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new york, inc.

Los Angeles Times

July 17, 2001

POP MUSIC REVIEW

Buena Vista Social Club Still Has Magic to Offer

ERNESTO LECHNER, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Amid a growing critical chorus that the Buena Vista Social Club has run its course and has nothing left to offer, members of the celebrated Cuban collective countered with a mesmerizing performance on Sunday at the Hollywood Bowl.

The capacity audience greeted pianist Ruben Gonzalez and singer Ibrahim Ferrer with the kind of feverish adoration usually reserved for rock stars, underscoring the popularity that the elderly musicians have found with their string of recent albums and a sweetly nostalgic documentary film by Wim Wenders.

Spearheaded by American musician-producer Ry Cooder, the Buena Vista Social Club brought a bunch of talented artists out of retirement, igniting a genuine interest in the beauty of traditional Cuban folklore. For the last four years it has given the world a faithful, flavorful representation of what Latin music is all about. Given that, the current, perhaps inevitable, backlash seems unfair and petty. And even though Sunday's show was a virtual re-creation of previous performances by Ferrer and his orchestra, there was much to enjoy--and much to discover.

Looking significantly more fragile than he did last year, Gonzalez performed only three tunes: "Mandinga," the Orquesta Aragon classic "El Bodeguero" and "Chanchullo," the title track from his second solo album.

Other, more virtuosic pianists were present on Sunday's bill: the prodigious Chucho Valdes, who performed with his Latin jazz quartet as the opening act, and the remarkably fluid Roberto Fonseca, backing Ferrer.

Gonzalez can't match those two in terms of technical skills, but he more than makes up for it with the warmth of his sound and the smoky, delightful flavor of his improvisations.

As a singer, Ferrer also compensates for his technical shortcomings with his endearing persona and his ability to express inexhaustible joy (in the raucous "Marieta") and longing (the sadder-than-sad bolero "Herido de Sombras").

Without key Buena Vista members such as Omara Portuondo, bassist Cachaito and *timbalero* Amadito Valdes (all of whom are working on other Buena Vista projects), Ferrer's band has perfected a more spare, slightly darker, intensely opulent sound.

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