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They Once Were Lost, But Now Are Found

Buena Vista Social Club is about a group of old Cuban musicians long forgotten by most of the world that, against all odds, took the music world by storm. More than just a portrait of once forgotten musicians, *Buena Vista Social Club* is a portrait of a forgotten people, waiting to be remembered by the rest of the world. The director, Wim Wenders, paints this colorful portrait with individual sketches of each musician, panoramas of Cuban seaside and city, and vibrant samples of Cuban music.

In shooting this film, Wenders made the distinct choice of showing each member of the group. By showing each individual musician in the group instead of portraying the group as a whole, Wenders is able to use the powerful individual tales of each of these musicians to show a much larger picture, much like jigsaw pieces, of the population as a whole. Wenders starts with the most compelling story, that of Ibrahim Ferrer. Orphaned at age twelve, Ibrahim, as he put it, "had to jump into life." He was forced to give up his studies in order to survive. This remarkable singer is compared by Ry Cooder, founder of the group and leader of sorts, to the late great Nat Cole. Despite this, Ibrahim could not, before being rediscovered, make ends meet. In the middle of the film he says that he would do whatever it took to provide for his family including beg or pick through trash. When he was found by Ry Cooder he was working as a shoe-shine. The first time he came to the studio he had a face blackened by polish. Ibrahim's story, while powerful, is

not used just to tug at the heartstrings of the audience. This story forces the audience to acknowledge that these individuals have not all lived privileged or pampered lives. It is this realization that connect deeper with the story, and lets Wenders get his point

Next, Wenders tells the tale of Omara Portuondo, remarkable not for any particular hardship that she faced, but for her lack of privileges expected by the film's American and European audiences. Omara is the daughter of a great Cuban baseball player. Her father was one of the first Cubans to play outside of the country, namely in the United States. It would be expected, especially by an American audience, accustomed to superstar athletes with lucrative contracts and million dollar mansions, that she would be very well off, but this is not so. She still wanders about the streets singing, appearing neither better nor worse off because of her familial history. She casually talks and sings with the locals as she wanders through the streets of Havana. It is this connection and similarity between her and other Cubans, especially Cuban women, which Wenders uses. Wender uses her to draw connections between the musicians and the island populace. She reinforces the connection started with the tale of Ibrahim, and subtly opens the mind of the audience to further prodding.

Following these two emotional tales is yet another, that of Eliades Ochoa, the tres player. At age eight, Eliades would help his parents make money by walking through the districts of town passing around his hat. He even walked through the local Red Light district asking the prostitutes and their clientele for money. This tale following the other two, and then each of the next musicians' stories one after another keeps reinforcing the idea that these musicians are common people with musical talent. These stories form a

chain for the audience that gets stronger with each added link between the musicians and the general populations until these musicians are but a handful out of millions

While the portraits connect the musicians with the common people, they do not answer the question of who are the people of Cuba. To answer that question Wenders uses scenes of Cuban countryside and city. In each of these short clips you see rusted out automobile relics lining the streets, decayed but once-beautiful homes standing proudly over the boulevards, and a people uniformly impoverished. Every scene brings more squalor to the viewers' eyes until they are convinced that this is what it means to be in Cuba. Every new scene brings an involuntary reaction from the audience, who each of whom has the freedom to spend a night watching the movie, of revulsion. In this way Wenders gets the audience to question if this is what Cuba really is, he forces them to think about what they see. Wenders questions all of the audience's expectations, destroys the expectations of most, and then replaces it with this horrible reality. In one scene the camera enters Ibrahim's small apartment. It looks completely barren except for a table with a few chairs surrounding it, a refrigerator that looks as old as he is, and a couple couches in the only adjoining room. Through the links forged by the characters Wenders imprints this image onto the audience, shows them what it means to be a Cuban in Cuba today.

Beyond the links of the individual portraits and the images of Cuba, Wenders uses another technique to impress his point upon the audience, he uses music. The music played during the film becomes a second bridge between the musicians and the rest of the people of Cuba. The film often during interviews jumps between the person in Cuba, and the same person performing during one of the concerts. The only thing that really

connects the two scenes concretely together is the music. For almost every musician Wenders flashes between one musician playing a solo, to the musician playing that song with the rest of the group. This jumping back and forth connects the audience to each of the musicians; it draws them from their world into the musicians' world. This connection facilitates and enhances the connections drawn from the individual stories and from the scenes of Cuba.

The music also directly connects the musicians with the common man or woman of Cuba. Omara discusses two of the songs that she sings in the movie and explains that they are both songs that she has known since childhood. For one she says that she would sing the duet with her father, him as lead, her as second. This is further emphasized when one of the women on the street begins to sing along with Omara as she walks by singing. Wenders uses this connection along with the ones stated previously to reinforce one another, making each stronger than either would be individually.

The portrait painted by *Buena Vista Social Club*, much like a photomosaic puzzle, is made up of many individual images that come together to form one large picture. the musicians, the scenes of Cuban squalor, and the music each give individual small little snapshots of this forgotten people that come together to form a much larger portrait. They paint a portrait of a people that once were lost, but now are found.