

Andy Palacio (in white) and the Garifuna Collective onstage in Dangriga, Belize, last November, and with admirers (below)



the voice of the people

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZACH STOVALL

BY DAVE HERNDON

“I’m not a bloody pop star!”

insisted Andy Palacio after an outdoor gig in Hopkins, Belize, that was so incendiary, a sudden rainstorm only added sizzle. But if it was true that Palacio wasn’t a pop star, you couldn’t tell it from the royal treatment he got everywhere he went last November upon

Andy Palacio was more than a world-music star. He was a cultural hero who revived the hopes of a Caribbean people whose heritage was slipping away.





THE EVENTS OF THAT NOVEMBER TOUR WILL HAVE TO GO DOWN AS PALACIO'S LAST LAP, AND FOR ALL WHO WITNESSED ANY PART OF IT, THE STUFF OF HIS LEGEND.

Palacio with his role model, the singer and spirit healer Paul Nabor, at Nabor's home in Punta Gorda (left). The women of Barranco celebrated with their favorite son on the day he was named a UNESCO Artist for Peace (below left and right).



returning home from a triumphant tour of Europe. His album *Watina* — earthy, spiritual, melodic and rhythm-crazy — had struck a universal chord and won him world music's version of the Palme d'Or, the WOMEX Award. Back in Belize, everyone from the Prime Minister to the requisite shrieking females hailed Palacio with the kind of adulation every man should experience for one glorious week of his life. Receiving proclamations and playing concerts over a weeklong span, he was nothing less than a national hero taking a victory lap.

And yet, Palacio preferred to think of himself not as a star but as a "cultural worker" and his albums as "development tools." For nearly 30 years he had been on a mission to revitalize and strengthen Central America's dwindling Garifuna (ga-REE-foo-nah) culture by singing about the lives of its people in their dying native tongue over the rhythm of their ancient drumming styles. Early in his career he was known for playing a party version of Garifuna music called *punta* rock, but over the years Palacio deepened his commitment to roots music. The success of *Watina* on the world stage signaled a milestone in his cultural rescue mission. Ethnically diverse Belize (formerly British Honduras) had for the first time since gaining independence in 1981 found a unifying voice to rally around, as had the greater Garifuna community, whose 250,000 souls

also inhabit the Caribbean coasts of Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, as well as a smattering of émigré outposts like New York, Miami and Los Angeles.

Traveling around Belize with Palacio during that glory-filled week last November was a chance to witness a historic moment remarkable for its self-awareness. His homecoming concert in Belize City the previous weekend had drawn a huge crowd and made front-page news; he said it represented "a coming of age



for me as an artist, and for the Belizean people as an audience." The Minister of Tourism thanked Palacio for putting Belize on the map in Europe, UNESCO named him an Artist for Peace, and the Garifuna celebrated him as their world champion. He was at his peak, recognized not just as a music star or a cultural worker, but as a vehicle for the aspirations of the many. A leader.

Just two months later, devastating news from Palacio's record company crashed into the inbox: "We're deeply saddened to report that Andy Palacio has experienced what was apparently a severe heart attack and is in grave condition." He was taken off life support and died on January 19, 2008, at age 47. His sudden collapse shocked his family, his country, his Garifuna brothers and sisters and his global community of listeners. Their mourning was made all the more profound and disorienting for the precipitous loss of collective altitude it represented.

When a hero dies just after planting the flag atop the mountain, he becomes larger than life, and surely that is the stature Andy Palacio is already attaining. The events of that November homecoming tour, when his own accomplishment was celebrated along with the nation's annual Garifuna Settlement Day festivities, will have to go down as Palacio's last lap, and for all who witnessed any part of it, the stuff of his legend.

MUSTERING UP AT A HOTEL IN BELIZE CITY to embark on the tour, Andy Palacio and his comrade-producer Ivan Duran were at the head of a pack called the Garifuna Collective, disparate musicians and singers from Honduras, Guatemala and Belize who had been molded into an ensemble the likes of

which had not been seen before in those parts. There was no Belizean roots music scene or industry besides what they themselves had generated over more than a dozen years of collaboration. To make *Watina*, they started with traditional themes and motifs and added songcraft, contemporary production values and imported musical elements like saxes and electric guitars. Over time, a female vocal group, the Garifuna Women's Project, evolved under the umbrella of the Collective.

A flight transported the entourage south to the seaside town of Punta Gorda, which as far as most tourists are concerned is simply an airstrip gateway to eco-lodges in that district. The tour bus pulled up at a weathered little compound of shacks made from wooden planks, tin and thatch. Humble though the trappings, this was the home of the King of Paranda, 80-year-old singer Paul Nabor. Wearing a felt fedora and a purple-and-white dashiki, the slightly stooped elder came to the door and welcomed us into his sparse home with a bony handshake and a smile that glowed through rheumy eyes.

One of the rhythms and musical styles of the Garifuna, *paranda* is dance music with a strong Latin inflection, and Nabor has long been its reigning artist. He starred on the Duran-produced *Paranda* album of 2000, which laid the foundation for the popular reception that greeted *Watina*. He's featured on two of *Watina's* tracks, both laments about fishermen who become shipwrecked, a subject he knows too well: He tells a harrowing and fantastic tale of suffering a stroke in his own boat and miraculously finding his way to shore despite being paralyzed on one side. After his convalescence 16 years ago, he heard a call from "the Good Lord" to become a *buyei*, or spirit healer, and moved to this shed-like house, which doubles as a temple. A side room contains an altar with statues and pictures of Christ and Mother Mary, candles and soda bottles

PALACIO'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS WERE CELEBRATED ALONG WITH GARIFUNA SETTLEMENT DAY

Every November 19th, Garifuna Settlement Day is celebrated in Dangriga (and elsewhere) with reenactments of the original arrival of the people on these shores in 1832. This early-morning parade culminated at a Catholic church.



filled with holy water and rum that exemplifies what Palacio called the “syncretic” nature of Garifuna spirituality.

“Nabor symbolizes my aspiration,” Palacio said later. “As a child I wanted to be like him, and to see him now in his golden years makes me aspire to be like him in mine. This journey is a transition from Paul Nabor to what is yet to become. I am the next generation because I am literate.” Palacio trained to become a teacher, and it was during a teaching stint in Nicaragua during the Sandinista revolution that he discovered his vocation to help salvage Garifuna culture, which was only a remnant in that country and on the wane in his own.

Nabor gathered a small duffel bag of belongings and got on the bus, bringing an aura of magic realism with him. At a nearby pier, a launch waited to ferry us 12 miles south to Palacio’s childhood village of Barranco. “It used to take me six hours to paddle

to Punta Gorda,” he shouted over the roar of the engines as the boat skirted the coastline. Barranco was one of the last bastions where children of his generation spoke Garifuna as their primary language, and the island just north of the Guatemalan border wasn’t connected to the mainland until the late ’90s. Five hundred people lived there when Palacio was growing up; only some 300 do now. The village is a victim of Garifuna success, he said, as upward mobility enables rural folks to move away and assimilate into the Belizean mainstream.

At the end of a wooden pier in Barranco, a group of older women wearing big, blousy gingham and madras dresses waved cassava fronds and ululated as our launch approached. If this were a movie, this would’ve been the overture: A couple of drummers pounded out a rapid heartbeat, the women sang call-and-response chants, and the hive of people clustered

around Palacio moved in a slow procession down the long pier to a lawn where a tent and folding chairs were set up. There he would be proclaimed a UNESCO Artist for Peace, literally a cultural ambassador. That designation followed the organization’s recognition in 2001 of the Garifuna language as “a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity,” which brought with it seed money for projects that helped Palacio and others fan the embers of the culture around the Caribbean rim. He earned a living by working in the National Institute of Culture and History while recording *Watina* in weekend sessions.

Prayers were said, schoolchildren sang and speeches were made that praised his accomplishments — “You sing our story to the world,” he was told. Palacio’s late father was recognized as “a local musical legend” who played harmonica and sang

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to passengers on the boat he captained. “Andy comes as no surprise,” said the Minister of Culture.

In his acceptance remarks, Palacio acknowledged his own infirm mother and the generation of women who paraded him in: “Our mothers have been instrumental in making this happen. In Barranco, women rule.” Afterward he joined hands and danced among them as they sang over the drummers’ renewed attack, which would remain relentless over the course of a loud, sweaty afternoon jam in the yard next to Palacio’s aunt’s house. This was more than one man’s victory being celebrated.

“At the core of the Garifuna psyche is the concept of reciprocity, the all-encompassing concept of family,” Palacio told me. “I am related to every Garifuna person. We are natural socialists. For us, making music is a social process, not an economic one.”

If it takes a village to spawn a legend, well, Barranco was the

village. Here you could see the roots, the family tree and the fruit all at once. If you looked around at the humble wooden houses in plots hacked out of thick tropical bush while listening to the drummers drumming just as Palacio’s grandfather had, you would have sworn you were in West Africa, where some distant origins of the Garifuna journey lie. One strand of their provenance comes from survivors of slave ships that wrecked near St. Vincent in 1635. They assimilated with Caribs on that island, as well as some wayward French invaders. The Garifuna, sometimes known as “Black Caribs,” were among the region’s last holdouts against colonial domination. According to Palacio’s cousin Michael Polonio, a historian, the Garifuna identify more strongly with their Amerindian forebears in the Amazon and Orinoco regions of South America than their African ones, whose language and culture got lost in the diaspora. It remains an open question how the musical legacy migrated, but Palacio was proud to think of the Garifuna as the “epitome of the African Caribbean.”

King Cassava is a drummers’ hangout in Hopkins, the Garifuna village where Palacio’s breakthrough album was recorded and the site of his final performance (right).

When the British finally subdued St. Vincent, the Garifuna were exiled and eventually settled along the shores of Central America. It is this discovery of a homeplace in 1832 that descendants of those exiles celebrate

each November with reenactments of their landing, parades, concerts and masses.

Among the country’s six core Garifuna communities, Dangriga is the capital, so to speak, and the site of the main Settlement Day activities. Palacio headlined the Saturday-night concert, which was held under a tent at a venue the size of a high-school basketball arena for a few thousand excited concertgoers. Nicely dressed young women in their 20s pushed up to the front; they knew all the words and were ready to sing them at top volume. By the time all the Garifuna Collective musicians had taken their places and the singers filled in the gaps between them, the band looked tribal and mighty. So was the music they created, an onslaught of grooves anchored by a busy pair of drummers and Palacio’s rich, avuncular, storytelling vocal presence. He was more the song leader than the lead singer; a white tunic with a Nehru collar lent him a ministerial aspect, and the choral backup vocals (including the cast of hundreds) added to the concert’s gospel quality. Indeed, many of the songs were spiritual: “Baba” (“Father”) was a lament with lyrics that could have come from the story of Job (“Let us pray to our God that He may help us out of the impossible”). In most of the songs, the sentiment was downbeat while the music was anything but. The title track, “Watina” (“I Called



Out”), is a gorgeous, galloping ballad about the everyday travail of hitchhiking and failing to get a ride, a fanfare for the common man.

For all the love that was showered on Palacio, however, it was the old man Nabor who earned the loudest squeals from the ladies when he came out to sing a few parandas. His vital voice belied his fragile appearance, and he allowed himself to bask in the adulation with a twinkling expression that said, I’ve still got it, and yes, it’s good to be king.

THE NEXT DAY FOUND THE ENTOURAGE IN Hopkins, an off-the-beaten-track town a few miles down the coast where they had recorded *Watina* in a seaside thatch-roofed cabin that was somewhere south of rustic. “The musicians were totally at home here,” said Ivan Duran, indulging in a bit of honest nostalgia. “The ladies cooked fish every day, there were drums all over the deck and there were very few distractions.” Along the main drag one can find art galleries, craft shops, a drumming school and the town’s hot spot, King Cassava, the very incarnation of everything a roots tropical bar should be.

That afternoon, Palacio and company played a free concert there for a few hundred people — not a one of whom could have conceived that they were watching his final performance.

While the repertoire was the same as the night before, the reduced scale made everything more intimate and personal; there was no stage to speak of — the performers were all on the same level as the audience — and Palacio was able to engage the people directly in his remarks.

“I never fail to mention to audiences abroad that *Watina* was recorded in a small village on the coast of Belize where Garifuna is still the first language of small children,” he said, igniting a Hopkins-in-the-house cheer.

“Bring the children forward,” he said. “I want to sing this song to the younger generation because it’s about them. It’s a personal song I composed because I’m concerned.”

When the youngsters had mustered in front of the makeshift bandstand, the band played “Amuñegü” (“In Times to Come”), and he sang to them, in Garifuna, of course: “Parents, please listen to me. Teach the children our language and our songs, our beliefs and our dances. The time has come for it to be preserved.”

For all the great events of the previous couple of days, for all the lofty rhetoric and transporting music, it was at this moment that it hit me over the head and in my heart that I was in the presence of something more than simply excellent and righteous, but something noble: The man was singing directly to the next generation about the importance of their cultural heritage, their

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legacy of resistance and tenacity despite their minority status, the distractions of globalism and “progress.”

After the gig, a British music journalist named Peter Culshaw and I were at the bar comparing notes. “It’s like seeing Springsteen at the Stone Pony!” I gushed, and Culshaw upped the ante on me: He said it was more like seeing Fela Kuti in Lagos, Nigeria — or yes, Bob Marley in Trenchtown. Palacio, he said, had some of that man-of-the-people greatness about him, the extremely rare ability to take a third-world populist message to the first-world stage.

Producer Ivan Duran (below) at the cabin where he recorded *Watina*. Above: Palacio at Wamasa Watering Hole in Seine Bight. Opposite: Singer Sofia Blanca of the Garifuna Women’s Project, in Dangriga.



the song to the audience. There is no greater feeling than that level of collectivity with my people.”

I told him that Culshaw had just compared him to the likes of world-historic political musicians Fela and Marley. Of course he was flattered, but he demurred — “It’s hard to become in that pantheon” — and placed himself instead in the context of generations of Garifuna who came before him.

“This is a snowball effect of something that started a long time ago,” said Palacio, with characteristic modesty. “Somebody had to be there, but it didn’t have to be me. I’m grateful for the position I’ve been given and fortunate to be prepared academically for this very important role. I wasn’t supposed to be a musician; I was supposed to be a teacher or a higher-level bureaucrat. But I’ve been allowed to use my artistic life to accomplish the higher ideals of world peace and intercultural dialogue. I’ll be the voice.”

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ANDY PALACIO'S LEGACY

The Beats Go On

Who's next? Who is going to fill Andy Palacio's shoes? Those are the questions most frequently asked these days of Ivan Duran, Palacio's producer at Stonetree Records, the label behind Belize's "modern roots music" movement. "But to me, it's not important to think about a substitute," Duran says. "It's important for kids to know how Andy was loved around the world not only for his music but for the way he dedicated himself to his cause. That's his biggest gift: He left a clear path. The next step is to build on his legacy."

That's why Palacio's touring band is determined to go through with a previously scheduled U.S. tour in April and May, now called The Garifuna Collective, a Tribute to Andy

Palacio. "Onstage Andy always said, 'There's a lot more where I come from,'" says Duran. "The Collective has talents who will step up."

Among the featured vocalists will be members of the Garifuna Women's Project, whose debut album, *Umalali*, is out this month. Like Palacio's landmark *Watina* album, it is available from Vermont-based Cumbancha (cumbancha.com), and that's also the place to find out about tour dates. Other recordings essential to appreciating Palacio's musical context include *Paranda* and *From Backabush: Ten Years of Stonetree Records* (available through stonetreerecords.com). Donations to the Andy Palacio Garifuna Music Education Fund, which will provide children instru-

ments and lessons, can be made through the label on that site.

Palacio had five children and two grandchildren, and Belize's National Institute of Culture and History has established the Andy Palacio Trust Fund on their behalf. Those interested in contributing may contact the NICH head office at 011-501-822-3302 or athene@nichbelize.org. — D.H.

