

BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Nigel Williamson on the incredibly successful Cuban music phenomenon

BUENA VISTA SOCIAL CLUB



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It was after reviewing the 2004 solo album by Cuban trumpet player Manuel 'Guajiro' Mirabal that I realised a Beginner's Guide to the multiple off-shoots, solo albums and side projects spawned by the Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon was sorely needed. When my commissioning editor at *The Times* came on the phone, it was clear that despite my best efforts to explain all in my brief review, confusion still reigned. "So, who exactly is this Mirabal? And what's his connection with Buena Vista?" he demanded. "These old guys are like the Wu Tang Clan of world music. I can't keep up with them."

For those readers not versed in the ways of hip-hop, Wu Tang are the nine-strong rap collective whose various members, cousins, friends and acolytes seem to release albums at the rate of about one a month. Sometimes it can seem like that with Buena Vista, too – although this is partly because there are a lot of exploitative, bandwagoning reissues of old

material around. So let's try to make some sense of it all.

First, there is only one authentic Buena Vista Social Club. They came together for a week in 1996 as a one-off project to record an album produced by Ry Cooder and Nick Gold. The front line personnel consisted of Compay Segundo, Rubén González, Ibrahim Ferrer, Omara Portuondo and Eliades Ochoa. Many of the arrangements and ideas came from Juan de Marcos González, who was credited on the album as '*A&R consultant*' and the backing musicians included such phenomenal instrumentalists as double bassist Orlando 'Cachaíto' López and Manuel 'Guajiro' Mirabal.

The BVSC staged live concerts in 1998 in Amsterdam and New York but as a collective entity, they never made a follow-up album. However, the story didn't end there. Juan de Marcos had his own band – the Afro-Cuban All-Stars – which included several of the BVSC musicians and made two albums for World Circuit. Marcos has since pursued his career away from World Circuit, his most

recent release being *Step Forward* on his own new label DM Ahora Records (reviewed in this issue), which includes a nine-minute suite in tribute to Rubén González.

Meanwhile, leading members of the original collective have continued to record together with Gold's production team in various permutations and with strategic additions to the personnel to create a body of work that can be said to constitute the Buena Vista legacy. Before he died in 2003, Rubén González made two solo albums, *Introducing Rubén González* (1997) and *Chanchullo* (2000). Both were produced by Gold and found the pianist backed by Buena Vista alumni. Ibrahim Ferrer has also made a brace of solo albums with 1999's *BVSC Presents* and *Buenos Hermanos* four years later. Both were produced by Ry Cooder, and the long delay between them was caused by his difficulties in persuading the US authorities (who fined him for recording Buena Vista in Cuba) to allow him to return.

Buena Vista's leading lady Omara Portuondo, has two elegant solo albums to



MAIN: *Taking a bow at Carnegie Hall, New York, 1998*

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: *Eliades Ochoa, Orlando 'Cachaíto' López, Joachim Cooder, Ibrahim Ferrer, Juan de Marcos González, Ry Cooder*

RIGHT: *Ry Cooder at the BVSC sessions, 1996*

ALL PHOTOS: *Geraint Lewis*



Cachaíto (2001)

1022



The most audacious album in the BVSC series, a sonic adventure in which producer Nick Gold pushes Cuban music to places it hadn't ventured before.



BVSC Presents Manuel 'Guajiro' Mirabal (2004)

1023



A different spin on the World Circuit formula with a confident and at times even swaggering collection of songs written by the great Arsenio Rodríguez.



Finally, Cooder's last return to Cuba produced 2003's *Mambo Sinuendo* (Nonesuch), a magnificent Grammy-winning collection of guitar duets with Manuel Galbán, who was not an original BVSC-er but once played with Cuban doo-wop group Los Zafiros and has appeared on recent solo albums by Ferrer, Portuondo, Cachaíto and Mirabal.

Anything else in the record racks bearing the Buena Vista name is likely to be a compilation of ancient material dredged from the vaults of EGREM, Cuba's state-owned record label. That doesn't make it fake. But the recordings may lack World Circuit's exacting quality control and you should listen carefully before buying.

BEST ALBUMS

Buena Vista Social Club (1997)

1019



Accept no substitutes for the original is still the best.



Sparkling production and brilliant performances from a veritable 'Who's Who' of Cuban musicians from the golden age.

Introducing Rubén González (1997)

1020



Recorded in two days as an after-thought at the end of the original BVSC sessions, and containing some of the most magical piano playing you will ever hear.



BVSC Presents Ibrahim Ferrer (1999)

1021



The second best-selling BVSC album after the original. Ferrer is in fine voice on some stately boleros and Rubén González and Cachaíto are among the supporting cast.



her name co-produced by Gold and Jerry Boys: 2000's *BVSC Presents Omara Portuondo* and *Flor de Amor*, released four years later. More confusingly, the World Circuit catalogue also boasts Nick Gold-produced albums by two of Buena Vista's lesser-known backing musicians: 2001's *Cachaíto* and the aforementioned *BVSC Presents Manuel 'Guajiro' Mirabal* – plus the recent strongly jazz-tinged *Echu Mingua* by percussionist Angá Díaz (also reviewed in this issue), which deploys many of the BVSC singers and musicians.

Away from World Circuit, two other key Buena Vista men have enjoyed solo careers with Spanish labels: Compay Segundo with DOA/East West and Eliades Ochoa with Virgin. The quality of their solo work is variable but unqualified recommendations can be given to Segundo's *Antología* (1996) and Ochoa's *Tribute To The Cuarteto Patria* (2000).

BEST AVOIDED

The Stars of the Buena Vista (Tumi Records, 2000)



Shameless repackaging of old solo material from some of the key players. It's not all bad *per se*. But it's designed to mislead and comes with the tackiest album cover you ever saw.



LIKE BVSC? THEN TRY...

★ *Velha Guarda da Mangueira, Velha Guarda da Mangueira*

(Nikita, 1999) 1024

The Brazilian equivalent to the BVSC. This gem of an album brings together a group of veterans from one of Rio's oldest and most traditional samba schools.



Read, dial, listen... and, if you like what you hear you can buy the CD – NOW!
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