

The sound of Belize, please

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As world music moves forward creating a new future, it sometimes expands our awareness of the past. Now, in time for Black History Month, a bittersweet new album reveals a little-known facet of the African diaspora.

"Wátina" (Cumbancha) from Andy Palacio and the Garifuna Collective is an album that invites superlatives, distilling the essence of a little-known musical heritage and placing it in a modern context, making it accessible to a much-wider audience.

Palacio is part of the minority Garifuna people in the tiny Central American country of Belize. The Garifuna trace their heritage to 1635, when two ships carrying African slaves sank and the survivors went ashore on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent. They mixed with the Indians on the island, eventually losing a battle against the British, and were exiled to another island. Over the years, they established themselves in a string of villages along the Caribbean coasts of what is now Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.

In the 1990s, Palacio became a successful musician playing "punta rock," a kind of party music based on Garifuna rhythms. After traveling to Nicaragua and seeing the Garifuna culture almost gone, he realized that the same fate was threatening his own community in Belize. He decided he had to rally himself and others not just to preserve their culture, but to strengthen it. To do that, he said, he created "music for the spirit, not just the body."

He brought together a multigenerational ensemble of Garifuna players with the aim of creating a modern record that experimented with traditional song styles. The musicians settled into a seaside cabin for several months, writing and arranging songs that limned the collective Garifuna heart.

The resulting album is a gorgeous reformulation of traditional music. Mostly acoustic, the group does make wonderful use of some understated but exquisite electric guitar. The album's autumnal colorings reflect the sad situation of the Garifuna people, but the gently insistent and ever-present undercurrent of percussion conveys a refusal to wallow.

While the album never rocks out, it does keep moving along. A few tunes are livelier than others, but even the sadder tunes have a languid, companionable sway, saving them from maudlin-ness.

Garifuna songs often tell a simple story that resonates with a larger truth. **The music on "Wátina" paints a picture of a spiritual people who, despite hard times, carry on with dignity and hope for better days.**

The title tune tells of a man trying to get a ride who sees cars pass him by again and again. The narrator sings: "Oh, God, please change my life this year/I ask you to change my life but please do not take it away/Please leave me here where I can be a bothersome spirit."

The sly reggae-clavé beat of "Lidan Aban" gives an easygoing groove to a call to work together. And the album closes with the sweet, upbeat "Ámuñegü," which urges the Garifuna people to preserve their culture: "The time has come for it to be taught ... Lest we lose it altogether."

Palacio's aim with "Wátina" is higher than simple aural pleasure. He said he hopes to show the world that Garifuna culture is a "broad and deep untapped resource" and even to create a new industry for his economically strapped country.

At a recent appearance at Globalfest in Manhattan, Palacio and band played a lively and varied set, at one point offering an extended drum and chant song reminiscent of Afro-Cuban music. The audience erupted when Palacio brought out the leathery 78-year-old musician and traditional healer Paul Nabor, who sang and tossed off a few stiff-jointed dance moves. Nabor embodied the tenacious spirit that makes "Wátina" an uplifting experience.

As revelatory as Paul Simon's "Graceland" or the Buena Vista Social Club, Wátina - with its sunset palette - could just be the dawn of a new day for the Garifuna's overlooked culture.