



Buena Vista Goes Broadway

By: David Barbour

A hit musical moves uptown, complete with an innovative tracking and monitoring solution

When we covered the hit Off-Broadway musical *Buena Vista Social Club* in February 2024, we noted that the just-closed attraction (part of the Atlantic Theater Company's season) was likely to turn up again. That prediction came true this March, when it opened at Broadway's Booth Theatre, where it continues to draw crowds. It also racked up five Tony Awards, including one for sound designer

Jonathan Deans.

The award was well-deserved. Suggested by Wim Wenders' 1999 documentary about the distinctive pop music—a sizzling mix of African and Spanish influences, with a bit of jazz tossed in—that flourished in Cuba during the pre-Castro era, the production features an onstage band of ten crack musicians. As orchestrated by Marco Paguia and arranged by him, Javier

Diaz, David Oquendo, and Leonardo Reyna, the songs are rendered with a vibrant authenticity that is rare for Broadway. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the show's music, which profoundly influences the characters and their life choices, is another character in the story.

In Marco Ramirez's book, sisters Haydee and Omara dream of big-time show business success while perform-

All photos: Matthew Murphy

ing “exotic” numbers for tourists in a chain hotel. While Haydee pursues a contract with an American recording executive, Omara ends up in the nightclub of the title, falling in love with the heavily Black-influenced music performed there, and, in the process, scandalizing her well-off family. (Adding fuel to the fire, Omara also falls for the singer Ibrahim, who works there.) But the revolution is in progress, the window of escape is quickly closing, and both sisters will be forced to make fateful decisions that continue to haunt Omara three decades later, when a young American entrepreneur comes to Cuba, hoping to recruit her, now a recluse, and her former colleagues for a new recording.

At the Atlantic, an inhospitable environment for amplified musicals, Deans’ design was remarkable for its clarity, allowing each instrument and musical line to be heard. The voices sat comfortably on top of the music, achieving a nearly ideal blend. But transferring a musical from an intimate Off-Broadway house to a Broadway venue with five times the audience capacity



Above and below: Deans outfitted the musicians with trackers from the audio gear manufacturer TiMax. “Each of them wears an RFID device, so I can track them as they move around,” he notes. Opposite: Adding to the show’s kinetic energy is the choreography by Patricia Delgado and Justin Peck.

is rather like relocating a delicate plant from a hothouse to a stadium. Fortunately, Buena Vista Social Club proved capable of expanding to fit comfortably in its larger environment. Also, Deans and his team had strategies for addressing the new production’s fresh challenges.

Off Broadway to Broadway

The main issue with the Atlantic Theater auditorium, aside from its highly reflective brick walls, had to do with a relatively high stage and a lack of front fill (Arnulfo Maldonado’s set didn’t accommodate it), which threatened to create a kind of audio



Bermuda triangle in the downstage center of the audience. The solution was a highly targeted set of loudspeakers from the German manufacturer Holoplot.

Working in the Schoenfeld, one of Broadway's flagship houses, the problem evaporated. "It was lovely at the Atlantic because it was cozy and the audience was a part of the show," Deans says. "Moving to Broadway, you think it is going to lose something. But the Schoenfeld is a beautiful theatre, nice and compact both upstairs and down. Once the set was built and installed, [the show] was like it had been downtown; the connection is very special."

Off Broadway, Deans' loudspeaker rig included four Meyer Ultra-X23s hung in proscenium positions, five Meyer UP-4s for front fill, three Meyer 750-LFC subwoofers, and nine d&b audiotechnik E12-Ds in side orchestra and rear fill positions. Three d&b E5s, placed in the theatre's rear, functioned

as surround speakers; another eight were used as stage monitors—six flown and two wall-mounted. Naturally, for the Schoenfeld, he designed a rather more expansive rig. It includes, on the proscenium, a left-right system of four Meyer Ultra-X23s plus two Ultra-X40s in a left-right arrangement for orchestra-level coverage. These are supported by 22 Meyer LINAs: eight each in balcony left and right positions, and six more providing downfill. Front fill is supplied with seven Meyer UP-4slims, with additional orchestra-level fill courtesy of four Meyer UPA-2s (plus two more serving as apron monitors.) Two Meyer UPJuniors cover balcony fill, with a Meyer UPQ-D1 for the center balcony. Providing low end are two Meyer 900-LFCs. Five d&b E6 units deliver additional orchestra-level fill.

The Ultra-X40s, Deans says, provide detail "that is so crucial, because of [the musicians'] precision." Interestingly, he adds, he chose not to

implement an extensive surround system. "In this show, it's all about what is onstage, about the musicianship." The emphasis, he adds, is "the actors, the instruments, and the choreography. They connect with the audience, rather than sitting back to experience a soundscape or an immersive system. The audience connects with the people onstage; it's a one-to-one, back-and-forth experience."

Tracking the musicians

Deans notes that he struggled to provide the best possible monitoring for the musicians. The solution he devised at the Atlantic, involving speakers built into the deck, was complicated by the fact that the players are frequently in motion, either roaming the stage or sitting on a deck that moves up and downstage. "It was hard getting them what they wanted, because it's a very small stage, with very loud instruments," he adds. His goal, he notes, was "to make sure nothing sticks out and that everyone can hear each other and work together."

At the Atlantic, he says, he came to a realization: "Cuban music, it was explained to me, is like a watch," he says. "The cogs all must work together, and if we miss one, it doesn't work. It's fascinating, as all ten of the musicians are the hub. There's not one person who leads; they are all playing off each other, both with rhythm, pitch, and tone, and who steps forward, so getting the monitoring right for them was the key to success." He quickly realized the musicians had little interest in using in-ear monitors. "Giving them what they need to hear onstage in that environment is completely different from where they would sit or be in a concert or a studio or that." David Strang, vice president, audio sales, of the production's audio gear supplier PRG, says, "I visited Jonathan at the Atlantic. He said, 'I feel like a watchmaker, because every time the musicians are here or there, I need to adjust things a little bit to make sure they're getting exactly what they need





Above and opposite: Putting speakers in the deck isn't a new idea, Deans says, but the combination of Meyer Sound Galaxy and Spacemap Go with TiMax is an innovation that involved considerable cooperation between the two companies.

through the speakers mounted in the floor.' And it was being done manually. Jonathan hoped that using a tracking system, getting things properly linked, would take away some of the burden of having to program every bit of blocking."

Strang adds, "I know there was a concerted effort on his part to get the musicians comfortable with the idea of using in-ears, and that lasted about two minutes after they tried it. I can appreciate that. As soon as you put something in your ears, you're now relying on somebody else for the most basic information. It's not a trust issue; it's just you feel separated from the band members that you need to be with in the same acoustic space." At the Atlantic, Deans installed 27 d&b audiotechnik E5s in the deck, a plan that proved to be only a partial success; among other things, production

sound mixer Timothy Jarrell "was taking many, many cues per song to give them what they wanted," Deans says. "But it was a live show, so it wasn't always the same." Rethinking the approach for Broadway, he outfitted the musicians with trackers from the audio gear manufacturer TiMax. "Each of them wears an RFID device, so I can track them as they move around," he notes.

Instead of using TiMax's TrackerD4 system conventionally, to help the audience focus on the spoken word or the singing, Deans linked the tracking system via two Meyer Sound Galileo GALAXY Network Platforms to Meyer's Spacemap Go, so it could vary the foldback in real time across the monitor speakers in the stage floor.

"My understanding was that I could plan the speaker layout, the tri-sets, and the crossfades in Spacemap Go,

put a TiMax TrackerD4 Tag on a musician, and their mix would follow them around the stage," Deans says. "And it worked. It gave the musicians the freedom to move more freely without having to think about exactly where they are standing, and the front-of-house mixer to concentrate on the sound for the audience mix."

To pair TiMax TrackerD4 with Spacemap Go, Deans says, "David Strang; Robin Whittaker, from TiMax; and Steve Ellison and Rob Mele, from Meyer Sound, got together to make sure that the communication between the two devices worked well. Both manufacturers had been looking for a project that would work to make the handshake between both systems completely solid, and this was it, and it is now in place." Strang adds, "Dave Haydon and his folks at TiMax did some off-the-cuff programming to

make sure that the output TiMax system would track into the language used by Meyer Galileo. That was a big piece of the puzzle.”

Deans adds that the tracked monitor mixes create stronger sound-focused anchors onstage, which helps the fixed-delayed, audience PA system to localize the performers as they move around. The system uses TiMax TrackerD4’s ability to note when each of the musicians reaches their home position and stops tracking. This prevents audio output swapping between

two speakers in the floor, should the actors move around in their seats, for example, which would cause confusion and a musical distraction. Also built into the upstage portion of the deck is a set of six Meyer UM-1Ps, which provides foldback for the stationary percussion system.

“Galaxy is a speaker management tool, but you set it into Spacemap mode,” Deans adds. “Then you can use the Galaxy’s outputs to control the signals going to speakers. I have 27 speakers on the floor, all pointing up at

the musicians. As they walk around the stage, we know where they are; if two people are moving, their mixes follow them around, and they hear them coming from the floor. If the mix moves with them, they have exactly what they need.”

Putting speakers in the deck isn’t a new idea, Deans says, but the combination of Galaxy, Spacemap Go, and TiMax is an innovation that involved considerable cooperation between the two companies. This arrangement comes with a side bonus, he adds: “They have so much energy that it can get very loud onstage. And the extra energy coming up from the floor creates a point source for the audience; they feel the energy more where the musicians are, so, therefore, it gives a little more focus on them.”

Strang adds, “It’s a credit to the folks at Out Board [parent company of TiMax] and Meyer, who were behind the scenes, communicating and making sure that it all happened. Representatives from both companies were briefly on-site to make sure that the system operated the way it should. But it seemed to go very smoothly.”

Additional gear

The cast members sport DPA 4466 mics, and the musicians wear DPA 4099s; wireless systems consist of Shure AD4Q receivers and ADX1M body-pack transmitters. Instrument mics include a mix of gear from AKG, Audix, Countryman, Helpinstill, Neumann, and Shure. The onstage pianos are miked with Fishman BP-100 upright bass pickups, a fairly simple solution; the grand piano features Yamahiko SR CPS-PF1S mics, a rather more high-end choice.

Overall, Deans says, “The trick is to get it all under control, to get to a place with monitoring that makes sense for the musicians, to merge it with the sound coming from the stage into the auditorium, so we can mix it again, getting the focus on the performance.”

The production’s sound is con-



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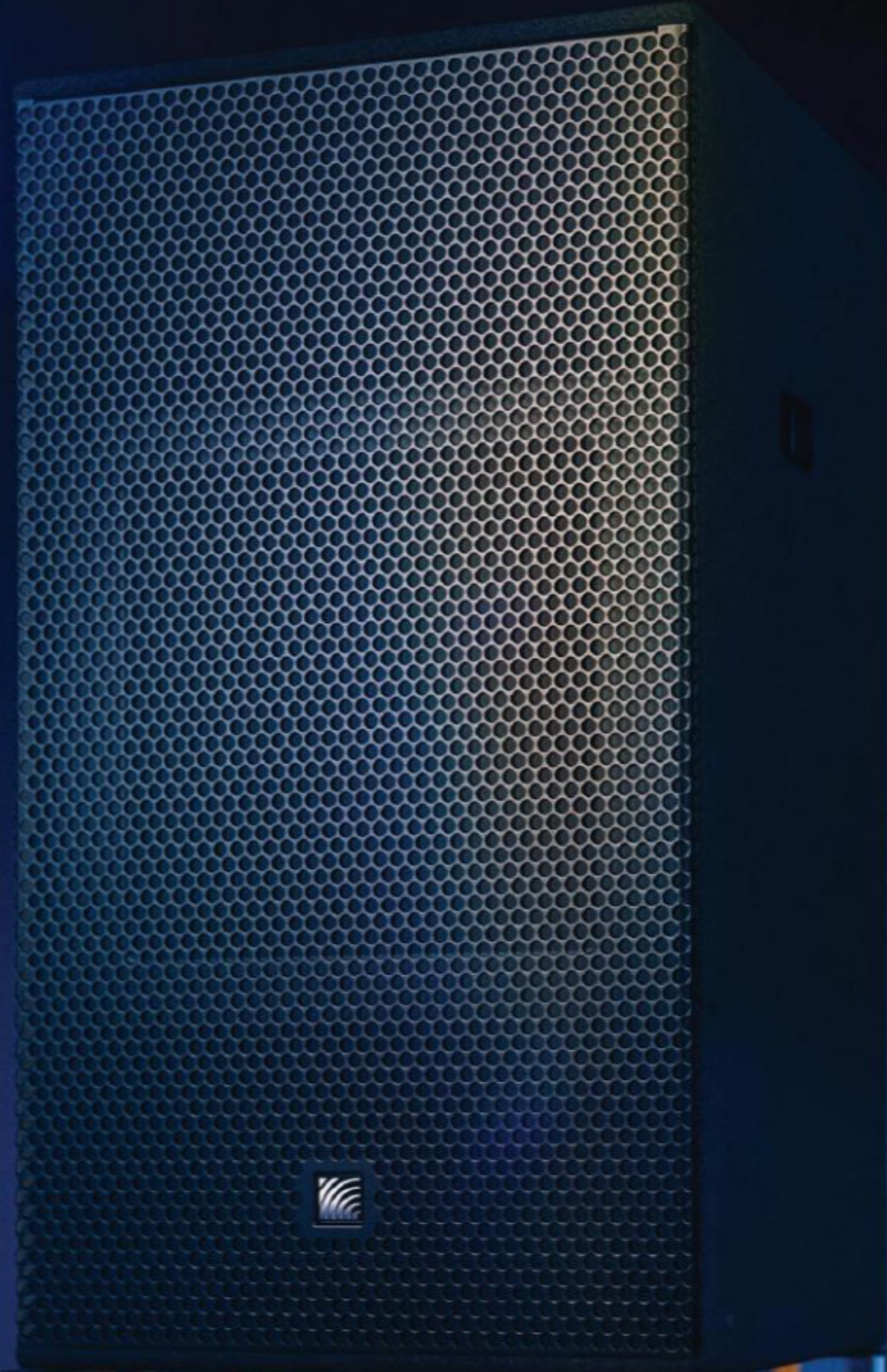
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trolled by a DiGiCo Quantum 7T console, which Deans describes as “a joy to use.” Processing gear includes a Rupert Neve 5045 Primary Source Enhancer, a Solid State Logic MADI-to-coax converter, one Tascam CDR200, and various TC Electronic reverbs. The production also uses a Clear-Com comms system.

Adding to the stress factor, *Buena Vista Social Club* opened on March 19, as the end-of-Broadway season madness was just gearing up. With more than a dozen shows opening in less than six weeks, rental houses were pushed to the edge, their shelves being stripped of gear as crews raced to get everything installed before rushing off to the next project. “That’s when we need to be on our game,” Strang says, “because, when you’re in the middle of all that chaos, one little ripple can impact a lot of people. That’s not what we ever want to do. As an equipment and service provider to Broadway, we

work hard to make sure that’s not happening. Over the years, we’ve done things that, even for us, are hard to imagine, airlifting equipment halfway around the globe because of some last-minute problem with equipment. That’s the kind of solution that sometimes we have to be prepared to effect if we’re going to be good partners.”

Deans stresses that everything in the show’s sound design is geared toward highlighting the authenticity of the music onstage. “These musicians are the real deal,” he says, adding that for any Cubans in the audience, “this is the score of their lives. It’s a legacy.” He compares it to its work on the Cirque du Soleil production *The Beatles’ Love*, another project that involved “collaborating with people who knew the music inside out and trying to be as pure and honest about it as possible.” On *Buena Vista Social Club*, he appreciates “being allowed to see it and getting to

understand something unique. Our communication was very, very strong. That’s why I came up with the idea of tracking their mixes onstage, to allow them to perform the way they need to.”

Other key audio personnel on *Buena Vista Social Club* include Daniel Lundberg and Mike Tracey (associate sound designers), Tauheedah “Tate” Abdullah (assistant sound designer), Timothy Jarrell (head audio/mix engineer), Darren Shaw (deck sound/A2), Thomas Ford (sound programmer), and Sandy Paradise (head house electrics/sound). Lundberg also serves as production sound. Having also earned Tonys for leading lady Natalie Venetia Belcon, choreographers Patricia Delgado and Justin Peck, orchestrator Marco Paguia, and a special award for the band, the show continues to do sellout business in its open-ended run. 🎧