Spirits of Havana

Images courtesy of the NFB

A CUBAN (MUSICAL) REVOLUTION:
The NFB Captures Jane Bunnett's Love Affair with a Nation's Music

BY MATTHEW HAYS

The folks behind *Spirits of Havana*, the feature–length NFB documentary that premiered at the Montreal World Film Festival in September, 2000, and was chosen to close Hot Docs, the Canadian International Documentary Festival in May, have found themselves in an odd position while promoting the film. On the one hand, they've been given an extra hook, in terms of publicity, in the form of recent cinematic forays into Cuban culture such as Wim Wenders's *The Buena Vista Social Club* and Julian Schnabel's *Before Night Falls*. On the other, they want to emphasize the uniqueness of their film, to distance it in particular from Wenders's hugely successful musical foray into Cuban beats and rhythms.

"We'd been developing this project for at least a year before we heard of Wim Wenders and *The Buena Vista Social Club*," says *Spirits* co–director Bay Weyman, anticipating my question. Adds Ricardo Acosta, the film's editor, "For a time, it seemed everything was being reduced to an extension of *The Buena Vista Social Club*. I didn't want to be a part of that." The creative team needn't worry. *Spirits of Havana* stands on its own as a highly intriguing, energetic and, yes, spirited feature–length film about two Canadian artists' cultural trek through Cuba. The title itself is a bit of a misnomer, as Toronto–based jazz recording artist Jane Bunnett and her entourage travel the length of the island and it's Bunnett's husband, trumpeter Larry Cramer, who plays a prominent role in the film.

As Weyman explains it, the inspiration for the film was clear. Bunnett, considered one of Canada's premiere jazz musicians, had been inspired during a 1982 trip to Cuba by the nation's rich musical culture. Since then, she has attracted a good deal of media

attention with albums that mine the sounds and soul of the island's culture, including "Ritmo & Soul," "Chamalongo," "Rendez-Vous Brazil/Cuba" and "Spirits of Havana." "I had known about Jane and her work since the early 1990s," says Weyman. "I had filed away some press clippings about her, thinking it would make for a great film one day."

After meeting NFB producer Peter Starr at the Toronto International Film Festival in 1998, Weyman brought up the concept. Starr immediately took to the idea, sensing that Bunnett's cross-cultural journey was both fascinating and decidedly Canadian. "I had seen Jane play," says Starr, the producer behind such films as *Dream Tower*, *The Herd*, *Dream Machine* and *East Side Showdown*. "I didn't know that much about her at the time, but I certainly liked what she was doing. The idea of a film project centring on her and her music seemed to make great sense." Chilean-born director Luis O. García joined the team, as Weyman knew he needed someone who could serve as an authority on Latino culture.

"We'd been approached by many people," says Bunnett, "but Bay was persistent. I wanted to know that he had similar ideas about where the film would be going. I didn't want this to be 'see Jane run,' but rather a film about the music." A year and a half later, after a great deal of research and preparation, the film crew, Bunnett and Cramer headed out for their Cuban adventure, a five-week tour during which the video cameras caught everything, from lively jam sessions to cinéma-vérité-like moments some might see as more private.

"While we were making the movie," reports Bunnett, "I would wake up in a cold sweat. Just knowing the depth of the music, it was very important for me to do it justice. We were trying to do so much and clearly there were musicians we couldn't pack into the film." As with virtually all documentary films, many of the toughest choices had to be made during the editing process. With over 200 hours of footage, the team behind *Spirits of Havana* had to make some key decisions about what focus would guide the film. Early in the process, all agreed the film should feature Cuban musicians but that the story should really be about Bunnett and her journey.

Thus the film was handed a pretty clear throughline. Though mainly set in the here and now, there are flashback sequences of sorts in which Bunnett's history of attachment to the Cuban culture is traced. We see archival concert footage, marked in black and white, of Bunnett performing with Merceditas Valdes, the legendary singer who died in 1996. Their friendship is updated poignantly, as Bunnett and Cramer attend her grave to place flowers and a plaque in memoriam. It's a solid starting point for a film titled *Spirits of Havana*. The film then launches into Bunnett's tour, which includes a visit to a children's music school, where she arrives with new instruments and a team of repair specialists who help by teaching the staff how to maintain its musical equipment.

While Bunnett's tour may have lent the filmmakers a logical and convenient narrative device, there were still several burning creative questions to be answered.

Chief among them was the consideration of politics. It's something both Wenders and Schnabel faced before them. Many people on the left have lauded Cuba's resistance to all things American. Weyman says part of the charm of the place is the fact that it's devoid of any McDonald's golden arches or KFC buckets in the sky. But, by the same token, filmmakers don't want to soft peddle the very real oppression the average Cuban citizen faces on a day-to-day basis. By and large, their rights remain extremely restricted and with the tourist trade in full swing, and a major part of the national economy, they tend to be treated as second- or third-class citizens within their own country. The director's decision was that Bunnett would be the focus of the film, but that thorny political issues would never be side-stepped.

For Acosta, an émigré who fled the country because of his sexual orientation, the film's subtle but undeniable political outlook was imperative. "I was kicked out of the Communist Party in Cuba in 1980. I defected to Canada in 1993. This film was very important to me. I wanted to do something about my country and history, not about the politics primarily. I think even five years ago, I would have been too angry to have worked on the film. But now, I was ready. I'm not anti-Cuba, by any means. I am anti-Castro, however."

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Weyman says it was difficult to disavow the nation's politics, seeing as the filmmakers felt the intrusive hands of the state, however briefly. "A load of our Beta tapes was confiscated at the airport," says Weyman. "We got them back after a week. They were blank, of course. We hadn't started filming yet, but I guess we had a lot of them. There was never any clear answer as to why they'd been confiscated." One lively scene has a group of Cuban sports enthusiasts gathering on a street corner around Cramer and delving into a loud conversation about baseball. A number of Cubans make disparaging remarks about the Blue Jays and debate the relative merits of the team's chances up against an all-Cuban team. Then, surely enough, a Cuban police officer is seen in the background, eavesdropping on the conversation while letting the men know they're being watched. It's an eerie and Orwellian moment. It's one of the film's reminders that rights in Cuba are not the same as they are in Canada. (Interestingly, baseball is one of the few topics Cubans are officially allowed to have loud public conversations about.)

"For me, that scene had two very important meanings," says Acosta. "Cuban's passion for baseball and the omnipresence of the police. It was important to have both of those things come through." The scene certainly scored with Cuban audiences when the film played at festivals in Havana and Miami. The audiences at both fests, packed with Cubans or those of Cuban descent, began to participate during the scene, yelling things like "Hey, watch out!" when the police show up in the background. Another scene has a group of schoolchildren gracefully accepting the instruments Bunnett and company have brought them. It is punctuated by a shot of a wall mural of Castro himself. Throughout the scene, the children sing a song about the brilliance of socialism and creating great socialist art. "I knew that song very well," says Acosta. "It was something that we heard all the time growing up, a very Stalinist song that was sung throughout the 1970s. It made for a great irony – the school accepts gifts, while the children sing about the paradise of socialism."

Politics were definitely something on Bunnett's mind as well, in terms of the film's overall effect on audiences. "I've been called 'Havana Jane,'" she says. "It's not something I wanted. I didn't want to seem like a crusader. However, I've certainly grown more political over the years." Bunnett was affected personally by the ongoing Cuba/U.S. animosity when the Helms–Burton bill was voted into effect in U.S. Congress in 1996. The bill meant the end to five American dates for Bunnett. "Many of the arts organizations that booked acts like ours receive funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. People were panicking, basically. It took on the feeling of a witch hunt."

Part of the film's politics, of course, emanates from her relation to the Cubans. She clearly enjoys their music and has gained from it. But the filmmakers were aware that audiences might interpret her as a sort of honorary cultural citizen or simply another outsider, a *tourista.* Criticism of the film came to the fore after *Maclean's* film critic, Brian D. Johnson, singled out a scene in which Bunnett is horrified to discover that her instruments are missing. The camera follows Bunnett throughout this tearful melodrama until it turns out that the instruments had only been misplaced. Suddenly she is just another flipped-out tourist losing her stuff and suspecting the natives. The criticism hurt Bunnett, who says she fought to get the sequence removed from the film, feeling it didn't really represent what actually happened and that it was fair enough for her to be distraught in that situation.

"The context wasn't entirely clear," she says now. "I felt sick to my stomach. It was like losing a limb, really. My horns are almost like family to me. I was just sitting there thinking, 'How could this happen to me?' If we'd actually lost the instruments at that point, it would have meant the end of the tour, the film, of everything. We phoned a place in Toronto to send for replacement instruments, but made the mistake of telling them they'd probably been stolen. They weren't about to send $15,000 in replacement instruments if there was a risk of the replacements being stolen."

Jane Bunnett, centre, with husband, trumpeter Larry Cramer, right.

But the filmmakers were almost certainly correct in leaving the sequence in the film. As Acosta points out, it humanizes Bunnett. It shows her vulnerability. "Ultimately," Weyman says, "the film stands as a document of the music, the strains of touring in a foreign land and of political and cultural differences bridged through the art itself." *Spirits of Havana* is a film about different cultures communicating and hopefully understanding one another. It's not so much a political or intellectual film, though those elements are there as much as it is a human film. TAKE ONE