

Review of *Buena Vista Social Club*

(film directed by Wim Wenders, 1999)

Our society is one in which critics run the risk of being denounced as pathological pessimists and miserable kill-joys. Conversely, there is an almost compulsive search for 'feel-good' factors. It has particularly affected modern movies. Over the summer of 1996, it was reflected, for example, in the huge box office success of the film *Independence Day* which, despite all the destruction by hostile aliens it portrayed, nonetheless offered the reassuring thought that human ingenuity and guts (under American leadership, of course) could overcome the most terrible of threats. James Cameron even managed to raise a happy ending as the *Titanic* went down

It sometimes seems that as environmental despoliation and social disintegration intensify, millions of people increasingly deny the danger by seeking out entertainment that reassures them that all is well and, indeed, has never been better. The result is a flood of trite rubbish, whose slick style barely disguises poverty of content. There is nothing wrong feeling good *per se* and such sentiments are at the heart of some truly great movies. Perhaps *It's A Wonderful Life* provides the perfect illustration, though its greatness is partly built on the fact that it also contains its own dark side.

The Buena Vista Social Club is also a great film that makes its viewers feel decidedly good. It is not some phoney concoction but a real celebration of human spirit. A documentary, it tells the story of a group of elderly Cuban musicians who, in the twilight of the lives when everyone seem to have forgotten them, are rediscovered and finally receive the acclaim their talents truly deserve.

Modern society has made a cult out of youth, treating with disdain age and tradition. The media too tend to portray the elderly as either helpless victims (e.g. crime shows) or nasty 'old gits', with one foot in the grave (e.g. TV sitcoms). Renown German director Wim Wenders cuts through such stereotypes. He showcases the marvellous musical skills of people like singer Ibrahim Ferrer and pianist Ruben Gonzalez, then still thriving in their 80s. Gonzalez, for example, is seen being helped on stage yet once at the piano the years suddenly fall away. Perhaps the most touching scene shows him playing piano in sort of gymnasium surrounded by young children.

The musicians were pulled together by the great American guitarist Ry Cooder during a visit to Havana in the mid-90s. Needing some extra musicians, he tracked down veterans of the 40 and 50s music scene in Cuba. The film's narrative follows their story from the studio sessions organised by Cooder to the natural finale of their appearance in concert at New York's Carnegie Hall. (*The Buena Vista Social Club* CD itself has become an international hit in its own right and really does deserve a hearing)

There is of course a long tradition of cultural imperialism, which like its more violent cousins, rips off the resources of exploited countries to the benefit of imperialist predators including, in modern times, transnational corporations. Thus the musical traditions of lands across Latin America, Africa, Asia and Polynesia have been pillaged to supply raw material to the music industries, primarily of the USA and the UK. The American singer Paul Simons, for example, was attacked (unfairly, I feel) for ripping off musicians from the townships of South Africa.

On the evidence of this film, Cooder has done right by the musicians he unearthed. Ferrer, for example, had been reduced to shining shoes while Gonzalez no longer could afford a piano. Clearly the *Buena Vista Social Club* musicians are grateful for the work Cooder has done. On stage and on the CD, Cooder, a great musician in his own right, modestly takes a back seat. It must be added, though, that the direction and especially the editing of the film do bring him to the fore, even in the live performances.

To be fair to Wenders, he allows Ferrer and the others, including female singer Omaro Portuondo, speak for themselves. Sometimes, Wenders display an irritating penchant for having the camera circle the speakers as they tell the story of their lives. Otherwise the film works well and the concert performances have a vigour and immediacy rarely caught on film. It certainly makes the flashy MTV videos look quite dead. The music itself somehow manages to be full of laid-back cool and yet brim with energy

Cuba itself seems a fascinating country. Due to the American blockage it has been isolated for decades. To that extent, the consumerism that holds sway in most other lands is a comparative

newcomer to the island, mainly arriving on the backs of the new wave of tourists. Whatever the very real failings of the Castro regime, it says something for the society this government has helped to shape that its people, as seen in this film, seem so down-to-earth and full of life. It is all the more sad to see the musicians wandering the streets of New York, singing the praises of a country that has done their homeland so much harm. That thought will not stop viewers coming away from the film feeling good. There does seem to have been a happy ending for these great characters who have waited so long for proper recognition. It is also uplifting to see old people so spry.

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