If popular music really is a refrain, then there is strong case to be made that nostalgia, in practice, is an instrumentalisation of the refrain. Nostalgia, I want to suggest, is inbuilt in the refrain itself. The very structure of popular music, its inherent repetitiveness in other words, makes it an especially potent nostalgia-inducing agent. My implication is that nostalgia does not only concern the distant past, nor indeed is it only a matter of memory (sometimes memory does not come into it at all). It is manifest in the present as repetition, and its function is not simply mnemonic. (Buchanan)

It was the autumn of 2008 when I biked over to the music store Concerto on Utrechtsestraat in Amsterdam to purchase an album, Buena Vista Social Club at Carnegie Hall, which I had been anticipating for weeks. It was a live recording of a concert that had taken place on another continent nearly ten years earlier, featuring a group of aging Cuban men and women singing about a place and time existing through the rhythm of imagination. I first heard the Buena Vista Social Club while in Amsterdam years before that, when a friend played their eponymous debut album from 1997 during a round of poker. Since then I have been a fan of the group’s energetic music, characterized by fast and multi-textured acoustic instrumentation, upbeat lyrics, minor tones, boisterous percussion, and bright brass, and where accents take precedence over meter. While Buena Vista Social Club at Carnegie Hall is eighty minutes of resurrected Cuban music in the United States, its allure is definitely more widespread: the stacks of CDs and pervasive marketing in Concerto affirmed my hunch of a dedicated western-European audience.
I quickly bought the CD and popped it in when I got home, cranking the volume to allow the precisely flavored buildup of each song to percolate throughout our living room’s space. Although I found it difficult to sit for the polyrhythmic fervor, I managed to open the liner notes to the first page and read the reprinted ten-year-old New York Times review of the concert. Portraying the event, the author wrote that:

The music was rich with tenderness and nostalgia, suggesting a world of tropical ease and pre-Revolutionary innocence. Part of Cuba’s new appeal to the outside world is the notion, partly illusory, that its isolation has made it a time capsule, maintaining styles that have been overrun by hectic commerciality elsewhere. But these Cuban musicians, an apparition made possible by shifts in politics, ambition and taste, are not disappearing again. Mr. Gonzalez, Mr. Ferrer and other core members of the Buena Vista Social Club will be touring the United States in the fall, keeping Cuba’s past in the present. (Pareles 22)

In a way, the album to which I was listening was a sort of time capsule: since the 1998 concert at Carnegie Hall, guitarist Compay Segundo, percussionist Anga Díaz, singer Pío Leyva, pianist Rubén González, and singer Ibrahim Ferrer had all died (since the live album’s release, bassist Orlando López and guitarist Manuel Galbán have also passed). But I had to wonder: what could this “partly illusory” “new appeal to the outside world” mean? What was being situated in a statement like that? Or excluded? Cuban music has played an integral—formative—role in the evolution of jazz and “world music.” So what about the narrative of this particular band, or the music they play, could incite this nostalgic reaction, a pointed yearning for the “innocent” style of a perceived traditional and authentic Cuban sound? Why here, now, for these obscure musicians seemingly preserved only by cigar smoke and providence?

Sure, it could simply be the ages of the musicians themselves that captures a feeling of nostalgia for listeners. It might be the songs, many of which were written well over five decades ago, and are now given fresh and tight interpretations by band members who had never played together as the Buena Vista Social Club. For those familiar with the PBS documentary of the group by director Wim Wenders, that romantic sentimentality of “keeping Cuba’s past in the present” might also be attributed to the tale of the group’s initial recording and production: the happenstance assemblage of musical masters long forgotten by both the politics of the American embargo on Cuba and by changes in the “traditional” Cuban musical forms of boleros, sons, and guajiras toward the nuevo canto sound. Or, at last, perhaps something more than simple exposure was being smuggled in the album’s distribution via the “world music” genre: that the Carnegie Hall performance somehow reflected an entire era for an audience to behold, installing the adjacent sentiment too, that “this is the way we expect Cuba’s music to have once and always sounded.”