

A few years ago I helped Warner Brothers compile a tracklisting for a proposed retrospective four CD set covering every facet of Ry Cooder's 40-year musical voyage. Sadly, the man himself nixed the project, insisting that box sets were "for dead people". It was a crying shame for it's hard to think of a musician whose career is more deserving of such a collection.

Once voted by *Rolling Stone* as one of the world's top ten guitarists, Cooder has had at least four quite distinct and separate careers in the course of his restless musical journey. As a rock'n'roll session player in the late 60s he had a spell as a sideman in Captain Beefheart's Magic Band and played slide guitar on records

by the likes of the Rolling Stones and Little Feat. His initial solo career cast him as a stylish acoustic bluesman who branched out into a variety of other genres. Parallel with that ran another career composing Hollywood soundtracks, with Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas* perhaps the most famous of the dozen and more films he has scored. After abandoning solo recording in 1987, he began his fourth career as a world music adventurer, duetting with Ali Farka Touré, producing the *Buena Vista Social Club* album and working on a host of other less high-profile projects. After a gap of almost two decades, in recent years, he has successfully resumed his solo career with the albums *Chávez Ravine* and *My Name Is Buddy*.

Born in Los Angeles in 1947, by his teens

Cooder was already playing just about any fretted instrument he could get his hands on, including banjo, mandolin and slide guitar and hanging out at the Ash Grove, picking up tips from visiting bluesmen such as the Reverend Gary Davis. By 1965 he had formed the blues-rock band the Rising Sons with Taj Mahal. It was a short-lived venture but the quality of his slide playing meant he was in huge demand in the rock world and, at one point, there was even a suggestion that he might replace Brian Jones in the Rolling Stones. Instead, Keith Richards 'borrowed' the guitar riff of 'Honky Tonk Women' from him.

His first solo album, 1970's *Ry Cooder*, was a mostly acoustic collection of old blues and traditional songs and a series of albums

followed in similar style, including *Boomer's Story* and *Into The Purple Valley* (both 1972). Cooder himself was no songwriter but he drew on a songbook that ranged from Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie to Blind Willie McTell and Sleepy John Estes and, in effect, his early albums were primers in indigenous American roots music, spanning folk, blues, gospel and country and populated by a cast of hobos, itinerant bluesmen and Dust Bowl refugees straight out of a John Steinbeck novel. Today we'd call it 'Americana'. If there's a criticism of those early albums, it's that the approach at times veers towards the archival, but that's to quibble. By 1976's *Chicken Skin Music* he had expanded his horizons to take in Tex-Mex and Hawaiian music, with guest appearances by the likes of Flaco Jiménez and Gabby Pahinui on an album that laid the seeds for his future world music collaborations in the 90s. Yet at this

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point he seems inexplicably to have lost his focus. 1978's *Jazz* was a tribute to Dixieland. There then followed a series of more overtly rock and R&B inflected albums such as *Bop Till You Drop* (1979), *Borderline* (1980), *The Slide Area* (1982) and *Get Rhythm* (1987). All included some stellar playing, yet listening to them today, the overwhelming feeling is that they lack both passion and direction. By contrast, some of his finest and most atmospheric work from the era can be found on such film soundtracks as *Crossroads* (1986), *Paris, Texas* (1985), and *The Long Riders* (1980), as if the discipline imposed by writing to order for somebody else's vision freed up his own creative juices.

He subsequently said that he had come to believe felt that his solo recordings had no context or wider meaning. "I kept thinking there is great music out there but I just can't

seem to be part of it. I didn't like the records I was making and they didn't reflect my feelings, so I quit," he once said. After 1987 it was another 18 years before he released another album under his own name.

He began looking elsewhere for a musical environment that could provide the context he was no longer able to find in American music and threw himself into a series of challenging and imaginative world music projects. Unlike Paul Simon, who used world musicians to add colour and flavour to his own pop songs, Cooder has always been careful not to dominate, preferring to insinuate himself in self-effacing fashion into the musical milieu of those with whom he works, whether they're from Hawaii, West Africa, India, Japan or Cuba. On *A Meeting By The River* with VM Bhatt (1993), *Talking Timbuktu* with Ali Farka Touré (1994) and *Mambo Sinuendo* with the Cuban guitarist Manuel Galbán (2003) he received joint billing. But on the most successful of all his world music collaborations, 1997's *Buena Vista Social Club*, his own production buried his slide guitar fills deep in the mix in order to allow the Cuban musicians to take the glory and it took a personal plea from World Circuit's Nick Gold to get him even to agree to have his name listed on the front cover.

After a titanic battle with the US state department, which fined him for recording *Buena Vista in Cuba* in breach of the US embargo, he was eventually allowed to return to the island to produce Ibrahim Ferrer's second solo album, 2003's *Buenos Hermanos*.

Finally in 2005 came his first solo album since 1987's *Get Rhythm - Chávez Ravine* - a concept album about the destruction of a Mexican community in Los Angeles. Two years later he followed with the more idiosyncratic *My Name Is Buddy*, which found him emerging as a ripe American storyteller.

At last, it appears, he has found a musical context to satisfy him in his own cultural backyard, although hopefully there are still a few more global adventures yet to come. Perhaps one day we'll even get to hear that box set. ●



GERARD LEWIS

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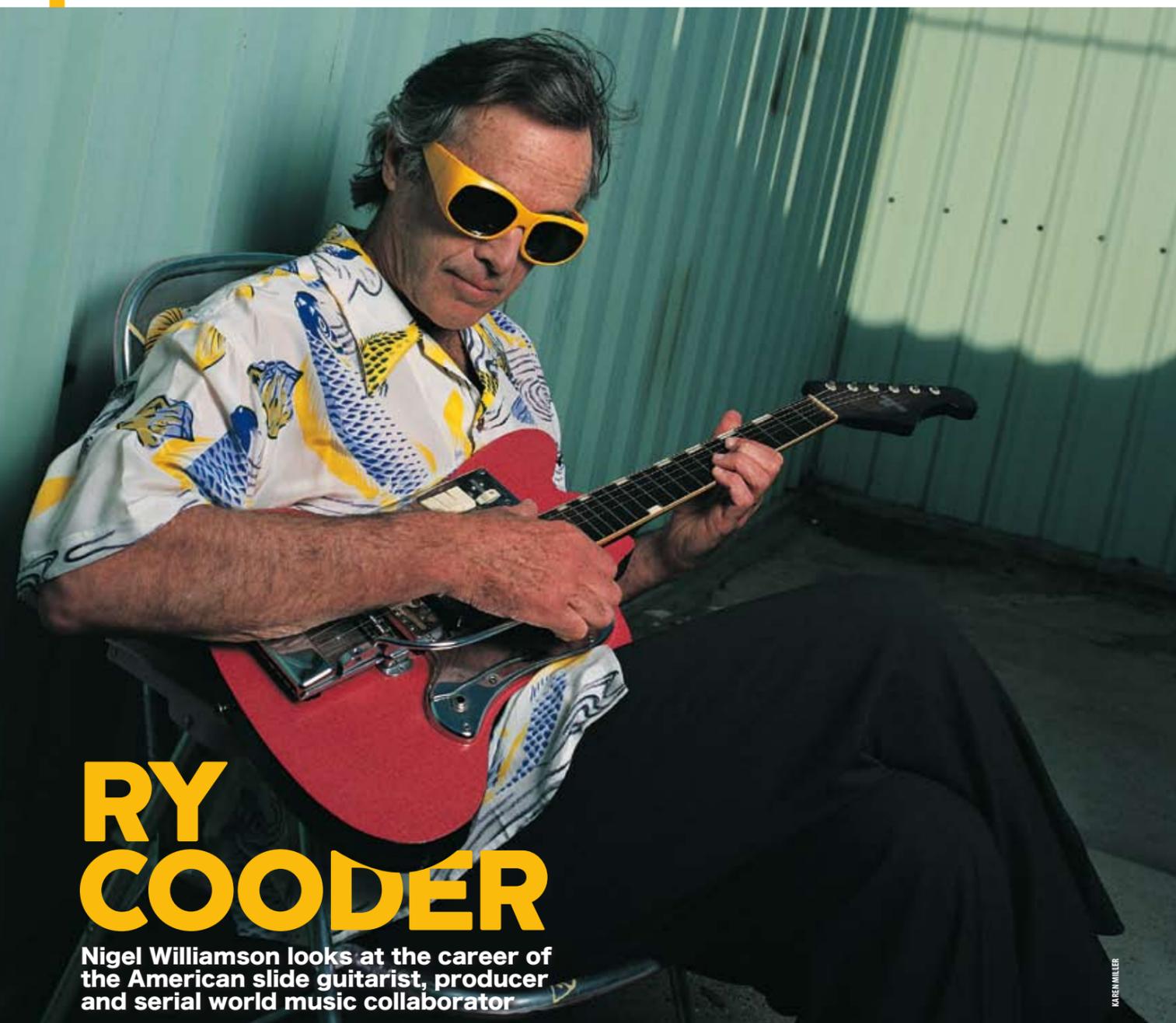
SUSAN TITELMAN



From top to bottom: Ry Cooder with BVSC's *Compay Segundo*; Recording *Talking Timbuktu* with Ali Farka Touré which won a Grammy; with Cuban guitarist Manuel Galbán

SUSAN TITELMAN

**You can hear Nigel Williamson and an excerpt from *Chávez Ravine* on this issue's podcast**



KAREN MILLER

# RY COODER

Nigel Williamson looks at the career of the American slide guitarist, producer and serial world music collaborator

## BEST... ...ALBUMS



**Chicken Skin Music** (Reprise, 1976)  
The most adventurous of Cooder's early solo albums found him travelling to Hawaii to

record two tracks with Gabby Pahinui and recruiting Flaco Jiménez to reinvent 'Stand By Me' and 'Goodnight Irene' as Tex-Mex classics.



**Talking Timbuktu** with Ali Farka Touré (World Circuit, 1994)  
Two guitar masters pushing, encouraging and daring each other

to unimaginable heights on a record which became the model for further African-American collaborations by the likes of Taj Mahal and Toumani Diabaté.



**Chávez Ravine** (Nonesuch, 2005)  
The album he swore he'd never make is an ambitious and at times thrilling blend of roots

rock, *corridos*, Latin swing, polkas, *pachuco* boogie and much else besides. It's also a rare concept album with a narrative that works.

## IF YOU LIKE RY COODER, TRY...



**BOB BROZMAN** *Lumière* (Riverboat/WMN, 2007)  
The parallels are numerous. Like Cooder,

Brozman is a virtuoso American slide guitarist who began playing the blues, but has since become a serial global collaborator. On this album he deploys a vast array of instruments and influences picked up on his travels to create a one-man string orchestra.