their music. For example, in April 1999 Los Van Van were granted a visa to perform in Miami only to be greeted by hundreds of protesters and squads of police in riot gear. The angry protests associated Los Van Van with the communist regime that had caused them suffering. Recording artists in Cuba are all registered with the Cuban Ministry of Culture, a government office, who receives a percentage of their takings. Some of the \$50 fee to attend the concert would fall in the hands of the Cuban government. Juan Formell, speaking to The Miami Herald at a press conference said 'we don't come here representing the Ministry of Culture, or the government, or as any kind of ambassadors. We come here as artists, as musicians, to play' (Garcia M, 1999). Another artist who met repercussions after broaching the subject of the Miami-Havana relationship is Manolín, dubbed "El Médico de la Salsa" given his background as a disillusioned medical student turned musician. His single 'Amigos in Miami' in 1997, which was about the reunification of a broken Cuba led to him being frozen out of the Cuban media and public performance for two years. Manolín actually relocated to Miami soon after (Sweeney, 2001, p.287). Furthermore, the political divide affected the way that labels could do business. For example in 1993, Ralph Mercado the director of New York salsa label RMM was reported to say that he could never sign a Cuban star whilst Celia Cruz was alive (Sweeney, 2001, p.288). This presumably was for fear of upsetting the most valuable artist on his books. Celia Cruz was prevented from returning to her homeland when the Revolution came into effect. An Orquesta Buena Vista Social Club concert on the other hand has never provoked such negative attention. As Carlos Alfonso (Foehr, 2001) comments, BVSC do not narrate in their music any current issues that Cubans face, it is 'safe music' which tragically forgoes its opportunity

to educate its listeners on the real state present day Cuba. Juan de Marcos González (Foehr, 2001, p.160) believes that the BVSC album represented a point in time before the damaging effects of Cuba's isolation, in which the nation was the best sellers of tropical Cuban music in the world. It is something all Cubans can celebrate together.

3.3 GLOBALISATION AND THE TRANSNATIONAL FLOW OF CULTURE

The study of globalisation is a key strand when it comes to discussing music in terms of indigenous culture and its contact with the wider world. A local artefact, when disseminated outside of the realm that it belongs to, is exposed to the dangers of cultural appropriation and misuse, which in turn can threaten to irretrievably distort the identity of that product. A basic example of this could be a native Indian headdress being worn by a white teenager at a music festival. This person may identify it as something that appears bohemian and exotic to them, however it could cause offence to someone of the native Indian community who for them the headdress is an object of spirituality not to be trivialised. I will address the subject of cultural appropriation and misappropriation in relation to Buena Vista Social Club in chapter 4.4.

Fairley (2001, p.61) highlights that it is important to evaluate the descriptions of 'local' and 'global' as they cannot be defined as simply oppositional terms. Local music could be used to describe anything from a small gathering of musicians in a village hall jam session, to multinational corporations investing in and broadcasting a local talent. In the case of the Buena Vista Social Club, it is impossible to categorise. The identity of the BVSC is a complex relationship of local and global culture in a dynamic transnational setting. Transnationalism describes the heightened connectivity and blurring of geopolitical boundaries between nations. When George Lipsitz (1994, p.62) refers to the transnational recording industry, he refers to the ability of musicians from any background being able to enjoy access to wider audiences by conforming to internationalised codes of practice. Buena Vista Social Club has enjoyed widespread global success though I would argue that this success lies in refusing to conform to the international code of practice that Lipsitz refers to. This project was unlike anything that World Circuit records had undertaken before in terms of the financial risk. Neither the artists nor the repertoire had received much exposure to a European audience, it was a leap of faith in a business sense though it was undertaken because of an admiration for Cuban musicians and with respect for their autonomy over their local traditions.

CHAPTER 4: AN EXPLORATION OF THE SELF-TITLED ALBUM *BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB*.

Although there have been a number of works released under the umbrella term of Buena Vista Social Club, this chapter will focus on the self-titled album launched in September 1997 by World Circuit and Nonesuch records (owned by Warner Music Group) in the USA and Canada. I have chosen to analyse this album in particular as it is the first and most commercially successful release under the Buena Vista Social Club name, which laid the groundwork for the subsequent multi-platform development of the BVSC brand.

The album won the 1997 Grammy for Best Tropical Latin Performance, which as the BVSC vocalist Manuel 'Puntillita' Licea expresses in an interview ten years later, began the legend of the singers and musicians of the old guard, and marked the revival of traditional *trova* and *son* music (Lam, 2007). It is a collaboration of UK and US producers and Cuban musicians displaying an appreciation and respect for traditional Cuban music, whilst incorporating international influences.

I therefore wish to call into question the musical autonomy of the featured Cuban musicians, explore interpretations of ownership as well as the extent to which the album can be described as cultural appropriation. To achieve this I shall detail the musical styles contained in the album, examine the arrangements, instrumentation and lyrical content. It will feature a case study of the BVSC signature track 'Chan Chan'.

In her paper on the racial politics of Buena Vista Social Club, Tanya Kateri Hernández (2002) takes the stance that the creation and promotion of the BVSC record by a western organisation carries forward a residual imperialist attitude towards Cuba. The process of a UK record label World Circuit discovering Cuban talent and creating a product which was disseminated at their control certainly increases that label's influence over foreign perception of Cuba's identity. In the following subchapters I shall look in more detail into the relationships between the three primary figures that put the BVSC project together, Nick Gold, Juan de Marcos González and Ry Cooder. They have differing cultural backgrounds but shared the core principal of giving a global voice to Cuban talent that would otherwise go unheard. It is difficult to consider the western producers of the album culturally imperialist as it is not a case of a western record company promoting their culture over Cuban culture; in this scenario it is the lesser known Cuban music culture that is the valuable desired product. The repertoire was written for, sourced by and performed by Cubans according to Cuban values.

4.1 'THE COODER PARADIGM'

In Jan Fairley's article 'The local and global in popular music' (2001, p.71), she describes distinct approaches to working with artists from different cultural backgrounds, one of these being 'The Cooder Paradigm'.

Cooder's approach to recording the album, according to Wim Wenders (1999), towed the line between tradition and modernity. He did not want to record it in the way it had always been done, but at same time was conscious not to undermine the legacy of the works that they would present on the album.

Figure 6: Position of mics and musicians during Buena Vista recording, EGREM studio 1996.



Juan de Marcos says that Ry created a sound he would personally never have thought of making 'like the 1930s, a very dirty sound and very rough, almost no mix. Buena Vista Social Club sounds like a recorded rehearsal with nonprofessional mics.' (Foehr, 2001, p. 159). He felt that it gave the album an understated character of authenticity. Ry selected that particular room shown in figure 6 as the full ensemble could gather in a circle and communicate freely; typically the musicians preferred the smaller studio downstairs as there was a better separation of sound, but this is what Ry didn't want. He wanted the record to impart that sense of communication, community and musicianship that would be lost in a more polished and edited production.

In October 2010, Juan de Marcos González gave an interview on *'la verdadera historia'*, the true story of BVSC's conception, with Rafael Lam, a prominent music historian based in Havana. González commented that owing to a combination of the experience and sensitivity of the musicians recorded and the production techniques of Cooder, the sound of this album has a sense of dynamics that is lacking in the over polished productions of Cuban *timba*. He says, 'these musicians harness the spirit of the music, the sudden piano, the climax and anti-climax, the colours through the dynamics' (Lam, 2010).

4.2 THE WORKS, INSTRUMENTATION AND LYRICS

The album seeks to revive traditional Cuban musical styles by bringing together a group of experienced and talented musicians, many of whom had not been commercially active for some time. The repertoire largely consists of reproductions of traditional Cuban music standards written in the 1930s and 50s, by artists who characterised the golden age of the country's musical history *'la guardia vieja'* which are interspersed with the featured musicians own unique compositions, celebrating their creative talent and virtuosity. Of the fourteen tracks, four can be considered *son*, three *bolero*, two *danzón* and one track apiece in *guajira* and *criolla* styles. The album incorporates international influences in the form of the Cooder father and son duo's accompaniments, including alternative percussion instrumentations. In addition to this, there are two American jazz-blues style arrangements of *son* compositions.

The album opens with three *son* tracks beginning with the project's famed signature track, 'Chan Chan', which I discuss in detail in subchapter 4.3, followed by 'De Camino a La Vereda' and 'El Cuarto de Tula'. Lucy Durán notes that the repertoire on the album, even without the Africans present is a weird combination of eastern and western Cuba styles (2014, p.147). Representing the east is Eliades Ochoa, in his trademark cowboy hat, and the legendary *trova* artist Francisco "Compay Segundo" Repilado. Eliades leads the track 'El Carretero' which is an eastern Cuban country lament. Ry Cooder's blues and slide guitar contributions can be heard on most tracks. In 'Orgullecida', an Americana influenced ragtime piece, Ry plays a guitar solo which Compay was particularly delighted with. He thought it would have met the composer Eliseo Silveira's approval (BVSC, 1996, p.36).

In terms of the rhythm section, it primarily consisted of members of Juan de Marcos González *son* revival group, Sierra Maestra, featuring the typical Cuban set: maracas, guiro, bongos, congas, cowbell and clave. Ry Cooder's son Joachim joined them on an array of alternative percussion

instruments including full drum kit on the jazz shuffle track 'Orgullecida'. On a number of songs he is heard to play a North African goblet drum known as the *doumbek*, including 'De Camino a La Vereda' and 'Y Tú Qué Has hecho?'. In 'Pueblo Nuevo' and 'Buena Vista Social Club' he is heard to play the *udu*. These two instruments are not commonly associated with Afro Cuban music, but can be traced to the same tree of African membranophones that gave rise to the contemporary Afro Cuban congas and bongos.

In the case of BVSC, they are playing a mixed repertoire of music that pre dates the 1959 Revolution, and much of the narrative of the songs concern issues faced by Cubans who lived during that time. Wim Wenders (1998), in his commentary on the BVSC documentary, observes that in Cuba everyone puts a lot more value in the writers of Cuban popular music lyrics than in our throwaway western pop music. Cuban musicians often sing about the daily struggles faced by the people, love and loss, economic woes, or traditional folkloric tales all with a casual air of Cuban humour. The themes of sexual attraction and conquest are a regular appearance often by way of poetic metaphoric imagery and a dose of double entendre and wordplay.

The track 'El Cuarto de Tula' is a prime example of Cuban lyrical improvisation and Santiago tradition sexual innuendo. '*El cuarto de Tula, le cogió candela*' exclaims Ibrahim Ferrer, Tula's bedroom is on fire. 'Dos Gardenias' however is more of a subdued and intimate *bolero* concerning saying goodbye to a loved one. '*Dos gardenias para ti, con ellas quiero decir: te quiero, te adoro mi vida*' mourns Ferrer, with these flowers I want to say I adore you, my life. Ibrahim Ferrer also sings on the romantic ballad piece 'Murmullo', he softly croons 'there is a soft whisper, in the silence of one blue night, of two lovers bewitched by their love'. The composer Electo Rosell was inspired by Hollywood musicals. Omara Portuondo features on only one track 'Viente Años', another *bolero*, which is the genre she was famed for in the 1950s. She sings with Compay Segundo on the subject of the fears surrounding the possible infidelity of a lover and the effect it would have, and they are mournfully watching as a part of their soul is torn away.

Garcia (2006, p.144), criticizes this album for not containing any works by legendary Cuban *son montuno* composer and band leader Arsenio Rodriguez. He was an influential artist also prevalent in the music scene of the so-called golden years, which is the period of music history that the BVSC repertoire is centred around. Arsenio, a figure who was a victim of racial discrimination and segregation contributed in the popularisation of *son montuno* and *danzón- mambo* styles in the types of black social club which the BVSC is named after. Garcia believes that the BVSC is omitting a crucial aspect of Cuban musical identity by not including any works that are in these styles, including Arsenio's repertoire, or including any indication of racial conflict. It is worth mentioning however

that the reason that this record did not include his work was that Juan De Marcos had already recorded an album which was a tribute to Arsenio previously with *World Circuit, Dundunbanza!* (1994). It would not make sense from a marketing perspective to repeat the same kind of material.

4.3 'CHAN CHAN' IN FOCUS.

The first track on the album, 'Chan Chan', was quickly received as a firm favourite and signature track among the Buena Vista repertoire and therefore an appropriate candidate for an in-depth case study. The first time the track was played in concert, in April 1998 at the Carré Theater, Amsterdam, the audience rose in standing ovation as they performed it and at the Brighton Dome concert it received the loudest applause of the evening. Over the years the song has gone on to be reproduced by many subsequent artists in various styles. The popular rap group Orishas, on their album *A lo Cubano*' (1999) released a remix of 'Chan Chan' called '537 C.U.B.A'.

The piece is unique in that it is the only original work composed by an artist who is playing on the album. Francisco "Compay Segundo" Repilado, the oldest member on the record at 88 years old wrote this *son* in 1987. In the characteristic spirit of nostalgia, the piece recounts a traditional tale from his childhood, Chan Chan y Juanica. It is a simple story of a man and woman who decide to build a house together, when they go to the beach they collect sand to be sieved for purposes in the construction. On seeing Juanica shaking the sand, and herself, Chan Chan's passions are stirred.

In terms of structure, the entirety of the song is built around a steady circulation of Dm-F-Gm-A, played out by a *guajeo* on guitar following the clave rhythm which is supported by a matrix of Afro Cuban rhythmic lines on congas, maracas and bongos. The sparse texture allows plenty of space for the song to derive interest from the vocal harmonies and the interspersal of improvisory solo passages by the trumpet, slide guitar and Cuban *tres*. The Cooder father and son duo again contribute African flavours into the musical palette. Ry plays the *mbira*, a West Africa derived thumb piano. He plays a subtle ostinato that compliments the *tres* line. Joachim plays the *udu*, a Nigerian clay vessel which is similar to a *botija*, a clay pot brought to Cuba by the Spanish which was used as a bass instrument in *son* music during its 19th century development. The *udu* produces a bass tone that reinforces the back line.

Segundo sings backing throughout, bouncing between verses in which he and Eliades Ochoa tell the story of Chan Chan and Juanica, and the chorus in which Ibrahim Ferrer joins him in the refrain 'De

Alto Cedro voy para Marcané, llego a Cueto voy para Mayarí (BVSC, 1996), which traces the path of an itinerant *trova* musician visiting towns in eastern Cuba. Compay Segundo in Spanish literally translates as “the second mate”. However in the early 20th century *trova* tradition, two voices would customarily sing together, the lead *voz primera* and the second *voz del segundo*. This singing style was adopted in many later *son* pieces¹. The inclusion of this track on the album gives an opportunity for Francisco to play out the same role that he held during the 1950s in his *trova* duo ‘Los Compadres’ in which he was always the second supporting voice. Although this song is a relatively recent composition, again it fixates on pre-revolutionary nostalgia.

4.4 ISSUES OF MUSICAL AUTONOMY

There are the established arguments that this album was a form of musical treasure hunt, claiming the unspoiled colonial fantasy and that it represents a present day manifestation of residual imperialist attitudes towards Cuba (Hernández, 2002, p.65). Although it may be true that the album has been released and marketed by a UK organisation, the individuals that pulled the strings in terms of the actual repertoire and arrangements were the Cuban musicians themselves, suggesting to me that this album can indeed be considered an authentic document of Cuban art.

Given that this album was designed to be a showcase of the best of golden age Cuban music it is an important detail that the oldest member who had lived through that time, Compay Segundo, 88, was at the centre of the record’s development. Wenders (1999) observed that during recording the BVSC album, none of the producers dared to call out Compay on his tuning, instead arranging for the other instruments to tune to him, such was their respect for his authority. Ry Cooder comments ‘the whole album turned on Compay. He was the fulcrum, the pivot. He knew all the best songs and the way to do them. Well, he’s been doing them since World War One’ (Smith, 1998). In interviews, both Ry and Nick have explained that Compay had the last word on the arrangements during recording. Nick Gold recalls, ‘I remember Ry being in awe of Compay... he loved to say “*incorrecto...*” in a loud booming voice, and Ry would laugh and say, “Oh, we don’t want *incorrecto!*”’ (Durán, 2014, p.149).

Ry Cooder had a sensitive approach to cross-cultural collaboration as highlighted earlier in this chapter. Although he is listed on the album as the producer his input was primarily the sound design rather than composition. Juan de Marcos in his role as musical director was responsible for arranging and conducting the group. Nick remarks that he would have everything written, sorted, charted,

¹ I am grateful to Dr Sue Miller for this observation.

planned and had been rehearsing with pianist Rubén González and bassist Cachaíto for months before the recording time arrived. (Durán, 2014, p. 145).

I believe that any allegations that the album displays a misappropriation of Cuban musical form can be dismissed. Decisions on the arrangements of the songs were ultimately reached by group consensus of the musicians involved, all of whom being Cuban nationals apart from Ry Cooder and his son Joachim. Although certain creative and transnational elements were included into the recordings by Ry and Joachim Cooder, their additions are informed by a sensitivity and fundamental respect for the Cuban musicians. Misappropriation, in a cultural sense, is the unauthorised or dishonest use of a product by someone belonging outside of that culture. In addition, this album was recorded with full consent from EGREM, the government owned record label which runs the central Havana studio where the album was recorded. Also, during the filming of the documentary the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC), again government owned, donated the film crew portable generators so that they could continue filming and recording the musicians during the frequent power cuts.

On this subject of misrepresentation, I feel Cubans could take issue with is the following comments by Ry Cooder and Nick Gold in the *Story* section of the Buena Vista Social Club website (2015). Ry describes Ibrahim Ferrer as 'a Cuban Nat King Cole', and Omara Portuondo as 'the Cuban Edith Piaf'. Nick describes the album as being 'world music's equivalent of The Dark Side of the Moon'. They are comparing their Cuban counterparts in terms of being successful as these following white artists, which sets off the kind of imperialist attitude alarm bells that Tanya Katerí Hernandez (2002) had been ringing in her paper. In reality, as shown by their conduct with the musicians of BVSC, they have a great deal of respect for Cuba and make consideration for the musicians' autonomy of their compositions. Notwithstanding, in this certain case they should have been more careful. Lucy Durán (2014) mentions in her paper that some music critics view the world music industry as having a bias against recognising authorship in traditional music. Far from it, one of the impressive things about the album was the 47 page accompanying sleeve note booklet, which the producers went to great lengths to produce. It has many photos of the artist past and present, details about the origins of the compositions, and a comprehensive list of the musicians, instruments and composers of each track. 'Ry was quite big on that, about songwriters.' adds Nick (Durán, 2014, p. 149).

By all accounts the measures taken by Ry, Nick, and Juan de Marcos were to ensure that the record was a natural, candid representation of traditional Cuban music. However, the final executive decision in terms of deciding the material that would be released on the record rested on Nick Gold's shoulders as executive producer. Nick although in that executive position of power acted in the best interests of Cuban music and maintains now a positive working relationship with Cuban

musicians demonstrated through his string of further releases on World Circuit to this day with various other Cuban artists.

4.5 'FILLING IN THE GAPS': AFROCUBISM AND *DISTINTO DIFERENTE*

The Buena Vista Social Club album has met criticism by scholars and fellow musicians in that the narrative didn't actively engage with present day Cuban issues, and also that it didn't adequately give a balanced representation of the Cuban musical repertoire of the era it was attempting to showcase. It is my view that the BVSC record should not be evaluated individually but rather as a part of a wider effort to promote the richness of Cuban culture to the world. In this subchapter I will demonstrate the efforts made by Juan De Marcos González and the label World Circuit to essentially fill in the gaps left by the BVSC record, to further demonstrate Nick Gold and his company's dedication and respect for Cuban music, providing artists with an empowering global platform to showcase their culture.

In Madrid in 2010, Nick produced the fusion record *Afrocubism*, an album which finally sees the realisation of the original objective of the Buena Vista project, a meeting of Malian and Cuban musicians. It features the guitarist Eliades Ochoa with his band, including Jorge Maturell on bongos and congas. The Malian contingent included the *ngoni* (African lute instrument) player Bassekou Kouyate and guitarist Djelimady Tounkara, the two missing 1996 musicians.

Afrocubism establishes the contemporary cross cultural relationship between West African and Cuban musicians that the Cuban authorities denied them in 1996, demonstrating the complementary nature of West African and Cuban melodies and polyrhythms. The Malian *kora* player on the album, Toumani Diabate was thrilled that they were able to record the album, 'We are at the heart of African music; they are so important to the Americas. This music came from Africa, and now it is coming home. The past is meeting the present and forming the future.' (Hutcheon, 2010).

When the passports of the Malian musicians were suspiciously misplaced by the Cuban Embassy in Burkina Faso, the BVSC team needed to improvise by drafting in alternative set of musicians. It became an album that was largely centred on eastern Cuban traditional music though they still decided to include an element of African percussion played by Joaquin Cooder and blues tinged

guitar playing by Ry Cooder. It was neither a pure Cuban record nor the fusion of African and Cuban that they had desired, yet it was the record that went on to define this category of music.

Juan de Marcos' personal music agenda was not particularly concerned with fusion music making, his focus was always with the Cuban golden age big band sound. He says very explicitly in his interview with Rafael Lam (2010) '*no me interesaba lo africano, sino un homenaje a lo cubano, a lo mío*'. His goal was to pay homage to his Cuban heritage. He has gone on to conduct many of his own projects, the most recognised of which is the Afro Cuban All Stars group. Juan de Marcos organised a follow up to the *A Toda Cuba Le Gusta* (1997) album with *Distinto, Diferente*, in 1999, which offered a continuity of the BVSC legacy. He describes it as 'again multi-generational but with a sound much closer to the vanguard of Cuban dance music.' (Afro Cuban All Stars, 1999, p.4). With this album he is renegotiating ideas of Cuban identity in ways that the BVSC album did not touch upon. He said in an interview, 'I wanted to do something else, change the language, more in touch with jazz like Irakere' (Lam, 2010).

The album is a whistle stop tour of Cuban styles past and present, from *timba* inspired *son moderno* tracks like 'Reconciliación', the Afro Cuban jazz dedication to Arsenio Rodriguez 'Tumba Palo Cocuyé', the African tribal inspired 'Warariansa', to slow tempo emotive *filin bolero* tracks like 'Homenaje a Martha Valdés', which is included as De Marcos identified that this important composer had been widely forgotten today.

'Reconciliación' is a track calling for a united Cuban identity, a reunification of the Cuban diaspora, particularly the Miami community. Ibrahim Ferrer sings on this track with Teresa García Caturla who sang with Omara Portuondo during the 1970s in El Cuarteto d'Aida. Lyrics include 'If you don't love Cuba, don't call yourself Cuban' and 'I hold out my hand to you, asking from my heart, for reconciliation among all Cubans'. In chapter 3.2, Political Ideology, I highlighted the difficulties that musicians have had in grappling with the USA-Cuba binary. De Marcos is broaching the subject of unification of national identity in a way that is 'transcending political taboos' (Afro Cuban All Stars, 1999, p.5). Also the musical style is more in keeping with *timba* than the slower paced *son* of the BVSC album, featuring a *guajeo* ostinato pattern on the piano and uplifting brass mambos.

'Warariansa', meaning brotherhood, is a collaborative track written by De Marcos and Gregorio "El Goyo" Hernández. El Goyo was one of the founders of the *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional*, the National Folklore Group which among other things promotes Afro Cuban arts in order to rehabilitate Cuba's musical roots. The track is dedicated to De Marcos' father who was a member of an Afro Cuban

fraternity of Nigerian origin, Abakuá. The track is therefore sung in a Nigerian origin language and features a percussion led Abakuá orchestra.

The *son* 'Huellas del Pasado' (Footprints of the Past), is Juan De Marcos fresh arrangement of the composition by the respected Francisco "Compay Segundo" Repilado. Initially, stylistically it follows the eastern *campesino* tradition with prominent *tres* finger picking and lyrics concerning the well-travelled path of lost love and betrayal, with intriguing, if bizarre, wordplay like 'Women are like bread, they must be eaten hot. If you let them get cold, not even the devil will take a bite'. De Marcos reinvigorates the track by developing into *son moderno* brass improvisations in its second half.

In typical World Circuit style, the sleeve notes of this album contain extensive information about the creation of the tracks, the lyrics, the composers and the musicians. This allows consumers to have a greater cultural understanding and appreciation for Cuba.

More recently in 2015, World Circuit released a compilation of previously unreleased material from the last two decades of interactions with Cuban musicians, including recordings from the 1996 session and live concert material. The album, titled *Lost and Found*, gives a broader image of Cuban music that goes towards addressing the concerns raised by scholars like David García (2006), and Tanya Katerí Hernández (2002).

CHAPTER 5: BRAND AND RECEPTION.

An important consideration in order to understand Buena Vista Social Club's success is its identity beyond simply an ensemble of musicians, but as its influence as a global brand. This chapter will consider the wider implications of the Buena Vista project both abroad and within present day Cuba.

On Buena Vista Social Club's website, Nick Gold the executive producer of the self-titled record and its subsequent follow-ups writes this,

At its peak, it seemed that you couldn't move without hearing Buena Vista's potent, captivating soundtrack : in coffee shops and mojito bars and even department stores and elevators songs such as Chan Chan, Dos Gardenias and Candela came to accompany our daily existence. Suddenly, Buena Vista was not so much a record as a brand, albeit one based on musical quality rather than marketing hype. (BVSC, 2015)

He is keen to highlight the distinction between BVSC and the pattern typically traced by successful commercial pop releases. Gold explains that good reviews provide an initial surge in sales, followed by an advertising campaign that would sustain sales for a while before eventual tailing off. Whereas the BVSC album enjoyed an organic build in sales sustained almost entirely by word of mouth, no marketing ploys- the quality of the artistry would sell itself, before reaching what he describes as a 'critical mass' of 'Cuba-mania'(BVSC, 2015).

5.1 THE MISSING VOICE- CUBAN MUSIC ON THE WORLD MUSIC CIRCUIT

The surge of global Cuban music dissemination abroad and Buena Vista Social Club's subsequent ambassadorial presence within this movement is a result of the project's positioning as a central exponent of the newly coined World music scene. Nick Gold was in fact one of the figures that contributed to the proliferation of the term World Music. Lucy Durán (2014, p.137) recounts that during the 1980s there was little opportunity to listen to Latin music in the UK so through the charity Arts Worldwide (she was on the board of directors) they sought out musicians to play in Britain who had strong local followings at home but had little global presence. In order to achieve this they started up World Circuit Records, and appointed Nick as its executive director.

Sue Miller (2014, p.xvi) notes that before the success of Buena Vista Social Club it was very difficult to find Cuban music in British record stores, in her case she relied on a mail-out salsa fanzine. So when the album emerged in the late 1990s it held something of a monopoly on the cultural representation of Cuban music. The author Salman Rushdie described the hot long days of 1998 'that Buena Vista summer' (BVSC, 2015).

A detail I found intriguing is that in attempting this project, Nick had gone against the brief Arts Worldwide had devised. Many of the musicians on the album had been in retirement and did not have a current local musical presence to speak of. Nick recalled, 'they [the office] thought I'd gone mad, that I hadn't taken the financial aspect into consideration' (Durán, 2014, p.150). He wanted to record pianist Rubén Gonzalez so much that he was prepared to make a financial loss. With many of the musicians already in their 70s, the likelihood of having the time for future albums and recoup costs was unlikely. Nick was taking a risk by embarking on this project; he and Juan De Marcos agreed that it wouldn't generate much of a financial gain (Lam, 2010). Some previous expositions of Cuban music in the fledgling world music scene had not generated the desired interest, for example DJs and journalists viewed La Orquesta Revé's 1989 WOMAD appearance as too 'hard-edged' for their taste and describing the horns as sounding 'too cabaret' (Durán, 2014, p.140). Nonetheless they were compelled to carry out the recordings and to their relief the BVSC album really resonated with the UK, US and European consumers. Juan De Marcos observes that westerners in a way appreciate this music much more than Cubans do, 'the white middle class feel spiritually touched before a project where old people are the protagonists'. (Lam, 2010).

The record had such a profound impact on the global world music market but did not actually reach common circulation in Cuba until nearly a year after its US and European release, due in part to the U.S trade embargo, but largely because the kind of repertoire on the album was already in common circulation informally, known as the music people's older relatives listened to when they were younger. De Marcos says, 'the album is not that famous, because it's completely normal. It's the music that we have on our streets.' (Foehr, 2001, p.159).

According to Juan De Marcos in his interview with Cuban musicologist, Rafael Lam (2010) it seems that the Cuban public were largely indifferent to the BVSC release. I also got this impression in my observations during my visit to Cuba, detailed in subchapter 5.3. Nevertheless, the issue that Cubans are certainly not indifferent about is the subject of Cuba's isolation. Many artists strive for an opportunity to engage with the international community and promote their unique culture. In the late 90s, whilst consumers were experiencing and discussing the record abroad, a crucial voice was largely absent, the voice of the islanders whose musical traditions it was seeking to represent. It

seems the global media was talking *about* Cuba, but not *with* Cuba, which is a situation that carries a great capacity for harm.

Although Cuba was developing its tourism sector and receiving more foreign visitors, the opportunities for the likes of the BVSC musicians to travel abroad and promote their work were scarce. Few people had access to the internet in Cuba at this time either so struggled to reach out to the global community by that means. The result is that the promotion, circulation and discussion of this Cuban music material is largely dominated by a record label and consumers that operate within a culturally diverse setting to that of its conception, and we as consumers in the UK or other western counties will make interpretations based on our societal conditions. With infrequent direct dialogue with the Cuban people, we are perhaps less likely to experience the sentiment of BVSC's music in the way that is authentically intended and therefore the greater the potential for misrepresentation and appropriation.

At the time of the BVSC release there was a major disconnect between Cuban musicians operating within Cuba and those operating outside, which is something that only in the last decade has begun to improve. The Cuban diaspora is of significant size in relation to its home territory and even in relation to the diaspora of major western nations. According to data provided by the Cuban Research Institute (2011, p.38), it is apparent that the number of Cubans living in the USA is equivalent to around 15% of the total population of Cuba, which is not taking into account the further number of Cubans living in other parts of the world. The U.K diaspora is equivalent to 7-8% of the domestic population. However, Cuba struggles with the incorporation of its diaspora. The Cuban Research Institute reports that Cuba is marked by a lack of circular migration (CRI, 2011, p.42). Circular migration refers to the process of individuals leaving their country of origin in order to gain resources and experience which can then be reinvested back in their society, yielding an economic gain. This lack of circular migration until recently was exacerbated by the regime's policy of labelling Cubans who left the country as traitors, or as Fidel put it, '*gusanos*' (Astley, 2012, p.20). Furthermore, the dialogue between Cuba and its diaspora is restricted by the lack of internet access on the island; according to recent polls (Fusion, 2015) currently only 16-25% of Cubans have access to the internet. Nevertheless this number is increasing as policy reform sees Cuba taking steps towards modernity and diplomatic restorations. I will address internet activity further in the following subchapter.

Since a policy reform in 2013, Cubans living abroad are now able to return to live on the island without difficulty. Those people once labelled *gusanos* are now accepted as economic migrants (Rainsford, 2013). This new found freedom of movement has great opportunities for transnational

music making between Cuban musicians on the island, the diaspora and the international community. In December 2013 the *timba* artist Manolín “El Médico” returned to live in Cuba after a decade in Miami and was received by a jubilant domestic media, signalling a step to restoring positive working relationships between the Miami and Havana communities. In addition, the Cuban government abolished the \$300 exit permit paperwork required for citizens to travel abroad. Although the cost of a passport is still at \$100, 5 months state salary, again this represents another opportunity for musicians who wish to take their art to a larger audience.

5.2 BUENA VISTA IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In a recent BBC podcast, Nick Baker (2014) reports that internet connectivity in Cuba, and the telecommunications infrastructure at large is at least a decade behind the U.K in terms of its development. The government controlled organisation Etecsa is the sole provider of internet access and telecommunications on the island meaning that vast swathes of internet content is filtered if it is deemed in any way counterrevolutionary. Etecsa internet cafes can be found in most urban centres; however the content is limited and the speed is painfully slow, often at dial-up level, meaning that often video or audio streaming takes a long time. The hourly rate of using these computers until recently had generally been around 3 or 4 Cuban convertible pesos (equivalent in value to the American dollar), so given that the average month’s salary of a Cuban on state wage is around 20\$, it could be a frustrating and unfruitful experience. Moreover, internet café users have to provide identification meaning that any undesirable activity can be identified, and fear of the repercussions backs Cubans into the corner of self-censorship.

Changes are happening slowly. It has been legal to purchase personal computers since 2008 but they are difficult to purchase on the average Cuban budget. Interestingly, for those lucky enough to have access to the internet at home not as many sites are blocked as one would have imagined; Facebook and Twitter are allowed, Youtube is not, but here are other video platforms available like Vimeo. According to the recent Bendixen & Amandi poll (Fusion, 2015), approximately 1 in 4 Cubans use the internet and only 1 in 20 has home access. Generally these people are those who are in a privileged government role or in jobs such as medical research, although Fairley (2004, p. 120) reasons that an increasing amount of musicians are accessing hard currency through foreign concerts and collaborations and are therefore in a position to purchase PCs and other luxury conveniences. She considers Cuba’s musicians as ‘the new elite’ (2004, p.120), who are becoming the prime movers of

the economy, bringing in money or sending it home to family. Also, they are 'visible symbols of a new materialism and hedonism fuelled by tourist culture' (2004, p.120.). This presents a threat to the cohesion of Cuban culture on the island, with the potential to exacerbate a disconnect between Cubans who pursue a road of capitalist commercialism promoted by the US and those who reject it in favour of a modern renegotiation of socialist Cuba. I will engage with this issue in the following subchapter.

During my time at the Havana Rhythm and Dance Festival, *Fiesta del Tambor* in March 2015, I got to know Reinier, a drummer and music teacher from Camagüey province who I have remained in contact with since my return. Up until recently the only service available to him through which we could communicate was his father's government provided email service, which he had home access to owing to his status as a district church pastor. According to a report from Fusion (2015), the cost of accessing the internet and social media has greatly reduced, and many Cubans are enjoying online culture and greater contact with friends and family abroad. Reinier's household now has open access to the internet and he is able to create a network with other drummers through his Facebook account, including myself and players from other Latin American countries who attended the festival.

The connection between popular music and social media is vital in present day Cuba. Jan Fairley describes the role of *timba* artists as an 'oral newspaper' and 'a barometer of Cuban life' (2004, p.124). César "Pupy" Pedrosa, songwriter and one of the founders of Los Van Van, comments that his songs are products of real-life events that he hears about through conversations in his neighbourhood. The subject matters are diverse from ration disputes, personal relationships between Cubans and between Cubans and foreigners, gossipy stories or government policy criticism, all delivered with wit, subtlety and old poetic traditions (Fairley, 2004, p. 125). Their role is hugely important as Cuba does not have a free press, all newspapers and news broadcasts are controlled by the state communist party. Using platforms like Twitter and Facebook represents a breakthrough opportunity for Cuban artists to freely commentate on their issues direct from the streets around the globe and importantly, to escape censorship from the state. Cuban musicians and non-musicians alike have the opportunity to engage in online culture, characterised by a fast paced information exchange of ideas. In the present day, the internet represents an additional platform that more developed capitalist societies can use to enact the kind of relationships of cultural hegemony theorised by Antonio Gramsci. It is a clear fear of the Castro government that global internet service could further corrupt their vision for the country. In an attempt to restrict the information flow, in 2010 the government launched Eured, a copycat domestic Wikipedia service and the following year

RedSocial emerged, an imitation Facebook platform. This was in order to keep the discussions of *cubanía* where they belonged, in Cuba. In the age of the internet, there is the threat of Cuban culture being homogenised into western mass culture. However, I think that increasingly Cubans crave using resources like Facebook as a tool to reach out and promote their unique culture, putting forward an image of a strong independent people who have moved beyond and overcome their periods of colonial history, which had been dominated by the interests of the US and the Spanish.

Due to BVSC's global mobilisation, they have a strong online presence, they take full advantage of social media in its capacity as a support structure for the Orquesta's touring schedule and to integrate in one online space the multitude of works released under the brand name, including the individual projects by associated musicians. Buena Vista use their Orquesta Facebook page to generate excitement within their fan base as they trace their route around the world, showing pictures of their activities and inviting fans to

Figure 7: The Orquesta Buena Vista 'Pasaporte' Concert Programme.



direct questions to individuals of the group. The platform is also used to stage informal competitions on the fans knowledge of their music. For example, a February 2015 post asks 'Who was the *Tres* player on the BVSC album and which songs did they play on?'. The Facebook friend who responded with the most informative answer was rewarded with a limited edition poster of the latest release, 'Lost and Found' (BVSC, 2015). By embracing social media, BVSC has had the ability to augment its global presence whilst also maintaining a greater level of control over its local identity.

Figure 7 shows Orquesta Buena Vista's unique concert companion published by independent Spanish firm Montunno, which features programme notes, pictures, interviews and a 'day in the life of Buena Vista' section. It also includes a selection of postcards so the concert goer may spread the message of Cuban music to friends and family. The *Pasaporte*, to me represents a celebration of global mobility of Cuban music and a gentle satire of Cuban foreign policy. It is a document with which the group can establish itself as a global entity, but also makes an effort to educate the discerning foreign audiences about the local culture of Cuba, for example there is a section devoted to idiomatic Cuban music terms and street jargon, as well as highlighting the nuances between

different Afro Cuban styles like *bolero* and *danzón*, which would not necessarily be recognised by the average concert goer.

It is an unfortunate hurdle that presently on the island, access to Youtube is blocked. However, a solution is available in the form of a VPN, Virtual Private Network, which routes your internet connection through an untraceable encrypted network, thereby bypassing the government's censorship. The appropriately named company *Hidemyass!* (Nicola, 2014), produced a blog post encouraging Cubans to utilise their VPN server. They state their belief that it is everyone's right as a global citizen to have free and open access to the internet and voice their opinions.

One Havana based Cuban band that is utilising Youtube, whether it be via a VPN or by international assistance is Havana D'Primera, an Afro Cuban *timba* group which was founded by the popular trumpet player Alexander Abreu in 2008. Recently in 2015 they have been touring internationally including dates in the UK and along the way have been cultivating a significant online presence. Like Orquesta Buena Vista, it also has used a travel theme to define itself in the global market. *Pasaporte* (Havana D'Primera, 2013) is the title of their latest album. From the Youtube music-video *La Vuelta del Mundo* (Havana D'Primera, 2015), the world tour, it is clear that they are generating both a significant online following and a great deal of money. The video is as flamboyant and extravagant as they come, depicting the band playing in front of their own private airliner. Abreu gets out of his Mercedes to join the band and their sexualised dancing flight attendants, and later they enjoy a glass of rum as they jet to Europe. This video clearly symbolises the sort of 'new materialism and hedonism fuelled by tourist culture' which Jan Fairley (2004, p.120) describes as a contributing factor to the radical change that is occurring in the Cuban music business. They sing of their pride for their country and their desire to play its music across the world. But they do this whilst flaunting a level of wealth that most Cubans could never dream of attaining and in doing so, could run the risk of alienating their domestic fan base in favour of their sizeably capitalist international market. The Buena Vista Social Club has been charged with portraying the hedonistic tropical playground days of pre-revolutionary Cuba as an 'unspoiled colonial fantasy' (Hernández, 2002, p.65), that is incompatible with the politicized content of popular contemporary dance groups. I would argue that Abreu's unattainable depiction of jet setting, materialism and hedonism is as equally incompatible and alienating to the Cuban public and a majority of creative Cuban musicians today.

The description box of the video explains that musical taste is today a universe that rotates, moving the physical disk to the virtual universe, and invites the viewer to join them in a tour of the new Cuban music scene (Havana D'Primera, 2015). Many internet users have indeed joined them, since November when the track was published they have clocked over 98'000 views. Havana D'Primera is

striving for international success and like Orquesta Buena Vista it uses Facebook to interact with its fan base. In figure 8 we can see Havana D'Primera and Orquesta Buena Vista Social Club's Facebook pages side by side (Havana D'Primera, n.d; Orquesta Buena Vista Social Club, n.d.). In August last year the number of users who had "liked" the Havana page against the number achieved by Orquesta BVSC club was 123'043 to 128'358. Following D'Primera's UK and European tour in 2015, their number of online followers dated January the 25th, 2016 has now surpassed Orquesta BVSC's with over 146'585 followers to 130'007. This exponential growth in global online presence shows that the Havana D'Primera is worthy competition for the Orquesta BVSC as they strive for the broad dissemination of Cuban musical culture. This also suggests that there is an increased demand for *timba* style of Afro Cuban music abroad.

I recognise that directly comparing a present day music video depiction of Cuban identity with conclusions drawn from an audio release from 1997 cannot yield an entirely convincing or balanced conclusion. However, with a lack of any music video release by the Orquesta BVSC I felt that some common ground between Havana D'Primera and the BVSC should still be indicated, informing further opportunities for research.

It must also be noted that this particular discussion comparing the online presence of Orquesta BVSC and Havana D'Primera highlights the way in which Cuban artists are accessing a larger international fanbase however is not strictly an equal comparison owing to the fact that when the BVSC self- titled recording was released the internet usage was not nearly as widespread. This subchapter does however demonstrate that the Orquesta BVSC, by engaging with multi channels of media, has been able to carry on the legacy of the original recording project and access new fans that may not have discovered this repertoire of music previously.

Figure 8: Havana D'Primera and Orquesta BVSC Facebook pages. Accessed 27 August 2015.

The image shows two screenshots of Facebook pages. The top screenshot is for the 'Havana D'Primera' page, which has 123,043 likes. The page features a cover photo of a musician in a red shirt. The 'ABOUT' section lists members including Alexander Abreu Manresa, Amaury Pérez Rodríguez, Anibal Zurbaran Leonard, Aniel Tamayo Mestre, Bernardo Antonio Rodríguez Menéndez (Tony), Bruno Rogelio Nápoles Collazo (Nápoles), Carlos Alberto Nogera Lara, Carlos Luis Álvarez Guerra, Enrique Luis Pérez Prieto, Guillermo del Toro Varela, Harold Díaz Escobar, Jannier Rodríguez Milán, Keisel Jiménez Leyva, Orlando Jesús Vázquez Peña, Raúl Tobías Gil García (Avi), Uyuni Martínez Romero, and Yosvel Alexei Bernal Pina. The genre is listed as Latin Salsa Jazz. A recent post from 1 hour ago announces a tour in England: 'INGLATERRA: GLASGOW y LONDRES ! HDP TOUR ! YES Sir !!!'. The post includes a promotional image for a Saturday concert on October 17th, featuring Richard Fallon and Alexander Abreu.

The bottom screenshot is for the 'Orquesta Buena Vista Social Club' page, which has 128,358 likes. The cover photo is a collage featuring a passport, a red 'PASAPORTE' document, and a red circular sticker that says 'OUT NOW AVAILABLE ON TOUR'. The page includes a link to 'WWW.ADIOS-TOUR.COM'. The 'ABOUT' section lists the home town as Havana, Cuba, and provides a link to ask for the website. A recent post from 6 hours ago reads: 'Regresamos a casa con el corazón lleno de alegría, sonrisas y abrazos! GRACIAS a todos por tanto cariño!!! Heading back home! THANK YOU! for such a great tour in the #US!'.

5.3 BUENA VISTA! TONIGHT! EVERYWHERE!

Regardless of whether the group truly represents Cuban music interests of today, the Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon has boomed and been exploited by the tourism industry in Cuba to the point where it is now deeply entrenched into the foreign perception of the island's culture.

By the mid-1990s Cuba's economy was nearing complete meltdown in the wake of the collapse in 1991 of its primary trading partner, the Soviet Union. As a result Fidel decided to open the country's doors to foreign capital investment and tourism again as an avenue of economic stability, diverting resources that would have previously been used for housing into the construction of tourist hotels. He said, 'The sea, the sun, the climate, the moon and the palm tree are the natural wealth of our country, and we have to take advantage of them'. (Foehr, 2001, p. 257) These actions went against a previously unshakable revolutionary commitment to self-dependency and putting Cubans before the interests of foreign visitors. This development of the tourist industry coincided with the moment that the BVSC record was released worldwide, meaning that for prospective tourists, the album was likely to have been their initial point of contact with Cuban culture before visiting.

As Síntesis founder Carlos Alfonso (Foehr, 2001, p. 156) laments, many of his musician peers in the late-1990s were compelled to leave their contemporary projects and electric guitars in order to play *boleros* and *sones* on the *tres*. The salsa groups were reaping a lot of money by entertaining tourists in search of the traditional and exotic sound of Cuba heard on the likes of the BVSC or Afro Cuban All Stars records. Cuban musicians were under pressure to alter their culture at the will of growing commercialism.

The emergence of copycat acts, especially in Havana presents a confusing image of Cuban musical culture to tourists in search of the authentic experience. On my visit, Buena Vista was seemingly omnipresent. On Friday the 6th March, a Havana taxi driver informed me, unprompted I should add, that they would be playing at a nightclub in town and that her friend could get me tickets for a

Figure 9: 'Buena Vista Social Club' at Hotel Nacional, June 2009



great price, which was a small glimpse of the black market enterprise dealing with fake BVSC experiences aimed at tourists. Later, in the Hotel Nacional, I noticed a banner inviting guests to see

Buena Vista in their bar later on that same evening. Meanwhile, the bonafide, officially licenced musicians of Orquesta Buena Vista were in fact playing in Adelaide, Australia in the first leg of their recent *Adiós* tour.

This would not come as a surprise to the musicians of BVSC. Juan de Marcos (Foehr, 2001, p.159) admits that you can find 35-40 different Buena Vista style groups playing in Havana at any one time, such as this group of musicians seen in figure 9. The state's official domestic online encyclopaedia, *Ecured* (n.d.), informs that Buena Vista Social Club may be used as an inclusive term used to label any types of presentations, collaborations and releases that relate to the "golden age" of Cuban music between 1930 and 1950.

This is just as well because one such presentation can be seen in a Youtube video posted by Jos van Kouwen (2015). Jos has recorded a concert he attended at the Centro Cultural Rosalia de Castro whilst on holiday in Havana. The footage depicts the entrance banner which advertises the '*Gran espectáculo*' of Buena Vista Social Club, however in the following footage I am not able to identify a single musician present who had actually appeared on any of the World Circuit Cuban releases let alone the BVSC album. That is, apart from one woman who appears half way through the set, Teresa Garcia Caturla, who sang with Ibrahim Ferrer on the Afro Cuban All Stars record *Distinto, Diferente* (1999). Whether this qualifies the concert as an authentic Buena Vista Social Club experience remains to be seen. Nevertheless, this video's number of views at the time of writing was an impressive 106'878, indicating that the demand for this style of music has no sign of letting up among the international community. Moreover, this further demonstrates the impact that the internet and social media can have on the perception of Cuban music, which is why it is important for Cubans to be online and part of the discussion.

On informing friends and colleagues that I would be travelling to Cuba, more often than not it was met with the likes of 'That's great! Get there before McDonalds do, you will see the real authentic Cuba before it gets diluted by U.S influences' (P. Francis, personal communication, Feb 18, 2015).

One of the prevailing reasons of coming to Cuba as a tourist is hearing the 'pure sound' (Smith, 1998) of the BVSC style music in this country which due to its isolation and limited development, their national cultural expression had not yet become homogenised with western mass cultural products. Juan de Marcos González identified this when putting together the project, saying 'People of the First World are very involved in the very technological psyche, and they need space to relax in. Buena Vista Social Club gives that space to relax.' (Foehr, 2001, p.159).

Speaking in 2001, Pedro Monzón, the director of international relations at the Cuban Ministry of Culture at that time highlighted a major issue facing musicians in Cuba as the tourist industry and foreign investment developed. He explained that before the economic changes brought about by the special period, musicians were supported by a regular salary provided by the government. He says 'there was not a validation in the process between creation and commerce' (Foehr, 2001, p.257). They performed just because they wanted to. But now there is the threat that mass tourism and its inherent commercialism, could result in musicians being under threat to 'bend their culture at its will'.

However, he also highlighted that Cubans have a high level of cultural consciousness. At this time, kiosks had been popping up in Havana that were using the McDonalds yellow and red colour scheme in order to take advantage of the brand's image. However, questions were raised amongst locals about cultivating the city's own personality. Monzón says, 'Why should we repeat what was happening?'. The kiosks were later repainted in an alternative colour scheme (Foehr, 2001, p. 257).

There are, as Monzón indicates, many artists and organisations that are taking steps to redefine the authentic experience of Cuban music for the international community. The Havana Rhythm and Dance Festival is certainly one such organisation. Festival director, Giraldo Piloto (Ginger Media, 2013) says that the festival seeks to position itself as a major identifier of Cuban culture, *cubanía*.

Far from the white middle class dominated audiences of the Orquesta BVSC, the festival attracted a large demographic including families, young adults and musicians, many from other parts of Cuba and from abroad. As seen in figure 10, they hosted a week of percussion masterclasses, dance and drumming competitions as well as *timba*, Latin-jazz and Afro Cuban concerts, featuring the likes of Havana D'Primera, NG La Banda, and the virtuosic

Latin-jazz pianist Roberto Fonseca (who has played on a few BVSC recordings). Those performing artists who were not Cuban were selected specifically as they were seen to be top exponents of

Figure 10: Fiesta del Tambor official publicity poster



Cuban music abroad, fulfilling a role of global ambassadors. The London based Latin-jazz fusion group Nomad Collective was received with a lot of enthusiasm by the audience.

Notably the week long programme did not feature a single artist that resembled the traditional form of Cuban music played by the Buena Vista Social Club. Rather, there were many timba artists, Afro Cuban groups and Latin-jazz artists who took the basic principles of *son* but merged and evolved them with transnational rock, blues and funk elements and larger scale orchestrations. The programme did however include music from the golden age that had Afro Cuban jazz or *son montuno* character, artists like Arsenio Rodriguez or Francisco Emilio Flynn (whose act toured with BVSC in 2000). They are artists whose genres are not adequately represented on the BVSC repertoire, but have been explored on other World Circuit releases. Flynn's track which was reproduced by Juan De Marcos' Afro Cuban All Stars 'Gandinga, mondongo y sandunga' (1999) was the opening song of the festival's main event, Los Mejores Percusionistas De Cuba Y El Mundo on the 4th of March. This reinforces the point made by Carlos Alfonso (Foehr, 2001, p. 156) that the Buena Vista Social Club music is not really music for the domestic Cuban stage, only the contrived hotel or restaurant settings where there is tourist demand for it, the kind of settings that are out of reach financially for the average earning Cuban. Besides, Juan de Marcos (Foehr, 2001, p.159) also points out that the demand for this music simply isn't there for the domestic market; it is considered the older informal music that can be found played on the streets and at home. There is a need to reinvigorate and repackage the traditional music from the golden age in order to stay relevant to present day Cuban consumers.

The festival presented an alternative cultural experience of Cuba to that which can be accessed through BVSC's music, it is one that celebrates the African aspects of Cuban identity and pushes for a preservation of traditional Cuban musical vocabulary when engaging with transnational styles of music. Fairley (2004, p.124) notes that the emerging wave of *timba* artists, with their 'oral newspaper' role is a crucial voice that could speak for the Afro Cuban religion, *santería*, 'as a sustaining belief system during a period when many ordinary Cubans felt that the Revolution had failed them'. Of the week of concerts, for me a group named Yoruba Andabo stood out as receiving the highest level of excitement and animation amongst the audiences. This was a group which celebrated folkloric music from the Yoruba people of Nigeria, including the typical *batá* drums, tribal dancing and vocals in the Yoruba language rather than in Spanish. The Yoruba were people who were brought to Cuba as slaves by the Spanish in the 17th Century. The festival had a dedicated venue which hosted *Rumba* and African roots groups, called The Jardines Del Teatro Mella. Each night it played host to groups such as Timbalaye, Iyeroso and Los Muñequitos De Matanzas, which

was one of the first Cuban groups that was invited by Arts Worldwide to play in the UK in 1989, the time when World Circuit began seriously considering promoting and backing Cuban music.

I observed that here the way in which the audiences interacted with the musicians on stage was uninhibited. The atmosphere was comparatively riotous in contrast with the knee tapping and polite applause at the BVSC concert I attended in Brighton. Daniel Levitin (2007, p.6) observes that ‘only relatively recently in our own culture, five hundred years or so ago, did a distinction arise that cut society in two, forming separate classes of music performers and music listeners.’ I believe that fundamentally there is a higher degree of cohesion and unity between these two groups of people in Cuba than in the western culture that I was raised into. However there is also the case for the venue itself shaping the type of audience experience. Many of the Orquesta BVSC concerts, like the one I attended in Brighton Dome Theatre, are set in prestigious seated concert halls. There may have been very different audience interactions even within the UK if the concert had been held in a more informal setting.²

The festival highlighted to me innovations in Cuban popular music. Modernisation whilst retaining the Cuban character was a high priority. One masterclass concerned the *songo* drumming style, led by the Cuban session drummer Oliver Valdés. The *songo* was the first identifiably Cuban rhythm designed specifically for drum kit, first introduced by Los Van Van drummer José Luis Quintana, also known as “Changuito”. The development of the *songo* saw the drumkit being incorporated into the common instrumentation of *timba* groups. The rhythms were designed to emulate the parts traditionally played by the conga, bongo and claves. It incorporating the subtle rhythmic drive of the *son clave* but played across different drums. He also highlighted that a characteristic sound was beating the outer shell of the floor tom forcefully.

The Havana Rhythm and Dance Festival is a grassroots operation designed to deliver the best of home-grown talent to a wide audience. As suggested to me by one of the performing artists, the festival essentially runs like a charity with any profits from the ticket sales re-invested into the festival. I was informed that Giraldo Piloto and his team do not earn any wage from it and neither was a fee given to any of the artists, only a small amount of money for expenses was given. This being the case even for the international artists (Nomad collective, personal communication, March 2015). If true, this can be seen as a positive step in opposition to the fears of Pedro Monzón (Foehr, 2001, p.257), which clearly highlights a collective dedication to Afro Cuban expression. The motive of

² Again, I thank Dr Sue Miller for this observation.

musical creation, development, and celebration of Cuban music is present without a strong motive of financial gain, as was the case when Nick Gold approached the BVSC project. Juan De Marcos also recognises that the Afro Cuban roots movement, which the Havana festival plays host to, is at its essence not for commercial gain but for the personal exploration of Cuban identity through music (Lam, 2010).

Despite this, I still found in this setting the present danger of the kind of parallel tourist economy that has shown to split Cuban culture in two. Because of financial constraints, lack of resources and only a very limited government contribution to the running of the festival, they are heavily subsidised by their foreign partnerships and visitors. We can see the long list of sponsors and contributing organisations in figure 10, including drum companies who

donated prizes to be awarded at the competition. For the *timba* concert featuring NG La Banda at the Karl Marx theatre on 7th March, the festival representative that I was in contact with encouraged me to purchase an advance ticket. Once there I came to know that at this concert and the majority of the others there was a certain ticket price for foreigners and another for the locals. As seen in figure 11, the price was \$30, which represents six weeks average salary. The price on the door for locals amounted to around \$2. I recognise that in a relative sense, my price was as affordable for me as the locals price was for them, and that my money as a comparatively wealthy tourist was a valuable contribution to the maintenance of the festival. However, it is a shame that the festival is in a position where it has to perpetuate the inequality of parallel tourist and local economies. Also, aside from the free public percussion masterclass programme was *Kosa Cuba* (2015), a study and performance camp designed for foreigners who wish to discover Cuban percussion. The cost of this was over one thousand dollars. As such they received preferential treatment, a higher level of hospitality from the festival organisers. Leading performing artists including Giraldo Piloto himself taught sessions at this camp but did not present at the public classes.

This example, as well as my Havana D'Primera case study highlights the increasing blurring of ideologies in the contemporary Cuban music industry. The socialist values of collectivism and voluntary effort seem to be present in this festival, the organisers reportedly work for free and there is a collective desire among the performing artists to promote their culture which has their African musical heritage at its forefront. However, there is also a growing commercialism in favour of foreign interests. As Fernandes (2006, p.10) points out, their culture has become an important export

Figure 11: Ticket for NG La Banda Concert. March 7, 2015



commodity for Cubans. They charge a premium for foreigners to come and sample the Cuban experience, giving the wealthy visitors preference over the requirements of the locals. Overall, the festival provides a platform for locals to present their ideas of *cubanía* to a global stage; it celebrates the incorporation of African heritage into contemporary Cuban culture. It also promotes *timba*, which moves beyond the sound of the BVSC and promotes the innovation of transnational musical products, merging them with traditional Cuban musical elements.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

‘Las cosas cuando se hacen con amor, autenticidad y desinterés, pueden triunfar’, asserts Juan De Marcos González (Lam, 2010). When something is done with love, authenticity and selflessness, it can succeed. The enduring success of the Buena Vista phenomenon is a testament to what can be achieved by a sensitive and respectful attitude towards cross cultural collaboration between societies whose history has been marked by conflict, political differences and the legacies of colonialism. The project was born out of a genuine desire to promote the richness of Cuban culture. Juan De Marcos, Nick Gold and Ry Cooder, the three figures responsible for the project never began the Buena Vista Social Club journey expecting to make any money from it given their knowledge of the world music market, however by 2000 the album had sold over one million units and was certified a platinum record by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA, 2016). They have now sold well over six million copies (BVSC, 2015).

At the moment the Buena Vista Social Club was released, the island has seen something of an identity crisis due to the government’s decision to open up the island to tourism and foreign investment, thereby weakening the strength of the revolutionary doctrine that held such a tight grip on society during the earlier days of the Castro regime. Musicians on the island, as Pedro Monzón indicates (Foehr, 2001, p.256) were split between musical creation for commerce and the entertainment of foreign visitors, or for creations sake. It is clear however in my observations first hand, that Cubans have incorporated and claimed the African aspect to their identity, and organisations like the Havana Rhythm and Dance Festival help to promote that. Many popular groups, such as Havana D’Primera, NG La Banda or Los Van Van take the principles of the traditional music found in BVSC, embrace Afro Cuban elements from their Yoruba or Bantu heritage, and narrate the present day critical issues faced by Cubans. That is not to say there is not still relevance and demand for the BVSC style music today, the hundreds of concerts that the Orquesta Buena Vista Social Club performs every year stand testament to that. They have extended their current *Adios* tour by popular demand; they are performing extra dates across the globe including London’s O2 area in April 2016.

The lack of a developed internet infrastructure in Cuba during the 1990s limited the extent to which Cuba could engage in global discourse of its own music. However, this situation is now improving slowly. Following the special period the government had to compromise some of its previously steadfast revolutionary ideals and give way to policy reforms, including opening their borders to foreign direct investment and the development of the tourism industry. More Cubans and

importantly, more active Cuban musicians are taking full advantage of their increased access to hard currency. Since 2008, more Cubans have access to personal computers and the cost of internet access by the national provider, Etecsa, is reducing gradually. Popular groups based on the island like Havana D'Primera are able to maintain an online presence on social media that can match and in fact surpass the likes of groups with a longer established internationality, in the case of my example Orquesta Buena Vista Social Club, this was not difficult as the popularity of the original BVSC album peaked between 1998-2003, yet it interesting to see the ways that the BVSC brand has remained relevant to a new generation of music consumers. Besides this, the government introduced policies which gave artists in favour more freedom to roam, to conduct their own contracts and forge an international presence. Furthermore, an immigration and border policy reform in 2013 gave the opportunity for Cuban musicians in exile to return to live in their native land without difficulty or persecution. This is a positive step in the reunification of Cuba and its diaspora, a subject that many Cuban musicians have called out for.

García (2006) criticized Buena Vista Social Club for being a misleading selective presentation of history, music and culture (2006). The BVSC album was a project dedicated to promoting the individual talents of a selection of ageing veteran musicians and marking it for posterity. Also, certain tracks were omitted from the final cut as they wished to differentiate this album from the other projects recorded in those two weeks, namely the pianist Rubén Gonzalez' album and Juan de Marcos' Afro Cuban All Stars, a big band sound inspired by other golden age greats like Benny Moré and Arsenio Rodriguez. BVSC gave momentum to later releases by World Circuit that could connect in a more meaningful way with the vanguard of popular Cuban dance music and the issues faced in present day Cuba.

I feel that Juan de Marcos' Afro Cuban All Stars release *Distinto , Diferente* (1999) gives more of an accurate representation of the essence of Cuban musical identity than the BVSC album. It is still released by the same label, has access to the same markets as the BVSC record as well as featuring many of the same musicians such as the vocalists Ibrahim Ferrer and Omara Portuondo, bassist Cachaito Lopez and trumpet player Guajiro Mirabal. Yet, it is more in touch with popular musical developments and narrative of contemporary Cuba following the special period and incorporated ideas of Afro Cuban identity in a way that BVSC failed to attempt. It included *timba* inspired *son moderno* compositions like the title track 'Distinto, Diferente' and 'Reconciliación', which calls for a united Cuba and diaspora. It also explored the boundary of Afro Cuban jazz with 'Candinga, mondongo y sandunga' and the Arsenio Rodriguez homage 'Tumba palo cocuyé'. The former could be heard played at the Havana Rhythm and Dance Festival; during this week of attending concerts I

did not hear any tracks that had been included in the BVSC album. *Distinto, Diferente* celebrates Cuba's African heritage with tracks like 'Warariansa', and finally, there is a space reserved for the respected golden age *sonero* and central figure of BVSC, Compay Segundo. His *son* composition, 'Huellas del Pasado' begins in the eastern *campesino* tradition with prominent *tres* finger picking before developing into *son moderno* brass improvisations in its second half. This album was entirely the brainchild of Juan De Marcos rather than an artist collaboration, Nick Gold produced the album but the selection of material, artists and arrangements were handled by De Marcos. There are no novelty inclusions of African instruments or slide guitar like that provided by the Cooder father and son in the BVSC album, which leads me to conclude that it is an autonomous product of Cuban identity which is well equipped to represent Cuban music to the international market.

The Cuban music industry is torn in two, between the fifty years of revolutionary socialist culture and the lure of the capitalist materialistic culture of the USA and beyond. It is divided between musical pursuits for commerce or purely for creativity. As Cuba re-emerges from economic isolation, many Cuban groups are finding their feet on the global arena and renegotiating ideas of *cubanía*, often in the perplexing form of neo-socialism, an identifiably Cuban tropical mixed economy of socialism and capitalism. The local talent of the Buena Vista Social Club was propelled directly into a globalised world music market and has succeeded in holding consumers' interest for two decades now, far longer than those who began the project expected it to last. One certainty is that Cuban music trends and tastes appear, disappear, transform and evolve but the musical legacy of the Buena Vista Social Club has endured.

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