June 19, 2005----

Chavez Ravine always has been about a sense of place. Today it's the home of the Los Angeles Dodgers, and since it was built in 1962, Dodger Stadium in Chavez Ravine has become baseball's version of Ellis Island. Mexican folk hero Fernando Valenzuela pitched at Dodger Stadium, as did Japanese legend Hideo Nomo. Former Cub Hee Seop Choi is now thrilling the South Korean population in Southern California. Architect Emil Praeger and owner Walter O'Malley intentionally placed the streamlined stadium within dreamsicle hills overlooking the San Gabriel Mountains. In doing so, 300 acres of land between downtown Los Angeles and Pasadena were cleared. An entire community of poor Mexican-American laborers was displaced.

This is the theme of Ry Cooder's new CD, "Chavez Ravine" (Nonesuch/Perro Verde), released Tuesday -- arguably the most ambitious recording project of his career. And considering the slide guitarist and composer's pursuit of music has taken him to Hawaii, Mexico and Cuba (the latter for his critically acclaimed "Buena Vista Social Club" projects), that's saying something.

The 15-track record is sung in Spanish and English, and features the last recorded performances from "Pachuco Boogie" king Don Tosti and Chicano music patriarch/farm activist Lalo Guerrero, both major figures in East Los Angeles. Little Willie G. (William Garcia), an ordained minister and front man of Latin garage rock band Thee Midnighters, serves as the spiritual thread. Other guest artists include David Hidalgo of Los Lobos and Tex Mex accordion player Flaco Jimenez.

The roots of Cooder's record are found in Chavez Ravine, 1949: A Los Angeles Story

(Chronicle Books) written by Don Normark (1928-2014). In 1948, Normark, then a photographer for Sunset magazine, chronicled hardscrabble lives in the ravine through honest black-and-white portraits. Normark did not know the families would be uprooted in 1957, when Walter O'Malley moved the Brooklyn Dodgers to Los Angeles.

"About four years ago, Don called me out of the blue," Cooder said in a recent lengthy conversation from his home in Santa Monica. "He had been out of Los Angeles for years. He got such response to his book, I think he wanted to do his own bit of searching. He came back looking for the families. They have a picnic every year. It was originally 1,000 families, now extended, multiplied and divided. I went to one of these picnics. There were at least 2,000 people there. They have have nice cars, cool jewelry, whatever. They look like everyone else now, but they have this keen identity."

Normark wanted to make a documentary film about the families, and he asked Cooder to assist with the score. The 24-minute film "Chavez Ravine: A Los Angeles Story" was shortlisted for the best documentary short at the 2005 Academy Awards.

In 1950, the City of Los Angeles evicted more than 300 families from Chavez Ravine to make way for a low-income public housing project. Churches and schools were razed. However, real estate moguls seized on the land and, in an era in which public housing had become equated with creeping socialism, accused Los Angeles Housing Authority official Frank Wilkinson of being a communist agent. Wilkinson appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee. After refusing to answer questions that he viewed improper, Wilkinson was sentenced to jail for a year. The city dumped the public housing plan and sold the land to Walter O'Malley, who built Dodger Stadium.

All of this subject matter is covered with detail, empathy and passion on Cooder's album. Wilkinson, who is in his 90s, contributes spoken-word segments around Jim Keltner's bongos and Cooder's vocals and guitar on "Don't Call Me Red."

Guerrero was the first artist Cooder contacted. Besides recording for Imperial Records in the 1940s, Guerrero -- known as "The Father of Chicano Music" -- also worked with Cesar Chavez for farmworkers' rights. Guerrero died on March 17 at age 88, but not before singing on three tracks for Cooder's disc, including "Corrido de Boxeo," a rhythmic ballad about East L.A. boxers Carlos and Favela Chavez. Guerrero knew them. The fight song becomes a metaphor for the "low blow" deals enveloping Chavez Ravine.

Guerrero then opened the door to other East L.A. artists. "Willie G. was the one who said, 'Let's tell the story, let's go for it,' having his own articulate notion of community

and history," Cooder said. "Willie has this lingo and memory for everything from early childhood. He is like an open book. You just turn to the page. But I never looked forward and saw this."

The "Chavez Ravine" story includes low rider-meets-high life grooves that define the lead track "Poor Man's Shangri-La" (the street name adopted by Chavez Ravine residents), swaying palm tree melodies that shape "3rd Base, Dodger Stadium" (with Hawaiian guitar virtuoso Ledward Kaapana) and street-corner doo-wop of Leiber and Stoller's "Three Cool Cats," a hit for the Coasters that features Willie G. on vocals.

"Dodger Stadium is now the ravine filled up," Cooder explained. "As the song ["3rd Base, Dodger Stadium"] says, underneath the stadium there is a town. It's like when they put in a dam and flood a canyon with water. Except this is cement. This all took a long time. Every day I worked on a verse, a chorus, I figured out chord changes, I'd get an idea. And then the next day, and the next day. It's a funny thing. It could have gone on forever."

Like all of Cooder's solo work, "Chavez Ravine" is dictated by environment. He uses broad strokes of East L.A. jazz, pop, corrido and R&B to paint his pictures. Cooder's 1972 recording "Into the Purple Valley" counterpointed tropical influences, such as calypso and Hawaiian slack key, into Woody Guthrie's Dust Bowl. His 1976 "Chicken Skin Music" was recorded in Hawaii with Gabby Pahinui and Atta Issacs, yet it featured backing vocals from soul singers Bobby King and Terry Evans.

"Environment is the way I go about things," Cooder said. "You get a picture of a place, it feels the way it feels. People lived in these little houses all over L.A. -- black neighborhoods, Chinese, Mexican-American or Russian before the whole damn town was paved over and changed. They speak to me. My grandparents lived in such a house in Santa Barbara. They were Italian sharecroppers who had given up farming and moved to town. Behind their house was dirt paths and no more pavement. I just loved that. It felt like things had happened before and they might happen again. It was so obvious it never was going to happen in Santa Monica [where Cooder grew up]. It felt outside of the heartbeat of things. But you would never try to put moods like that in a record. How would you do it, for heaven's sake?" Cooder paused, leaving space for a world of dirt paths.

He continued: "Then I figured out the Chavez Ravine story gives you a script. There's a cast of characters. Events. It's like what [director-screenwriter] Walter Hill always told me, 'Character and incident, it's all there.' You ought to be able to write songs along those lines. But you do have to picture it and imagine it. It can't be linear, like a book."

Did "Chavez Ravine" incorporate any of the disciplines Cooder used on soundtrack work such as "Paris, Texas" or Hill's 1980 Western "The Long Riders"? "It's all the same," Cooder answered. "Sound and music is pictorial, or it's nothing. If it's not that, then it is just a lot of racket. I grew up liking rural music, country music and blues. It's incredibly visual. Every note has something about where that person is from. That's what they know.

"Later, people in cities learn music to make money, have a career or be famous. But some guy on the plantation or a hillbilly band from the mountains -- the only thing they know is what their environment has shaped. Same deal with the Hawaiians and the Tex-Mex guys. They know what that place looks like. And you can always hear it."