



# Feel the Music

Natalie Venetia Belcon and  
Isa Antonetti lead the band  
in *Buena Vista Social Club*.

By Diep Tran

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It's never too late for a second chance. That's a theme of the new musical *Buena Vista Social Club*, but it's also one for its leading lady, Natalie Venetia Belcon, who was last on Broadway in 2016. "In a way, it's my second chance also," she remarks. "I haven't done a Broadway show in about 10 years." Belcon originated the role of Gary Coleman in *Avenue Q*, but she admits that Omara, which is a more dramatic role filled with regret and pathos, "is much different than Gary Coleman." Then she adds with a smile, "and it's not a farce."

Instead, *Buena Vista Social Club* is a thrilling and moving exploration of the power of music. *Buena Vista Social Club* is based on the best-selling Cuban album of the same name, which took the world by storm in 1997,

selling millions of copies worldwide and winning a Grammy. The name of the album was a reference to the Havana clubs that were a key place for mingling, dancing, and performing live music—which were shut down following the Cuban Revolution in 1959.

For the artists who performed on *Buena Vista Social Club* (who had been successful in Cuba in the '50s but who found themselves struggling after the revolution), the album introduced them and the songs of a bygone Cuba to a worldwide audience—who adored the music even if they didn't completely understand the Spanish lyrics. The success of the *Buena Vista Social Club* album led to U.S. tours, offshoot projects from its members, an Oscar-nominated documentary from Wim Wenders, a Carne-





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gie Hall concert, and a resurgence in interest in son and bolero music.

It is a testament to the global appeal of that album that Belcon, who was born in Trinidad and does not speak Spanish, knew of the music long before she auditioned for the show. “I knew the album. I have musicians for parents. So, I grew up around all kinds of music.”

This new musical, with a book by Marco Ramirez, dramatizes the recording of that album and how all those musicians reunited for one final shot at glory—though Belcon admits it’s not striving for complete historical accuracy. Belcon plays Omara, a star singer who is based on the real-life Omara Portuondo. “You have to think about it as a fable. While the characters are loosely based on real people, there are a lot of liberties.” The musical premiered in late 2023 Off-Broadway at Atlantic Theater Company and was such a hit that it was extended twice.

The *Buena Vista Social Club* musical is a love letter to Cuban music, while also introducing it to a new generation. That’s reflected in newcomer Isa Antonetti, who had not heard the music until she auditioned for the show last year. Antonetti plays the younger version of Omara as she begins her career in the 1950s. The show flashes back and forth between the young, hopeful Omara played by Antonetti and the more disillusioned one played by Belcon—and how the singer heals her old wounds through music.

As someone who grew up singing in Spanish, once Antonetti heard the songs, she was hooked. “Just the fact that they were doing the music authentically—the music was in Spanish, it wasn’t changing it to English for people to understand...I was like, ‘I want to be in it,’” she exclaims, with visible excitement. “I don’t want

to just watch it. I want to be inside of it.”

Yes, the songs in *Buena Vista Social Club* are entirely in Spanish. For Antonetti, who grew up singing Spanish music in her own family band, Orchestra Antonetti, *Buena Vista* felt familiar. Her father owns a social club in Rochester, New York, where community

members could come dance—a fortuitous connection that Antonetti didn’t make until this reporter pointed it out.

“There is this moment where I come into the social club [in the musical], and I am supposed to feel this overwhelming sense of joy and love. And this music is filling up every part of my body. And I felt that so many times in my family band that I grew up with,” explains Antonetti.

Though Belcon does not speak Spanish, she sang so well in the Off-Broadway run of

*Buena Vista* (winning a Lucille Lortel Award for her performance) that many thought she was a native speaker. She credits the show’s dialect coach Rosie Berrido. “There was a Cuban couple outside the stage door, and she was speaking to me in Spanish, asking me if I’m Cuban,” recalls Belcon, chuckling. “She just stood there staring at me, gagged, gagged. It’s the best compliment I could possibly get.”

And though she’s singing in Spanish, she’s not worried about audiences not being able to understand her. After all, the *Buena Vista* album was able to connect people across nationalities. The new musical hopes to do the same. “This show is *absolutely* undeniable,” Belcon says emphatically. “I am so proud of it and proud to be a part of this. This is a one-of-a-kind thing.” And she hopes audiences will get on their feet at times and dance along with the performers on stage. After all, that’s the point of a social club. “I hope they serve rum shots as the first note hits. Rum shots for all!”

