Chapter 2: The *Buena Vista Social Club* Phenomenon

I knew it would be much easier for me to keep filling my pockets with money doing more Buena Vista projects, producing what the record companies want. But I am Cuban, and I understand very well what I have to do for my culture and identity.

-Juan de Marcos González (2000)

The Story of the Buena Vista Social Club

In 1996, American guitarist Ry Cooder traveled to Havana planning to record an album with Malian and Cuban musicians for the British label *World Circuit Records*. Due to visa complications, the musicians from Mali never arrived, and Cooder was forced to form a new group consisting only of Cuban musicians. He enlisted the aid of Sierra Maestra bandleader Juan de Marcos González, who contacted some of his own personal heroes, many of whom were long retired from professional music. The recording sessions that followed resulted in two releases, *Buena Vista Social Club* and *Afro-Cuban All-Stars: A Toda Cuba le Gusta*. Two years later, after *Buena Vista Social Club* had become a surprise hit in World Music markets, Ry Cooder convinced documentary filmmaker Wim Wenders to return with him to film the recording of one of *Buena Vista's* singers. The documentary, also titled *Buena Vista Social Club*, was a huge financial success as well (Hernández-Reguant 2000: 3; Katerí Hernández 2002: 62).

The *Buena Vista Social Club* documentary and music collection have had a tremendous impact on the world market for Cuban music. During my years performing son in the U.S., the *Buena Vista Social Club* (BVSC) was the lowest common denominator for communicating to audiences, booking agents, and skeptical relatives exactly what it was that I *did.*

More important than the direct economic impact on the international sales of Cuban music recordings, the iconic quality gained by the BVSC since its release in 1997 is perhaps one of the biggest influences on the expectations of tourists who travel to Cuba. Given its widespread success around the world, it is reasonable to believe that almost all visitors to Cuba are at least familiar with the album, the documentary, or both. As noted in Chapter 1, tourists' expectations affect what kinds of performances they will accept as authentic, and given that many performers rely on tips for most of their income, tourists' preconceptions can have real consequences.

In this chapter I will examine the impact of the BVSC phenomenon from perspectives on and off the island. Differing views on the project, its musical interpretations and misinterpretations, its distortions of social realities, and the label of authenticity imbued by World Music sales, will help us to understand the complexity of musicians' attitudes to the so-called "son revival" of the late 1990s.

Cuban Music in the International Market: Context for the BVSC

Contrary to popular belief, the BVSC project was not an isolated breakthrough for Cuban music in international markets. Since the late 1980s, Cuban music had been enjoying a growth in sales not seen since before the U.S. embargo. Cuban music had been successfully promoted in the U.S. on David Byrne's *Luaka Bop* label, and some Cuban groups regularly toured Europe (Pacini Hernández 1998: 345; Fornet et al. 2000: 175).

Music became an important source of revenue for the Cuban government soon after the onset of the *Período Especial* (Special Period) in 1990. Since then, popular music has generated revenue for the state through taxes withheld on performances at tourist venues, licensing fees for archive material charged by local record companies, revenues from performing rights collected, percentages on money earned by musicians touring abroad, and income tax paid by musicians at home and abroad (Perna 2001: 79-80).

Economic reforms in the 1990s focused on music as a product for export, and encouraged musicians to tour abroad in Europe, Canada, and South America. By 1999, more than 6,000 musicians had spent part of the year on tour outside Cuba, mainly performing salsa, son, and traditional music (i.e. rumba, *batá*, etc.). Perhaps the greatest economic impact of this increased world-wide visibility of Cuban musicians has been the generation of tourist revenue, as a growing number of tourists flock to Cuba to hear music and learn dance steps (ibid.).

Although a handful of dance bands have had success touring abroad, recordings produced on the island have yet to find real success on the international market. This is primarily due to lack of infrastructure and expertise in the recording industry. Despite the recent construction of state-of-the art recording studios (at EGREM, as well as Silvio Rodríguez' Abdala Studios), lack of distribution deals on the international market means that sales lag behind expectations (Perna 2001: 82; Fornet et al. 2000: 177).

Another major reason that Cuban music has not flourished in global markets is the U.S. embargo. During the 1950s, the U.S. was Cuba's most important market for export, including tourism and music (Schwartz 1997: 117-20). After 1960, the U.S. trade embargo effectively cut off Cuba from Latin music hotspots like New York and Miami. Despite opportunities for recording and touring in Europe and South America, Cuban recordings were rarely sold in significant numbers during the 1960s and '70s. Until the mid-1980s, Cuban musicians were cut out of the Latin music loop that they had once dominated (Pacini Hernández 1998: 111).[1]

In 1978, Columbia Records negotiated with the U.S. state department to produce and record a joint concert of U.S. and Cuban musicians in Havana. A recording of the concert was released in the U.S., and one of the Cuban groups, Irakere (by then renowned in Cuba for their innovative fusion of jazz,

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[1] It could also be argued that the Cuban government did a fair amount to shut out U.S. musical influence as well – see later in this chapter.

funk, and Cuban popular dance styles), so impressed Columbia that they signed the band, agreeing to hold the group's earnings in an escrow account in the United States (ibid. 116).

Since then, many similar arrangements have been made with Cuban artists. This has helped the sale of Cuban music to some extent, but in general it benefits the foreign record companies without really helping sales of music produced in Cuba. Perna (2001: 93) notes that BVSC, the only recording of Cuban music to reach hundreds of thousands (much less millions) in sales, was recorded by a British label. Meanwhile, only a handful of the island's musicians benefit from contracts with foreign labels; most of Cuba's 13,000 musicians are unemployed or underemployed (ibid.: 84).

The BVSC*'s* release by World Circuit in 1997 represented the first international bestseller for Cuban music. Since then, it has been called one of the best-selling world music albums of all time, selling 5 million copies worldwide (*Music Week* 2004: 8). Ry Cooder received a Grammy for "Best Tropical Latin Performance" in 1997, and Ibrahim Ferrer's solo album (produced by Cooder and the subject of the BVSC film) received the same Grammy award two years later (*Grammy.com*). World Circuit later released several other albums featuring the performers heard on the original BVSC recording: two CDs featuring pianist Rubén González, two more by Juan de Marcos González' Afro-Cuban All-Stars, and two solo albums each by singers Ibrahim Ferrer and Francisco Repilado (a.k.a. Compay Segundo). *Music Week*

(2004:8) called the BVSC album an "essential world title for retail" in 2004, stating: "This album, more than any other, has changed the English-speaking world's perception of what music from other cultures can provide…" By 1999, over 1000 articles had been printed in the U.S. alone about the album, and *Rolling Stone* magazine declared a "Cuban music invasion" (Valdés-Rodríguez 1999).

The Son Revival in Cuba

International sales do not accurately gauge popularity within Cuba. Since few Cubans can afford CD players or even CDs, most use tapes either bought at subsidized prices at government stores or dubbed from friends. Thus Cubans are rarely considered in market studies such as those that trace the BVSC and similar projects. While Perna (2001) and others point to BVSC as the marker for the son revival on the island, other sources suggest a much longer trajectory for son's return to the mainstream.

A number of factors contributed to a decrease in the popularity of son, and dance music in general, during the 1960s and '70s. On one hand, the gradually increasing pressure on artists of all disciplines to openly express their support for revolutionary ideals and to create new compositions centered on appropriate moral values caused a number of well-known musicians to leave the country in the early 1960s. Organizational difficulties in establishing centralized music agencies, as well as shortages of musical

equipment of all kinds, made the production of concerts more difficult. Into the 1970s, officials in charge of cultural policies tended to favor music that promoted revolutionary ideals; dance music was increasingly viewed as hedonistic and, potentially oppositional (Moore 2005: 171-75).

Although many established bands, such as Estrellas de Chappottín and Orquesta Aragón, continued to perform through the 1970s, son-derived dance music was largely replaced by other styles. Eliades Ochoa recalls that "in the '60s, you never heard a single son, or a single danzón, or a single guaracha, but you did hear the Beatles"[2] (Pineda 2002: 157). Godfried (2000) asserts that excessive emphasis under the new government on all things "new" and "progressive" put new forms such as nueva trova and songo in the spotlight and eclipsed older styles.

Godfried credits the group Sierra Maestra as having rescued the traditional son from obscurity in the late 1970s. Founded by Juan de Marcos González, a music school dropout then studying engineering, the band originally performed rock, Andean music, and the nueva trova songs popular at the time (Alemañy 2001). But de Marcos González's father, who had been a singer with the great bandleader Arsenio Rodríguez, convinced the group to start performing in the older son septet style. Sierra Maestra impressed older generations with their authentic recreation of the traditional septet sound, while still managing to connect to younger audiences; as de Marcos González

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[2] "En los '60, no se oía ni un son, ni un danzón, ni una guaracha, pero sí los Beatles,"

recalls, "…part of our success came from the way we dressed like punks" (de Marcos González 2000).

Ignacio Richard, director of the newly formed Septeto Antonio Machín, confirmed Godfried's statements about music trends in the '60s and '70s. However, like many other musicians I spoke with, along with musicologist Maya Roy (2002: 169), Richard credits Oscar D'León as having started the dance music revival in Cuba. D'León, who became the first internationally known dance music artist to perform in Cuba in 1984, had always expressed his affection for Cuban music. According to Richard, it was D'León's use of older repertoire that rekindled an interest in Cuban son.

> At that time, people here, in Havana, realized that there was something of ours, something of "us," of Cuba, that had almost been lost. And it was in that moment that son was reestablished here (Richard, interview).[3]

By the 1990s, dance music was once again the popular favorite, but the most popular performers were those of timba or salsa, not traditional son. Timba bands like Charanga Habanera and NG La Banda, bolstered by support from local audiences, were able to find work touring in Europe, as

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[3] "En ese momento, la gente de aquí, de La Habana, se dio cuenta de que había algo nuestro, algo de nosotros, de Cuba, que casi se había perdido. Y fue en ese momento que el son se restableció aquí."

timba gradually began to find its way into DJ playlists there (Roy 2002: 196). To those caught up in the timba craze, the success of BVSC seemed hard to believe.

The Secrets of Success: Cuban Music as World Music

Although Ry Cooder received a Grammy award in the Latin category for BVSC, the project has had relatively little success in traditional Latino markets (Valdés-Rodríguez 1999). Instead BVSC was an overwhelming World Music success, relying on mostly middle-class white consumers.

> According to Monica Ricardez, Latin music buyer for the Tower Records chain in the Los Angeles area, the typical Buena Vista Social Club consumer is a Caucasian between 35 and 55 who has heard about the album through the Wenders documentary, public radio or newspapers. This assessment was echoed by several other retail specialists (in Valdés-Rodríguez 1999).

Pacini Hernández (1998) and Hernández-Reguant (2000) have argued that the path for the success of the BVSC was paved by earlier recordings that helped to position Cuban music as World Music, thus circumventing the strict boycott of all things Cuban maintained by ex-patriot Cubans in the U.S., who control much of Latin American radio. In particular, David Byrne's compilation *Dancing with the Enemy* (Luaka Bop 1991) helped to bring Cuban music into the forefront of World Music market in the U.S.

Pacini Hernández (1998: 113) holds that the success of Cuban music as World Music is owed to its greater recognition, relative to other Caribbean popular forms, of its African origins. She suggests that consumers of World Music trace authenticity not through closeness to older playing styles or use of acoustic instruments, but through loyalty to African roots.[4] It may be true that, relative to other Hispano-Caribbean nations, "Cuba is exceptional…in the degree of attention it has given to its links – historical, cultural, and ideological – with Africa"(ibid.: 114). Daniel (1995), Hagedorn (2001), and Bettelheim (2001) have demonstrated Cuba's support of Afro-Cuban culture, at least since the 1980s.[5]

However, Pacini Hernández' theory would imply that the most visibly "African" groups, like Los Muñequitos de Matanzas or Conjunto Folklórico, would be at the forefront of Cuban World Music sales. Although many musicians featured in BVSC projects are of African descent, neither the album

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[4] Pacini Hernández cites artists such as Fela Kuti and the Haitian group Boukman Eksperyans, who, despite using amplified Western instruments, are seen as authentic by consumers because of their incorporation of African-derived melodies, lyrics, or rhythms (ibid.).

[5] See Moore 1997 for an in-depth examination of shifting attitudes toward Afro-Cuban culture from the turn of the 20th century through the 1940s. Since 1959, promotion of Afro-Cuban culture has been problematic, in that cultural products such as music and dance are promoted as part of national folklore, while actual participation in Afro-Cuban religious activity was strongly discouraged (de la Fuente 1998: 61-63; Hagedorn 2001).

nor the documentary film foreground this aspect in the way that Pacini Hernández suggests.[6]

It may be that it was Ry Cooder's established reputation as a "World Music veteran" (Hernández-Reguant 2000: 4) that gave the BVSC album the promotional edge that it needed to reach 5 million buyers. Cooder had already won two Grammy's for his recordings with V.M. Bhatt (Water Lily Acoustics 1993) and Ali Farka Touré (Rykodisc 1994); World Music audiences, although not particularly interested in Cuban music, might rely on Cooder's knack for finding "authentic" musicians to play with (Hernández-Reguant 2000: 4; Perna 2001: 256; *Music Week* March 6, 2004: 8; Valdés-Rodríguez 1999).

This would not be the first time that a celebrity producer pushed through a hit record in World Music. Pacini Hernández (1998: 117) points out

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[6] This point has been debated in several cases. For example, Perna (2001: 273) argues that BVSC effectively "whitens" Cuban son, traditionally an Afro-Cuban genre, in order to "cuddle the nostalgic tastes of the white, middle-class exile community." Katerí Hernández (2002: 64), on the other hand, criticizes the film for its presentation of an artificially constructed "Afro-Cuban indigenous 'Other'" through, for example, its references to Afro-Cuban religions such as Santería.

The intentions of the filmmakers and producers notwithstanding, I assume that the perceived racial character of the musicians is highly subjective, depending on audience expectations and preconceptions of race. However, I make this point in order to demonstrate that proximity to African roots is not the sole criteria for success in World Music markets.

that David Byrne's Talking Heads fame helped him get started promoting Latin American and Caribbean music in the 1980s.

Whether or not Ry Cooder's celebrity was a part of World Circuit's marketing scheme, it is clear that Latin music markets were intentionally left out. BVSC did not just happen to hold greater appeal for World Music buyers than for Latinos; Valdés-Rodríguez (1999) shows that the decision to target World Music networks and neglect Latino buyers was deliberate. According to her article in the *Los Angeles Times,* WEA Latina, the sister label of World Circuit/Nonesuch, was not even contacted to help promote the album. Many recording industry experts feel that this was a grave error on the part of Peter Clancy, World Circuit's marketing director, since Latin music has been a growth market since the end of the 1990s. But most likely, the marketing plan that was a sure sell with World Music fans would have little effect on Latinos.

This is because the main selling point of the BVSC is the promise of discovery. In the liner notes to the album, Ry Cooder proclaims, "Music is a treasure hunt. You dig and dig and sometimes you find something" (Cooder 1997). In this case, the hidden treasure is in the form of exotic Cuban music from a bygone era. The production notes read like a travel brochure:

> Cuba is a land of sensuality, passion, determination, pride – an exotic place sealed off from the ultra-organized and noisy world where most of us live. It is a land filled with stunningly dramatic music created by some of the world's greatest (and least-recognized) musicians (Wenders 2000: 2).

In the film, Cooder claims that the musicians on the album were "still alive and well, though forgotten." The poverty of their surroundings is foregrounded to emphasize just how forgotten they are; later Cooder said in an interview that "a lot of people thought Rubén [González] was dead" (in Mariner 1999).

The message of the BVSC project was taken up whole-heartedly by journalists and popular music critics, who applauded Cooder for having "discovered Cuban musical treasures that the nation itself had overlooked" (Thigpen 1999) and "revitalize[d] the forgotten music of *son* that made Cuba great before the before the socialist revolution" (Johnson 1999).

Needless to say, the target audience ate it up as well. Visitors to a bulletin board on the film's official website wrote their reactions:

> I had to hold back tears when I saw the film…Through the songs and images one can feel the triumph of the human spirit over the chains of economic tyranny (in Hernández-Reguant 2000: 6).

> Havana comes across as a surreal time-warp panorama of gorgeous 1940s cars, derelict yet splendid architecture and an impoverished, pastel-dressed people that seem eerily happy. Cuba, as never imagined. After the movie, I wanted to buy a ticket immediately (ibid.).

This rhetoric of exoticism and discovery was clearly geared toward listeners with no previous knowledge of Cuban music. The BVSC offered escape from middle-class America to the idyllic beauty of a Caribbean isle. Cooder later said, "People want to go somewhere and stay home, to travel in their armchair. That's fine. Journey with us now for an hour or so and that's enough" (in Williamson 1999: 23). For World Music fans in search of something new, Cooder's invitation was quite tempting.

Obviously, this approach would not have had the same effect in the Latin music market, where son and danzón are old news. Valdés-Rodríguez suggests that

> It may be that the mass U.S. Latino audience just wouldn't care about the album, a collection of antique Cuban folk music recorded by a geriatric group of Cuban musicians. After all, the son style has been out of date for 50 years, and the average age of a Latino in the U.S. is 26. There are no commercial Latin radio stations in the nation that would play it (Valdés-Rodríguez 1999).

Indeed, the awe with which Cooder and his son talk about Cuban son seems ridiculous, and a bit condescending, to those already familiar with Cuban music. In the words of Cuban musicologist Helio Orovio, "Someone showing up and saying they discovered Rubén González makes me want to die laughing!" (in Fornet et al. 2000: 174).[7]

Since the narrative of discovery was so central to BVSC's success with World Music fans, it would have been difficult to modify it to appeal to Latino consumers. Although Valdés-Rodríguez criticizes this decision as short-sighted, it is important to remember that Latin music is not nearly as lucrative in Europe and Japan, where BVSC has been extremely successful. Ibrahim Ferrer's solo album sold three times as many copies in its first year in Germany, for example, than it did in the U.S. (Hernández-Reguant 2000: 3).

While the U.S. Latino community might feel that Cuban music is being "over-hyped," in the words of Prestigio Records President Bill Marin (in Valdés-Rodríguez 1999), the impact of Buena Vista on musicians, scholars, and music consumers cannot be overestimated. While some credit the BVSC success with increases in tourism and record sales, others criticize the project for its many distortions (even blatant inventions) of reality.

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[7] "Aparecerse alguien diciendo que ha descubierto a Rubén González es para morirse de la risa!"

The Politics of Nostalgia

Perhaps the most common criticism shared by both Cuban and foreign scholars is the BVSC's apparent attempt to rhetorically distance the musical material and its performers from the politically problematic Cuban Revolution (Hernández-Reguant 2000; Katerí Hernández 2001; Scruggs 2003). This is accomplished by emphasizing the age of the performers, the antiquity of the musical tradition they represent, and through romanticizing poverty and political isolation.

The oldest musicians of the group (Compay Segundo, Rubén González, and Ibrahim Ferrer) are foregrounded. Less attention is paid to Eliades Ochoa, for example, who is only in his late forties. Compay Segundo and Rubén González, in their 80s and 90s, link the entire group to pre-Revolutionary music. Each musician tells a part of his or her musical background; the stories emphasize the musicians' humble origins and musical families (further proof of their musical purity) (Hernández-Reguant 2000: 6). Those musicians who made their careers during the Revolution, including Ibrahim Ferrer, Omara Portuondo, and Ochoa, are either mentioned less or depicted as guardians of the much older tradition: Cuban son.

In fact, many of the musicians involved in the project are known for their contributions to more recent dance music styles. Ibrahim Ferrer, for example, is best known as the lead singer for Pacho Alonso y sus Bocucos, a

pilón band from the 1960s (Moore, p.c. 2005). Omara Portuondo made her mark as a singer of nueva trova, the most popular genre of music in Revolutionary Cuba during the 1970s and '80s. Instead of acknowledging the group's eclectic background, great care is taken to highlight the musicians' common ground as that of traditional Cuban son and the even older genre, danzón (Scruggs 2003: 3; Perna 2001: 256-57). In the liner notes, Cooder (1997) describes the musicians as having developed "over the past 150 years." There is no mention, in the recording or the film, of the U.S. embargo or the Período Especial (Katerí Hernández 2001: 63).

BVSC presents a romanticized vision of the pervasive poverty of Cuba in the 1990s. Old cars and crumbling buildings are seen as just part of Cuba's magical atmosphere, what Wenders calls "a time warp" (in Hernández-Reguant 2000: 5). In a roundtable discussion on the BVSC, Cuban scholars voiced similar opinions:

> I think there is a kind of valorization, of sugar coating poverty and showing it as something good…That kind of exoticization of poverty bothers me (Alan West in Fornet 2000: 169)[8]

[8] "Creo que hay una especie de valorización, de dorar la píldora de la pobreza y mostrarla como algo bueno…Ese tipo de exotismo de la pobreza me perturba."

> The contrast of Havana with that New York – which isn't the New York that corresponds to that Havana, because, actually, there is another New York – also seems to me to be an attack (Maria Teresa Linares in Fornet 2000: 165)[9]

In this latter comment, Linares points out that the sections of Havana shown in the film were not analogous to the sections of New York shown. In other words, driving around Centro Havana should have been compared to driving around Harlem, instead of midtown Manhattan.

Cuba's economic isolation is also valorized. Cooder (1997) proclaims that the musicians are more "pure" because they are "not yet touched by commercialism." This simultaneously serves to authenticate the performers (since they have obviously not been "corrupted" by outside influences) and to contribute to the project's narrative of discovery.

No mention is made whatsoever of the U.S. or any Cuba/U.S. politics. The economic problems caused by the U.S. embargo, exacerbated by the fall of the Soviet Union, are absent from both the film and the recording. Hernández-Reguant (2000: 7) calls the film "imperialist nostalgia," noting that it attempts to replace Cuba's violent past and precarious present with sunsets, cigars, and smiling negritos.

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[9] "Pero el contraste de La Habana con esa Nueva York – que no es la Nueva York correspondiente a esa Habana, porque, efectivamente, hay otra Nueva York – también me parece una agresión."

Katerí Hernández (2001: 68) argues that the BVSC portrayal of Cuba could have real impact on future U.S. policy toward Cuba. She points out that court decisions are often influenced by popular thought and mainstream media. Thus, the depiction of Cuban musicians as sadly neglected by an inept and backwards regime could provide "ideological justification for contemporary colonial and economic conquest." The implicit message of the film, in Katerí Hernández' eyes, is that Cuba needs the U.S. to intervene on its behalf.

The BVSC vs. Música Bailable

Political implications aside, many argue that the more immediate impact of the BVSC has been on younger musicians performing newer styles, especially *música bailable* (lit.: "danceable music").[10] Although música bailable remains the most popular music on the island, its international audience is dwarfed by that of BVSC. While son has been thrust forward to meet tourist demand, música bailable remains difficult to market abroad and receives less government support as a result (Perna 2001: 257). Effectively shut out of Miami-dominated U.S. Latin music markets, timba had gained some

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[10] Although it translates literally as "danceable music" or "dance music," in common usage the term *música bailable* refers specifically to salsa and timba groups, connoting modern rather than traditional styles (see chapter 3).

popularity in Europe by the late 1990s, although Roy (2001: 193) notes that BVSC has largely replaced timba in European popular concert venues and record sales since 2000.

The success of BVSC has polarized the popular music community in Cuba. Those who feel that traditional music has been neglected in recent years, such as Godfried (2000) and de Marcos González (2000, 2001), welcome the BVSC as a long-awaited triumph for Cuba's national music. Musicologists such as Maria Teresa Linares and Helio Orovio, while objecting to the imagery used in the film, applaud the album's success on the grounds that any international recognition of Cuban music, especially traditional music, is a good thing (Fornet et al. 2000: 163-69). Meanwhile, many musicians argue that the album is out of step with contemporary Cuban music. Timba bandleaders José Luis Cortés and David Calzado, among others, have vocally denounced the album. Their objections include the fact that the musicians do not represent the best performers of traditional music, and that the presentation of the album implies that traditional son is Cuba's only music (Perna 2001: 264-66). Rumba musicians echo these concerns, calling the BVSC stars "old" and "out of touch" (in Ghertner 2003: 113).

Released the same year as the controversial ban placed on the popular timba bailable band La Charanga Habanera, critics argue that the BVSC gave

opponents of timba the leverage they needed to wrest it from the mainstream, or, more specifically, to undermine its government support.[11]

> While *Buena Vista* has generated substantial economic returns for Cuba, its bigger dividends for the government have been political. Together with the film, the album has affirmed a "traditional" image of local culture against xenophile, socially embarrassing timba (Perna 2001: 272).[12]

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[11] Although in recent years government censorship of musicians has relaxed to some degree, artists are still not free to deal with many hot-button issues. Censorship is most often directed at specific songs rather than bands; songs with recognizably "anti-revolutionary" lyrics are *bajada de frecuencia* (lowered in frequency, i.e. on radio playlists, etc.) (Moore 2005: 194). However, in 1997, La Charanga Habanera, the most popular band in Cuba at the time, was banned from all public appearances and other professional activity for a period of six months "so that the band could evaluate their artistic projection and image" (*Granma* in Perna 2001: 244). The ban was a major blow to timba artists in general, who until then had been enjoying widespread national and international success, despite a climate of controversy. The ban on Charanga Habanera, which was explained by officials in rather broad terms, put many música bailable musicians on the defensive (see below).

[12] See Perna 2001: 247-72 for details on controversies surrounding timba. The term itself, although arguably in common parlance for many years, was officially adopted in 1998 by groups such as Los Van Van, La Charanga Habanera, and Paulo FG as an attempt to set Cuban dance bands apart from New York salsa. Perna argues that this move was also a reaction against revivalists bolstered by the success of BVSC. Moore (p.c. 2005) and Lara Greene (p.c. 2005) note that in recent years, timba-style playing (see chapter 4) has been

This polemic environment gave added importance to the use of terms like "timba" versus "son" to describe música bailable. Juan Formell emphasized that the term timba should refer to all music made in Cuba since 1959. Meanwhile, other música bailable stars chose to strategically define themselves more closely with traditional son. Giraldo Piloto, of Klimax, has used the term "son progresivo," for example, while others such as Adalverto Álvarez prefer "son duro" or simply "son cubano" (Perna 2001: 100, 266).

Juan de Marcos González (2000, 2001) has hedged his position on traditional music since the late 1990s. Although it was his ambition to bring traditional son back into the limelight, he later announced his intention to "try to convince people that Cuban music continued after Castro, contrary to what so many people think" (2000). De Marcos González blames the international media for its portrayal of BVSC:

> People who don't know Cuban culture and Cuban music and are inside of a phenomenon in a sort of boom like what's in fashion, started writing and implying that the only kind of music that we have in Cuba is the music of the 50s. They started talking about pre-revolutionary music and post-revolutionary music and shit like that (de Marcos González 2001).

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imitated by Miami salseros with some success, despite Miami's continued boycott of music originating on the island.

Subsequent albums released by the Afro-Cuban All-Stars, under de Marcos González' direction (*Distinto, Diferente* 1999; *Introducing Félix Baloy;* 2000) were intended to fuse traditional music with modern harmonies (ibid.).

De Marcos González does not go so far as to endorse timba. While conceding that there are many fine musicians involved, he asserts that timba has lost its connection to the roots of Cuban music. At best, timba is merely "a transition music [sic] going toward something better and more authentic" (de Marcos González 2000).

Despite all of this controversy, many claim that the BVSC has had little impact on Cuban audiences. The actual album is not legally available in Cuba, and although sales of other recordings of the BVSC stars have gone up in tourist shops, timba remains the most popular dance music. Hernández-Reguant (2000: 9) stresses this point, pointing to poorly attended concerts, negative reviews, and poor radio coverage of BVSC stars. According to one radio DJ in Havana:

> [The Buena Vista Social Club] has not affected me. I haven't benefited from it. In Cuba nobody cares. In Cuba, they say, what? They got a prize? Huh! Good for them! And that's it. (in Hernández-Reguant, 2000: 9)

Bands performing traditional son, such as Sierra Maestra (until recently headed by the same Juan de Marcos González), continue to have

greater success traveling abroad than performing for local audiences (Perna 2001: 266).

However, the perception of traditional son as a more marketable style for foreign consumption has affected Cuban musicians. Roy laments the fact that many young musicians who would otherwise be playing jazz or classical music,

> confine their talents to a narrow traditional band performing the inevitable *Son de la Loma, Lágrimas Negras,* and *Guantanamera*…hoping for tips in dollars that nonetheless are often few and far between (Roy 2001: 197).

In 2004, every musician I spoke with, whether or not they expressed a long-standing interest in son, agreed that it was much easier to find work if they participated in a septeto. Many had worked in the past with timba bands or orquestas típicas, but had had to switch because those bands did not find enough work during the Período Especial. Others, such as the senior members of Cañambú, had been playing son for as long as ten or twenty years, and were finally finding the audience that they felt they deserved.

Regional Identity in BVSC

T.M. Scruggs (2003: 10) criticizes Hernández-Reguant (2000) and Neustadt (2002) for reinforcing the BVSC's "Havana-centrism." He argues

that scholars too often rely on Havana as the point of reference for all of Cuba. While Scruggs concedes that timba is still the most popular music across the country, he asserts that in the eastern province of Oriente, son still has a loyal and active following among all ages. He notes that BVSC's big hit, Compay Segundo's "Chan Chan," was a regional hit in Oriente, performed by several groups for "standing-room only audience[s]."

Scruggs (2003: 8) points out that the BVSC project completely omits any reference to the regional identity of the performers. The film is shot entirely in Havana, and viewers are left to assume that all of the musicians live in the neighborhood, when in fact several key players live on the eastern end of the island.

> This omission in the album and film only replicated an on-going process that virtually everyone I spoke about music with in the Oriente expressed, often virulently: Havana's hegemony that unfairly defines national culture and denigrates that of the eastern region, their music in particular (ibid.: 9-10)

My experience confirms Scruggs' statement. Musicians attribute the lack of government support, inadequate and insufficient performance spaces, and thin tourist population to neglect on the part of the central government in Havana. Ivan Batista, of the septeto Típico de Sones, told me that the recent transfer of the second largest TV broadcasting station from Santiago to Havana has had a tremendous impact on musicians in Oriente as well, since

groups often gain notoriety through performances on television (Típico de Sones, interview).

Conclusions

It is difficult to trace directly the impact that BVSC has had on Cuba, even in strictly economic terms. The album's release coincided with a boom in tourism, and may have contributed to tourism's steady rise since the late 1990s. However, musicians are reluctant to attribute tourism growth and interest in Cuban son to just the BVSC. Obviously, the project remains controversial for many, whether or not they may perceive themselves as benefiting from its success.

Despite the controversy discussed here, though, the album was almost universally loved in World Music circles. Its huge financial success, especially in Europe, home to the majority of Cuba's tourist market, is a testament to that fact, and suggests that perhaps the greatest impact of the album has been in the way that it has shaped the expectations of tourists. The fact that BVSC far outsells other recordings of Cuban music means that some tourists may hold BVSC as their sole point of reference, and many more may have been introduced to Cuban music through the project.

Thousands arrive in Havana and request their favorite traditional Cuban number, "Chan Chan," from the trio on the corner, the band at hotel café, and everyone in between. Tourists are quick to tip when their requests

are honored, and its no accident that "Chan Chan" and "El Cuarto de Tula" now form part of the standard septeto repertoire across the country. For tourists, BVSC stands as an icon of Cuban son, and informs their notions of authenticity. As noted in Chapter 1, these expectations on the part of tourists have real consequences for musicians, and support a narrow definition of traditional music that is not universally held by musicians or local, internal audiences.

The following chapter examines scholarly definitions of son and related genres. While tourists may not be aware of these issues, they also affect the lives of musicians in their application to empresa categories. Following the lead of Robbins (1989, 1990b) and Acosta (n.d.), I adopt a definition of son based on musicians' usages, which often include a much wider range of music than that heard on the BVSC recording.