

## Buena Vista Social Club Background Information

Note: This resource is intended for teachers to build their own background and thus facilitate deeper conversations about the Buena Vista Social Club, as appropriate for the classroom community.

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Abandoned building in Almendares, Marianao, that housed the Buenavista Social Club in the 1940s.



The Buenavista Social Club was a members-only club originally located in Buenavista (literally *good view*), a quarter in the current neighbourhood of Playa (before 1976 part of Marianao), one of the 15 municipalities in Cuba's capital, Havana. The original club was founded in 1932 in a small wooden venue at *calle Consulado y paisaje "A"* (currently *calle 29, n. 6007*).<sup>[3]</sup> In 1939, due to lack of space the club relocated to number 4610 on Avenue 31, between *calles 46 and 48*, in Almendares, Marianao.<sup>[3]</sup> This location is recalled by Juan Cruz, former director of the Marianao Social Club and *master of ceremonies* at the *Salón Rosado de la Tropical* (other nightclubs in Havana).<sup>[4]</sup> As seen in the *Buena Vista Social Club* documentary, when musicians Ry Cooder, Compay Segundo, and a film crew attempted to identify the location of the club in the 1990s, local people could not agree on where it had stood.<sup>[5]</sup>

At the time, clubs in Cuba were segregated; there were *sociedades del blancos* (white societies), *sociedades de negros* (black societies), etc. The Buenavista Social Club operated as a black society, which was rooted in a *cabildo*. Cabildos were *fraternities* organized during the 19th century by African slaves. The existence of many other black societies such as Marianao Social Club, Unión Fraternal, Club Atenas (whose members included doctors and engineers), and Buenavista Social Club, exemplified the remnants of *institutionalized* racial discrimination against *Afro-Cubans*.<sup>[4][6]</sup> These societies operated as recreational centers where workers went to drink, play games, dance and listen to music. In the words of Ry Cooder,

*Society in Cuba and in the Caribbean including New Orleans, as far as I know, was organized around these fraternal social clubs. There were clubs of cigar wrappers, clubs for baseball players and they'd play sports and cards—whatever it is they did in their club—and they had mascots, like dogs. At the Buena Vista Social Club, musicians went there to hang out with each other, like they used to do at musicians' unions in the U.S., and they'd have dances and activities.*<sup>[5]</sup>

As a music venue, the Buenavista Social Club experienced the peak of Havana's nightclub life, when *charangas* and *conjuntos* played several sets every night, going from club to club over the

course of a week. Often, bands would dedicate songs to the clubs where they played. In the case of the Buenavista Social Club, an eponymous danzón was composed by [Israel López "Cachao"](#) in 1938, and performed with *Arcaño y sus Maravillas*. In addition, [Arsenio Rodríguez](#) dedicated "Buenavista en guaguancó" to the same place. Together with Orquesta Melodías del 40, the Maravillas and Arsenio's conjunto were known as *Los Tres Grandes* (The Big Three), drawing the largest audiences wherever they played.<sup>[7]</sup> This vibrant time in Havana were described by pianist [Rubén González](#), who played in Arsenio's conjunto, as "an era of real musical life in Cuba, when there was very little money to earn, but everyone played because they really wanted to".<sup>[8]</sup>

### **After the Revolution**

Shortly after the [Cuban Revolution](#) of 1959, newly elected [Cuban President Manuel Urrutia Lleó](#), a devout Christian and [liberal](#), began a program of closing gambling outlets, nightclubs, and other establishments associated with Havana's hedonistic lifestyle. This had an immediate impact on the livelihoods of local entertainers.<sup>[9]</sup> As the Cuban government rapidly shifted towards the [left](#) in an effort to build a "classless and colourblind society", it struggled to define policy toward forms of cultural expression in the black community; expressions which had implicitly emphasized cultural differences.<sup>[10]</sup> Consequently, the cultural and social centers were abolished, including the Afro-Cuban mutual aid *Sociedades de Color* in 1962, to make way for racially integrated societies.<sup>[4][11]</sup> Private festivities were limited to weekend parties and organizers' funds were confiscated.<sup>[12]</sup> The measures meant the closure of the Buena Vista Social Club.<sup>[6]</sup> Although the Cuban government continued to support traditional music after the revolution, certain favor was given to the politically charged [nueva trova](#), and poetic singer-songwriters such as [Silvio Rodríguez](#) and [Pablo Milanés](#). The emergence of pop music and [salsa](#), a style derived from Cuban music but developed in the United States, meant that [son music](#) became even less common.<sup>[13]</sup>

Cuban music experienced quite radical change in the 1960s, as [National Geographic](#) notes:

Cuban dance music also witnessed dramatic change beginning in the late 1960s, as groups explored the fusion of Cuban son with American rock, jazz and funk styles. Groups such as Los Van Van and Irakere established modern forms of Cuban music, paving the way for new rhythms and dances to emerge as well as fresh concepts in instrumentation. ... Cuba's dance music had already inspired a change from the older son-style dances, as younger Cubans broke free of step-oriented dances...<sup>[14]</sup>

The occurrence of these closures and the change in traditions is the simplest explanation of why many musicians were out of work, and why their style of music had declined before the Buena Vista Social Club made it popular again.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buena\\_Vista\\_Social\\_Club](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buena_Vista_Social_Club)