



[Orquesta Buena Vista Social Club](#)
at The Liverpool Philharmonic
Reviewed by **[Jane Turner](#)** ■ March 2011

Hola! Providing a poetic ray of sunshine on a grey and drizzly Wednesday evening in Liverpool, the vibrancy of this traditional Cuban music was a much-needed shot-in-the-arm for this particular latterly lethargic reviewer.

My thanks go out to [The Liverpool Philharmonic Theatre](#) for playing host to the Orquesta Buena Vista Social Club, featuring the amazing vocalist Omara Portuondo for one lively night only! On a day when there was much discussion in the news about Arts Council Funding cuts and the impact on Arts provision, the Liverpool Philharmonic announced a comprehensive programme from April – September that includes a savvy mix of classical, traditional and modern and also brings in some big names and local heroes including Rumer, Echo and The Bunnymen, Russell Watson, Madeleine Peyroux, The Soweto Gospel Choir, The Irish Sea Sessions and Jimmy Cliff. Also for this season a good selection of films, a series of jazz, roots and unplugged gigs, some family and variety shows and a full schedule of classical music from the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. A very impressive programme given the huge cuts in funding and possibly one of the best programmes of any theatre in the country?

The Philharmonic's success has no doubt been in part due to its ability to attract and keep new audiences, but also because it has a very loyal fan base to begin with who appreciate the Arts and support the orchestra. If you have never been to Liverpool, "The Phil" as it is known locally is on one of the city's most attractive theatres, Art Deco in style with great acoustics. It sits on one of the many culturally laden streets in Liverpool - Hope Street – sandwiched together by Liverpool's two cathedrals each an imposing presence at opposite ends of the street and is also home to The Everyman Theatre and bistro, the Philharmonic dining rooms and public house, and has a good choice and mix of pubs, clubs and eateries and is a very good place to start for a Liverpool socialising novice.

Direct from Havana were the legends of Cuban music and stars of the album produced by Ry Cooder, and the acclaimed film of the same name, Buena Vista Social Club (BVSC). From the original BVSC, and performing since she was a teenager in 1940's Cuba, the main star of the show was the remarkable 80 year-old (!) vocalist Omara Portuondo.

Included in the thirteen strong line-up were four of the musicians from the original film;

- "The Trumpet of Cuba" Guajiro Mirabal
- Laúd virtuoso Barbarito Torres
- Trombonist Jesus "Aguaje" Ramos
- Guitarist/keyboardist Manuel Galbán

Renowned vocalist Carlos Calunga and the talented pianist Rolando Luna represented a younger generation of Cuban musicians.

Potted History

Cuban music like the island itself has a long history. Many have set foot on the Caribbean island and left their mark, but the music has its roots firmly entwined in Spain and West Africa, which

over time has taken on new influences.

The Buena Vista Social Club (BVSC) was a popular members club and meeting place in Havana, that held dances and musical activities in a relatively short period of Cuban musical history - the 1930's and 1940's. The club was run along the lines of a self-organised fraternity with members determined by ethnicity at a time when slavery and racial discrimination against Afro-Cubans was institutionalised. There were many such distinctive clubs in Cuba for separate races and early African slaves had their own clubs as did various different cultural groups. The BVSC was for Afro-Cuban artists, and many prominent musicians performed there throughout the 1930's and 1940's playing mostly for pleasure as there was very little money to earn in Cuba. For anyone who knows their musical history, this was the era that saw the birth of a jazz influenced Afro-Cuban musical style which had a strong impact on popular music not just in Cuba but also in the United States of America (USA).



Shortly after the Cuban revolution of 1959, Fidel Castro ordered the newly elected Cuban President Manuel Urrutia Lleo to begin a programme of closing nightclubs, gambling outlets and other establishments associated with Cuban's "hedonistic lifestyle" (people enjoying themselves - now we can't have that), and supposedly to make way for a more egalitarian and integrated society. Many of the clubs open to members of one race were closed, including the BVSC. It was during this period that numerous musicians emigrated, and the best and the rest were thrown out of work due to venue closures all over the city. Not only did this cause economic

difficulties for the artists, one most famous talent resorting to shoe-shining on the ramshackle city streets in order to eke out a living, but it also paved the way for a radical change in musical style, which became heavily influenced by American rock and funk.

Fast forward to 1996, and the visit to Havana by American guitarist Ry Cooder, who although he hadn't planned to, ended up recording a collaborative session with some of Cuba's finest musicians for a new album - most of whom had been coaxed out of retirement for the session. One of the songs they recorded was "BVSC" and when Cooder enquired about the name and was told about the history of the club, he decided to give its name to the album. As a result interest was revived in the club and its music and the album became a huge worldwide hit.

After returning to the US and realising there was a story to be told in the history of the BVSC (and maybe thinking he had a propaganda coup on his hands?) Cooder persuaded a German film maker, Wim Wenders, to make a documentary about the club, which he agreed to. The film included some footage taken on location in Havana and also in New York and is famous for a scene in which the Cuban musicians, some of whom had never left Cuba before, are seen window shopping and visiting tourist sites in New York. These scenes were labelled "innocents abroad" and publicised by Sight and Sound magazine as "beautiful and moving", on account of the expressions on the faces of the visitors. Take a look if you can, and when you watch you will clearly see the awe and wonder wordlessly revealed by the visiting Cubans, like that kid-in-a-sweet-shop moment, when they see the consumer delights available in the large department stores and as they experience the sights and sounds of a developed city. Undoubtedly the contrasts between the developed consumer society they were visiting and the impoverished, embargoed and frozen-in-time island they had come from were quite stark - so small wonder really that they showed surprise. The film was a box office success and there was more and greater interest in the music of the BVSC, even though some found the film condescending and blatantly obvious in its message with its footage of run-down Havana shown in contrast to the ultra-modern, shining and gleaming New York.

TV appearances, performances and international shows soon followed with a varying number of different musical line-ups, as many of the ageing Cuban performers died along the way. Due to the political climate, some of these concerts were not without problems. It was difficult to perform in Florida with its large exiled Cuban community and in the late 1990's one concert turned into a near-riot, with protesters who opposed the Cuban government attacking and spitting at concert-goers, and there were other such incidents in Miami where several concerts had to be cancelled. But like old stalwarts do, the band played on, despite many line-up changes and they continued to perform throughout the world re-igniting an interest in the irresistible magic of the music. As change has inevitably come to Cuba and its once firmly closed doors have been opened and left slightly ajar, many of the Cuban musicians have gone on to perform individually or in collaboration with other acclaimed artists enabling the elegantly sculpted tunes and warm acoustic rhythms from the tiny resilient Caribbean island of Cuba to live on and making worldwide stars of a group of Cuban octogenarians who have lived quite literally through thick and thin.

The concert

Whilst the economy of Cuba is still in a mess (and who are we to talk?), with many buildings falling apart (ditto, especially here in parts of Liverpool, despite its new facade) and most infrastructure in a permanent state of disrepair, food shortages and long queues for necessities, a thriving black market and eye-opening but decrepit and



out-of-date transport (I feel another ditto coming on), the music that comes from this small, luscious island is the absolute opposite. It is energetic, exciting, full of possibility and as passionate as the feelings that the word Castro stirs in almost everyone. With CD sales in the tens of millions, this music must be some of the most popular and enduring, ever?

The sound of “Guantanamera” played in a bit of a mash-up rather than in its original format and entirety, is a well known Cuban piece recognised worldwide (hijacked by and favoured with football chanters which made it hard to focus on the original lyrics, instead of which my sound waves were intermittently interrupted by “there’s only one Wayne Rooney, Steven Gerrard” or whoever). Nevertheless, hearing it again took me back in an instant to a sunny Cuban holiday a couple of winters past and a lingering afternoon whiling away the hours being serenaded by a travelling 4-piece ensemble and the aroma from their big fat Cuban cigars! Live music in a smoke-filled atmosphere, now there’s a distant memory...

With many of the “grand old men” no longer in the band, the new orchestra and team of performers put on a pulsating display with music that lives and breathes and transmits a joyous life-affirming vitality that makes you marvel at how it could come out of such a troubled mess-up of a country. It left me thinking that if only the Cuban people were to inject just half the energy and vitality that is in their music into the Cuban economy, I have no doubt that they would give many of the more and recently developed nations a run for their money. If music expresses “that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be silent” (as someone famously once said) the repressive environment from which this music has been cultivated has given rise to a whole lotta verbal’s. Unable to voice it freely elsewhere Cubans have obviously had a lot to say and said it loud through their music.

This was a no-nonsense tour of Afro-Cuban repertoire and the magical mesmerising fusion of rural, urban, African and Latin music and was pure musical adrenalin. Somehow in this large and open theatre, this band managed to re-create that backstreet nightclub atmosphere often found in places that by day look not much better than dungeons, but by night are transformed by live music and subtle lighting into places where people can “do their thing”. There was not much seat hugging on the night either, the audience began its dance instantaneously and remained in a permanent state of “wiggle” for most of the evening despite one or two nervous twitches from the attendants and the silent protestations of those remaining indignantly seated. It was good to see that those who wanted to get up and dance were left to do so and were not given the football-fan treatment of being forced to stifle their enjoyment by over-zealous crowd control.

Watching this 13 piece band was like looking at one big happy family on stage; the age range must have been from 18 – 80+, and the elder members seemed to have the most puff – you had to be there to witness the orchestrated dance routine of the three octogenarian brass players, flat caps and crimplene trousers included! Cool! The 80-something year old vocalist Omara Portuondo had to take a seat now and then but remained in the limelight, reminding me of the perennial performance of an auntie at a Christmas party, who once up singing and dancing and hogging the microphone, refuses to leave or let anyone else have a look in. She still had an amazing voice and range and the vitality of a much younger woman. The pianist - Rolando Luna – managed to work in a few chords of The Beatles’ “Yesterday” (no doubt just for the locals and one of the very few slower pieces in the whole show) to one of his solo performances and his “tinkling on the ivories” had the audience enraptured.

To end with another un-sourced quote; “music washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life” I heartily agree. For one night only the BVSC helped me not to think about my own predicament. Officially an unemployment statistic due to the public sector massacre, I am, hopefully, if only temporarily, enjoying the state of “wiggle” that this performance has brought on! Not sure it’s a “transferable skill”, though any (reasonable) offers considered for a “wiggler” on the dole?

[Buena Vista Social Club](#) is now on nationwide tour, and I recommend you catch a performance.