

Geoffrey Baker. 2011. *Buena Vista in the Club: Rap, Reggaetón, and Revolution in Havana*. Durham: Duke University Press. 410 pp. ISBN: 9780823349594.

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My first encounter with Geoffrey Baker's *Buena Vista in the Club* was rather unique. I was told I was "in it" and as any curious scholar might, I flipped quickly to the bibliography to find my reference. However, my name wasn't in the bibliography. I skimmed through a few pages to discover I was in the actual text. I had conducted my doctoral research in Havana over much of the same timeframe as Baker, and worked with many of the same rappers he makes reference to. Suddenly I realized I had entered Baker's ethnographic orb, and found myself amongst his subjects. His introduction eloquently reminds us, as cultural scholars "we can no longer be airbrushed from the picture we create" (p. 22).

Baker presents us with an extremely valuable contribution to ethnomusicology and Caribbean studies, making *Buena Vista in the Club* a must read for scholars of global hip-hop or Cuban culture. His exquisite writing style and inquisitive tone guide the reader through his analysis which presents a profound ethnographic study of rap and reggaetón in Havana. What I found most interesting however, was how he intertwines a second narrative about Cuban scholarship and institutional politics that molded the local music scene. The commoditization and globalization of Cuban music by foreign explorers (artists, activists, and scholars) is a fundamental theme of the book, and is the primary focus of my review.

Baker compares the overseas frenzy propelled by the album and film project "Buena Vista Social Club" (Cooder 1997, Wenders 1999) to that which occurred with Cuban rap during the same years (pp. 3-6). Through an analysis of discourse, Baker highlights the parallels between the foreign popularity generated in *son* by the "Buena Vista Social Club," and the wave of attraction that followed the New York based Black August Hip-Hop Collective's discovery of Havana's rap scene in the late 1990s. Both of these projects generated a first-world search for lost purity and authenticity in Cuba's musical genres. By considering why there was an explosion of interest by scholars and filmmakers in Cuban rap, and what their resulting documents or films were, Baker allows us to see how these projects impacted their (and in-turn, his) subjects of study (p. 249-250).

The book is separated into four lengthy chapters. These focus on: the nationalization of Cuban rap and its relationship with the state; the

growth of reggaetón's popularity; the urban geography of music; and the rise and fall of an afro-centric black power era of Cuban rap. Baker's investigation is drawn from fieldwork conducted in Havana between 2003-2010, complemented by a historical review of Cuban rap scholarship for six years prior to his arrival. His analysis centers on language and text, built from a combination of rap lyrics, local and foreign news reports, scholarly publications, and documentary films. These are then interposed with first hand interviews and ethnographic experiences. In regards to the later, I would have liked Baker to provide us with a more in-depth discussion about his methodology, rather than piecing it together from endnotes and references.

Baker effectively brings to the forefront the disjuncture between what U.S. artists and activists sought after in Cuban rap, versus what Cuban rappers were actually producing (p. 244-248). The Black August Hip-Hop Collective, along with a troupe of well-known U.S. rap artists, arrived in Havana during the late 1990s in a quest for an ideological oasis of afro-centric rap, resistance to U.S. capitalism, and a celebration of Cuba's Black Panther exiles. Local rappers, keen to what foreigners wanted to discover, and influenced by the potential for success abroad in the midst of the Special Period, adopted and tailored their narratives to suit the much-sought-after image. How much of this adoption was an organic acculturation versus an imposed assimilation remains questionable. Baker describes how such tensions over this disjuncture manifested themselves through performances of Cuban rappers to foreign audiences. Some lyrics were so critical of local politics, that foreigners became publicly disturbed to hear criticisms about a Cuba they defended back home. As a result, local institutions sanctioned said rappers. Baker proposes that "the foreign gaze is, in some ways, complicit with censorship, and it may stand as a proxy for the scrutiny of the state" (p. 251). The success of this era of Cuban rap, which Baker refers to by the title of "*Hip-Hop Revolución*" relies on its ambiguity. The term "revolution" remains applicable for local rapper's criticisms, yet sufficiently ideological for the foreigners gaze (p. 48, 52-56, 61-63).

One of Baker's greatest contributions to the study of Cuban music is his assessment of the relationship between rap and reggaetón, a topic overlooked or even intentionally avoided by many scholars. By describing reggaetón as "somewhat of an inconvenient truth for Cuban hip-hop studies," he signals out a divergence that exists not only between its respective musical communities but one that has been transferred to its scholarship circles (p. 112). Where rap is seen as conscious music for the mind, reggaetón is seen as playful music for the body. Baker exemplifies the discord between these genres by narrating the careers of a handful of rappers who transitioned from a message-based rap repertoire to a

playful reggaetón performance (p. 155). Opposite to rap's intellectual lyrical content that aims to promote solidarity and social constructive criticism, reggaetón has become an avenue for reinventing the body as a site for individual satisfaction and personal reward. Many viewed the transition by rappers as a form of "selling out," particularly since Baker demonstrates how the shift in genre styles led to economic betterment.

Although Baker's primary ethnographic account is of rap and reggaetón in Havana, he subtly interlaces a secondary narrative about Cuban state institutions, in particular the Hermanos Saíz Association (AHS) and the Cuban Rap Agency (ACR). Both the AHS and ACR are government institutions that have addressed rap on the island. An important difference between them is that the AHS is subsidized, whereas the ACR is self-financing. These differences lead to two dissimilar operational methods which Baker exemplifies as illustrating pre- and post-1990 institutional models marked by Cuba's Special Period (p. 160). Baker's study of these institutions is elegantly carried out using the optic of rap music. Such a viewpoint allows us to see the state, not as a static singular actor, but rather made up of various institutions and intermediaries. This approach helps us move beyond previous studies that paint the Cuban state as static, monolithic and homogeneous (p. 36-41). According to Baker, previous scholars have created an image of the Cuban state as a cohesive apparatus that stands in opposition to rappers. Alternatively, Baker opts for a more complex analysis where he views the state as fragmented by the agendas and activism of individual players (p. 148).

I found Baker's analysis of Cuban scholarship particularly useful and fulfilling. He refutes the racial categorizations of rap presented by U.S. academics such as Mark Perry (2004) and Sujatha Fernandes (2006:266-293). Baker articulates race as a socially constructed category, arguing that many Cubans who may be considered black in the United States by hypo-descent (one-drop rule), might not self-identify as black in Cuba. He exemplifies how Perry's definitions lead to an exaggeration of blackness that creates an overarching narrative of Cuban hip-hop, and questions Fernandes' labeling of rap as a black cultural phenomenon. Both are problematic because they overlook rap's multiracial participation and origins (p. 266-278). Using these two primary studies and a handful of other research publications, Baker insinuates that such works reflect more about their authors than about Cuban hip-hop (p. 288) and elegantly poses the question, "where has the revolution of blackness taken place—in Cuban society, Cuban hip-hop, or Cuban hip-hop studies?" (p. 292)

After such a detailed dissection of foreign influences on the Cuban rap and reggaetón scenes, I have to ask, why did Baker choose to nearly avoid any discussion of Miami? I have found that Miami media and its

Latin-driven music industry have consistently been an influence on music in post-revolutionary Cuba. The streets of Havana, which Baker refers to as a metaphor of the dialectics of hip-hop, “the moral authority and the hustle” (p. 350) have been sprinkled with the Cuban exile communities’ money seeking to finance anti-Castro lyrics in a post 9/11 era. To present the affects of foreign influences on Cuba’s musical scene, but leave out Miami, seems to leave Baker’s analysis incomplete. Perhaps this is where future scholars can complement his work.

Undoubtedly, *Buena Vista in the Club* goes far beyond Baker’s intention of throwing a “grain of sand, as the Cubans say, in the field of cultural politics” (p. 31). Few ethnographic accounts assess not only their local field subjects, but also the anthropologists and scholars that studied them. The dual research of rappers and scholars alike is precisely what makes this publication unique, reflexive, and indispensable.

References

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The debate on immigration reform has recently come to the forefront in political debates, academic classrooms, conferences, seminars, and discussions. The Latino population has exponentially