

Famous Cuban entertainers: The Buena Vista Social Club



The Buena Vista Social Club will perform at The White House in Washington, Tomorrow Oct. 15. The Cuban music veterans, who after almost 20 years of touring the world are on their farewell Adios tour in the U.S., will appear at a party to be attended by international diplomats on the closing day of Hispanic Heritage month.

There could not be a more perfect end of an era for the orchestra members, who could be called diplomats themselves. In 1997, the Buena Vista Social Club album, spearheaded by U.K. label World Circuit's Nick Gold and produced by American Ry Cooder, did what it would take President Obama two more decades to achieve. It broke through the Cuban embargo, through music, reaching out and creating a relationship with the American people on a massive level.

The record, and more so, the concerts that would follow, including one at Carnegie Hall, gave forbidden fruit a folksy face, in the form of a band of senior citizens with incredible charm and irresistible old songs. The fact that Buena Vista's traditional repertoire did not reflect what was actually popular in Havana at the time didn't matter in the end. The recording session, for which Cuban bandleader Juan de Marcos Gonzalez called-in a bunch of marvelous but mostly forgotten artists at Cooder's request, turned out to be a brilliant way to reconnect the shared past of Cuba and the United States.

Making history was not always easy. In 1998, Compay Segundo, the craggy-faced singer who emerged as the front man of the band, traveled to Miami with other Cuban musicians to perform at a music conference. They were received by Cuban exile protesters, and during the concert the hall had to be evacuated because of a bomb threat. Segundo, who was 90 years old at the time, presided over a press conference with the skill of a seasoned statesman.

Along with Ibrahim Ferer and Reuben Gonzalez, Segundo has since passed away. New, multi-generational musicians have stepped in to the orchestra over the years, maintaining the band's appeal while subtly updating its sound. The final U.S. tour, which wraps up in New York in January, has been selling out since it began in August.

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