

Lots of Bola

An interview with José Sánchez-Montes, director of the documentary “Bola de Nieve (Snowball): the sad man who sang happily”

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The first reference that José Sánchez-Montes had of the Cuban musician Ignacio Villa, “Bola de Nieve” (Snowball), was provided by some records given to him by his friends who knew of his admiration for Cuban music. They thought he would like it, but they never imagined that the encounter would lead to a documentary about such an attractive personality. “From that moment, I became interested in him. Bola is somebody who leaves an everlasting impression,” said the Spanish director. The project was headed by the Ático 7 Company, headquartered in the city of Granada, in co-production with South Andalucía Channel, the Cuban Institute of Art and Cinematographic Industry (ICAIC), Media 3.14 and Channel 11 of Mexican television.

Michel Suárez: Today, what is the real repercussion of Bola de Nieve’s work on the Spanish audience?

José Sánchez-Montes: Bola de Nieve is unknown in Spain right now, except to intellectuals. It’s no coincidence that there are references of Bola de Nieve throughout literature, in biographies of writers, and songs of Spanish musicians. Renowned intellectuals and artists such as Pedro Almodóvar, Joaquín Sabina, Alfredo Bryce Echenique, Camilo José Cela, Rafael Alberti...have mentioned him. I think he’ll become huge at a certain

point and that people are going to be interested in this worldwide figure.

MS: How is the documentary structurally envisioned?

JS: *Bola de Nieve: the sad man who sang happily* is a 72 minute documentary told by friends, family, acquaintances and music experts. They narrate the details of Bola’s biography and his personality that in my opinion was fundamental for him to be able to sing and compose as he did. It starts with a sequence that we call “hero’s death,” which is a multitudinous burial in Guanabacoa. We then begin to tell his story from the beginning until the revolution. Bola joins that first revolution, which was still vibrant and appealing to people. It was the only revolution he witnessed due to his death in 1971.

From that point on we begin to focus on other elements such as his black race in a Cuba which had always discounted black people and continues to do so, as well as his homosexuality in a Cuba which had always been very against it (even the revolution was initially against it). He navigated that world with certain ease and ended up being an important artist in the time of Fulgencio Batista’s government and afterward in the revolution. I find it fascinating how this character was able to overcome and avoid all those difficulties.



MS: Some believe that he was luckier in his relations with the new regime than his countrywoman, the popular ballad singer La Lupe, as a result of being more eccentric...

JS: La Lupe was a great singer because of the feeling and passion of her songs, which is very similar to Bola. However, Bola surpasses her in the study and profound investigation of Cuban music. The musicologist Helio Orovio told us, and I believe it's true, that Bola was a precursor to mambo

prior to the pianist Dámaso Pérez Prado. He was also the precursor of "feeling." Some have identified him with the "feeling," but Bola is beyond it. Even the singer/writer Marta Valdés categorically refuses to be included in that movement.

He is the international precursor of songs as renowned as *La flor de la canela* and *La vie en rose...* Bola is lots of Bola. He is an absolute icon. Edith Piaf used to say that nobody sang *La vie en rose* like Bola. The Peruvian composer and singer Chabuca Granda was absolutely passionate about him, and his interpretation of *La flor de la canela* is brilliant, "flamboyant" as Orovio says, or "homosexual" as I say. In that sense, he is unique, and I believe that Latin America thinks so too.

Logically, I believe that Bola was a lot more adaptable than La Lupe. He was a "seguidista," which is some sort of poster child of the revolution. He traveled around the world. In Russia he sang in Russian and sang Chinese in China. He took pictures with





Bola de Nieve accompanied on piano Lilia del Valle in several songs which the beautiful artist sang in the film "Mil Besos" ("Kid Tabaco")

Mao Tse-tung. He was an openly declared pro-revolutionary, which was where his falling-out with the writer Reinaldo Arenas came from. Arenas started out as his friend, but he later accused Bola of being "the coachman of the Party."

Bola declared that he was Marxist, Fidelist and Yoruba, which means that he was a fierce thing to behold. I think that is understandable because he only lived through the first years of the revolution, in that idealized world in which the black people suddenly believed that they would be happy and that their status would change. Homosexuals probably thought the same. He practically lived in a cloud, where he socialized with Fidel and all the international artists that visited Cuba. On the other hand, La Lupe was from the streets; the neighbor-

hoods; the lots, and she would sing about what she lived through. But Bola didn't live in that world. Bola was from "the VIP world."

MS: In your opinion, was he the black Cuban musician who accomplished the most from the institutional point of view?

JS: There is no doubt that Ignacio Villa became an ambassador of the revolution. He probably fulfilled a very special role during the 60's, since he was the face of the rights that the new regime had supposedly recognized for the blacks. In addition, he was the counterpart to those other first class artists who had left Cuba.

Since then there has been great success for black Cuban musicians; from the singers/writers César Portillo de la Luz and Pablo Milanés, to the old "Son" musicians,

who are now big recording and media artists. But in that time period, Bola accomplished a very important task and, without a doubt, was very well supported by Castro's Cuba.

MS: On what testimonies did you base your documentary?

JS: There are a lot of interesting people. Overall, there are a lot of radio interviews with Bola in Peru, Mexico and Cuba. Helio Orovio is in it. To me he's a stupendous character who knows Cuban music like the palm of his hand, from Afro Cuban to Rap, all of it. In addition, the speaker Luis Carbonell, who was Bola's friend; a lady of Cuban music such as Esther Borja and the musician and folklorist Lázaro Ros provided testimonies. The composer Vicente Garrido can be found amongst the Mexicans, and singer Santiago Auserón from Spain, who has done a lot of work with Cuban music. Then there's a character called Israel who is part of the private side. He was the maître'd of El Monsignor Restaurant, which was called Ché Bola during a period of time. He was a very intimate and special friend of Bola's, and he forms part of the narrative thread of the second part of the documentary.

Regarding the image archives, we have been absolutely surprised because I had never seen Bola de Nieve. I believe that hardly anybody here had seen him. I even discussed it with the singer/writer Joaquín Sabina, who had only seen him in pictures. I started to investigate in the ICAIC archives and found some brief fragments from the movie *Nosotros la música*, of the documentary director Rogelio París. That's all that was available. But I found many files on Cuban television, even some that weren't edited. I investigated the films in which Bola appeared and I found seven movies, three of those in Mexico, one in Brazil and



three others in Argentina. We found very high quality material.

MS: What international impact has your documentary had?

JS: The documentary started off very well and we'd been very fortunate because they invited us to close the New York Latin Film Festival and people liked it. As Bola would say, they didn't throw tomatoes at us or anything like that.

When it premiered in New York I never imagined that it would have such a huge impact. Since then, the movie has been shown in more than 60 festivals throughout the world, two of Bola's records have been reedited and a theatrical musical which is currently touring Spain has been produced.

Deep down I believe that the goal has been reached, people are again speaking of a genius who should be of vital and artistic reference to many people. But personally, what made me feel the best was when the Spanish cinematographer Fernando Trueba wrote me to tell me that he had been in his house with Bebo Valdés, and that the brilliant pianist was so touched by the production that he was moved to tears.