

At the Crossroads between *Paris, Texas* and the *Buena Vista Social Club*, Havana: Wim Wenders and Ry Cooder as Collaborators

Stephen Gregory, University of New South Wales

Paris, Texas and *Buena Vista Social Club* are what might be called crossroads movies, the first because of the meeting of Europe and the United States implied in everything from the title on, and the second through the implications of a Cuban community centre whose name meshes Spanish with English. Both films also stage in very different ways the collaboration between Wenders as film maker and Cooder as musician, a working arrangement which originates in a shared affinity with the blues, a crossroads or fusion type of music itself in that it incorporates folk and traditional elements from West Africa and North America, and is both secular (in its derivation from chanting in chain or work gangs) and religious (whether pagan through links to African rituals, or Christian in its associations with gospel singing and church ceremony).¹ Crossroads, then, is where the mundane and the exotic, the material and the spiritual, can meet, a point on a real or symbolic map where a new direction can be chosen or rejected, where the present offers the chance to measure the weight of the past against the potential of the future. It is this conjunction of the spatial and the temporal that provides a fertile cinematic crossroads for Ry Cooder and Wim Wenders.

Wenders's appreciation of the blues is perhaps most succinctly expressed in the words quoted in the blurb for his music documentary *The Soul of a Man*: 'These songs meant the world to me. I felt there was more truth in them than in any book I had read about

¹ For the general history of the blues, see Lomax (1993), Oakley (1976), and Palmer (1982; 1995).

America, or in any film I had ever seen' (Wenders 2003). Similarly, but much earlier (1970), thus indicating the depth of Wenders's loyalty to this music and the later rock and roll derived from it, we find: 'Music from America is more and more replacing the sensuality that the films have lost: the merging of blues and rock and country music has produced something that can no longer be experienced only with the ears, but which is visible, and forms images, in space and time' (Wenders 2001, 56). This combination of music, images, sensuality and (from the previous quote) truth about the United States will re-emerge forcefully in the consideration below of Wenders's work with Ry Cooder. For now it remains only to add the redemptive role Wenders gives in 1988 to rock music in his account of growing up in early post-Second world war Germany: 'Rock'n'roll rescued a whole generation from loneliness and ... helped it to realize its creative potential' (Wenders 2001, 309).² His dream was 'to put music on the screen' (248), while filmmaking was a substitute for not being able to 'play saxophone and drums and guitar all at once' and rock music was free from any associations with Nazism (Dawson 1976, 11-12).³

Ry Cooder's relationship with the blues is just as formative: he listened to it as well as folk music as a child in a home where both were associated with left politics, and first learnt guitar by listening to records of this music.⁴ He has a finely tuned and often technical understanding and admiration for the music and many of its exponents, and his own first recordings in 1965 were collaborations with other musicians, Taj Mahal particularly, and were essentially combinations of folk rock with electric blues, but were not at the time thought good enough for release (see *Rising Sons* 1992). He greatly admired Robert Johnson, the blues man whose legend is most closely associated with the crossroads,⁵ and one of his later film scores was for Walter Hill's movie *Crossroads*

² See also his earlier prose poem-cum-meditation 'The American Dream' (Wenders 2001, 123-154, especially 132-3), written in 1983-4 at the same time he was working on *Paris, Texas*, towards the end of his seven-year sojourn in the United States.

³ It is worth noting here that Sam Shepard, the American playwright Wenders picked as the main scriptwriter for *Paris, Texas*, only turned to writing after realizing he would never be a rock star, although he had his own band in the 1960s and wrote a kind of eyewitness chronicle to Bob Dylan's 'Rolling Thunder Revue' tour of 1975. See Rose (2002) and Rosen (2004, 15-16).

⁴ For accounts of Cooder's life and career, see Tobler & Grundy (1984) and Metting (2001). A selection of original tunes Cooder listened to and later reworked or covered is *Catfish* 2002.

⁵ Johnson's brief tempestuous life (he died in 1938 at twenty-six, apparently poisoned by a jealous husband) took in alcoholism, womanising, wandering around the Mississippi Delta, just two recording sessions (including a 'Crossroads Blues'), and the much vaunted story of a pact with the devil whom Johnson supposedly met at a lonely crossroads at midnight where he traded his soul for a unique and, for

(1986), a not altogether successful homage to Robert Johnson.⁶ As Cooder expanded his repertoire on the slide guitar he had first picked up with the blues and country music, he added to the mix such disparate elements as gospel singing, Caribbean and Hawaiian guitar, African and Indian string instruments, Tex-Mex instrumental combinations, and increasingly under his son Joachim's guidance, percussion from all over the developing world.⁷ A practical politics can be derived from Cooder's methods for achieving this increased musical fusion.

While Cooder has made the occasional foray into overt political content,⁸ the keys to the process lie in his attitude to the different music and musicians he uses and plays with. He approaches making music as a craftsman who wants to improve by learning from others how to do what he does not know or understand, and from history how the same or different things were done in the past (see Fishell 1980, 74, and Scherman 1985, 39). All of the interviews used here, especially those in magazines devoted to guitar playing such as *Acoustic Guitar* and *Guitar Player*,⁹ display Cooder's enormous knowledge of the techniques involved in what he does, but some explain how he went about acquiring those skills. Even when very young, Cooder, who is white, would approach older black players for advice and answers, invariably getting the help he sought, but would not interrupt them if they were too busy or looked harassed. He would, however, leave what he learnt or heard alone if he felt that he could not play it properly or it was so unique it could not be imitated or improved (Fishell 1980, 60 and Fleder 1971, 3 and 6). At the practical level, then, Cooder learnt an ethic of sharing what you knew with those who

some, still mysterious talent. See Greenberg (1994), Guralnick (1998), Marcus (1997), Obrecht (1993) and Scherman (1991).

⁶ Cooder himself did not like the script but was determined to make the best of the experience of working with Walter Hill, a director he admired. See Scherman (1985) and Forte (1988). Both these items are interviews with comments by the interviewer. For a dismissive view of the film, see Marcus (1997, 186, note).

⁷ See Cooder albums such as *Into the Purple Valley* (1971), *Chicken Skin Music* (1976), *Get Rhythm* (1987), *A Meeting by the River* (1993) and *Talking Timbuktu* (1994). For Cooder's own comments on the blues and other musical influences and inspirations, see, in addition to the interviews already mentioned, Fleder (1971), Fishell (1980), Santoro (1986), Lyseight (1994), Miller (1996) and Williamson (1999).

⁸ His 1982 album *The Slide Area* explored the suburbs of Los Angeles most immediately threatened by landslides and earth tremors, while more recently *Chávez Ravine* (2005) explores the 1950s story of the lives of poor Chicanos (and their public housing) being sacrificed to build the Dodgers' new stadium. In the latter CD's liner notes, Cooder relates the politics of this episode to the secret funding of outlaws in the 'Wild West' by corrupt politicians in the East as portrayed in a Roy Rodgers record he used to listen to when growing up. See Cooder (2005).

⁹ But see also his very detailed remarks on Robert Johnson's playing and singing in Scherman (1991, 36-7 and 40-41).

were effectively apprentices, as well as a sense of aesthetic decorum and an acceptance of his own limitations.

In later years he learnt not only to seek out the major exponents of different styles of playing on his chosen instruments (to guitar Cooder added first banjo and then mandolin), but also how to find musicians he could play with, if only as part of the backing ensemble. Thus, he went into the Tex-Mex 'barrios' of San Antonio, Texas, finding out about and looking for particular players recommended to him. He would then spend hours just observing and listening before asking whether he might play along or whether they might like to come and play with him (Fishell 1980, 80 and 84).¹⁰ With Hawaiian musicians (one of whom, Gabby Pahinui, was one of his two 'musical beacons' [Scherman 1985, 39]),¹¹ he would listen and discipline himself to adapt to their style while on stage (Fishell 1980, 86). Similarly, after being commissioned to produce an album with Malian guitarist Ali Farka Touré (it would become *Talking Timbuktu*), he persuaded the CD company executives to abandon the idea of a backing band to let Touré's music be heard more for itself, casting himself as 'good accompanist'. On the promotional tour he did not want to be introduced as part of a double bill: 'I'm just happy to get up on stage to back him up' (Lyseight 1994, 32-3). However one may feel about the risks of First or Western world artists appearing alongside their counterparts from the developing or (now) post-colonial world,¹² it is impossible to deny the essential humility of Cooder's approach here. Whether or not originally imbibed from the radical politics of his parents, what Cooder shows is a deeply ingrained respect for the dignity and integrity of the other, particularly, as over time was increasingly the case, when coming from his own position of strength and influence, a situation that would be highly relevant to the *Buena Vista Social Club* project.

¹⁰ Cooder here, consciously or not, is following the way most Delta Blues players learnt their trade as well as the songs, which they would, like the bards of oral literature, go on to modify or imitate.

¹¹ The other was Bahamian Joseph Spence.

¹² Metropolitan artists' borrowing from the culture of actual or former colonies has aroused not always justifiable suspicion and controversy from, say, Picasso and Giacometti's (ab)use of African sculpture in the early twentieth century to Paul Simon's flirtation with black Southern Africa in *Graceland*. It is indeed difficult for any such act, however well intentioned and honestly undertaken, to escape entirely all taint of exploitation by the (ex-)colonising power.

Cooder's humility intersects in important ways with Wenders's political orientation. In 1989, he made what is still his most explicit political statement on the function and nature of film:

As far as politics goes, the most political decision you make is where you direct people's eyes. In other words: what you show people, day in day out, is political. Explicit political content is about the least political side of it ... And that for me is the only political act of which the cinema is capable: keeping the idea of change going ... the really political act that the cinema is capable of is making change possible, by implication, by not gumming up people's brains and eyes. (Wenders 2001, 333)

The important point here is the preponderant role given to understatement and implication, or more generally to form and structure over content. Equally significant is Wenders's summing up of the lessons he learnt from American cinema: 'You can live in the present if the past is an open book and the future beckons' (438). In short, individuals' capacity to change and whether or not they are helped or hindered in that enterprise by who or what surrounds them now or in the past (which includes his own films) is the kernel of Wenders's politics.

However, to probe more deeply the character of the Wenders-Cooder collaborations we must first go back to the blues. As mentioned above, in 2003 Wenders made a documentary on the blues called *Soul of a Man*. While one of the songs by Delta blues man Blind Willie Johnson gives the film its title, a voiceover pretending to be the soul of Blind Willie talking from outer space informs us that another, the slide guitar solo 'Dark Was The Night,' was included in the 1977 Voyager mission as one of the recorded messages for delivery to literally anybody out there. Blind Willie Johnson's music had aroused Cooder's enthusiasm even more than Robert Johnson's (Scherman 1991, 41), and therefore united one of his first loves with one of Wenders' when he returned to it for the *Paris, Texas* score.

From the title itself, *Paris, Texas* plays on the idea of crossroads. Wenders himself referred to 'that amazing collision of Paris and Texas' as 'the essences of Europe and America,' having agreed with Sam Shepard that 'Texas was America in miniature' (Wenders 2001, 265). In addition, much of the film's weight is carried by the psychological and social trajectory of its protagonist, Travis, as a kind of modern Odysseus (see Irwin 1991, 99) who journeys from hermetic muteness to an ability to think and talk at length, a rebirth into society symbolised by his quest to recover two

maternal figures (his own and his son, Hunter's). This enmeshing of cultural critique and individual psychology has determined that two theoretical perspectives vie for dominance in critical approaches to the film: psychoanalysis,¹³ and European or expatriate views of the United States.¹⁴ It is this division that is largely responsible for the myriad readings of the film's most potently symbolic image: the photograph of a vacant lot in Paris, Texas that Travis bought through the mail and carries with him at all times. These interpretations range from Wenders's own, that Paris, Texas, a little town near the border with Oklahoma, is where Travis believes he was conceived and, consequently, where he hopes to build a home and reunite his family (Wenders 2001, 265) to the view that the screen *Paris, Texas* has 'no mimetic relationship to an actual place in either Europe or America' (van Oostrum 1994, 17). Travis is also a crossroads himself, being the first son of a Texan father (his surname, Henderson, emphasises this role which is such a problem for him) and a Spanish-speaking, perhaps Mexican, mother (again the European/American ambivalence), hence his affinity with things Mexican that punctuates the film regularly from its very opening, where he has just crossed the border from Mexico and staggers into a clinic to be treated by a German immigrant doctor, the first of many flawed surrogate parental figures (which will include a Mexican maid and a Parisian sister-in-law, as well as his brother and young son) to guide him on his way.

Another interpretative way into *Paris, Texas* is via a different crossroads: that which sees it as the junction of several cinematic genres, notably the western and the road movie (both of which can easily incorporate the very European notion of the quest narrative, whereby the vacant lot is a kind of existential holy grail, signifying the possibility of Travis reuniting if not his family, then at least his traumatised self and only slowly remembered past). The other genre linked to these two is the one Shepard brought by way of Hollywood and the American theatre: the family melodrama, Travis's individual story being linked directly to those of three families. The first is the dysfunctional one from which he comes (characterised by his father always wanting his wife to come not from Paris, Texas but from Paris, France, as exemplified in the so-

¹³ See, for example, Luprecht (1992), Bromley (1995)—which sees the film through the theories of Julia Kristeva—and Carveth (1997).

¹⁴ See Watt (1987), Denzin (1991), Cook (1997) (all of which use Baudrillard); van Oostrum (1994) (which adds Tocqueville and Henry James to Baudrillard). No commentator on the film seems to have used that other great jaundiced expatriate view of America that is Henry Miller's *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945).

called joke he repeated to all new friends and acquaintances). The second is his own with Jane and their son Hunter, which he destroyed by effectively re-enacting his father's refusal to see and accept his wife as she really was (as the elder son, Travis is marked by bearing his father's name). The third family, which Travis threatens and destabilises by taking away his son, is that of his brother Walt, who has resolved his father's problem by symbolising his upward mobility into the dubious dreams of the North American suburban middle class with his marriage to a French woman who really *is* from the French capital, and his successful billboard advertising business based in Burbank, also home to some of Los Angeles's film studios (not for nothing does he share a first name with Walt Disney). But Walt has no children, except the one he and Anne inherited from Travis's and Jane's disappearance, and his life is correspondingly fragile because, like the existence of a cartoon character or the model in an inflated billboard image, it is only a life style, the borrowed child having been perhaps its only real support.¹⁵

If *Paris, Texas* as a crossroads can be summed up as the 'interlacing of modernist exploration and more traditional narrative development, the sequestering of new positions in old conventions' (Kolker & Beicken 1993, 122), the following description of the music for it is understandable: 'The "subject" of Ry Cooder's highly distinctive score is synonymous with the subject of the film – the plight of the individual imagination in a world of pastiche – modern America' (Lack 1997, 231). Wenders himself almost encourages this projection of the whole film on to its music in a 1990 documentary: 'When we finally recorded the music, Ry Cooder was standing with his guitar in front of the screen playing directly to the images. It felt like in a strange way he was reshooting the picture and like his guitar was somehow related to our camera' (quoted in Lack 1993, 230). Cooder's recollections of recording the music are revealing in quite different ways, however: 'Wim Wenders was paranoid to get involved. He had made *Paris, Texas* a delicate, fragile thing. But the music could murder the film. So he paced the floor and climbed the walls and I said, "Just calm down. This is easy, there's going to be no problem. Let me do a couple of cues and show you what's happening". And he said, "Oh, my God, I think he's got it"' (from 'Interviews' in Romney & Wootton 1995, 130). In this misleading Dr. Doolittle look-alike scene, Cooder

¹⁵ On genre and family matters, besides those essays named above, see Clum (2002), Geist (1988), Kadish (1986), Lev (1993) and Zavarzadeh (1996).

effectively has to convince Wenders that he knows how to be a ‘good accompanist’ with a soundtrack as well as on stage. In fact, Cooder was extremely sensitive to the film’s needs:

It’s a journey in this guy’s mind and everything else derives from that. Especially that he doesn’t talk much. So for me the basic question was, so if he doesn’t talk much, does he hear anything? Converting that silence into sound, into melody, this is what the score is. So you take the basic theme and develop it, and each time it’s a little more, a little different, and the slightest little nuance is going to push it this way or that. (quoted in Lack [1993, 231]. See also Metting [2003, 102])

And the reason Cooder could feel his way so accurately into the film’s narrative is that the music he composed and played is an intimate part of his own journey. For, although the vision of Cooder standing with a guitar and playing to the moving images encourages the inference that he is improvising, the fact is that the slide guitar music is a series of variations on a tune he had previously agreed on with Wenders.¹⁶ What is more, it is one Cooder had first covered or adapted for himself over ten years earlier.

Cooder had first recorded Blind Willie Johnson’s ‘Dark Was the Night,’ which he had originally heard as a child, as the last track on his first album in 1970, when he was in his early twenties (see Johnson 1998, track 2, and Cooder 1970). Blind Willie Johnson’s original, recorded in 1921, is played on acoustic guitar with a bottleneck slide, accompanied by a wordless moan that alternates literally between humming and ah-ing but in which it sometimes seems possible to discern the standard blues laments “Oh, Lord” and “How Long?”, the prayer for deliverance and the despairing cry of pain, here muffled by suffering. In both Cooder versions, he compensates for the complete absence of the human voice by slowing the tempo to increase the expressiveness of the instrumental sounds extracted from the slide guitar. The 1984 account fuses Johnson’s gospel and blues combination on to an amplified guitar style that knowingly wears all Cooder had learned from Hawaiian and Caribbean guitarists.

Contrary to the impression given by Wenders and others regarding the use of the music over the opening credits and famous sequence of Travis walking through the desert landscape familiar from westerns (it stops when he reaches the dry tap at the boundary of the property at Terlingua—the land of language where he must learn to find his

¹⁶ Wenders refers to the song ‘we had chosen’ (Romney & Wootton 1993, 126, my emphasis).

way),¹⁷ the music is not associated only with this landscape but with Travis's whole tortured journey through an at first incomprehensible present towards a final painful confrontation with the past that drove him to flight, out of which he will make a more meaningful future at least a possibility. Cooder fashions some twenty interventions which, like the first, are variations on the main theme of 'Dark Was the Night' to mark various stages in the long process of Travis's re-surfacing. However, we do not hear the whole of Cooder's new version of Johnson's lament until the final moments of the film, with Travis driving off alone along the Houston freeways into the sunset after watching from the ground through a hotel window the successful reunion of his son Hunter with his mother, Travis's ex-partner, Jane. If the film is framed by two of Cooder's variations on Johnson's tune, it is no less contained between two written announcements that recount the distance Travis has covered between the opening sequence and the last. The first is scrawled on a piece of cardboard pinned to a wooden pillar in the bar Travis faints in at the start and reads: 'The dust has come to stay. You may stay or pass on through'. The last is seen on a billboard advertisement similar to those erected by Walt's business and is passed by Travis's truck before the last scene fades into the final credits. It reads: 'Together we make things happen'. Not for nothing is the title of Johnson's song in the past tense: 'Dark *Was* The Night,' because to say so, you must already have survived it and have 'passed on'.

Strictly speaking, despite the claims on the soundtrack album,¹⁸ there is no original music in *Paris, Texas*. The other tune of which Cooder plays and arranges variations is a traditional Mexican 'Canción mixteca'. Its chief use is to provide the background music to the home movies section of the film when, in Walt and Anne's house, Travis and Hunter join them to watch Walt's Super-8 record of the holiday by the sea they all went on with Jane when Hunter was only three. It is watching this that brings about the beginnings of the *rapprochement* between father and son that will eventually send them off in search of Jane. This music is, then, associated not with Travis alone but with the family he created with Jane and Hunter and his successful period as husband and father,

¹⁷ Wenders sees the music as all but 'coming out of the landscapes' (in Driekmann 1984-5, 5), an approach suggested by most who comment on the moodiness of the guitar music, seeing it largely as background to Travis's travels. See Kadish (1986, 117), Irwin (1991, 96), Miller (1996, 35), Silberman (1995, 216) and Smith (1995, 36).

¹⁸ Both original soundtrack CD and the new digitised version credit Cooder as composer (see Cooder 1985 and 2001). The same kind of mistake will get him some undeserved bad publicity for *Buena Vista Social Club*.

and it is apt that he should sing a little bit of it when engaged on the domestic chore of washing up.¹⁹ It is also fitting that a slowed down version of this music, and not anything derived from the Johnson tune, should accompany part of the monologue Travis delivers to Jane on his second visit to the peep show parlour. It also picks up the association with things Mexican (or Spanish) regularly made throughout the film: Travis has been in Mexico before the film opens, his mother was probably Mexican, he understands Spanish, seeks advice on being a father from Walt and Anne's Mexican maid (thereby underlining the gulf between the two brothers regarding their mother) and, when he buys a car, it is an old *Ranchero*, an appropriate vehicle to carry him and his son to their different but simultaneous reconciliations with the maternal principle. *Paris, Texas* closes without telling us whether reconciliation will lead to reunion, separation or some kind of negotiation between the two, but the open ending does indicate that Travis's vacant lot can now be filled with something.²⁰

As different as *Buena Vista Social Club* is from *Paris, Texas* as a film, it too will deal with the desire for an impossible utopia and the need to create some kind of reality that will fill the gap. Its apparent success in doing so has been such that a recent book on Latin/o American music could begin its preface as follows:

As the twentieth century drew to a close, a small band of elderly Cuban musicians, known collectively as the Buena Vista Social Club, was playing to sold-out concert halls throughout the world, selling hundreds of thousands of compact discs, and starring, with Ry Cooder, in an award-winning documentary by Wim Wenders. They reminded us, not for the first time, that the irresistible rhythms of traditional Cuban dance musics continue to excite audiences everywhere. (Fernández 2006, vii)

Similarly, the blurb for the video and DVD release of *The End of Violence*, a 1996 Wenders thriller for which he also contributed music, has Cooder not only as the co-star in *Buena Vista* but also as composer of its music (see Wenders 1996). It is the taking of often mistaken opinion and publicity hype such as this for accepted fact, together with *Buena Vista's* undoubted success in Europe and North America, that have probably helped to perpetuate what was initially only a suspicion in some quarters, namely that the film is an example of cultural imperialism.

¹⁹ On the soundtrack album, the actor who plays Travis, Harry Dean Stanton, sings the whole song in Spanish.

²⁰ The actor Harry Dean Stanton (Travis) has also played Tex-Mex music in his own band, and felt personally implicated in Travis's plight when acting the part. See <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001765/bio>. I thank one of *Portal's* anonymous readers for this information.

The case against the film can be briefly summarised: the absence of any reference to what has been done since the revolution to promote all music in Cuba; the therefore inevitable omission of all modern Cuban dance music and to the social realities that subtend it; the omnipresence of Ry Cooder (whose Hawaiian guitar is heard, moreover, as an intrusion)²¹ and his son Joachim, and the concomitant diminishing of the real role played by Cubans in carrying out and completing the whole enterprise; the projection of a mythologised, pure pre-revolutionary past, including the picturesquely dilapidated buildings of Havana, to pander to a fashionable, first-world 'retro' taste.²² In short, a near textbook case of arrogant, unprincipled and highly selective appropriation for commercial gain by agents from the developed world of the culture of part of the developing world, aggravated in this case by the agents in question (the most ubiquitous of them, anyway) coming from the imperialist power that has devoted considerable time and money to the vain endeavour to overturn the socialist revolution in the country whose music they are filching.²³

The most obvious point *Buena Vista Social Club*'s accusers have to answer is why, if there was any suspicion of the film being counterrevolutionary in any way, the Cuban government, normally acutely sensitive in such matters, has not joined in the chorus of voices denouncing it. The answer to this is simple: the Wenders/Cooder project dovetailed neatly into the political and economic requirements of the so-called special period, when the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites had deprived Cuba of the main market place for its goods and of its primary political allies. To compensate for this loss, the government (reluctantly, in some quarters) encouraged tourism and investment from the west (excluding the US, of course, at least directly) and allowed some inevitable 'dollar-ization' of the economy, while attempting to control completely any political fallout from the process. When Wenders and Cooder came along to make the film in 1998, this enterprise was producing a dance music industry the government saw as going too far in catering to tourists' more depraved tastes. The chance to back a

²¹ Its infrequent if sometimes redundant appearance hardly merits the following aggressive comment on the 'Theremin-like, surreal sounds made by Cooder's guitar, which appropriately signal his intrusion as the musical alien from outer space' (Perna 2002, 225). It is not untypical, however, of the emotional reactions aroused by the film.

²² See the condensed account of Cuban responses to the film in Maya (2002, 193-196). The two most readily available and detailed negative critiques of the film are probably Hernández (2002) and de la Campa (2003).

²³ Hence the reaction of the friend who all but left the cinema in disgust mentioned in Melis (2000, 153). As she goes on to clarify, this was not her own opinion (155-6).

project that promoted the far more acceptable dance music of the traditional *son* was seen as part of a need to dampen down the potentially dangerous fires being lit by the increasingly unhealthy relationship between sex and money in many tourist nightspots. In other words, far from being an exercise in cultural imperialism, *Buena Vista Social Club* actually played a part in the revolutionary government's campaign against potentially dissident elements among its own country's youth.²⁴

The leading role of the Cubans becomes clear in a brief review of how the project started. Nick Gold, president of London's World Circuit records, realised that the international markets had overlooked some Cuban dance genres. He contacted Juan de Marcos González, a Cuban musician and producer and former leader of the band Sierra Maestra, who got together a group of musicians and singers to make the album *A toda Cuba le gusta*. Its success prompted Gold and Marcos González to contact Cooder with the prospect of making a record jointly with African and Cuban musicians. When the Africans (who included Ali Farka Toure, whom Cooder had accompanied on *Talking Timbuktu*) could not get visas in time, Gold and Cooder effectively improvised the project that eventually became the 1996 CD *Buena Vista Social Club*, Gold renewing his contact with Marcos González, who resuscitated many of those already used in *A toda Cuba le gusta* and rounded up a few others, notably Ibrahim Ferrer, who had dropped out of sight or retired.²⁵ The CD's success ensured solo albums for several of the Cubans, concert tours for the whole group, and the interest of Wenders, to whom Cooder had passed some early tapes for the CD. It is the Ferrer recording sessions in Cuba and the whole band's concerts in Amsterdam and New York that Wenders filmed in 1998.

While Marcos González is listed importantly as 'Artistic Consultant,' Cooder's only credited official roles is as one of the musicians listed in alphabetical order and one of two sound mixers (W. & D. Wenders 2000, 128), while he had rung Gold in London

²⁴ For detailed accounts of the social and political implications of what might be termed the 'dance music wars,' see, in addition to Perna (2002), the opposing perspectives in Godfried (2000) (pro-Cuban government and pro-*son*), and Fairley (2004) (much more receptive to what she sees as the liberatory aspects of the new dance music).

²⁵ Maya (2002, 184-192) shows that, contrary to the propaganda about the film that stated or implied that most of the musicians had been plucked from obscurity, many of the Cubans involved in the project had been working as regularly as they had wanted. Most of those interviewed in the film also say that they have a lot to thank the revolution for. See also the participants' own words in W. & D. Wenders (2000). Cooder is particularly grateful for Marcos González's location of Ferrer in Williamson (1999, 21).

just before the CD's release to get himself off the album except as producer, precisely to ensure the Cubans got their full recognition (Williamson, 1999, 21). It is usually (but not always) hard to hear him when he plays as just one more accompanist²⁶ and often difficult to pick him out onstage (Wenders complained that he 'always tried to disappear so much when the camera appeared' that in the concerts he is in the 'back row') (Falcon 1999, 25). While this is an exaggeration, Cooder is never up front but always only among the band (exactly as he appears in the group photo in front of Carnegie Hall). Capturing the band's collective ethos, Cooder underlines the 'feeling of brotherhood' among the Cuban musicians, while both Wenders and Cooder emphasise that it was the music, the musicians and their lives that were the reason for making the film at all, and the trumpeter Manuel Mirabel Vázquez believed that it was thanks to *Buena Vista Social Club* (the project, that is, not Wenders and Cooder as individuals) that they would all be so well remembered.²⁷

We can begin our look at the film itself by noting that the only scenes in which Cooder does get star status (along with his son) is in the shots of their motorbike and sidecar moving through the streets of Havana on the way to either the recording studio or wherever Wenders is filming the Cubans' lives outside their music. In other words, these shots are simply there as structural links in the narrative of the Cubans at home, at work or at play in Havana; they support those who really are the stars and allow Wenders to show the place where they clearly enjoy living (none gives the impression of wanting to be anywhere else, not even when they are being thrilled by New York). In fact, Wenders had wanted to end the movie in Havana because of this sense that this was where they all belonged and because they were 'dedicated socialists' (Falcon 1999, 26).

On one of these outings with singer and guitarist Compay Segundo, they go in search of the original Buena Vista Social Club. Underscoring how this film's title is a differently politicised kind of crossroads from the one embodied in *Paris, Texas*, the combination of English and Spanish in the name already associates it with the American penetration into pre-revolutionary Cuba. Wenders, Cooder and Compay Segundo do not find the

²⁶ Chanan (1999, 153) correctly describes his playing as 'discreet'.

²⁷ The photo is in W. & D. Wenders (2000, 124-25), while Cooder's words are on page 121. For Wenders and Cooder on why they came to do the film, see pages 13, 15 and 117, 120 respectively, while Vázquez is quoted on page 85.

Club since it was closed down at the start of the revolution, although some of the neighbours they ask claim to remember it (W. & D. Wenders 2000, 20). Apparently, it was one of the relatively few music halls of its kind to let blacks in (Hernández 2002, 66), and would therefore have been important as a place where an otherwise marginalised community could gather together and enjoy itself. While such venues were replaced by those that grew up as products of official revolutionary policy, its absence, like the vacant lot in *Paris, Texas*, looks not backward to some pre-revolutionary golden age in the past (as in the earlier film, that is accepted as gone, illusory or destroyed), but forwards to a point of meeting or convergence, a moment of being together.

The main issue is where in *Buena Vista Social Club* this might be. It might be tempting to say New York since the film ends there and the Cuban musicians are entranced by its sights and sounds. However despite some critics' comments on these scenes,²⁸ the Cubans do not convert to capitalism there. However, what they *do* exhibit is a childlike, wide-eyed sense of wonder, surprisingly similar to that expressed about Cuba and its musicians by Cooder and Wenders,²⁹ and evidently just as open to misinterpretation. Moreover, Wenders's understanding of the Cubans' sense of home reinforces his own appreciation of the dramatic interplay between home, travelling and return (Wenders 2001, 315-6). But most tellingly, we have the evidence provided by *Paris, Texas*. We first see Travis's brother Walt, the character most attracted by the allure of consumerist fantasies, talking on a then state-of-the-art cordless telephone in front of a skyscraper. Suddenly the skyscraper starts to move, as though built on quicksand or suddenly succumbing to earthquake or terrorist attack, but we see instead that it is one of Walt's billboard ads being manipulated into position. In the words of one of the critics who usefully refract the film through the prism of Baudrillard's provocative early essays on simulacra, 'simulation replaces identity and marks its absence' (Watt 1987, 76). Wenders is not going to be impressed by anyone taken in by such treacherous delusions, and the Cubans are not ('Everything's for sale here,' Compay Segundo remarks on looking in a shopwindow displaying plastic models of everybody from US presidents to the cast of *South Park*). The counter-posed attractions of Havana are not, as *Buena Vista Social Club*'s opponents would have us believe, based on some equally deceptive old-

²⁸ See, for example, de la Campa (2003, 151) and Bromley (2001, 108).

²⁹ See the director's foreword to W. & D. Wenders (2000, 11-15) and the interview with Cooder by Peter Kemper in the same book (117-121).

world picturesque innocence, but on the fact that it is just what it is, in all its pastel shaded, withered flower poverty, a home to people who value a real sense of community and solidarity.

But the site where the dream of togetherness is fully realised in *Buena Vista* is the space where music is made and played: the recording studio and, most spectacularly, the concert hall stage, where the feelings of being and belonging join the acts of imagining and creating. These sections of the film are its backbone and occupy most of its time. One of them, in which Ibrahim Ferrer mid-concert wipes a tear from Omara Portuondo's eye (the moment most admired by Wenders himself [Falcon 1999, 26]), equals in intimacy only Ferrer's display of his altar in his home or in generosity the 90 year old Rubén González's other act of music making as he plays piano in a decaying mansion for young girls to practice ballet, an unsurpassed image of old age lending its time and expertise to the youngest of those born since 1959.

Consequently, the montage of scenes that Wenders intercuts with the closing concert footage from Carnegie Hall is a microcosm of the whole film's concerns. Passing from rehearsal to performance, clips from different songs in the concert are at first interrupted by shots of the Cubans sightseeing, where they unsurprisingly behave like tourists overwhelmed by the sheer extravagance of New York.³⁰ However, presumably as an alternative to ending the film in Havana as Wenders had wished, these are contrasted with street scenes from the Cuban capital. This in turn allows Wenders to include two crucial moments at the film's close. Firstly, the juxtaposition of a suddenly serious Ibrahim Ferrer on stage with a brief extract from the interview with him illustrating his Santería faith by brandishing the staff he has kept with him since his mother died, suggest he is remembering his origins even while onstage abroad. Secondly, he includes three Havana street scape signs: the first the sign board of a supermarket with the anti-capitalist name 'Karl Marx,' its second 'r' hanging loose, while the others are revolutionary slogans that recall analytically the commercial advertising lambasted in *Paris, Texas*. But if that movie ended, we remember, with a bank's promise that 'Together We Can Make It Happen,' the streets of Havana remind us that 'This

³⁰ For post-9/11 viewers, the film's moment of poignant nostalgia is not of the kind denounced by its critics but the one revealed by the sight of the Twin Towers in Manhattan seen from the top of the Empire State Building.

Revolution is Eternal' and 'We Believe in Dreams'. And it is the fact that the revolution continues to inspire hope despite the poverty revealed by peeling paint and rusting metal that guarantees the integrity of the impulses that generated these messages, while the excess of wealth exposes the hypocrisy of Walt's (and New York's and Hollywood's) hyperbolic hard sell (how much real solidarity is there between a bank's shareholders and customers such as Travis?).

We then return to the Carnegie Hall stage as a member of the audience hands Juan de Marcos González, who is dressed as much like Che Guevara as concert etiquette permits, a Cuban flag that is then unfolded and waved by some of the Cuban musicians and singers. As Bromley observes: 'The Buena Vista is the catalyst and medium for this ensemble which is a work of anamnesis, a bringing into consciousness of heritage and history. The Cuban flag unfurled in Carnegie Hall was both an act of defiance and a sign of healing, a maker of a possible future' (Bromley 2001, 109). As the final credits roll, Marcos González introduces all the musicians by name, leaving the Cooders till last, while Cooder introduces 'my friend' Marcos González (who had, of course, omitted himself from the line-up). And if Cooder gets to take a solo bow, it is only to acknowledge his audience of compatriots and because Wenders's involvement was the one thing entirely due to Cooder's intervention. The film's close unites German, American and Cubans in a fond farewell gesture of solidarity.

But this is only possible because film itself allows Wenders and Cooder to realise *their* dreams. Wenders discovered early in his career that 'refusing to explain things was right and that you could explain them well enough by just showing them' (Dawson 1976, 10). He later expanded on this saying that he wanted to make films that allowed the viewer 'to put [them] together in his own way' so that 'they can exist in the imagination of each member of the audience': 'I try not to do too much finger-wagging and just leave the things there, so that you're free to see something or not, just as you are in life' (Wenders 2001, 311). While realising that such a sensual openness is a kind of utopia, for Wenders it must exist to make filmmaking worthwhile at all (347). In the case of *Buena Vista Social Club*, it is the resulting lack of explicit endorsement of any overt pro-revolution propagandist message that, I suspect, many commentators have mistaken as conservative or quietist complicity with the ideology of an economic imperialism that has sought to exploit the film for its own ends. Wenders has opted to run this risk in his

urge to serve both the subjects and the audiences of his films by deliberately leaving both as free as cinema allows. Persuasion through the montage of carefully filmed images is not the same as wilfully attempted manipulation for promotional purposes.

Similarly, Cooder regards his work as a maker of film scores as ‘a kind of service’ (Metting 2001, 16) which he sees as ‘much closer to being the music Ry Cooder likes to make than the Ry Cooder you *think* you’re listening to on Ry Cooder records’ because his soundtracks are free from the tyranny of the pop or rock music industry (Scherman 1985, 40).³¹ Once again, Cooder suggests that he can most fully be himself when he is lending his skills and craft to another’s vision. It is precisely Wenders and Cooder’s practice of creative collaboration as joint participation in a collective enterprise that brings us back to the notion of crossroads with which we began. For a crossroads is where the self and the other can meet but where each self must recognise that it *is* the other if that meeting is to be fully realised.

Paris, Texas shows that this event is possible by enacting a traumatic collision between the European and the North American which leaves reconciliation of the two as psychologically feasible; *Buena Vista Social Club* suggests that the Cuban revolution’s mingling of multiculturalism and socialist politics can make such a meeting happen on the stage of artistic creation and collaboration. The Cuban revolution’s very survival may well depend on its ability to become itself a crossroads of contributing agents if it is not to wind up as the scenario for some appalling rerun of the imperialist domination of the previous five hundred years. That was what resulted in the need for the kind of Buena Vista Social Club the last half century has endeavoured to make redundant.³²

Reference List

- Bromley, R. 1995, ‘Traversing Identity: Home Movies and Road Movies in *Paris, Texas*,’ *Angelaki*, vol. 2, no.1, 101-108.
- Bromley, R. 2001, *From Alice to Buena Vista. The Films of Wim Wenders*, Praeger, Westport.
- Carveth, D.L. 1997, ‘The Borderline Dilemma in *Paris, Texas*: Psychoanalytic Approaches to Sam Shepard,’ *PsyArt* [internet journal], <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipsa/journal/1997_carveth01.shtml> (accessed June 2006).
- Catfish 2002, *The Roots of Ry Cooder*, Catfish CD No. KATCD216N.
- Chanan, M. 1999, ‘Play It Again, or, Old-Time Cuban Music on the Screen,’ *New Left Review*, no. 238, 150-156.

³¹ Lack 1997, 219, makes a similar point about many rock musicians’ experience of working with film.

³² The author would like to thank Paul Allatson, and *Portal*’s two anonymous readers who read an earlier draft of this article. Their painstaking comments greatly helped with its revision.

- Clum, J.M. 2002, 'The Classic Western and Sam Shepard's Family Sagas,' in M. Roudané (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 171-188.
- Cooder, R. 1970, *Ry Cooder*, Warner Archives CD no. 7599-27510-2.
- Cooder, R. 1985, *Paris, Texas*, Warner Brothers CD no. 25270-2.
- Cooder, R. 2001, *Paris, Texas*, Warner Brothers CD no. 9362480892.
- Cooder, R. 2005, *Chávez Ravine*, Nonesuch CD No. 7559796772.
- Cook, R.F. 1997, 'Postmodern Culture and Film Narrative: *Paris, Texas* and Beyond,' in R. F. Cook & G. Germünden (eds), *The Cinema of Wim Wenders*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 121-135.
- Dawson, J. 1976, 'Interview with Wim Wenders,' in J. Dawson, *Wim Wenders*, trans. C. Wartenberg, Zoetrope, New York, 4-24.
- de la Campa, R. 2003, 'Globalización y nostalgia: *Buena Vista Social Club*,' in H. Herlinghaus & M. Moraña (eds), *Fronteras de la modernidad en América Latina*, Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana, Pittsburgh, 143-156.
- Denzin, N. 1991, *Images of Postmodern Society: Social Theory and Contemporary Cinema*, Sage, London, 137-148.
- Drieckmann, K. 1984-85, 'Wim Wenders: An Interview,' *Film Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2-7.
- Fairley, J. 2004, "'Ay Dios, Ampárame'" (O God, Protect Me): Music in Cuba during the 1990s, the Special Period,' in K. Dawe (ed.), *Island Musics*, Berg, Oxford/New York, 77-97.
- Falcon, R. 1999, 'The Heavens Over Havana' [interview with Wim Wenders], *Sight and Sound*, vol. 9, no. 10 (October), 24-6.
- Fernández, R.A. 2006, *From Afro-Cuban Rhythms to Latin Jazz*, California University Press, Berkeley.
- Fishell, S. 1980, 'Ry Cooder: Ethnic Roots, Stylistic Innovations,' *Guitar Player*, vol. 14, no. 3 (March), 58-88.
- Fleder, R. 1971, 'It Comes from Delta Music Somehow,' *Sing Out*, vol. 20, no. 6, 1-6.
- Forte, D. 1988, 'Ry Cooder: In search of the Big Note,' *Guitar Player*, vol. 22, no. 3 (1988), 32-48.
- Geist, K. 1988, *The Cinema of Wim Wenders. From Paris, France to Paris, Texas*, UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, 111-125.
- Godfried, E. 2000, 'Buena Vista Social Club: Critics, Self-Criticism and the Survival of Cuban *Son*,' online at <http://afrocubaweb.com/eugenegodfried/buenavistacritics.htm> (accessed July 2006).
- Greenberg, A. 1994, *Love in Vain: A Vision of Robert Johnson*, Da Capo, New York.
- Guralnick, P. 1998, *Searching for Robert Johnson*, Plume, New York.
- Hernández, T.K. 2002, 'The Buena Vista Social Club: The Racial Politics of Nostalgia,' in M. Habell-Pallán. & M. Romero (eds), *Latino/a Popular Culture*, New York University Press, New York, 61-72.
- Irwin, M. 1991, 'Romancing the American Desert (A Second Look),' *Denver Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 2, 96-101.
- Johnson, B. W. 1998, *Dark Was the Night*, Columbia Legacy CD no. 65516.
- Kadish, D.Y. 1986, 'Crimes of Domestic Violence in *Paris, Texas*,' in D. Radcliffe-Umstead (ed.), *Crimes in Motion Pictures*, Kent State University Press, Kent, OH, 116-124.
- Kolker, R.P. & Beicken, P. 1993, *The Films of Wim Wenders*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Lack, R. 1997, *Twenty Four Frames Under: A Buried History of Film Music*, Quartet, London.
- Lev, P. 1993, *The Euro-American Cinema*, Texas University Press, Austin, 109-114.
- Lomax, A. 1993, *The Land Where The Blues Began*, Dell, New York.
- Luprecht, M. 1992, 'Freud at Paris, Texas: Penetrating the Oedipal Sub-Text,' *Literature Film Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 2, 115-120.
- Lyseight, G. 1994, 'Rytimes,' *Straight No Chaser*, no. 26 (Spring-Summer), 30-33.
- Marcus, G. 1997, *Mystery Train*, 4th edition, Plume, New York, 19-35 and 184-196.
- Maya, R. 2002, *Cuban Music*, trans. D. & G. Asfar, Latin America Bureau, London.
- Melis, D. 2000, 'Buena Vista Social Club' [review], *Chasqui Revista de Literatura Latinoamericana*, vol. 29, no. 1, 153-156.
- Metting, F. 2001, *The Unbroken Circle. Tradition and Innovation in the Music of Ry Cooder and Taj Mahal*, Scarecrow Press, Lanham and London.
- Miller, D. 1996, 'Ry Cooder: Evocative scores from a master of slide,' *Acoustic Guitar*, no. 43, 34-37.
- Oakley, G. 1976, *The Devil's Music. A History of the Blues*, BBC, London.
- Obrecht, J. 1993, *Blues Guitar: The Men Who Made the Music*, 2nd edition, Miller Freeman, San Francisco, 2-19.
- Palmer, R. 1982, *Deep Blues*, Penguin, New York.
- Palmer, R. 1995, *Rock and Roll: An Unruly History*, Harmony Books, New York.
- Perna, V.A. 2002, 'Dancing the Crisis, Singing the Past: Musical Dissonances in Cuba during the *Período Especial*,' *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 213-229.

- Rising Sons 1992, *Rising Sons*, Columbia Legacy CD No. CK 52828.
- Romney, J. & Wootton, A. 1995, *Celluloid Jukebox: Popular Music and the Movies Since the 1950s*, BFI, London.
- Rose, D.J. 2002, 'Sam Shepard as Musical Experimenter,' in M. Roudané (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 227-246.
- Rosen, C. 2004, *Sam Shepard*, Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke.
- Santoro, G. 1986, 'Ry Cooder: Blues and Roots,' *Down Beat*, no. 53 (August), 26-28.
- Scherman, T. 1985, 'Ry Cooder's Crossroads Blues,' *Rolling Stone*, no. 392, November, 38-40.
- Scherman, T. 1991, 'The Hellhound's Trail: Following Robert Johnson,' *Musician*, no. 147, 32-48.
- Silberman, M. 1995, *German Cinema: Texts in Context*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit.
- Smith, R.C. 1995, 'Open Narrative in Robbe-Grillet's *Glissements progressifs du plaisir* and Wim Wenders's *Paris, Texas*,' *Literature Film Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 1, 33-8.
- Tobler, J. & Grundy, S. 1984, *The Guitar Greats*, St. Martins, New York, 109-120.
- van Oostrum, D. 1994, 'Wim Wender's Euro-American Construction Site: *Paris, Texas* or *Texas, Paris*,' in R. Chapple (ed.), *Social and Political Change in Literature and Film*, Florida State University Press, Gainesville, 7-20.
- Watt, S. 1987, 'Simulation, Gender and Postmodernism: Sam Shepard and *Paris, Texas*,' *Perspectives on Contemporary Literature*, no. 13, 73-82.
- Wenders, W. 1996, *The End of Violence*, MGM video M207354 and DVD 907791.
- Wenders, W. 2001, *On Film. Essays and Interviews*, Faber, London.
- Wenders, W. 2003, *The Soul of a Man*, Snapper DVD No. SMADVD031.
- Wenders, W. & D. 2000, *Buena Vista Social Club. The Companion Book to the Film*, teNeues, New York.
- Williamson, N. 1999, 'Ry Comments,' *Folk Roots*, no. 193, 21-27.
- Zavarzadeh, M. 1996, 'The Cultural Politics of Intimacy – Biology and Ideology: The "Natural" Family in *Paris, Texas*,' in T. Ginsberg & K. M. Thompson (eds), *Perspectives on German Cinema*, G.K. Hall, New York, 309-321.