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Andy Palacio & the Garifuna Collective

It takes a lot to make Americans listen to music recorded beyond our borders. Like [Buena Vista Social Club](#). I'll bet you bought that CD, played it to death, and drag it out now on occasions when you want an easy, hip-shaking lilt as background. But would you have given Cuban geezers a listen if renowned musician and producer Ry Cooder hadn't brokered the sale and turned an otherwise obscure CD into a Grammy-winning hit? If Wim Wenders hadn't made an exquisite [documentary film](#) that turned seventy-year-old musicians into brand names?



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Andy Palacio doesn't have Buena Vista's advantages. He's from Belize, the least-populated country in Central America. His music celebrates the Garifunan culture, which is known to maybe five American Caucasians. And although his record company couldn't be more distinguished in World Music circles --- Jacob Edgar, its founder, was head of A&R at [Putumayo](#) --- few of you have heard of him or his sparkling label, Cumbancha.

No matter. This musician you've never heard of, singing in a language spoken by no more than a few hundred thousand people, has delivered what could easily be the most enjoyable CD of the year. What's it like? Everything. And that's the key to the music.

In the 1700s, West African slaves were shipwrecked on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent. They intermarried with Arawak Indians and lived peacefully until the English forced them into exile on a small, resource-poor island off Honduras. They moved on to the mainland, but their identity has blurred over the centuries. Now there are just 11,500 Garifuna living in Belize --- and the Garifuna language, which is taught in only one village there, has been designated by the United Nations as among the "masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity."

Andy Palacio, a Garifuna from Belize, once modified his culture's music so it would have wider appeal. But the threat that it might become extinct encouraged him to return to his roots. And so he assembled all-star Garifuna musicians in a thatched-roof shack on Belize's Caribbean coast and spent four months with that band, playing endangered music deep into the night.

The musicologist in me wants to tell you about the richness to be found here: the sexy thrust you'll find in the Cape Verde songs of [Cesaria Evora](#), the raw vocals reminiscent of the Peter Tosh era with [The Wailers](#), the lyrics about life's everyday challenges that could have been written by [Ali Farka Toure](#) or [Boubacar Traore](#) --- and, of course, the joyous bounce of [Buena Vista](#).

But it's the enthusiast in me that carries the day. Here are 12 songs, each radically different, that, taken together, form a classic mosaic. The electric guitar couldn't be more seductive, the drumming catchier, the lead vocals more urgent, the harmonies more subtle. This CD is as irresistible as [Amadou & Mariam](#) --- you will leave your chair.

As I write, the music industry in America is facing the greatest crisis in its history --- it can't find much to sell that you care about. Well, here are some poor musicians no one ever heard of, who made the recording of their lives without any thought of fame or fortune. And here's a guy in a Vermont farmhouse, lavishing beautiful packaging and energetic promotion on these nonentities.

And what's the outcome?

For one of the planet's smallest subcultures, a moment of bracing attention. For you, satisfaction on the order of Buena Vista --- and maybe greater.

No kidding about that. Andy Palacio and his friends aren't just good, they're seriously great.

--- by Jesse Kornbluth, for HeadButler.com

