

Chavez Ravine

Ry Cooder is best known as the producer of the Buena Vista Social Club album, the man responsible for the international exposure of the group of brilliant though forgotten Cuban musicians at the heart of the album and the film. For the best part of the last 20 years he has earned his bread by writing music for films such as Paris, Texas, The Long Riders, Alamo Bay and many more. He hated the record and touring routine, giving up doing 'solo' albums in 1988.

Younger people may not be aware of his rich body of work which stretches back to the 1960s (see the link below for his discography.) His latest project - Chavez Ravine - is a much praised piece of work which tells the story of the destruction of a Los Angeles neighbourhood by use of a kind of musical collage. It combines music from the period with new material written by Cooder, his percussionist son Joachim, and Latino writers who hail from the area. Chavez Ravine took its name from Julian Chavez, one of the first LA county supervisors who bought the land in 1840. It was a "self-sufficient and tight-knit community, a rare example of small town life in a large urban metropolis." The area became a multicultural community: Mexican American, but with Chinese American, Russian and Jewish residents.

In 1946 the City of LA Planning Commission developed a housing plan for supposedly "blighted areas" such as Chavez Ravine. In 1950 the Housing Authority told the residents that their land would be purchased and used for public housing. People to be displaced were promised first refusal on housing in the planned Elysian Park Heights. Some of the residents resisted the order to move, whilst others took the money and left. Most of them received insubstantial or no compensation for their homes and property.

Using the power of "eminent domain", which permitted the government to enforce purchase of private property from individuals for projects deemed to be for the "public good", the City of LA bought up the land and leveled most the buildings.

However, the public housing would never be built. It was the subject of a decade long political and legal battle. Whilst supporters of the public housing scheme considered it an opportunity to provide improved services for poor Angelenos, opponents of the plan, including our old friend corporate America, utilised the atmosphere of the McCarthy era to denounce the very idea as a 'socialist plot'.

In 1952 Frank Wilkinson, assistant director of the LA County Housing Authority, one of the main proponents of the Elysian Heights plan, was called before the Un-American Activities Committee. Refusing to answer questions about organisations he had been a member of or known, he was sacked from his job and imprisoned for a year. Others suffered a similar fate.

The election of new Mayor Poulson in 1953 meant the project's days were numbered. He ran for office with opposition to public housing projects as a central plank of his 'programme'; a scandalous example of "un-American" spending. When elected, Poulson was able to buy back the Chavez Ravine land from the federal government at a greatly reduced cost, with the stipulation that it would be used for a "public purpose". This "public purpose" proved to be the building of a new LA Dodgers baseball stadium.

As Frank Wilkinson explained, "We'd spent millions of dollars getting ready for it, and the Dodgers picked it up just for a fraction of that. It was a tragedy for the people, and from the County it was the most hypocritical thing that could possibly happen."

There was eventually a referendum on the issue which the owners of the Dodgers won by a scant 3%. That great American hero Ronald Reagan made one of his off-screen appearances denouncing the lefty "baseball haters" who opposed the Dodgers stadium. After various legal challenges the last remaining residents were dragged away (see picture) and the stadium was built and opened in 1962.

Cooder's CD was inspired by the story of this injustice as told in two books. One was a book of photos by Don Normack, Chavez Ravine 1949: A Los Angeles Story". Normack, fascinated by a visit to Chavez Ravine in 1949, spent a year taking pictures of the local community. At the time, of course, he did not know that he was recording the last days of this community.

The second book was by UCLA Professor Dana Cuff: "The Provisional City: Los Angeles Stories of Architecture and Urbanism. Frank Wilkinson, now in his nineties, is one of the characters in her book, and Cooder contacted him after meeting Cuff. His recorded voice appears on 'Don't call me Red'.

Three years ago Don Normack asked Cooder to provide music for a short film of the photographer's reunion

with families from La Loma, Bishop and Palo Verde, the three neighbourhoods of Chavez Ravine. The project originated out of this.

Cooder, who grew up in middle class Santa Monica remembers reading stories when he was child and the comments of his parents who raged against the injustice.

“Occasionally there would be photographs of some poor Mexican family from the ravine watching a bulldozer tear up their little house while being harassed by the LAPD or lectured by some city politician.”

It set the post-war trend. LA was “paved over, mailed up, high rised, and urban renewed, as fortunes were made, power was concentrated, and everything got faster and bigger” in the words of Cooder. The tearing down of older areas of LA is something which rankled. “When they tore down Bunker Hill, I was crushed. I still am. I still get mad.” He wanted to bring to light the injustice of Chavez Ravine.

As with the Buena Vista Social Club, Cooder has used musicians originating from the area, allowing them to tell their story. Don Tosti and Lalo Guerrero who appear on the CD were two major figures in Chicano music of the period. Sadly, these two died before the release of the recording. The CD combines songs from the period with new material written by Cooder and these musicians. Willie Garcia, a singer from early 1960's East LA band, the Three Midnighters, co-wrote some the songs. Chavez Ravine is their story so they were obviously keen to tell it.

Ry Cooder has never been one to stick to musical categories. His playing and writing have always to varying degrees combined elements of American folk music, with blues, jazz, rock and Latino music. He has been a unique interpreter of traditional music who has long enjoyed working with diverse musicians from different disciplines and nationalities. Cooder's interest in Latin music predated Buena Vista. One of his long time collaborators has been 'Tex Mex' accordionist Flaco Jimenez.

Whilst this CD centres on the Latin music of the Mexican-American community which was at the heart of Chavez Ravine, he writes the first of his own material for a long time and draws on the support of Jazz musicians such as pianists Chucho Valdes (from Cuba) and Jacky Terrasson. As usual he gives old and new music his own stamp.

The song “Don't Call me Red” tells Frank Wilkinson's story, including some anti-communist propaganda in the form of a recording of the well know programme, Dragnet. In real life and on record Wilkinson was pleased to have “outlived those bastards all”; the bastards including Edgar J. Hoover. Wilkinson ended up working as a janitor in Pasadena.

Onda Callejera tells the story of a saturday night in 1943 when 300 sailors managed to find themselves 100 taxis (must have been just cruising along) and have an outing beating up 'pachuchos' – smart dressing Mexican Americans. This was known as the 'Zoot Suit Riots'. In fact it was a racist and premeditated attack. Some listeners might be irritated by the UFO pilot warning the locals about the gringos coming to take their homes from them. However, there was a UFO mania in California in the period, probably associated the anti-communist hysteria of the time. Those Reds could come at you from anywhere!

'It's Just Work for me' is the voice of the working stiff who was just doing his job knocking down the houses. 'In my Town' gives voice to the ruling elite of LA helping big business to make a fortune at the expense of the residents of Chavez Ravine and others who would not be allowed to stand in the way of what in those days was called 'progress'.

There is, of course, a Chavez Ravine in every town where 'development' has been an excuse for big business making money at the expense of the local population and the environment. In Los Angeles the car became king and choking smog was the result, beginning in 1955. Mike Davis, who Cooder consulted in the course of preparing the album, has written some marvelous books (City of Quartz, Ecology of Fear) about how the environment has been butchered by 'development' US style.

Former residents of Chavez Ravine have formed a group call Los Desterrados, the Uprooted, who meets each year to picnic at Elysian Park, the playground of their childhood.

Ry Cooder has produced a marvelous CD, to these ears at least, which is worth a listen in its own right. But it tells a story which has been repeated across the globe as the US model of 'development' has spread like a deadly virus.

You can hear four of the tracks on the Nonesuch Website at: http://www.nonesuch.com/Hi_Band/rycooder/

For those who listen to it and like it, if you haven't heard anything of Ry Cooder's pre-Buena Vista work, you would do well to seek out his earlier work.

Other interesting links

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/chavezravine/album.html>

See a photo album of Don Normack's photos of Chavez Ravine - with music as well!

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/chavezravine/>

Chavez Ravine: a Los Angeles story

<http://www.cultureclash.com>

Culture Clash a 'Chicano performance troupe' put on a musical play about Chavez Ravine in 2003 in Los Angeles. According to Culture Clash member Herbert Siquenza, although the battle for Chavez Ravine was lost, helped to create "a culture of resistance, the beginnings of a civil rights movement, of Chicano activism."

http://www.guardian.co.uk/friday_review/story/0,,269151,00.html

Guardian interview with Ry Cooder on the Buena Vista Social Club

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/guardianweekly/story/0,,893994,00.html>

Cooder's last visit to Havana?

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,,999553,00.html>

Ry Cooder speaking about Compay Segundo

<http://www.ryland-cooder.com>

Check out Ry Cooder's discography

Martin Wicks