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GenEc DVD Review

Sunday, September 18, 2011

"Cuba: Island of Music" (MVD)

I confess to being somewhat ambivalent about this documentary on Cuban music from filmmaker Gary Keys (whose films on Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Dizzy Gillespie were reviewed in this blog at <http://genecdvd.blogspot.com/2011/09/duke-ellington-reminiscing-in.html>)

First, the good news. There is a lot of very good Cuban music here in a variety of genres, both traditional and contemporary. The visuals give us a rare glimpse of Cuba as it was at the end of the 20th century. There is also something of an alternative political viewpoint espoused here, in that we are given the distinct impression that people in Cuba during the late Castro era were really pretty happy with life, by and large (despite the nay-saying of American politicians with an agenda to support). And the commentary by Cuban natives Chico O'Farrill (who died in 2001) and percussionist Candido Camero, balanced by some less thoroughly informed yet still insightful commentary by the late, great Dr. Billy Taylor tells much of the story of Cuban music when the narration fails to do so.

But there are problems. First off, it's a little too obvious that Gary Keys made this film in the wake of the astounding success of "Buena Vista Social Club". Whereas in the latter, Ry Cooder and his son Joachim toiled around Havana in a motorcycle with attached sidecar, Keys toiled around in a vintage convertible, witnessing (much as the Cooders did) the people and the architecture of the island. In addition to that superficial, yet blatant similarity, one might be convinced that Ry Cooder and "Social Club" director Wim Wenders got the cream of the Cuban-music crop to appear in their film, leaving Keys with the leftovers. But I know through hearing CD's that were issued in the US around this time period that there were many more first-rate musicians left that Cooder didn't record, whom Keys also seems to have bypassed in his search. Thus, as I said in the last paragraph, this is "very good Cuban music", but there's an inconsistency to Keys' selections which keep it from being a film about Great Cuban Music.

The problem lies at least in part in the film's premise. Keys discovers Cuban music from a distance (New York), then travels to Cuba to learn more about it and to see what else he can find. This

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About Me

Tom Bingham

Feel free to contact me at mason2042 at gmail dot com

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film is an honest documentation of his quest, but it probably would have worked a lot better - and contributed much further to our understanding of Cuban music at the turn of the 21st Century - if he had done more research. This would have given him a more informed idea of what he could uncover and where he could uncover it. His quest seems a bit haphazard, making accidental discoveries which - while certainly authentically Cuban, and thus representative of certain aspects of what was going on there at the time - do not strike me as the best of all available artistic treasures deserving of much-needed American exposure. What we have, in essence, is a fascinating, very personal travelogue which says, "I went to Cuba - this is what I saw, this is what I heard". And that's fine, there's nothing inherently wrong with that approach, but it isn't necessarily the ideal way to introduce or represent the music of a nation which was culturally cut off from American music lovers over several decades.

Another problem is the lack of a coherent narrative, which would have gone far to more effectively explain to a novice listener what one is seeing/hearing. Keys' folksy chatting from behind the wheel of a car lacks depth and explication. There is an attractive young woman who is assigned the task of providing more information, but this turns out to be more of an opportunity for the young lady to appear on-camera than a significant exposition of the important points which should be made about music in Cuba. Do I expect ethnomusicological analysis? Not necessarily, but a more knowledgeable descriptive account of the musical proceedings would have been very welcome.

Despite these problems, I think there is enough of value here in terms of music and variety to recommend this disc to readers with an interest in Latino music in general, so long as you have a good idea going into it of what this film and what it isn't.

Posted by Tom Bingham at 3:48 PM

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