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## Ry's the real boss

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### Ry Cooder

Chavez Ravine  
(Nonesuch 79877)

Storytelling is an increasingly popular pastime among American musicians of a certain age and status. Bruce Springsteen's recent album, *Devils and Dust*, unveiled a series of narrators doing unBruce things such as visiting prostitutes and fighting. Neil Young put out a multimedia parable, *Greendale*, in 2003.

Better than either of these is *Chavez Ravine*, the latest project from Ry Cooder, the man who made the enduringly successful *Buena Vista Social Club* album and rejuvenated at least half-a-dozen Cuban musical careers.

*Chavez Ravine* is a semi-fictional account of a lost Los Angeles Hispanic neighbourhood told by some of its surviving musicians, in songs from the time, through new compositions by the Angeleno native Cooder and, astonishingly, by 90-something Frank Wilkinson, a municipal housing officer jailed for unAmerican activities in the Fifties when he tried to build some housing for the poor.

It's a poignant tale of corruption and pathos, a musical Chinatown or *LA Confidential*. The peaceable, if down-at-heel Latino enclave was bulldozed so that the Dodgers baseball stadium could be built.

If an album, half in English, half in Spanish, about how big money and crooked public servants destroyed hundreds of homes and lives sounds like a worthy exercise in American liberal breast-beating, it really isn't.

*Chavez Ravine* unfurls its story more sinuously than that, concentrating on how life was lived in Forties Chavez. There's a borderline-cheesy Lieber and Stoller song from the era, 'Three Cool Cats', witnessing the flirtations between three guys in zoot suits eyeing up potato-chip munching senioritas.

There's the haunting 'El UFO Cayó', in which a UFO flies in with a -warning of trouble to come, its theme sung deliciously by Juliette Commagere. Most fun of all is 'Chinito Chinito', a jolly strut through a Fifties tune by Felguerez Diaz, whose casual racism of the time (the Spanish lyrics poke fun at a Chinese laundryman) contrasts with its innocent exuberance.

Even the gruff ballad of the bulldozer driver, 'It's Just Work for Me', just about convinces, in blue-collar Tom Waits fashion. The angry 'Don't Call Me Red', meanwhile, showcases non-musician Frank Wilkinson, getting the last laugh at McCarthyism. 'I outlived those bastards after all,' he sings, sounding a little like Johnny Cash towards the end of his years.

The album's real stars, however, are the august musicians Cooder has made it a priority to resuscitate. You don't need any foreknowledge of Latino music to appreciate Lalo Guerrero's tale of two local boxers, 'Corrido de Boxeo', or enjoy 'Muy Fifi', which pits Ersi Arvizu (of the Sisters and El Chicano) against Little Willie G, who once fronted Sixties LA band Thee Midneters. Cooder got to Guerrero, acknowledged as the father of Chicano music, before he died last March, continuing his exemplary record of giving Spanish-language musicians a shot at the Anglo market in their twilight years.

According to Cooder, the entire *Chavez Ravine* project began with a series of photographs taken by Don Normark, in which Angelenos of the era got married, showed off their children or just passed the time. It's this respect for the texture of the past, the matter of factness in the lives of the ravine's inhabitants that Cooder is at pains to capture, throwing in a UFO craze here and a zoot suit riot there. Part musical memory box, part psycho-geographical treatise, *Chavez Ravine* is a terrific achievement and a joy to listen to.

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