

# World Music, World Circuit: In Conversation with Nick Gold

Simone Krüger

Simone Krüger is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Liverpool John Moores University, UK, following her previous position as a Programme Leader in Popular Music Studies. Her research specialisms are, broadly defined, located in the sociology/anthropology of world music pedagogy; research methods, ethnography; musical globalization; the sociocultural study of music "at home" (Liverpool) and of Paraguay; and the cultural study of world popular music.

*This interview with internationally acclaimed World Music record producer and World Circuit label owner Nick Gold explores numerous pertinent issues surrounding the birth and successes of the British World Music genre. With thirty years of experience working with ground-breaking World Music artists like Ibrahim Ferrer, Ali Farka Touré, Rubén González, Oumou Sangaré, Orchestra Baobab, Cheikh Lô and Toumani Diabaté, Nick's World Circuit label has produced some of the finest and most successful World Music projects of the last two decades, notably the Grammy-winning Buena Vista Social Club. With personal stories from his own career in World Music, Nick presents a first-hand account of running a World Music label, attending the infamous 1987 pub meeting, ingredients for successful World Music, Buena Vista Social Club and more, with a look towards the future of the World Music industry.*

**Keywords:** World Music; music production; music label; Buena Vista Social Club; Ali Farka Touré; Ry Cooder

## Introduction

*Simone:* Good morning and welcome to our conversation with Nick Gold. Before we invite Nick on stage, let me briefly introduce Nick and his work to contextualise today's event. Nick has worked in the world music recording industry since 1986. Being a fanatical record collector since his teens with musical interests in Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker and Lester Young ignited by his father, the film director Jack Gold, he graduated from Sussex University with a degree in African history and held a job in the Kings Cross record shop Mole Jazz whilst also volunteering for the charity Community Music. Community Music fixed work-experience placements for its helpers, leading Nick to do a work placement with Arts Worldwide, a promotional organisation that brought over non-mainstream international artists, mostly from Africa, to tour in the UK. Arts Worldwide founders, Anne Hunt and Mary Farquharson, decided to release records by the world music artists they had brought over due to the growing demand for recordings from the concert-going public, and thus to bring the music from a local circuit to the world circuit. The label World Circuit Limited was born, and Nick got the job of overseeing the recording projects. A few years later, in the early 1990s, Nick assumed sole ownership of World Circuit, being instrumental in discovering and developing many of his label's acts, most of whom came from West Africa and Cuba, and developing a reputation for tasteful work and bold ambitions.

World Circuit was initially created with a specific vision in mind: artistic excellence; commitment to the artists; and high quality production, packaging, promotion and marketing.

The underpinning philosophy was to be an artist-led label with all aspects of each release tailored to the particular artist, and this is still key to World Circuit Records today. Nick is renowned to work closely with the label's musicians to produce repertoires that balance authenticity with accessibility, whilst seeking out experimental variations on traditional idioms (if the artists agree to it). Indeed many of his liveliest and most successful albums have involved some kind of musical collaborations. The typical World Circuit album is high quality and high concept, with rich and beautiful packaging—crisp photography, muted colours, generous and engaging liner notes—that reflects the care taken with the recordings. The personal touch and attention to detail, whilst capturing the essence of the music, is at the core of the label's ethos and its success.

World Circuit has been the force behind some of the finest and most successful World Music projects of the last two decades. The label is best known for the Grammy-winning *Buena Vista Social Club* album from 1997, which is the biggest-selling world music album of all time and elevated the artists to superstar status (with their own solo records released through World Circuit) and led to the phenomenal rise in popularity of Cuba's rich musical heritage, all of which has contributed to a massive boom in Cuba's tourist and recording industries.

World Circuit's African artists enjoy equal prestige, with *Talking Timbuktu*, Ali Farka Touré's Grammy-winning album with Ry Cooder from 1994, which sold over half a million records, an incredible figure for an album of its kind, and brought the label international acclaim. Malian diva Oumou Sangaré, the legendary Grammy-nominated Orchestra Baobab, a Latin-flavoured Senegalese band of the 1970's and 80's, and Senegalese multi-instrumentalist and singer Cheikh Lô, whose debut album *Ne La Thiass* was produced by Youssou N'Dour, have emerged as major stars in Africa and around the world. Meanwhile, World Circuit's acclaimed Grammy-winning duet albums *In the Heart of the Moon* (2005) and *Ali and Toumani* (2010) by Malian singer-guitarist Ali Farka Touré and kora virtuoso Toumani Diabaté have continued to set the standard with their beautifully produced and packaged albums of the highest musical quality.

After more than twenty years, World Circuit remains a truly independent record company producing, packaging, manufacturing, marketing, publicising all of their albums with a small dedicated team working with a likeminded network of independent distributors and tour agents around the world. Those who know Nick personally say that every record is treated with devotion and respect, from the recording to the packaging, and none smacks of novelty or opportunism. They are simply records and artists that Nick loves.

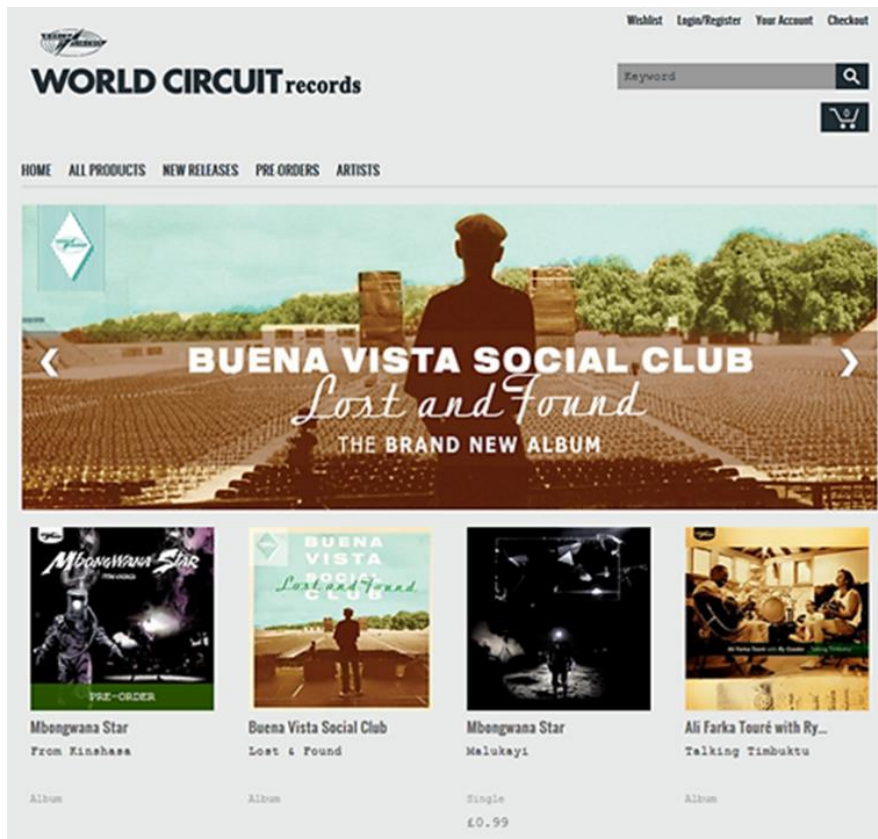


Figure 1: Screen shot of World Circuit Records website, available at <http://www.worldcircuit.co.uk/#Home>, accessed 10 April 2015 and reproduced with permission.

## Becoming a World Music Producer & Running a World Music Label

*Simone:* We have already heard that apparently you knew little about recording technology at the start, or never intended to run a music label. Nonetheless, you got successfully involved in world music production and running the World Circuit label. Tell us a bit more about it.

*Nick:* In the 1980s, Anne and Mary were bringing these [non-Western] artists in and a lot of people were coming after the concerts asking for recordings. There were no recordings available from them, maybe sometimes cassettes. So they set up this record company and I arrived after they had released one record. My own experience was having worked in a record shop and I liked records, plus I'd done various bits of voluntary work so I demonstrated that as an interest. Within two months they brought over a pop band from Kenya called Shirati Jazz, except their leader was unable to come. They came over and Anne and Mary said 'Let's make a record with them' and I hadn't made a record before, but I had some friends who had started a recording studio, so I booked a recording studio. We found someone in London who'd produced records in Kenya before and invited him along. They did one rehearsal; Anne and Mary were very good at rehearsing bands before they went on tour, because a lot of these musicians were used to playing in their own environment. This band [Shirati Jazz] would have been used to playing in a club for eight hours, but they had to come over and do concerts – one and a half hour concerts. The rehearsing and the rehearsals were just a disaster; it was just a mess as there was no leader and they didn't know what to do, but they did a concert the next

night where 2,000 people turned up. It was the time when people would go and see African music, especially in London as it was so rare. Then the next day they came into the studio and started to record and I was just fascinated. You had these six musicians – two guitars, bass, drums, two voices – I sat behind the mixing desk and just watched. As soon as I brought up just the bass or just the guitars, balancing the bass, I was just mesmerised by it. This went on for...I can't remember how long for...maybe a day and they said 'Right we're going home now', but I just didn't want to go home. It was wonderful; the whole process...I just loved it.

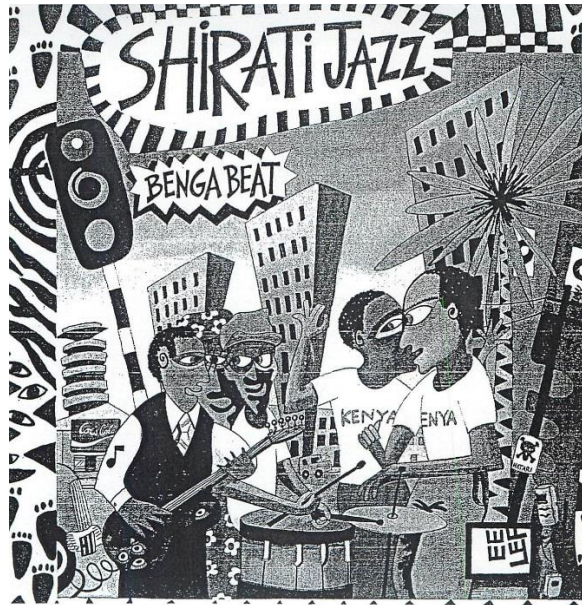


Figure 2: Album cover of "Benga Beat" by Shirati Jazz, released in 1987 on World Circuit, reproduced with permission.

*Simone:* That got you hooked...

*Nick:* Yeah absolutely, absolutely. I'd never thought about it before – 'Why is the bass loud on this record?'... All this and all that – suddenly I just found it amazing.

*Simone:* So would you say being at the right place at the right time played a massive role in your future, your destiny basically, and what you are doing now?

*Nick:* Yeah absolutely! I was just about to go to Teacher Training College in Leicester to become a Primary School teacher, but this work came up three months before I was due to go. Then after three months they wanted to keep me on, so I deferred my place and carried on doing this.

*Simone:* That's very interesting – so what would you say to music students; what attributes and experiences ideally should they have or attitudes should they bring, because you are clearly an example of somebody who...you don't necessarily have to have a music degree to be involved. What kinds of things would you say to music students?

*Nick:* To bring enthusiasm more than anything else and demonstrate that you're interested. It's not enough just to say 'I want to do it' or 'I'm interested' – anything like collecting records, reading magazines, doing voluntary work, giving out leaflets. I've done College Radio and

giving out leaflets and stuff, but I didn't do it because I then wanted to work in the industry, I just did it because I was interested to do it. I think when people employ you they just want to see enthusiasm more than anything else and you need to demonstrate it.

*Simone:* In which ways can a music producer make money? Is it still lucrative to work in music production?

*Nick:* I don't know at the moment. We've just done our first ever contract where we get some money from touring; apparently that's what you do now - These deals that are called '360' deals where you sign an artist for the publishing, for the recording and touring. It's the first time we proposed it and I just assumed that they'd say no, because when I started it was very much thought of as a conflict of interest. Publishing and touring all used to be completely separate. Now it seems you have to make those deals, because there's so much less money coming from selling recordings that you need to get something back. These were artists with very experienced managers, who really knew what they doing; I just presumed they'd say no, you can't have that, but apparently it's best practice now, normal and accepted. The other bit of money that everyone is waiting for, of course to see if it works is streaming. There's this theory that if people spend ten pound per month streaming, then that's more than they would have spent in a year buying CD's, so eventually that money is supposed to filter back. I don't know though, we'll have to wait and see.

*Simone:* We already got a sense of what is involved in running a successful World Music label, but can you give us a sense of the different areas that you actually have to be able to oversee?

*Nick:* When we started, and we still do this to an extent, we did everything. You'd basically find an artist, approach an artist that you wanted to work with and then organise a recording. Organising the recording, you'd have to decide where best to record and what to record. Most of the time we'd work with artists who were already doing...well the reason you want to work with them is because of what they're doing, so you try and capture that. Then you think 'Should I record them in their home country?' or 'Should I bring them to the UK to do it?' One advantage of doing it on location is that you get access to more musicians, so you need more musicians that play the sort of music you can just get there [on location]. There's also an argument that people play better if they're in their own environment. I don't think that's true at all, I just think they do what they do, especially if it's a group I don't think it matters where the studio is. Anyway, so you make the record, you work with repertoire, you decide the best songs, work with the musicians, make the record and then you have to present the record in some way. You have to try and make it look interesting or customise it according to what that record or what that artist is to capture people's imaginations, but also to give something of what that musician is about and put it into some sort of context. There's a recording side, there's a publishing side to sort out all the recording contracts, publishing contracts and then you've got to sell it. Most of what we would have done in this fledgling genre would be giving records away. I think we gave away loads more records than anyone else at the time in promotion, because when I was working in a record shop people would come in with a local newspaper and there would be a review and they would ask 'Can I get this record?' None of the other little labels doing this sort of music were sending...I mean they'd send out to *The Guardian* and to

*The Times*, but we'd send hundreds of records out. Internationally as well, so we'd just sort out wherever it would possibly be written about or played on the radio, so that was the main way for promoting we had. You'd advertise a bit in print advertising, but it's really expensive. Then you go onto all the other stuff; all the accounts, royalty accounting, distribution and manufacturing. There's a lot of stuff and at one point everything was in-house, including re-ordering records, picking up boxes. Oh the other main way we'd promote, other than sending out records, was to try and make sure that the musicians toured. The company that I started with used to do all the touring, but it was amazingly nerve-wracking and I found it very uncomfortable but it needed to be done. We'd work with agents to desperately try and get the artist on tour.

*Simone:* Why was it nerve-wracking?

*Nick:* If no-one turns up. The musicians included as Visas were a real problem. You could set up an entire tour and then have some Visa thing go wrong.

*Simone:* You're still probably quite hands on with everything – did you do all these areas yourself or did you have people to help?

*Nick:* Well I did them all myself for a long time and then there were two of us. Eventually there were thirteen and then a couple of years ago downsized back to four and outsourced all of the stuff, so we don't actually do it in-house anymore. We didn't do the re-ordering and the warehousing and the talking to distributors – it's all done by another company now.

### **The World Music Brand**

*Simone:* I believe you were invited or attended the inaugural 1987 meeting, where the commercial genre 'World Music' was coined by British record company officials and representatives. There's still some ambiguity about this meeting, so could you tell us what happened at the meeting? Do you remember what happened in the meeting in 1987 as it was quite some time ago?

*Nick:* Yeah I remember. I'd only been working for a few months doing this, so I didn't really know what was going on. A lot of little labels started at that time doing what is now known as 'World Music'. WOMAD had started a label, there was a label called DiscAfrique, which had the Bhundu Boys, and so there was maybe about eight labels. The problem was that people were doing this music and there was no way to put it into the shops. This was in the days when we had shops. There was nowhere to put the records so the records didn't go into the shops. It was really supposed to be a short term way of marketing and getting World Music on these things [racking], so there was somewhere to put these records in the shops. That was the aim of the meeting. Then they employed a PR person. I don't know what anyone else thought, but I thought it would be a very short term way of getting records into the shops and then they had a vote on what it would be called, or what the genre would be.

*Simone:* And 'World Music' was the winner...

*Nick:* Yeah 'World Music' was the winner. 'Roots' thing was sort of touted – There was talk of it being this sort of Roots Music or World Music. There was this whole thought of it being Roots Music as opposed to Pop Music...It all got a bit confused, but 'World Music' won. A pack went out of records, but I think nearly all of the records at that time were African. I think about eighty percent of them would have been African, but because there was a Bulgarian choir or something else in, it became 'World Music'.

*Simone:* What was the general mood towards world music at the time? Why did people look for new music from other parts of the world, and what was the appeal? What was missing at the time that people were yearning for that led to this rise in World Music?

*Nick:* That's quite interesting. I think a lot of music in the mid 80's was horrible as well, but I don't know, people just wanted their imagination stretched and people were interested in things that were different. People are always interested in something that's different I think. People were interested and there were labels making it and it was very difficult to find a lot of this music. It was very difficult to find African music or Latin music in shops; it wasn't like now where you search the Internet and stuff. The only way to find it was on records and cassettes, but they weren't being manufactured or weren't being produced by Western companies and African artists were badly distributed. I can't really answer why people were searching it out, but they were.

*Simone:* Do you like the term 'World Music'?

*Nick:* No, I don't.

*Simone:* Why not?

*Nick:* Because it's almost like it has created something that is a genre or a category, for something that is not a genre or a category. It's like everything else goes in there and I think initially it was really good, because there was somewhere to sell the records, but I think it's quite constricting now. It's now got its space in shops or in newspapers and stuff, but it's quite a small space. It's now almost as if what helped before to get it out is now quite constricting, and it's also defined from the outside. It's not defined by the people who made the music at all. The people in Africa who make that music, I don't think they consider their music to be 'World Music'...it's only defined like that by us, from the West, we define their music as 'World Music' and there's a problem with that. I think also at the time when it was coined, there was a real interest in African music and I think in a way almost handicapped African music becoming known, sought and given its rightful place, because it became subsumed.

*Simone:* Yes, just being put in one massive category and ignorant of the many differences amongst musicians...

*Nick:* It's very different in America; Latin Music is not defined as 'World Music' but it is here [United Kingdom].

*Simone:* It's very interesting. In an interview with *The Independent* in 2006 (Loundras 2006), you said "what I look for in the artists I sign is whether they move me or not. Whether I love



the music, whether it touches me – you know within moments of listening to something whether it's something you want to work with or not". Would you say this has helped making successful records? What would you say are the ingredients of a successful World Music album or performance?

*Nick:* I don't know; it's just I've been very, very lucky to work with musicians that I've liked and partly, I wouldn't know what to do with music I didn't like. If someone said 'Can you produce this?' and I didn't like it, I just wouldn't know what to do with it. I wouldn't have a clue, but if it's something you like, you just try to capture what it is you like. I wouldn't try and change it too much. Also, if you really like something, then the chances are someone else might really like it. Before I did this you'd have a record, buy a record, collect a record and say 'Hey, listen to this!' It's just that but on a bigger scale really. It's just trying to find something you like and then get it out there. If you capture the essence of what's good about an artist, then that's what you try and do.

*Simone:* Why do some 'World' musicians make it and others don't? What makes a good or successful artist or product?

*Nick:* I don't know; it's really difficult as they're so... I mean everyone will have records, books or films that they love, that aren't successful. A record like *Buena Vista [Social Club]*, you could talk for hours. I think the record is amazing but it's not enough to make it a success; there's something else that fires people's imaginations or catches in some way that brings it all to another level. If I knew what it was, you'd do it every time.

*Simone:* So it's instinct that you use?

*Nick:* Yeah but it's not even instinct that this is going to be successful; the only instinct is 'I like that'. It's 'I think it could make a wonderful record'. Afterwards then you start to think, 'Ok, now we need to...' – I mean if you like something a lot, you are going to try and find a way of getting it to other people, to expose it and see if they like it. Then you start to think of ways to basically catch people's imaginations and make people aware of it or listen to it and be intrigued by it.

*Simone:* In the 1980s, you also released two seminal UK jazz albums: the late Bheki Mseleku's *Celebration* and Andy Hamilton's award-winning *Silvershine*, the biggest-selling UK jazz album of the year. Why only two jazz albums? Why did you focus World Circuit on West African and Cuban music?

*Nick:* Jazz music was what I really liked before doing this; I still really like it and nearly all of the Jazz artists that I loved, those artists are either dead or they're working with other labels. There was no musicians of that stature or skill or wonder that was available to work with. Andy, when we worked with him, he was a seventy-four year old Jamaican saxophone player living in Birmingham. He came to London to play in a Jazz festival and his thing was that he played Calypso. I just liked it and thought he was amazing. He had this thing I liked; he was able to play like Ben Webster from the forties and fifties and he had this very special thing. We made a record with him and he died a few years ago. I haven't come across another unsigned jazz



musician that excited me so much. We've been amazingly lucky when you look at the list, I can't believe we've been able to work with those people, so you get very spoilt. It's very difficult then to think 'I want to work with that musician' when you've already worked with someone bigger within that area. It's so amazing.

*Simone:* How would you describe your marketing and promotional strategy? For instance, the New York Times (Sisario 2006) wrote that you distinguish World Circuit releases with a recognisable brand name like "Buena Vista Social Club Presents..." and "The Hôtel Mandé Sessions", which conjure a romantic exoticism and emphasise a back story that is not easily forgettable.

*Nick:* No, I think it was opportunistic rather than deliberate. After *Buena Vista Social Club* became very successful and then we were doing records by the individual members of *Buena Vista*, you wanted to let it be known where they're from and what the association was. We just called one of the early records *Buena Vista Social Club presents* just to make that connection. We'd made three records together at that point and I think that was a slightly cruder attempt to do the same thing. I don't think I'd do it again. It just felt like it was marketing and when you sort of do things that are marketing, then it felt slightly uncomfortable. There was us thinking it was a good idea but I don't know if it was.

*Simone:* Well apparently they say that this is the marketing strategy nowadays that everybody tries to emulate. It's interesting to hear that it wasn't a deliberate attempt, but rather that it fell into place.

*Nick:* Yeah it fell into place and just felt right at the time. With *Buena Vista*, who knew – it wasn't just a strategy from the beginning; it just became what it became.

*Simone:* I recently read an article in fRoots by Ian Anderson about the inaugural 1987 meeting, saying that as far as he is concerned the original bunch of 'World Music' people were enthusiastic about the music and they loved it, contributing to the general knowledge of these cultures rather than wanting to make money from it (Anderson 2000). It's still very interesting to hear those criticisms...

*Nick:* I think for a lot of people doing this music, it was always a surprise if you made any money. I don't know about the exploitative thing; maybe a lot of musicians from a lot of these countries work where the industry is different. Maybe they're not used to contracts or the way the industry works, so there's some explanation needed about how it works. I suppose also if you're imposing something on the music, like 'I want you to play it like this', that could be looked on as exploitative.

*Simone:* Do you do that?

*Nick:* No, I don't force anything. I did this one record and I got loads of criticism for it, for putting a Hammond organ on it and horns on it. There were some traditional songs on there too, but this particular review slammed me saying I'd imposed all this Western stuff on them. They said that she [the musician] finally got her way with the traditional pieces but it was completely the opposite. She asked to have horns on and I resisted it until I thought ok, if that's

what we're going to do, and I encouraged her to do the traditional stuff. It was one of those weird things where people thought that I'd imposed the thing that I'd given into.

*Simone:* You are renowned for your interest in musical collaborations, interesting combinations of musicians and so on. And some of your most successful records involve some kind of musical matchmaking. Give us an example of an album that stands out in your mind the most, and why are you interested in these musical collaborations? What do they bring?

*Nick:* I think musicians are interested in playing with musicians. I suppose the early one that we did, which I thought worked really well, was the Ali Farka Toré album with Ry Cooder. I suppose that's not really stretching it too much; its two guitarists together playing and there is some common ground there. I don't think 'Oo that'll be interesting to mix that with that'; it's very specific – that musician might like to work with that musician.

*Simone:* This collaboration was quite accidental? Ry Cooder sought you out, I believe, or how did it come about?

*Nick:* I'd been a huge fan of Ry since I was collecting records at fourteen or fifteen. I'd been working with Ali; we'd made two or three records with Ali and I was working in this tiny office. We had this intercom phone and one day someone said 'Nick, there's a call for you on line two', and I said 'Who is it?' and they said 'Ry Cooder', so I went 'Yeah, very funny'. I picked up the phone and went 'Yeah hello', then this voice came back down the phone and said [Nick impersonates the American accent], 'Is that Nick Gold?'. It was him [Ry Cooder] and he happened to be in London doing a gig and he said 'I hear you're the person I need to talk to, to find Ali Farka Toré'. He [Ali] was staying at my flat at the time, so Ry came over and they met, but there was only one guitar so they couldn't play together. They played around, so Ry would play and then Ali would play and they seemed to get on, then Ry said 'We'll try something one day'. Then it was just left. I could never pin him [Ry] down but then eventually I made sure that Ali had four days off on an American tour, booked a studio that I knew I liked working at and we reconvened. Ry turned up; I didn't know what he was going to produce or what he was going to do, but it became apparent very early on that he was producing. It was really weird for me because I'd worked on all these Ali records and I was ready to do it, so I thought am I going to dispute this? I thought it's Ry Cooder, so I just got out the way and helped facilitate it really. If Ali didn't like it, he would have said and every now and then Ry would do something, but then Ali would go 'No'. You couldn't force things on Ali. He did what he wanted to do and how he wanted to do it. Ry was trying things – will this work, will that work? – And Ali would give him a little nod or no.

*Simone:* That album, of course, led to the 1994 Grammy Award. How did that happen?

*Nick:* I'm not sure how they worked at that time. The Grammys...you get nominated for a category and they got panels to nominate within each category. There's a Jazz panel that nominates X amount of records and then all these bits of paper go out to everyone who is a member of the Gramophone Recording Association of America. You basically vote and they [Ry Cooder and Ali Farka Toré] won it.

## Buena Vista Social Club

*Simone:* World Circuit is best known for the Grammy-winning *Buena Vista Social Club* album, which is the biggest selling world music album of all time, and led to the phenomenal rise in popularity of Cuban music. The Buena Vista series continues with solo albums from the Grammy winning Ibrahim Ferrer, Omara Portuondo, Rubén González, Manuel Guajiro Mirabal, and the innovative albums from Cachaito López and Anga Díaz, which take Cuban music into the new millennium and beyond.<sup>1</sup> Tell us how *Buena Vista* came about, because again it was a string of coincidences and accidents and people coming together. Can you give us a brief snapshot from your perspective?

*Nick:* Yeah I can only give my own perspective, because everyone has their own way it happened. I'd been listening to a lot of West African music and some Cuban music, but one of the first records we had ever done was a Cuban musician called Celina Gonzalez. We toured with her and licenced a record. My real knowledge of Cuban music came from Africa. In Mali and Senegal where I've done work, Cuban music was incredibly popular there so a lot of Cuban bands...there is a strong Latin tinge to their music. The music went over there in the thirties and forties as sailors brought it back. I wanted to make a record that combined some Mali guitarists with some musicians from the East of the Island, Santiago. At the same time I was working with a musician called Juan de Marcos González and he had a son band called Sierra Maestra. He was talking to me about this dream project he had where he wanted to convene this multi-generational band, to reimagine the music of the fifties. A lot of these older musicians were still alive and playing, which to me was amazing because in America, the equivalent in Jazz were not playing. I shared my idea of an African Cuban collaboration with Marcos. I asked Ry [Cooder] if he was interested to come and he immediately came back and said yes. I was gathering repertoire with Juan De Marcos and Ry, sending it back and forward. Then finally we went to Cuba over and started to record the Afro-Cuban All Stars album, which was Juan de Marcos' project. It was a big band, but then during the recording of that we heard the Africans couldn't come because their Visas got lost in the post. Ry said he'd come anyway, so during this first recording of Afro-Cuban All Stars, I kept trying to think of musicians to keep back for what was then known as the 'Eastern Project' - Santiago being east of the island, it was supposed to be a more guitar based record. Ruben González was on Juan De Marcos' album, so it kept all of these musicians over for the second record. So we finished this first record and then Ry came the next day and we basically had a room in this studio in Havana, which is this beautiful room built in the fifties. It's very large room; wooden floors, wooden ceiling, wooden walls and it had this amazing sound to it. It was just a beautiful sounding room. We had all these musicians; musicians from Havana from like...quite urban musicians and we had musicians from Santiago...These musicians wouldn't have really mixed so much but they would have been aware of each other, because they were big stars. They wouldn't have played together before, so you had this sort of grouping of a band that shouldn't have been together really. It was from happen stance. I'd selected some of the musicians, Marcos had selected some of the musicians, Ry when he arrived asked for Compay [Segundo], and Compay had

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.pbs.org/buenavista/musicians/bios.html> for brief biographies of featured Buena Vista Social Club artists, accessed 19 May 2015.

just been signed by Warner Brothers. He said he couldn't play with us so we had to do all this contract stuff. Anyway, we were in this room with all these musicians and you'd literally walk around the room and they were all playing. There was an amazing atmosphere already because they'd just made the Afro-Cuban All Stars record the previous week, but a lot of these musicians hadn't worked for years and years. A lot of them had retired and Marcos for example, he'd got them to rehearse six months before we got there. They weren't just taken off the street and thrown into the studio – there was some preparatory work done. I had this list of repertoire that I thought was going to be the record, but once the Africans weren't there it kind of got thrown out. The first day of recording the tape machines broke – we were working on analogue machines, so we couldn't record. Everyone was just playing and I remember just walking around the studio. Rubén [González] was already there playing the piano; you'd turn up at nine and he's already waiting by the door. They locked the studio each morning and you'd unlock it and he'd literally run to the piano and start playing. He'd play all day non-stop; you had to close the piano to stop him playing. You'd walk a little bit further and Compay would be playing these sort of miniature masterpieces. It was just amazing. Ry had this tiny little dictaphone and he was walking around with this dictaphone. While we were doing all of this the tape machines didn't work, but you could still hear stuff from the studio. We put the ambient microphones really high in the ceiling and I don't know why they had them, but they had these huge stands that went up. Most of that record was these microphones high in the ceiling, to capture the...because the room sounded so beautiful. Eventually that's what the record is...so it was recorded like a classical record. Lots of classical records are recorded with a stereo pair of microphones and that's it. We had close mics on everyone as well, which were used just a tiny bit at the end for detail. Repertoire was chosen by the musicians playing it. You sort of got, with Rubén or Ibrahim [Ferrer] for example; you pretty much got their own personal favourite two or three songs. You've got this amazing way of hearing repertoire that I didn't know that I wouldn't otherwise have known about. It was their stuff that meant something to them or was heartfelt to them. It veered off the obvious to an extent. You've also got this huge variety, because you had this variety of ages and variety of different styles coming in. I remember Ry would come back in the morning and use his dictaphone. He would go to Rubén and say 'What's that?' and play it back to him, then Rubén would say 'I can't remember'. Eventually Rubén would remember and say 'OK, we'll do that'. That's how it worked; we'd say 'ok, we're doing that song now. How do we best do that song?' A lot of what Ry did...it was his idea to do the ambient mics and he kept pushing it [the mics], up and up and up. Our engineer Jerry Boys, who we took from London, he kept pulling them back because it was a weird thing to do. Then Ry would say, 'Ok we're going to do this song' and then you'd basically try to get as few people in the studio as you could, because we had a lot of musicians and a lot of musicians who wanted to play on everything. He wanted to get away from this big way of playing and capture some of the intimacy...get this dynamic going with a tiny group of musicians, because the interplay is very delicate and beautiful.

*Simone:* I believe it was a two week recording...

*Nick:* The whole thing was two weeks, but the *Buena Vista* record took five or six days and we were recording all day, every day. Again you didn't want it to stop; we came to the end of it and all the musicians said goodbye.

*Simone:* In total you made three records there...

*Nick:* Yeah we made the Afro-Cuban All Stars record, *Buena Vista* and then we made a record with Rubén. We had two days and I was praying that we would finish *Buena Vista*, so we could record with Rubén. I said do you want to make a record and he [Rubén] said 'Yes show me the contract', which was quite good. So we had to do a contract with him and then he turned up with a bit of paper, like a bus ticket, with ten songs written on it. He put it on the piano as if it was a manuscript and proceeded to just play it.

*Simone:* Brilliant. Then you had the big task of bringing it all together and finalising it, so how did that work?

*Nick:* We went to America to start mixing it. We mixed the Afro-Cuban All Stars album first, which was recorded very differently. It was recorded in sections with close mics; so just the rhythm section, then the horns, then the singers. We mixed that then got it ready. The *Buena Vista* record we started mixing in America and it didn't sound right. Eventually we had to find the same recording desks that we used in Havana and it suddenly sounded right. We mixed it and it took us three times in the end, but we knew it was amazing. We didn't know what it would sell but we knew it sounded...there was something about it. Especially when you played it, it sounded like you were surrounded by the musicians, it sounded like you were next to them. Then we started doing all the sleeve notes and doing all the biographical information and getting all the photographs. We wanted to present it as beautifully as we could. We staggered the release of these three records. I think there was about a month between each one. We got the band to come over; Afro-Cuban All Stars were the first band to come over and they played these little clubs. It was a band with a full band, with like five singers, trumpets, piano, everything. It was amazing. Then we released it and did the thing of just sending it to as many people as possible...and it started selling. The reviews weren't great at the beginning, but it really was a proper word of mouth thing. People started to buy and buy and buy it, then the band came over and their story started to get a bit more known. More people bought it and it was just rising. Then we were able to get the whole band together to play two concerts in Holland and then, our American distributors came over and saw that and brought us to Carnegie Hall. At that time Ry persuaded Wym Wenders to start filming. He didn't have a commission for it or anything, he just came to Havana when we were recording Ibrahim's first solo album. Then it just started selling more and more and more and more.

*Simone:* We spoke about this earlier today; the film is beautiful in contextualising the music and the setting and the musicians themselves. It gives a kind of perspective to the musicians and clearly that helps a western audience to understand the music, and feel closer to the music. Would you agree to that?

*Nick:* Yeah I completely agree. As you can tell, when people went to see...especially after the film people wanted to see Ibrahim, I think more than a lot of the other musicians. People wanted

to see and felt they knew him [Ibrahim]. Like you were saying before, that he seemed like he was a nice guy, he was an amazingly nice person. The nicest person you could ever meet – just a beautiful, beautiful man. Incredibly humble and sweet and that actually come across a bit in the film, so people wanted to be in his presence...to touch him or to have something close to him. That helped a lot. They [the musicians] were interesting people.



Figure 3: Ibrahim Ferrer was invited to the Buena Vista sessions by Juan de Marcos González when a bolero singer was needed. His first solo album, “Buena Vista Social Club Presents™: Ibrahim Ferrer”, was released in 1999, followed in 2003 by the Grammy-winning album “Buenos Hermanos” (both produced by Ry Cooder). Ferrer died in 2005 just after completing a European tour and his final album, “Mi Sueño” (My Dream), appeared posthumously the following year. Photograph available at <http://www.buenvistasocialclub.com/musicians/> and reproduced with permission by World Circuit.

*Simone:* Buena Vista sold eight million copies worldwide. How did this impact on the workings and structure of the label?

*Nick:* When we made the record there were three of us. We sort of caught up and had to...there were only three of us, but fantastic people and loved it and got the stuff out. Loads of care was taken on the biographies, trying to explain and show people what the music was and how it came about. Then we were just chasing our tails; it was just a lot of work because you had to do an amount of work looking after them [the musicians]. The musicians would come over and there'd be lots of tours, so you looked at the tour itineraries and thought 'woah, that's a bit much. These people are old'. They're not used to touring so you'd have to make sure that wasn't happening in too rigorous a way. We were chasing our tails a lot and we were recording a lot. That group of musicians we found that a lot of them weren't signed, so we were able to work with Ibrahim or Ruben, making all of these records so it was just a bit mad. Very, very full on and we were taking people on just to cope.

*Simone:* In *The Independent* I read that now you could afford to experiment more and to be perfectionists with future projects (Loundras 2006)?

*Nick:* Well it sounds like a good thing, because what it meant was just that records took longer to make and you'd worry about detail. You'd try loads of things; it says experiment but I

remember trying loads of things and not using any of them. It was a mixed blessing. When you're doing something fast and instinctively, often it's better with not thinking too much about it. We made quite a few more expensive records, but I don't necessarily think they were better.

*Simone:* Back in 2006 again, you said and I quote "I see my role as facilitator rather than producer. When you spend time in the studio with the musicians, you get some sense of the heights they can reach. They craft and nurture something so beautiful; you see it as your job to capture that on record" (Loundres 2006). It seems like your personal ethos toward what you are doing, but can you expand that please?

*Nick:* If you spent enough time with the musicians and not just for one content...if you see them playing live and see them playing here or playing there, you hear aspects of them that you might not otherwise hear with just a demo recording or something. You get to know a little bit of what is possible and to try and capture that, to get that in the same way. At the same time it's really difficult, because a lot of the time they're one offs. You might see them in a concert and they do something amazing, then you can forever try and get that. The majority of the best music you'll never hear on record, because there's something that happens that doesn't get captured. There's loads of times I've been to concerts and thought 'Oh, I hope they do that', but then you ask them to do that and they don't know what you're talking about. Especially Ali Farka Touré was like that; you'd say 'Can you do it again?' and he'd say 'Why?' I'd say 'Can you do it better?' and he'd say 'I can't do it better, but I can do it different'.

### **Miscellaneous Issues**

*Simone:* I'm now going to open up for questions from the audience.

*Audience member:* During your career in popular music from Africa, now with the Congo, and I'd say the gravity has shifted now to South Africa, you don't seem to have recorded many, if any, artists from either of those two countries and I wondered if there was a reason for that?

*Nick:* I think in the Congo, the main reason is because it all had been recorded or signed. Nearly all of the artists I loved from the Congo, all of those bands were already working on something. We've actually just signed a Congolese band. It's amazing but it's very, very different from the Congo music that I knew. It was basically that and the musicians that I would've wanted to work with weren't available, weren't accessible. I don't know much about South Africa music. South African music I like; the Jive and the Penny whistle music and that is still interesting to me. What happens as well is that you start working in Mali or Senegal and you get absorbed in that music. Then it's difficult to lift your head from amongst what you're working with. It's difficult to keep looking at different things, almost to the extent where you're scared. If I start to look at another place and find a lot of stuff I want to work with, the thought of it being unmanageable or being too much, like we lucked out in Cuba or in Mali, there's only so much you can do.

*Audience member:* You said the term 'World Music' is problematic and I agree with you, but what about the name of the record label called World Circuit? There seems to be a similarity there – was that conscious?



*Nick:* No. What happened was where...what Anne and Mary were trying to do at the beginning...the label was new before I got there. They were talking about bringing local music to a world circuit; that was the context in which they used the word 'World' – it was like to spread that music in the world, rather than defining it. When the term 'World Music' was voted in, it was already after I had got there [at the record label]. At times I quite liked it being used a phrase, because I felt that we got free publicity for it. Afterwards though, I see it...I wish we weren't called that [World Circuit].

*Audience member:* Obviously you are proud of being an ethical label. In terms of copyright of old songs, particularly Cuba where it's difficult to trace the original author of songs, how do you go about trying to find out?

*Nick:* On the Cuban records we've done, nearly all of the songs, well the vast majority, were published by this company called Peer Music, which was started by this guy called Ralph Peer in the U.S in the twenties. The vast majority of songs we have recorded were known songs, and I think there was a point when one of the musicians claimed one of the songs and a dual claim went in. You have to do this thing whereby people have to put their contracts on the table. They had contracts; interestingly some were done just before the revolution as well. All the Cuban songs that we've done are relatively well known. I think there was one on *Buena Vista* where there was a dispute on it and there's still a dispute on it. A lot of the stuff we've done seems to be copyrighted right back from the twenties. Then the newer stuff was improvised in the studio, so that was easy.

*Audience member:* When you recorded *Buena Vista*, did you encounter any obstacles when you went to America to mix it?

*Nick:* The problems we had were with Ry getting to Cuba and his representatives didn't want him to go. There was stuff happening, such as the plane which was shot down in Cuba, just before we recorded as well. Then when we went to mix, we just went in and mixed. Also, we were mixing what they understood to be Latin music. There was this tiny window at the beginning where it was alright, because we played Carnegie Hall and I still...looking back it's still weird that it was able to happen. For some reason, I think the age of the musicians helped that. It made them look more worthy and more folkloric; I think weirdly that helped. After that it became a problem again. Touring was really difficult for a long time. Ibrahim won a Grammy, which he wasn't allowed to go and collect, so touring has been really difficult. You might get your Visa on the day that the tour starts, but the tour companies won't risk it.

*Audience member:* In terms of the global market for so-called 'World Music', I mean...I know right now is a particularly difficult time for all record companies, but what would you say is happening with that market? Is it growing for this music or is it in contraction in retail?

*Nick:* It's very difficult to know specifically with this type of music what's happening, but it seems to be contracting in general. In Mali where we work with a lot of our musicians, for ages it was cassettes and now nearly all music in Mali is done by telephone. There are no cassettes, hardly any CD's, it's all by telephone and I don't know how to monitor that. In a lot of countries, especially West Africa, we've always given the rights back to the artist and they've

administrated it. I don't know to be honest with you. In Taiwan or China, I don't know what the market is like for Cuban music. I should know but I don't

*Audience member:* You spoke a bit about the 360 deals that you get involved in. Is that more because it's ideal for the company or more record labels do it now?

*Nick:* I think most Majors [major record labels] do it. It is more associated with Major labels and I think Independents...I just do a recording deal or a publishing deal. We did it on this one because we were investing a lot of money in getting them on tour and so forth. I think a lot of Majors won't sign an act now unless they can work with everything.

*Audience member:* Do you think it's possible for a music act to become successful without the help of people such as yourself, in their own countries for example?

*Nick:* In their own countries yes, like in Cuba and Mali, there a musicians who are successful in their own countries but then that doesn't translate. It's not always popular outside their countries. Maybe if it's something to do with an emphasis on lyrics, on the lyrical content of it, how important that is as opposed to the music. That would find an audience locally that might not translate, because we don't know what they're talking about. You have to tell people about it, because it's not just going to work as music. It's difficult for musicians to succeed, like it is for any musician here, you have to work and grind out. For musicians from countries like that, to come into Europe and try and enter this market, it's difficult.

*Audience member:* A lot of 'World Music' stars tend to be quite admirable. Would you say that there is a newer generation of 'World Music' stars that are not; is it an older person's kind of game?

*Nick:* Maybe a lot of the people who did 'World Music' like me are getting old. The people that listened to it a lot...maybe I'm weird because I loved that music that he [Rubén González] was playing, and it was pretty antique already when we were doing that music. There are younger musicians everywhere and they need to get exposure. There's a very young band from Mali now touring called Songhoy Blues; they're in their early twenties I think. These countries...they must have young musicians, but it's whether they're particularly interested in appealing to what we consider successful 'World Music'. That might not be on their radar as such. They might be doing a specific thing that's very relevant to them and might not translate here. To get it out and to get exposure, it's difficult.

## **Final Notes**

*Simone:* What would you say is your biggest or proudest achievement?

*Nick:* I don't know. My most pleasurable achievement was doing Rubén's record, just sitting and listening to it, because he basically just sat there behind a desk and played a record -This amazing, beautiful record.



Figure 4: Rubén Gonzalez and Nick Gold during the recording sessions in Havana. Reproduced with permission from World Circuit.

*Simone:* What are your future plans?

*Nick:* We've just done this record with this band from the Democratic Republic of Congo [Mbongwana Star], which is out next month. It's quite a different sounding record. It was put together and then pulled apart by a producer in London and then he put it back together, so it's a very different on Congolese music. I'm quite excited about that.

*Simone:* Well now is an opportunity to plug your new album, *Buena Vista: Lost and Found*, which has only just been released. Would you like to tell us a bit more about it?

*Nick:* Its lots of little clips after we were recording non-stop and the musicians were on tour non-stop. We were just recording all of the time. Any opportunity we got, we were recording and some of these got forgotten or some of it didn't fit onto the record. A lot of the musicians would treasure some of these recordings and always ask for them to be released. I started to listen to what else there might be and we found an album's worth, so it was just a way of finding an outlet for all this stuff. One of the songs on there didn't make it onto the original as we thought it was too popular, which is a bit ironic.

*Simone:* Finally, what is your favourite 'World Music' festival?

*Nick:* I like WOMAD – I like the food [laughing].

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