

SHOOK



HOSTED BY ANDY THOMAS. GUESTS: BUGS STEFFEN, SARAH WEEDEN, KATIA PARADIS

THE WAY OF THE GARIFUNA

THIS FRAGILE CENTRAL AMERICAN COMMUNITY, A RARE MIXTURE OF AFRICAN AND AMERINDIAN CULTURES IS UNDER THREAT FROM THE GLOBALIZING SWEEP OF CULTURE BUT ANDY PALACIO IS KEEPING THE ANCESTRAL FIRES BURNING.

"Garifuna music is very deep and very powerful," explains a pensive Andy Palacio, elder statesman and cultural ambassador for the Garifuna people of Central America. "There are a whole volume of songs in which we express our spirituality and our relationship with our ancestors across space and time. For example, the ceremony known as the *dugu* involves possession and is used to bring healing between the two worlds – the living make offerings of music, food and dance to the spirits of our ancestors. This goes on for four or five days with this deep, throbbing music."

On the cusp of the release of *Watina* from Andy Palacio & the Garifuna Collective, the album that looks set to open the ears of the world to this deepest but little known music, the softly spoken singer is rolling with stories of his upbringing in this little corner of Belize. "Growing up in Barranco there was a homogenous and self-sufficient Garifuna community," he explains. "There was a level of contentment all around and our culture was the essence of survival. We spoke Garifuna in our homes and in the street and the village would have its own festivities."

The Garifuna villages that populate the Caribbean coast of Central America appear to any visitor like a small slice of Africa. There's the smell of coconuts, the fishing boats which bring in their daily catch, and the little bars set back from the beach where people congregate as the sun goes down. But it's a culture being threatened with extinction. As more and more young people leave their communities for the big cities, traditions are forgotten between one generation and the next. "The whole matter of the transmission and transition of our music and culture is what is most important.



We owe everything to those who have remained in the communities as guardians of our culture and sources of continued inspiration, and I want to stay true to the mission of letting the world know all about us."

Although spread across Belize, Honduras, and Guatemala, the Garifuna people only arrived in Central America in the 1800s, having been forcibly resettled here by British colonialists. The roots of the Garifuna actually begin on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent some two hundred years earlier, amidst an unimaginable set of circumstances.

In 1635, Spanish a number of slave ships were shipwrecked in the Caribbean, and a group of Nigerian slaves on board managed to swim to shore. Arrived on St. Vincent, and fearful of being sent back to their Spanish captors, the passengers befriended the indigenous Black Caribs and, with no return ticket back to Africa, remained on the island. The Garifuna are mix of these African and Amerindian tribes, developing their own language and their own music and dance rituals that still today bind its people together.

Conscious of the uniqueness of his heritage, Andy

Palacio has been on a mission to preserve the Garifuna's traditions. It was an encounter with one of the elders in the Nicaraguan village of Orinoco (who was shocked that a young man like Andy could speak Garifuna) that really opened his eyes to the fragility of this rich culture. "That was very personal and it signified the future of my own community. That someday I might be the one happy to hear a 19 year old speaking my own language."

Returning to Belize, Andy became determined to protect his language and culture, becoming one of the key players of the Punta Rock scene of the eighties, releasing the unsurpassed *Keimoun* album. Andy recalls with a warm smile, "Those parties were roadblocks and I was totally inspired by them. Prior to that I had been writing songs in English trying to be the next Michael Jackson, so I put all that aside and said 'here is an opportunity to accomplish my musical dreams as well as speaking to my generation.'" Punta Rock quickly swept across the country and has since become the national music of Belize. "Even if I am not making songs with a social or spiritual focus just the fact that I was singing in our language was an expression of pride."

His new album, *Watina*, recorded at a wooden beachside studio in the Garifuna village of Hopkins, delves deeper to expose the diversity and creativity of this community. A powerful and evocative album, it fuses traditional Garifuna music (from the *dugu* drum rhythms of 'Weyu Larigi Weyu') to the sacred call and response chants of 'Baba') with subtle, contemporary instrumentation, and sets Andy Palacio's soulful Garifuna tongue with that of elders like Paul Nabor (who sings the raw and spin tingling 'Ayo Da') and younger lions from across the region such as Aurelio Martinez from Honduras.

"There are of course similarities between our music and that of Cuba, especially with the reverence to the spirits of our ancestors but also for the infusion of Christian references and African rhythms, so the drum remains for both of us an instrument of communication. For example, in both Punta Rock and the more traditional Paranda style, we use the primera and segunda drums to highlight the interaction between the man and woman in the courtship dance."

Listening to *Watina*, you can hear the echoes of Palacio's ancestors as they were uprooted from their spiritual lands. "I would tend to characterize our drumming as being distinctly African in origin," he states intensely. "But the acapella songs have similarities with Amerindian communities in South America, so I think the influences of the two lines of ancestry can be identified through our music. The lyrics of quite a few of our songs express nostalgia for the place from where we were forcibly removed. Our songs sing about resistance against the British who were trying to eradicate our people to take their lands and make plantations. Even though it's a very painful theme, the life that is given by the drumbeat and our



