



Yearning to Endure

Andy Palacio on his mission to perpetuate the stories, music and traditions of Garifuna culture | by Irene Jay Liu

Andy Palacio is an educator, by training and in mission. The medium of his teaching has taken many forms; he's been a teacher and a bureaucrat within Belize's Ministry of Culture. But when he arrives in Santa Cruz on Aug. 5 with a group of musicians called the Garifuna Collective, it is music that will convey the stories of his people.

Palacio is of the Garifuna, a distinct afro-Caribbean culture that originated when two West African slave ships sank off the coast of the Caribbean island of St. Vincent in 1635. The African survivors intermingled with the indigenous Caribs of the region, creating a distinct culture that blended African and Caribbean traditions. A fiercely independent people, the Garifuna resisted European colonization and were forcibly exiled to the Caribbean coast of Central America. There the Garifuna people dispersed; some formed enclaves that retained their distinctive traditions, while others were forced to assimilate.

An album called *Wátina*, which means "I called out" in the Garifuna tongue, was released in February by Andy Palacio and the Garifuna Collective. Each track on *Wátina* is based on a traditional Garifuna rhythm and the lyrics are in the Garifuna tongue, which blends Arawak, Carib, French and West African languages.

Palacio and the other members of the Garifuna Collective represent the Garifuna diaspora, originating from Belize, Guatemala and Honduras. While his experience growing up in the predominantly Garifuna village of Barranco in Belize was quite idyllic, Palacio discovered as a young man that Garifunas in other places faced significant adversity.

"I found a community in Nicaragua that had been broken down by that experience," says Palacio, "where their self-esteem had been chipped away for so long that by the time I arrived, what I found were the last remains of a Garifuna society.

That is when I came face to face with what could be the Belize experience if I didn't do something. And that is when I decided to take action."

The music of *Wátina* marks a significant departure from Palacio's previous endeavors. He came up in the Punta rock movement of the '90s, an upbeat Garifuna dance music infused with synthetic beats and keyboards. But Palacio felt that there was more to the Garifuna musical expression.

"For awhile it seemed that punta rock was defining itself as the highest form of our musical expression," says Palacio. "It became important for us to showcase Garifuna music in its diversity. To go beyond the physical and do something that will uplift the heart, the mind and the soul. That was what we were aiming for with *Wátina*."

And he succeeds. The voices captured on *Wátina* yearn for place, for acceptance in the present, and the future.

"Even if it's symbolic, there is always the central meeting point, St. Vincent, which for us is the point of genesis for Garifuna people," explains Palacio. "And the experience of being forcibly removed from St. Vincent has never left the psyche of the Garifuna person. So there is that ever-present nostalgia for a homeland."

It took five years for the musicians on *Wátina* to come together. The album was recorded over a few months in the Garifuna village of Hopkins, the hometown of Palacio's mother.

"Everyone in Hopkins knows my mother and by extension they know me," says Palacio. "But the charm of Hopkins as a Garifuna community is really in the experience of a community where Garifuna is still pretty much the first language. The Garifuna-ness is natural. There couldn't have been a better environment to record an album that sought to immerse itself in the Garifuna experience."

Andy Palacio and the Garifuna Collective will play at Moe's Alley at 8 p.m. on Sunday, Aug. 5, at 1535 Commercial Way in Santa Cruz. For more information call 479-1854 or visit moesalley.com. Tickets are \$20/advance; \$25/general.