

Getting Down with the Garífuna: Melodies of “Exile, Longing, Hope and Celebration” Put Belize on the Map

By Kate Joynes-Burgess in Dangriga, Belize

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Kate Joynes-Burgess travelled to Belize to experience the spellbinding Settlement Day festival that is the showcase of Garifuna music and culture brought to the world by musical mystic Andy Palacio.

Belize shares a small slice of Mexico’s southern border but the diminutive English-speaking country, marginally bigger than the Estado de Hidalgo with a tenth of the population, is habitually disregarded by its colossal northern neighbour. Even less familiar to most of us in Mexico is Belize’s minority ethnic Garifuna community but the soaring sounds of Andy Palacio and the Garifuna Collective are beginning to change that. His music inspired my pilgrimage from my home in Mexico City to dusty Dangriga in southern Belize, the country’s self-proclaimed “cultural capital” and heartland of the Garífuna. Every November, the Garinagu (plural of Garífuna), which account for just 6.6 percent of Belize’s bijou population of 270,000, becomes the face of the Central American country as it prepares to celebrate Garífuna Settlement Day. Garinagu from across Central America make the journey to celebrate their landing in the territory that was known as British Honduras until 1973. The ethnic group, whose cultural identity defies national barriers, originates from shipwrecked West African survivors of two European slave-ships who took refuge on the island of St. Vincent in 1635 and subsequently intermingled with the indigenous Caribs and Arawaks. Forcibly exiled from the British territory in 1803 for resisting the European colonial project, they settled along Central America’s Caribbean coast. Their arrival has been commemorated as a national public holiday in Belize since 1977. Officially observed on 19 November, the people’s impressive propensity for partying means that the festivities rumble on for a week, impelled by the rhythmic beat of the drum – or rather, myriad of drums. Almost seven years ago, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) proclaimed the

Garifuna Language, Music and Dance a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity but the community laid in languid obscurity until Palacio broke through on the music scene. His role in conserving and promoting the culture of Belize's lesser-known black community, which is ethnically and linguistically distinct from the creole ('kriol') majority, helped to earn Palacio the title of UNESCO Artist for Peace in October 2007. Settlement Day represents a unique opportunity to experience first hand the magnificent music and culture of the marginalised people for whom Palacio has become an ambassador.

On a Mission from Mexico

Mexico's overlooked English-speaking neighbour is notoriously difficult to reach. Cheap flights to the Mexican border city of Chetumal, the understated capital of Quintana Roo, are making visits to Belize more accessible. Regular buses to Belize City leave Chetumal's Terminal de Autobuses (100 pesos) every few hours but it is best to enquire on the day as the timetable is somewhat flexible. Belizean bus companies still sport the trademark Central American mode of transport that began life on a school run in the United States. Journey times are unpredictable taking between two and four hours depending on traffic and the potential sluggishness of immigration officers on both sides of the border. It is best to adopt a relaxed Caribbean attitude for maximum enjoyment of the meandering journey along the Hummingbird Highway, enjoying the lush vegetation and poetically-named towns and villages en route such as Orange Walk and Crooked Tree. Once in Belize City, an express bus will take you to Dangriga - the "place of the sweet water" in the Garifuna language - in about 2 hours.

On arrival, before I had even crossed the bridge over Havana Creek, separating the small bus-station from the rustic pension where I held a reservation, I could feel my shoulders relaxing despite the weight of my backpack. Four people had said "Hello"

to me or “Welcome” before I reached the front door of Pal’s Guesthouse. I had chosen the clean and basic sleeping house by virtue of a recommendation from the innovative Belize Tourist Board (www.travelbelize.org), which depicted the elderly proprietor, Mr Augustine Flores, as an authority on Garifuna culture. I was not disappointed. Mr Flores is a former school teacher, like many polyglot Garifuna men before him, and one-time president of the National Garifuna Council (NGC). A gifted story-teller, his stern demeanour is periodically broken by a brilliant smile and a low rippling laugh that warms your bones like the Caribbean sea. During one of our chats he casually introduced me to the Honourable Eldred Roy Cayetano, Secretary General of Belize’s National Commission for UNESCO, an equally inspirational figure dedicated to protecting their particular culture. While a cabinet member Cayetano had employed Palacio as a rural community development officer in 1999 and has strongly supported his musical development. Encounters with the essence of what Palacio calls “an endangered culture” are everyday occurrences in Dangriga and other Garifuna centres such as nearby Hopkins Village. The latter seaside settlement, located less than an hour’s drive from Dangriga, plays host to local label Stonetree Records, the brainchild of white Belizean Ivan Duran, who continues to work in partnership with the country’s most successful recording artist.

For most of the year Dangriga is a sleepy stopping-point for scuba divers, surfers and gap-year students. Sprinkled with a few soulless all-inclusive resorts on the outskirts of town, Dangriga’s brilliantly coloured wooden houses totter on stilts alongside tumbledown homes that expose the poverty of an area in desperate need of investment if it is to exploit its tourism potential. Such shortfalls fade into the background when the town and its people are lit up by the joviality and pride brought by Settlement Day. The carnival atmosphere gets under your skin. Every corner of narrow St Vincent Street, which runs through the centre of the town, is bedecked with Caribbean, Belizean and Garifuna flags marking the place of food stalls selling traditional Garifuna and Creole fare. Belize does not boast Mexico’s culinary variety but you can still find some tasty domestic offerings. I sampled locally-caught fish stewed with achiote, painting the soup a vibrant red, served with darasa, a kind of tamal made from mashed green bananas cooked in coconut milk with delicate

Caribbean spices. There was also the ubiquitous barbecued chicken accompanied by rice and beans and an unforgiving onion and habanero chilli salsa that would warm even weathered Mexican palates. Washed down with the local malted Belikin beer or Cristal Rum, there was plenty to fuel the fiesta.

Thanksgiving Belizean Style

Belize's special brand of Thanksgiving is not a solemn affair in spite of its historical and cultural significance. Celebrations culminate in the re-enactment of the Garifuna's arrival on Belizean shores. At 6am on 19 November, after drumming virtuosos had accompanied good-natured drinkers for more than 48 hours, a group of Garinagu sailed into the inlet in a dory (a dug-out canoe), bearing leaves from the plantain and cassava crops that sustained them on their original journey and while establishing themselves in their adopted country. Arrivals carried the tricolour flag of the Garifuna people; yellow to represent their indigenous heritage of those the British called 'Yellow Caribs'; black for their African roots; and white for the role that white people have had in determining their fate. Participants and observers alike are adorned in the same Garifuna colours. Recreating the original landing (Yurumein), ample bosomed women bedecked in traditional costume greeted the arrivals. Joining together with the throng on the waters' edge, the crowd danced its way to the Roman Catholic Sacred Heart Church where a Mass of Thanksgiving is held annually "in Honour of Garifuna Settlement Day". Maybe Latin visitors will have better luck but my uptight Anglo-Saxon genes refused to instruct my bottom to wiggle in quite that way. I was glad to hide myself within a huddle of other foreign tourists to obscure my blatantly inadequate backside. Embarrassment reigned the previous night when I foolishly attempted some 'bump and grind' moves at the Punta Rock Xplosion, part of the Settlement Day festivities, achieving nothing but a red face and a sore back. As Stonetree Records explains "The typical Punta Rock dance is about male and female interaction. Sweating bodies surrounded by the aromas of smoke and booze in dimly lit dance clubs, grinding to the pulsating beat with varying degrees of physical expression ranging from the merely suggestive to explicit pelvic gyrations and

physical contact”. Thankfully, British reserve did not rub off on the Belizeans during more than a century of colonial rule.

Homecoming and Homage

The true “highlight” of Belize’s 2007 celebrations came in the form of a pair of free concerts given by Palacio. Flush with praise from his globetrotting tour, he and his nine-piece band played their concluding dates to elated crowds in their people’s spiritual homeland in Dangriga and Hopkins. Prior to his performance at the Paranda Festival on 17 November, I snatched a few moments with Belize’s superstar. We chatted following his sound-check at a makeshift venue behind Dangriga’s modest market on the enigmatically-named Why-Not Island. I asked him what it meant to mark the end of his foreign tour in the place that it all began. He replied that it meant he had “come full circle”. But, later that night, searching the faces of the ecstatic audience singing along in their esoteric mother tongue there was a stronger sense of how far he and his community have come. They enacted what Cayetano described as the “pride factor” that Palacio is bringing to this compact Central American country. This stirring sentiment is helping Garífuna leaders to promote the value of their language and culture beyond the more commercially viable English and Spanish. Yet Flores, an English-educated octogenarian and founder of the Central American Black Organisation (CABO), explained the magnitude of the challenge still facing the Garinagu. “Most jobs in Belize require English and Spanish” even if this is not explicitly specified in an advertisement. This has made young Garífuna people less interested in becoming literate in their own language, he explained. Palacio’s bittersweet lyrics sing of a glorious, proud and peaceful culture under threat, calling upon the youth not to abandon the old ways.

Beyond Borders

Andy Palacio and Stonetree Records are encouraging Garifuna people to re-evaluate their own culture as much as marketing its fruits to the rest of the world. As Cayetano put it, Palacio's success "is a validation of what we have and...the result of an environment that we have been establishing for some time with the help of the government". Belize's "cultural renaissance" was a key pledge made by incumbent Prime Minister Said Musa during his triumphant electoral campaign in 1998. His People's United Party (PUP) has disappointed since then on the economic front but its achievements in promoting culture and education are tangible. Palacio himself has been part of this process. He was appointed Cultural Ambassador and Deputy Administrator of the National Institute of Culture and History in December 2004, having served as a Rural Community Development Officer under Cayetano. Palacio and Duran have brought veteran Paranda singer Paul Nabor and youthful Honduran Aurelio Martínez into the limelight. Mindful of their past their eyes are also fixed on the future. His Dangriga concert was preceded by a singing and composition contest designed to seek out new talent. He described the "Paranda" competition as "an effort to encourage younger composers to create material within that genre, to create new material and by so doing strengthen and retrieve this potentially endangered genre of garifuna music". Palacio raised the possibility of working with some of the participants in the future. Both a drumming rhythm and a genre of music, Paranda is one of Belize's traditional art forms that Palacio is dedicated to protecting. The music can be traced back to St. Vincent via West Africa. It pulses through the streets of Dangriga at festival time and whenever its residents are in the mood for a party – potentially any day of the week.

Andy Palacio's album *Wátina*, distributed internationally by Vermont-based Cumbancha, has won international critical acclaim, topping the European World Music Charts shortly after its release last year. He is attracting the attention of big names from beyond the World Music niche. In April 2007, Palacio received a visit from British dance music luminary Norman Cook (better known as 'Fatboy Slim'). Together they blended Belizean beats with Slim's slick club sounds that are anticipated for release in 2008. Palacio is encouraging encounters beyond Belize's cultural and national boundaries. As such, he has become a cultural envoy for Central

America and the Caribbean as a whole. On 8 December he performed in Havana to commemorate Cuba-CARICOM day. A week later he sang at the United Nations Headquarters in New York to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. Going back to the community's Caribbean roots he will perform on the island of St Vincent on 14 March to mark National Heroes Day in the name of fallen Garífuna Chief Joseph Chatoyer. St Vincent's first national hero was assassinated on the archipelago in the 17th century at the height of their people's persecution.

Palacio's music is about bringing people together, celebrating what Cayetano described as the Garinagu's "openness to other people". Speaking at the official ceremony in the Palacio's home village of Barranco – marking UNESCO's recognition of Belize's best export - fellow Garífuna Cayetano explained: "We have always considered ourselves citizens of this country and the wider world, deserving the right not only to become a part of other communities, but even to providing leadership to other villages, towns and organizations that we might choose to adopt. If you understand this...you would also understand how this village, looking deceptively small and unassuming, can spawn an artist who, in spite of his humble beginnings, can attain international acclaim that brought him to the attention of Mr. Matura, the Director General of UNESCO. Barranco is proud to acknowledge its own Andy Palacio." This idealised vision of a people's magnanimous nature became a reality during my short stay in their lands. Pack your bags for next November.

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