

**The following interview with  
RY COODER  
was conducted by the Library of Congress  
on April 25, 2022**



**Library of Congress: In your opinion, what are the most unique, distinctive elements of Cuban jazz?**

Ry Cooder: There's really two types: there's Cuban jazz, or Latin jazz, and then there's the traditional, a pre-jazz form that we know as *son*.

*Son* came first. Its development came out of certain classical elements. It came from Chopin and other French composers but mainly Chopin. It's interesting to know that a couple of early [Cuban] composers went to France to learn these changes, the chord changes, that Chopin and others had developed and that's the *son* form. Chopin was so good at structure, a genius at it. So one of them went over there and learned it from Chopin, or a Chopin protégé, and they learned it and brought it back to Cuba.

At the same time, you had two Cuban strains: the African (rhythm strain) and then the European, or Spanish influence...

And along came songwriting—poetry. Cubans are good at poetry. The poetry provided the topics—what to sing about. There was, in the poetry, a great patriotic tendency—Cuban was under the [control] of the Spanish. Cubans are very romantic in nature. So they have this enhanced romanticism that then created love songs.

And then you blend these. The poetry they had and with this new Europe influence, that created *son*....

And then you had the dance rhythm, [that came] from the African side. It's downbeats versus upbeats. In the African style, it's all about the upbeats. It's what came to be known as syncopation. A pulse is contra to downbeats, they go against. The upbeats is the African feeling. That became the Cuba, the primary concept in the *son*. Right from the beginning to now.

Once you can do that, you can do anything you want to do.

It's a dance form... As they say, "All coming up through the legs!" It's a Baroque Spanish.

And dancers have always been the leaders. Musicians play what the dancers want to dance to. They like the slow, the *son*, and then it evolved into other tempos and that became salsa. As society sped up, the music sped up. If you go do Havana today, there are some Olympic-grade salsa dancers who are doing things with their bodies that I could never do. You have to be athletic for that dance but they are an athletic nation. The way they walk, move around; this is a nation of athletes.

Cuban jazz began to develop in '30s alongside swing and be-bop coming from America. Radio, of course, was very big and they heard this stuff. After all, geographically, they are not far from it.

Machito wanted to leave Cuba and he came to New York. Then [he] brought it back and the result was bigger bands, the *son* orchestra.

Perez Prado was an innovator in arranging. He found success in Mexico. The recording industry never took off in Cuba but it did in Mexico City.

Benny More, in the 1950s, took up where Prado left off and the bands got even bigger!

One thing that is nice: Cuba--music never goes out of style. Nothing got thrown out. [When we were there,] you could make telephone calls and gather up all these marvelous players. It was amazing to be with these people who are so ...fluent in various styles.

“Buena Vista Social Club” blended people together who would not have played together otherwise.

We said, “We can’t duplicate the old records; we want to do something different.” We wanted to combine some of these players and hope they will be compatible. But Cubans—they don’t go on the star system ...they weren’t about producing stars, the music is more a group concept. That’s why they’re sound so good when they play together...they are good at finding the center and everyone is marvelous. Sadly, most have died since the record was made.

Latin music is always changing. Hip hop is big now, it’s a trend in Cuba. Even the government has supported it; they think it reflects the culture of black Cubans. We were lucky, we caught the tail end of the comet. It was the last minute to do this this before everyone was too old and too weak. Then the communal feel is lost. Once the culture of the music is lost, you can’t get it back. The loss of the record industry, the collapse of the industry built around radio and retail, how can you do it now? I still make records...It’s all I really know how to do. Luckily, we got [“Buena Vista”] totally by accident; fate intervened.

**LC: I heard that the album was made in just six days! How in the world did you manage to achieve what you did—an album with 14 different performances—in less than a week?**

RC: Actually, it was eight days total but three were gobbled up with electrical problems, rain coming in through the roof and other technical problems.

Electricity. Cubans don’t care much about electricity but we said, “This studio has to work. We found out that the whole control room--the console, the speakers--were all being fed through one outlet! And they were like “That’s how we do it.”

So we were like “What are we going to do?”

Then someone said, “I have a friend who has an extension cord.”

Well, that's great that you have a friend with an extension cord but we need to re-wire the whole thing.

The tape machine never worked and if it rained too hard that would knock the power out.... Then we'd get set to record and someone would yell, "Wait, I have to tune again" or "The bass part is incorrect!"

And I just had to yell, "We have to count off and play!" What I mostly did was beg, plead and then stop talking. It was a bit like herding cats. But then it got done.

**LC: How much of a problem was the language barrier?**

RC: Well, none of them spoke English. We had a translator but he was an academic translator who was of no use at all. They don't understand music.

We finally came up with a translator from the Film Institute. She was the greatest thing—she had learned English from her father's murder book collection. Her father had all these paperbacks. How he collected these in the 1940s, I don't know how he got them but she had learned English from them. And she had been around music all her life. So, in the end, she ran the whole thing. Her name was Toti. I sometimes said to her, "You know what I like, you do it." I think she "produced" the record.

The room was a lot of trouble but you can make a room sound like it's in a closet or you can make it big. We miked the room like it's being satiated by the sound. We'd have the musicians come into the booth and listen; they weren't used to this. They knew they sounded good. They'd sit there all day and night and enjoy themselves. I'd finally go up to bed... We could have stayed there indefinitely but we only stayed eight days—it had something to do with visas.

**LC: Was there anything left out of the album or was everything recorded for the album put on it?**

RC: Well, recently, in 2021, we put out a 25th anniversary of the album and we put five songs that were not part of the original on it and I'm not sure why they had been left off. It could be because they didn't want two CD's or a two LP package; it would have been too expensive to market.

But they are very good songs so we put the five back. And they added more photos and text and stories! BMG did this. Very elaborate and it's \$150 or something. Too bad nobody buys records anymore! I don't even have a copy!

**LOC: As a musician, what did you learn most from those six, eight, days?**

RC: I'll tell you it was a master class for me and for my son, Joaquin. To be around these guys! The *clave*--I got straight on that. The key thing, you have to feel it; be settled in it. I'm a much better player and fluent player now. It's how you get when you are around these guys.

Some of the players, they'd show me on the guitar. And I'd think, "He's 90. He's pre-media, pre-TV and radio" and he has a whole different touch on the instrument. And I'd try to synch...

You know, all recording is all a matter of problem solving. To understand quickly. No matter how many times—every time is different. There are new problems, new solutions. It's about adaptation. And as a musician, a player, the exciting thing is to learn things. If I had to play the

same thing every time, I'd go out of my mind. The idea of learning and seeing how things get done is the most interesting part.