

ICWA LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

TRUSTEES

Bryn Barnard
Carole Beaulieu
Mary Lynne Bird
William F. Foote
Peter Geithner
Pramila Jayapal
Peter Bird Martin
Judith Mayer
Dorothy S. Patterson
Paul A. Rahe
Carol Rose
John Spencer
Edmund Sutton
Dirk J. Vandewalle
Sally Wriggins

HONORARY TRUSTEES

David Elliot
David Hapgood
Pat M. Holt
Edwin S. Munger
Richard H. Nolte
Albert Ravenholt
Phillips Talbot

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

BPE 16
THE AMERICAS

Paige Evans is an Institute Fellow looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts.

Buena Vista: Good View

HAVANA, Cuba

December, 1999

By Paige Evans

Over *cafe con leche* at Havana's Hotel Victoria, my U.S. friend Tom Miller, a top-notch nonfiction writer and authority on things Cuban, describes the story he's here writing for *Smithsonian* magazine about a Havana guitar-maker crafting a *tres* — a six-string Cuban guitar — for the U.S. musician Ry Cooder. Like countless minions across the world, I'm a huge fan of Cooder's Grammy Award-winning album "The Buena Vista Social Club," on which he performs Cuban classics with a group of extraordinary, aged Cuban musicians.

Tom mentions, too, that Cooder's been rehearsing here with the group for their upcoming U.S. tour. I try to restrain myself but can't let this opportunity pass unexploited. In a tone just shy of pleading, I ask whether I can tag along to a Buena Vista Social Club rehearsal. Tom swiftly dashes my hopes, explaining that Buena Vista's rehearsals are open only to a select few. But he invites me to dinner Saturday with Cooder, himself and a few others.

* * *

While Tom searches the opulent Hotel Nacional for the Cooder coterie, I chat with his Cuban driver, Osvaldo — a reserved, neatly-dressed man with a classic silver watch on his left wrist, a sporty black plastic one strapped to his right. When I ask about his two watches, Osvaldo tells me the sporty watch was a gift from his elder daughter, who visited Cuba recently after being away for 13 years. Though both his daughters live only a hundred or so miles from Cuba in southern Florida, Osvaldo has never visited the United States.

We start to discuss the decades-long antagonism between Cuba and the United States, and Osvaldo's expression hardens. "It is like two stubborn young boys, waving their fists at each other — for forty years!" he barks. "It is ridiculous. When is this situation going to change?! The Cuban people have suffered long enough!"

* * *

Naty Revuelta awaits us atop a winding stone staircase at her home in Nuevo Vedado. A 74-year-old who was a bourgeois doctor's wife during the Batista era and then became a revolutionary after falling in love with the young, imprisoned Fidel Castro, Naty exudes sophistication and dignity. In fluid, charmingly-accented English, she greets Tom and me (she smiles at my pregnant belly and notes how my life has changed since she saw me last, over a year ago), the reticent Ry Cooder, his effusive wife Susie and the Cooders' buddy John.

We pass through her entrance hall, where a large portrait of Naty as a

stunning, expressionless young socialite looms to the left of the door. In the living room, we pause to admire the jumble of oil paintings lining the walls and the array of antique furniture and collectibles. Two ladies with ebony skin sit silently watching television in the adjacent sitting room.

Susie gushes compliments about Naty's beautiful house. John, a mellow fellow with long white hair and a Hawaiian shirt, tells our host: "I spoke with my wife earlier and told her we were coming here tonight. She said how lucky I am to visit someone's home while I'm here." Naty graciously agrees: "I always think it's important when traveling — to visit with someone who lives in a place." We all nod, and Tom good-naturedly interjects: "You must agree, though, Naty. Yours is not a typical Cuban home."

Naty ushers us to a lushly-planted, glassed-in terrace and encourages us to sit. Ry, an expansive man, squeezes long limbs onto a cramped cast iron love seat. I settle my swelling belly into a more capacious rocking chair and feel chagrined about it. Once we're all seated, Naty announces: "I have whisky, and I have rum. Seven year rum, five year rum and three year rum." We all hesitate, then mumble responses. Naty offers me grape juice or water. She starts to withdraw, and I heave myself up from my chair and follow along to help.

Naty's kitchen is more spacious than any I've seen in a Cuban home. At its center an ample table is heaped with painted antique platters, a silver tea set and good china. As she fills a silver bucket with ice, Naty tells me: "Before the Revolution, many Cuban families — even

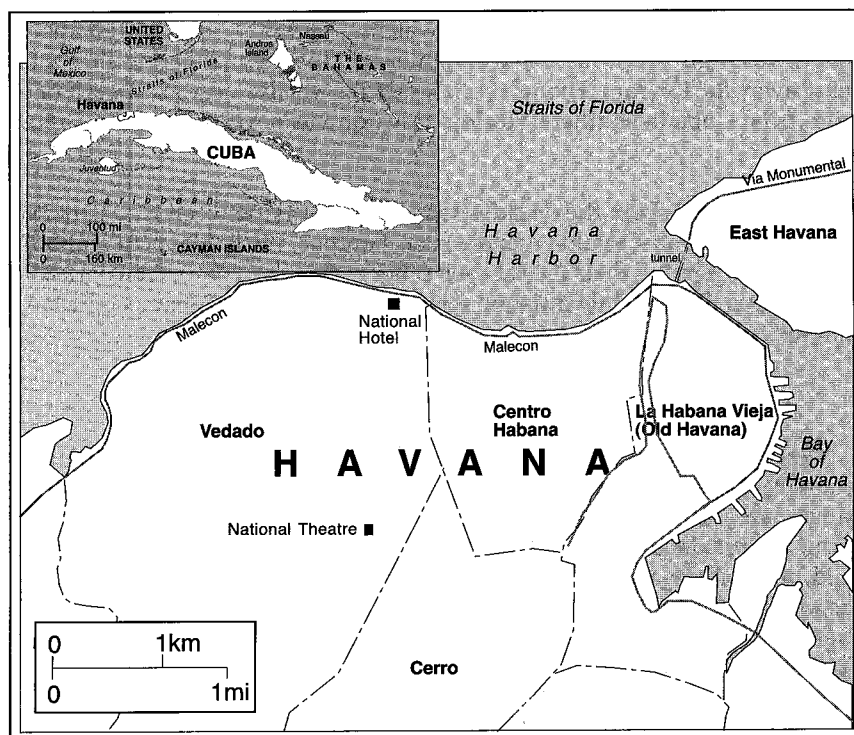
those who weren't terribly wealthy — had some good silver, a set of fine china and crystal glasses. But, like the precious antiques that once filled wealthier people's homes, many of these have been sold off over the years. Mostly by the government. The state hasn't preserved anything. They've raped this country."

On reading Wendy Gimbel's *Havana Dreams*, about Naty's passion for Fidel and its effect on four generations of women in her family, I'd gathered Naty remains infatuated with Castro. So her criticism of Cuba's Revolutionary government and the current state of things here surprises me. But her tone — unlike that of many Cubans when criticizing the government — is meditative rather than bitter or rancorous. "There was so much of value here, and it's almost all gone. Families are forced to sell off what little they have left, usually for much less than their heirlooms are worth."

The "grape juice" Naty offered turns out to be bright purple grape soda. I loathe grape soda; but, as Naty is already pouring it into a tall glass, I don't mention the fact. Naty reflects: "I hope a musician will be Cuba's next leader." Most Cubans refrain from speaking openly about Castro's successor — because they're afraid to do so or figure Fidel may survive for decades or think a change of leaders won't make a difference. "It's a silly fantasy, I know. But there are so many wonderful musicians in this country. Not the young salsa musicians who are suddenly so popular all over the world. They're a fad. I don't trust fads. But the older musicians, the ones in their fifties or sixties. Some of them are so talented, I imagine they must be able to run a country."

She hands me the glass of grape soda and, standing on tiptoe (she's a petite woman), reaches into a cupboard for bottles of Johnny Walker Red and Havana Club seven year rum. "The art schools have terrible conditions. We all know that. The music students lack instruments, the dancers wear one pair of ballet slippers for an entire year. But the training here is excellent. The schools don't just teach one technique, like Martha Graham or Alvin Ailey. They teach them all. And they teach them well. Very well. Of course, many of our best teachers and artists have left the country. That is another one of our tragedies."

Naty places the bottles on a silver tray beside the ice bucket and encircles them with crystal glasses. "The most interesting Cuban literature in the past forty years has been written by those who have left.



They can write more freely. Artists need to be able to express themselves to create. The government here has never really supported artists, though it pretends to. It has just allowed them to exist. Artists are by nature free thinkers. And that is seen as a threat in this country."

Back on the terrace, Tom opens his satchel and, like an Information Age Santa, lavishes Naty with gifts from the world outside: "*The Los Angeles Times*" Book Review, last Sunday's overstuffed "*New York Times*," Sotheby's Latin America Antiques Catalogue. Naty's thrilled. Leafing through the Sotheby's catalogue, she exclaims: "How wonderful, Tom! Wonderful! One sells things, but one is never sure what the price should be."

Tom suggests that Ry and John, who owns a Marin County used-record store geared towards collectors, would like to see Naty's records. She demurs, claiming her collection is too disordered and difficult to comb through. Turning to Ry, she adds: "Mostly, I have traditional music. Much of it's from the 1950s. I have a good deal of those old records, the ones that make thirty-three revolutions per minute."

Tom quips: "Speaking of revolutions, Naty, how's Cuba?" For a moment, Naty is flabbergasted. She sputters: "Tom, you've embarrassed me." Then she regains her characteristic composure. Addressing the group, she replies: "Cuba used to export war, guns and soldiers. Now, we are exporting doctors, artists and musicians. It is much better this way, don't you think?"

Later, when we're standing beside each other in the living room, Susie whispers to me: "Do you think Naty minds talking about the book?" I tell her I discussed *Havana Dreams* once with Naty, and, though critical of it, she doesn't seem averse to airing the subject.

Then I add: "From what I remember, her main objections to the book were that it was much more personal than she'd originally thought it would be, and that it treated her daughter unfairly."

"Really?!" Susie exclaims. "How interesting! I'd love to talk with her about that. I'd love to talk with you more about that."

Naty joins us, and she and Susie chat about a Cubist landscape hanging above the living room doorway. When I notice Ry standing alone before the portrait in Naty's entrance way, I nervously sidle up to him and blurt out: "I wanted to tell you how much I love the album you made with Ali Farka Touré." ("The Buena Vista Social Club" is the most recent in a series of recordings Cooder has done with musicians around the world. An album he made years ago with the Nigerian musician Ali Farka Touré is one of my all-time favorites.)

Ry mutters "Thank you," and we hover uncomfort-

ably by the front door as everyone gathers to go out to dinner.

While crossing the garden of La Cecilia, an overpriced tourist restaurant on Havana's still-elegant Fifth Avenue, Naty points to a cluster of small cottages and says: "This used to be a *posada*" — a couples' hotel with rooms rented by the hour for amorous trysts. "An upper-class *posada*. Not like those terrible places they have now."

La Cecilia's dining area, a neon-lit patio under a palm-thatched roof, is nearly empty; only one table besides ours is occupied. We peruse plastic-coated menus. Naty recommends a Chilean white wine, and Tom orders a bottle. When the waiter circles the table filling wine glasses, Susie (who's seated to my right) covers my glass and says "No." Irked by her presumption, I ask the waiter to pour me a taste. Susie is appalled. She sputters: "I don't know why I'm feeling so protective of this child. I just think it's best to avoid the things we know aren't good for it."

A trio on a guitar, *tres* (a smallesh guitar with three sets of double strings) and bongos approaches our table, and Ry grumbles: "Uh-oh. Looks like we're gonna be serenaded." Once the trio begins to play, though, his attitude changes dramatically. Tapping his foot, shaking his head, he's enraptured by the music. When John speaks to him, he doesn't respond. He's been transported to another, musical world.

When the musicians ask for requests, John suggests "*Y Tu Que Has Hecho?*" Groaning, Susie protests: "No, please! Nothing from 'Buena Vista!'" But the trio plays "*Y Tu Que Has Hecho?*" nonetheless, and Naty translates the *bolero's* lyrics: "On the trunk of a tree, a girl wrote her name. The tree was moved and gave her a flower. I am that tree. You wounded my bark. What have you done with the flower I gave you?" Afterwards, Tom tips the musicians, and they stroll towards the bar.

Ry is ecstatic. Over and over again, he intones: "That guy was great! The guy on the *tres*, the lead singer. He was great! Much better than most of the guys I've seen in L.A.!"

The abundance of skilled musicians in Cuba, a relatively small country, is striking. A talented musician performing for such a sparse audience bears testament to the glut. But places like La Cecilia are more desirable venues than they might seem. Most musicians who perform solely within Cuba — as opposed to those fortunate few who tour abroad for international pay, the bulk of which the state now allows them to keep — long to play in tourist establishments, where they can earn tips and sell their tapes or CDs for dollars. They're limited to playing a standard repertoire of tourist favorites (the oldies-but-goodies Cooder collected on his "Buena Vista" album), but with one set they can earn a tip worth more

than a month's salary offered by the state.

As our food — the standard bland, overpriced fare served in most Cuban tourist restaurants — is served, Susie asks Naty about her family. Naty says she's the only one still in Cuba; all her other family members have left for other countries. "My eldest daughter lives in the United States. I haven't seen her for sixteen years. My younger daughter now lives in Spain. It's been more than three years since I last saw her. My granddaughter is in college in Florida. I hadn't seen her for even longer, until she came back to visit me last year.

"My granddaughter was very struck by the decay in Havana. She hadn't noticed it so much when she was growing up here, of course. It was all she knew. But she also felt a magic in Cuba, a magic she hasn't found in the United States." There is a magic in Cuba: a romance, a poetry of spirit and the luxury of time: to talk and spend with family and friends.

Susie asks me whether my husband Ariel will be sad to leave Cuba once my Fellowship ends. I say he'll be sad to leave his family, with whom he's very close, but I imagine he'll relish the chance to support himself by working. I say that most Cubans are sad to leave behind family members and their beloved island home, but that frustration and desperation lead them to do so.

Incredulous, Susie counters: "Really?! You think so?! I don't see why they're so eager to get out. There are so many great things here. Like Naty said, there's a magic to this place. And what are they going towards, anyway? Opportunity." She spits out the word like it's poison. "They're giving up all this for financial gain. Look at Naty! She didn't leave." No, I think, but the rest of her family did. Besides, few Cubans have Naty's special circumstances.

When I tell Ariel about this conversation later, he shrugs and laughs it off. "What can you do? That is why I do not discuss politics with tourists. They come for a short time, and then they leave. We Cubans are not free to leave. Many tourists believe in the ideals of the Revolution — many Cubans once believed in the Revolution. But the tourists do not experience what we Cubans go through every day. They do not see the realities we live with now. The view is completely different from the Hotel Nacional than it is on the street." I've heard this argument before, both from Ariel and other Cubans. But I, myself, find it hard to avoid politics in discussing Cuba

— because everything here is, in the end, political.

Ry, who has barely focussed on anything else throughout the meal, searches the restaurant for the *tres* player. Naty asks the waiter about the musicians, and he fetches them from the bar. They play a few standards, and Ry again becomes completely rapt. Then the *tres* player announces: "And now, we will play a traditional Cuban song for you." As they begin "*Dos Gardenias*," another song collected on "Buena Vista," our table breaks into laughter at the coincidence. At song's end, we all applaud, Ry most enthusiastically.

Beaming, he stuffs a 20 dollar bill into the lead singer's palm and exclaims: "Thank you! Thank you so much!" I'm surprised he doesn't say "*Gracias*."

As if reading my thought, John comments: "I think Ry and I are the only two people around here who don't speak a word of Spanish."

After the musicians have left, John jokes: "Some day, those guys are gonna see the movie of 'Buena Vista.' They'll see Ry, and it'll dawn on them: 'Hey, isn't that that guy from the restaurant?!'" For my part, I doubt those three musicians will ever know who Ry is. Ironically, Cuba's one of the few places in the world where the "Buena Vista" CD isn't wildly popular. Its Cuban musicians, now international superstars, were better known in Cuba before the Revolution than they are today.

The "Buena Vista" movie, made by the renowned German director Wim Wenders, will play for an invited, international audience at this December's Latin American Film Festival in Havana. But though it focuses on Cuban musicians playing Cuban music, the film will not be shown afterwards to Cuban audiences in Havana's cinemas.

I imagine the film, about a US musician (Cooder) making an album that revives the careers of talented but forgotten Cuban musicians (whose crowning moment is visiting New York and performing at Carnegie Hall) doesn't deliver a message the Cuban government wants aired. Even its nostalgic view of Havana — of crumbling-if-beautiful buildings and ramshackle old American cars — is probably unacceptable to the Cuban authorities. Never mind that it's one man's nostalgic glance at Havana's scorched beauty. In Cuba, after all, everything is political. □