

Remembering the Buena Vista Social Club

By Alec Wilkinson

Editor's Note: Alec Wilkinson appeared with poet Edward Hirsch at the Miami Book Fair International in November, 2014. Inspicio interviewed Alec during the Book Fair, and excerpts from that interview appear in the "Video" section of the Inspicio website. To provide an example of Wilkinson's clear, crisp, yet elegant writing style, I asked Alec to send me one of his short music commentaries that he had previously published in The New Yorker's "Talk of the Town" section. rse



Paseo del Prado, Havana — Photo: Eliot Hess

Ry Cooder, the virtuoso guitarist, dislikes performing so much that he is almost never seen onstage, but he was in the city last week to appear with members of the Buena Vista Social Club, the band that he and producer Nick Gold assembled in Havana and that consists of mostly elderly men and one woman. The record they made in 1996—Buena Vista Social Club—has sold two million copies and won a Grammy in 1998. One of the band's principal singers, Ibrahim Ferrer, who is seventy-two, has a new record, and he and the pianist, Ruben Gonzalez who is eighty, are playing concerts in North America, with the band behind them. A week ago last Thursday, the musicians attended a party in their honor at a restaurant in the Village; on Friday afternoon, at Fidel Castro's insistence, they performed for more than two thousand diplomats at the United Nations; Friday night, they played at the Beacon Theatre.

At the party, the bartender made drinks from lime and rum and mint. On the tables were candles, and trays filled with water on which gardenias floated. A number of the Cuban musicians sat shoulder to shoulder on a banquette along one of the walls. They wore coats and sweaters against the cold, and looked like men waiting for a bus, or their turn to bowl. At a table in a corner several of them played dominoes. As many pictures were taken of them as are taken to document the average childhood. Ibrahim Ferrer delivered some remarks in Spanish, and so did Ruben Gonzalez. A translator said, "The two of them express that they don't have words to express how they feel, but they say that because they are Cuban they had to speak for five minutes."

Last Monday, following a performance in Boston, the band came back to New York to appear on the Late Show with David Letterman. Before the show, Gonzalez sat on a chair in a hallway outside the band's dressing room, in the basement of the Ed Sullivan Theatre, and Ferrer sat on a chair in a small dressing room on the theatre's sixth floor. Gonzalez is thin to the point of being frail. He is a bit stooped and sometimes limps a little. He has small hands and feet, and his handshake is delicate. He often wears suits, and he looks like a figure of romance, a plantation owner, perhaps.

Ferrer is taller and lithe and likes to dance, which he does as if the movement cost him no effort at all. His face is small and round and easily conveys pleasure. He usually wears a felt cap with a brim, the kind of cap that men who owned English sports cars in the forties and fifties wore. He is a tenor, and his voice is warm and a little gritty and expresses emotion succinctly and without being sentimental. Three days into making the band's record, Cooder says, he decided that the combination of voices wasn't exactly right. "Isn't there anybody who can sing the bolero?" he asked. "Doesn't anybody have that romantic style?" In assembling musicians, Cooder and Gold had the help of a man named Juan de Marcos Gonzalez. Marcos said, "There's one guy—I have to find him."

Cooder goes on, "So Marcos found Ibrahim, and Ibrahim said, 'I'm not interested. I don't sing anymore.' He'd had a lot of disappointments and, about five years before, he'd just given up, and was making his living shining shoes. Marcos is a forceful guy, though."

In his dressing room, Ferrer said that his new life as a celebrated singer arrived so abruptly that it seems a little like a dream. "I feel exactly as if two lives had been joined together," he said. "My old one and my new one, and this new one is a good one." The only disadvantage he could think of he said, was that in Cuba people were driving him crazy. Now that he is a notable person, everyone in the neighborhood comes over to his apartment, which is small, and wants to spend the day with him. When the first royalties were paid for the record, Cooder says, Nick Gold went to Cuba with a satchelful of cash to distribute among the musicians. He arrived at Gonzalez's house to give him his share while Gonzalez was playing the piano. Gonzalez asked to look at the money. Gold held the satchel open, and Gonzalez peered in at the dollar bills, then waved his hand. "Take it away," he said. In the theatre basement, someone asked him if he actually had made such a gesture. He smiled broadly. "I did do that," he said, "but it was a joke." ■