

**Symposium  
Garifuna Popular Music and Arts**

**Georgia State University School of Music  
April 19, 2008.**

**“Andy Palacio – tribute to a leader in culture and the arts”**

**Abstract**

This presentation is about Andy Palacio as the product of a socio-culture, who assumed various roles to reach some of the world’s highest acclaims in world music. I show that Andy was pivotal in forming Belize’s national culture as the country achieved independence in 1981. He successfully bridged the gap between Culture with a capital “C” and popular culture – the former being synonymous with national culture and the latter popular song and music.

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**Andy Palacio**  
– **Tribute to a leader in culture and the arts**

Welcome in Garifuna

Plea that my presentation be acceptable to the *ahari* (spirit) of Andy Palacio and those of our ancestors in *Seiri* (destination of the souls of our ancestors)

Special greetings to our relatives and friends from Balici (Belize) and fellow *Barranguna* (persons from Barranco)

**Introduction**

I express gratitude to the sponsors of this event, the Georgia State University School of Music.

This tribute to Andy Palacio is part of a series of events taking place in eleven cities between April and August, 2008. The symposium at this university is of special significance because it includes a weeklong series of sessions, all revolving around Garifuna people. To me this event today is special as it marks another collaboration that I am sharing with my friend and colleague Dr. Oliver Greene, Jr. Dr. Greene kindly contributed to our edited volume “The Garifuna – nation across borders”, published in 2005 by Cubola Press of Belize. His essay was entitled, “Music behind the mask: men, social commentary and identity in Wanaragua (John Canoe)”. I especially want to thank Dr. Greene for the invitation to participate in this discussion.

There is another reason why these weeklong events are unique. They are taking place not in New York, Chicago, New Orleans, or Los Angeles but in Atlanta, where there is also a growing Garifuna community. Furthermore, we are in the birthplace of the African American culture with which the Garifuna people share a great deal, including common roots in Africa, common histories of long term oppression in the Americas, and extensive intermarriage ties.

Let me start by elaborating about my direct personal connections with the person, who is the star of this event, the late Andy Vivian Palacio. We share the same last name and are close relatives. His grandfather Hipolito Palacio and my grandfather Norberto Palacio were first cousins and that makes us third cousins. But more than that our two branches of the Palacio family overlapped in so many ways - something that is inevitable in a small community, whose population rarely exceeded 250 people. Language symbolizes the intensity of interpersonal relations in a small community. Andy’s father called my father *nibugai* (big brother); Andy in turn called me *tati* (another term for big brother used more often by women) and I called him *namule* (my little brother). That community is called Barranco, the last village in southern

Belize but to all of us – its sons and daughters – including Andy and me, it is the best among all the scores of Garifuna villages found in Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and Belize.

At the personal level Andy and I were part of a network of close relatives and friends that interacted whenever we could – whether sharing a meal with our families, a beer with friends during light moments, or work in the public service or the University of the West Indies.

More importantly, we shared a deep intellectual comradeship. He took great interest in my own endless research on our people. He freely used the fruits of my investigations to widen his own repertoire of information. One of the several great things about Andy Palacio was his ability to talk with knowledge and confidence about Garifuna history and culture, showing the world that he had the unique gift to master both the performing arts and dispensing knowledge. I am happy that he got a lot from my own writings as well as that of others. He was praised in many reviews for his precise choice of words as well as erudition. One of the journalists described him as having a warm avuncular professorial style during interviews.

My wife Myrtle regarded Andy as her own little brother, although her true friend remains up to now his mother Cleofa Avilez. A virtuoso herself in Garifuna language, music, and dance, Myrtle gave much advice and sisterly support to him. Unlike the stereotypically shy artist, Andy liked people around him; and I am proud that my own family, including my children – Roy, Aniki, and Arreini – together with their spouses and children were part of the intimate network in some of Andy's several inner circles.

In this short discussion today, my sisters and brothers, I am trying to achieve the following. I am sharing with you some information about Andy Palacio as the product of a socio-culture; the challenges he overcame on his way to achieving greatness; and finally what we need to do to give fruit to his vision now that he is no longer with us in body.

### **Product of a Socio-culture**

The family tree of Andy Palacio endowed him with the seed that would grow as a baby and slowly develop the gift with which he was born. Let me mention some of the family surnames of his ancestors. They include from his father's side the

Palacio, Cesario (or Antonio), and Zuniga; from his mother's side Avilez, Cayetano, and Contreras.

Around the time when Andy was born in 1960 his home village was passing through probably the last phase of an economic boom self-generated by farming and fishing. His father excelled in these two ways of earning a livelihood. More especially Ruben, his father, was a man of the sea. He carved and repaired his own dories and produced his fishing gear, while being an expert on navigating the coastline from Punta Gorda to Livingston.

In day and night and under all kinds of weather conditions, Ruben was able to travel wherever he wanted to go and come back home safely. Ruben took along young Andy with him on his fishing and other sea-faring trips. From such experiences in his early formative years, Andy developed a great love and adoration for his father. He learned to appreciate the bounty of the sea and coastline. Furthermore, he acquired much self-confidence and determination to hold his own whether in good or bad weather. I would add that he also learned to appreciate music and singing from his father, who was a walking collection of songs in Garifuna, English, Spanish, and Latin. From his mother, the anchor who held the family together, he received the highest form of love and respect for the immediate and extended family, which included the whole village. During these early years, therefore, Andy acquired his abiding sense of rootedness in people and things Garifuna.

What was the cultural environment in Barranco that influenced Ruben Palacio and, which he in turn, passed on to young Andy? Music, singing, and dancing formed a continuous sound track within the village. Almost everyone could create a song and then popularize it during the several festivities taking place in the annual calendar. One of the main instigators had been S.B. Daniels, the village schoolmaster who taught music as seriously as he did writing, reading, and arithmetic. All of Daniels' students were introduced to the best of music at that time available in the colony of British Honduras. And Ruben passed this treasure to his son Andy.

The last stage in the good old days of the home village gradually declined as Andy was growing up. The community was overtaken by population decline, poverty, and an overall malaise to the extent that now all cash comes from outside as remittances. Sad to say, it is the same fate that has long been common in most of our Garifuna communities from Belize to Honduras.

But for Belize there was a silver lining on the horizon. In the 1960s and 1970s we were seeing the waning of British colonialism and the gestation of the political movement that would eventually culminate in the independence of Belize in 1981, when Andy reached the age of 21. By sheer coincidence his own growth would overlap with the building of the newly independent Belize. For even as the nation-state of Belize acquired political maturity, it needed a cultural soul; and Andy was destined to be a prime mover in creating a soul for our home country.

### **The Making of a ‘Pop Star’<sup>1</sup>**

Andy’s first sojourn from his village was to attend high school in the neighbouring town of Punta Gorda. Although Punta Gorda at that time had a large Garifuna population, the Creole language, a variant of Belize English, had already become the vernacular of choice for the youth. Punta Gorda, like the other towns in Belize, wanted to be a little Belize City, where the Creole culture predominated under a heavy topping of American and Caribbean cultures.

Andy continued his singing while in high school. The emphasis is on ‘continuing’ for even in his primary school pre-teen years he had formed a small band in Barranco, called the *Warambians*. The musical instruments were a drum and a few discarded tin cans. The music they made was so loud that it was difficult to hear their youthful voices over the rattle of tin cans. But *Warambians* have their place in musical history as the last band to be formed in Barranco but the first that Andy created – the precursors to the now world-acclaimed Garifuna Collective of Watina fame.

In high school Andy had to give up the Garifuna creativity that had characterized his early experiments in Barranco. As a young man growing up, trying to impress the girls, he had to sing popular songs – rhythm and blues from America, reggae from Jamaica, soca from Trinidad, and from Latin America merengue, cumbia, and bolero. Indeed, this was the trend throughout the whole country at that time. Occasionally, if Garifuna songs were played by dance bands, they did so only intermittently and in limited ‘brukdown’ sessions.

No doubt, Garifuna music would have continued to be marginalized in the whole country – and this could be said about Belize music itself, if there had not been

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the term ‘pop star’, although Andy deliberately said that he was not a ‘bloody pop star’ in one of his interviews.

a veritable cultural revolution taking place exactly at the same time Belize attained independence in 1981. The instigator was Pen Cayetano, a man of very humble beginnings from Dangriga. His band was a group that dressed so outlandishly that they wore black trench coats on the stage; his instruments were turtle shells and keyboards; his style rootsy and popular; and his mission to transform punta from its traditional format. By combining all these ingredients he quickened the tempo electronically and magically increased the popularity of punta among the youth – both Garifuna and non-Garifuna. Pen rescued Garifuna dance music; packaged it for easy consumption; and simultaneously popularized it across ethnic boundaries, giving to the new nation-state of Belize a cultural identity that it so desperately lacked.

One of the advantages of the Pen Cayetano revolution was that several young men now saw that they could be artistes by adding their own style to the growing genre of punta rock. One of those was Andy Palacio. His first hit was “Bikini Panty”, followed by several others, such as “Jammin’”, “Nagùara”, “Nabi”, and “Gimme Punta Rock”. By the early 1990s all Belizeans were jamming to punta rock; so was the entire Caribbean coast from Cancun to Panama; and so were the Belizeans in the American diaspora. The Garifuna nation had generously donated its own dance music to so many hundreds of thousands of people. In its wake scores of young men and women became stars within their communities. A new form of indigenous popular music and culture started to take off.

### **From Pop Star to Cultural Worker**

Punta Rock brought Andy much notoriety. He travelled extensively, reaching places where no Belizean artiste had ever been. During that time he performed at the Greek Theatre in Berkeley, Californian and I refer to what a Belizean Garifuna, who was in the audience said. What struck him about the show was that Andy was an excellent performer in his singing, dancing, and guitar playing. But he was much more. He was able to educate his audience, when the teacher in him came out to give information about his culture, even having them repeat some words in Garifuna. At the end of the performance one got the distinct satisfaction of not only having heard exotic music but also learning a little bit about the people, who created the music.

Andy Palacio could never have been remained a pop star. Firstly, there is little money, if any at all, in the competitive punta rock market. Metropolitan countries create pop stars not small developing countries like Belize. As popular as the music is,

the voracious pirates bite heavily into the CD market. The more paying engagements come from performing overseas; but they are sporadic and tied very much to short, poorly funded promotional trips. How was Andy to maintain his growing family with such pittance? Actually, Andy was gradually articulating a vision of himself more as a ‘cultural worker’ (to use his own words) than a pop star.

His sound academic background, which included high school education, a trained teachers diploma, and experience as school teacher did not take him too long to land him a moderately paying job. His supervisor turned out to be no other than Roy Cayetano, who is a fellow Barranguna (native of Barranco), a close relative, a socio-linguist, and himself an inveterate supporter of culture and education. Roy Cayetano and Andy worked in the Ministry of Rural Development and Culture. By working with Roy Cayetano, Andy could continue his first love – singing and doing performances – while learning more about promoting culture as an aspect of development. In short, he was carving for himself the niche of cultural worker, something that was unknown at that time in Belize. He did so thanks to the support of public funds. In return Andy gave back to the government and people of Belize far more in value than what he humbly received.

While at the Ministry of Rural Development and Culture, Andy worked with the team that prepared the candidacy of the Garifuna nation for the 2001 UNESCO Proclamation of Garifuna language, music, and dance as masterpiece of oral and intangible heritage of humanity. The experience gave him a hands-on internship on cultural work in terms of its research, writing, videography, and proposal packaging. He was able to see the strength of the traditional and that it could earn its own validation at the world level. Notwithstanding the rush of time in preparing the candidacy, Andy, the fast learner, soaked in much that he could later use in educating others about his people.

Having secured an opportunity to earn a livelihood for himself and family, how would Andy carry his music to the highest level to which his brilliant creativity kept pushing him? Here again we are talking about Belize, a small country with limited human resource and technical expertise. In stepped Ivan Duran, at that time finishing his formal education in Cuba and Spain in music with specialty in classical guitar. In Duran’s words the meeting took place over drinks at a hotel bar when with much trepidation he made Andy the offer to produce a CD with him. The thought of a CD with his name on the label was too strong bait for Andy to resist. And so they

started working together. The result was the first CD that Ivan's company, Stonetree Records, produced and without doubt the first professionally recorded CD on Garifuna music made in Belize. The name was Keimoun ('Beat on' in English).

The release of Keimoun in 1997 was truly historic in the music industry of Belize. We often use the word 'historic' without knowing what it means. Why am I using the term 'historic' to describe the unleashing of Keimoun?

Before Keimoun the recording of punta rock was mainly on audio-cassette for local consumption, using limited technology. Keimoun introduced high level recording equipment and sophisticated instrumental accompaniment for the vocals, resulting in a CD reaching first world standards. Apart from the material success of Keimoun, it also did something that is immeasurable in the history of music production in Belize. It re-assured the young and gifted Ivan Duran that there was a distinct future in combining his love with Belizean cultural music and producing it for the world to enjoy.

Keimoun, therefore, marked the collaboration of two young Belizean geniuses – one born and raised in a small coastal village and the other with roots in Catalan, Spain. What both had was a passionate determination to preserve and promulgate traditional Belizean culture. Interculturalism, as only Belize could generate and ferment, was receiving a high electrical charge of re-generation.

### **From the Living to the Legendary**

Part of the reason for my giving so much attention to Keimoun is that you cannot truly understand Watina without first listening several times to Keimoun. There is no need for me to repeat the reams of praise that Watina accumulated in 2007 and will certainly do so in the future. There is a partial list in Appendix 2. But the one thing I will say is that Watina continued where Keimoun left off. Watina captured traditional Garifuna music, packaged it, and gave it to the rest of the globe as world music. In doing all this Watina has spurred attention on the traditional in Garifuna, leading new people to experiment with it on the one hand; while, on the other, making the rest of the world buy into Garifuna music at a rate that we had never seen before. Before Andy and Ivan the last person to have had this dream and to lay the groundwork for its fruition was Pen Cayetano.

Among our people, we do not believe in death as the end of life. When we physically leave this earth, we go to join our ancestors in Seiri, best described as a

mythical Yurumei (St. Vincent). In Seiri we are liberated and become more powerful than when we were on earth. When you listen again to the words of Watina, you will realize that in doing the CD Andy was already making his transition from earth to Seiri. I have a strong feeling that Andy knew this. I do believe that having moved the mountain when he was here on earth, he was relieved that he would now become liberated in Seiri to help us plan and execute his legend, for what others are now calling the post-Andy era.

In dealing with the question what do we do now I will focus more on the academic community, i.e. those of us who are paid through public funds not only to teach but also to reflect, do research, and do community service. With the nation receiving so much attention, we have to step to the plate with a detailed knowledge base of our people. It is a shame to admit that there is more known about our history than about our present state. Besides, even the better known part of our history has come from outdated history books that should have been long discarded in favour of more current research. When someone asks simple questions like the size of the population, its demography, and state of development, we have to bow our head in shame and admit that we do not know. This kind of ignorance is unforgivable in this day and age. For in not knowing simple bits of information about ourselves we also do not know about our health status, poverty rate, land tenure, our use of natural resources, and where we are in the socio-politics of our respective nation-states.

We cannot answer the question how many of our people can still hold a conversation in our language; or what is the state of our spirituality, music, and traditional knowledge. It is bad enough to say that we do not know the answers to these vital questions. It is sadder to say that there is no academic institution in Central America or the American diaspora that is taking as a challenge the need to tackle these topics with a sense of desperate urgency, using teams of scholars and their students.

There is another side of our collective ignorance that is especially demeaning to our artistic expressions. There is no comprehensive group that is doing the critical work to preserve our language, music, healing systems, and more importantly to forge the connectivity among all of these as attributes of a culture in serious crisis.

If we cannot answer these basic questions we cannot move to the other level of answering who is training the scores of young Andy Palacios – both girls and boys – so that they could take their rightful place as world stars. How are we sharing our

God-given gifts with the other people with whom we have lived closely for generations – the Miskito, Maya, East Indian, Creole, and Mestizo, and here in the diaspora of African America? Finally, how many of us are inserting ourselves into positions at the highest levels of decision-making not only in the church but also in government, the private sector, and NGO's?

Andy taught us that nothing good comes without painstaking hard work and sacrifice. We in academia know that this certainly is so from our own personal experience. We do not do enough of two other lessons that Andy taught us. One is the need to share our workload within groups based on equitable reciprocity. The other is not being afraid to unleash our creativity, especially when it is embedded within our rich cultural tradition.

In this presentation I have shown how Andy Palacio led the interface between culture, national development, and performing arts during his relatively short lifespan with us. I have deliberately pointed to members of the academic community to sharpen their wide ranging capacity within his rich legacy partly because we have often felt that these matters are not part of our prerogative. On the other hand, I could have pointed to other sectors, which were also touched by Andy Palacio. They include artistes, media personnel, persons who work in recording studios, electronic experts, makers and repairers of musical instruments, persons involved in booking tours, and stage managers, among many others. There is a wide constituency out there that could take the time to formulate what they will be doing to add glory to the legacy.

### **Conclusion**

As my final word, I have to say that I have not sufficiently elaborated on perhaps the greatest legacy that Andy left with us. And that is linking culture with a capital "C" with popular culture. In Belize the elitist colonial legacy that culture with a capital "C" should remain aloof from the people has not yet been uprooted. Long before the term 'to be cool' became fashionable, Andy was 'Mr. Coolness himself'. The higher the awards he won the more he showed the world that he was still himself. Never did he insist that he should be addressed with the appellation "His Excellency" as deserving of his government-appointed title "the Cultural Ambassador of Belize". The impact on the public was a combination of awe, pride, disbelief, and genuine love. Culture does not have to be elitist and high brow. Probably the best way to explain this is to repeat what a non-Garifuna colleague of mine said on hearing that Andy had passed on. "No," he said in shock, "it can't be because I was playing

billiards with him just last week in San Ignacio.” He paused for a while and then continued, “The Prime Minister or Leader of the Opposition could have died but not my Andy P.”. At that point I shook my head in agreement and said to myself “Yes, we are finally reaching the point when we can give the ambassador of popular culture his due respect, thanks to my little brother Andy Vivian Palacio.”

In concluding let me repeat in bullet form some of the main achievements of Andy Palacio that we should remember in this tribute to him:

- Transformed music by extracting from it, mixing it, and returning it to the people and the world at large;
- Used his organizational skills to form the Garifuna Collective, which also includes several non-Garinagu;
- Making the culture truly trans-boundary in its heartland, the Caribbean coast of Central America;
- Initiating a production of women in recorded music through the recently released Umalali CD;
- Bringing socioeconomic development to the field of culture
- Combining a high level of artistic performance with an equally high level of intellectual capability;

Doing all of the above while being a son, father, husband – a truly ‘decent’ human being.

A noteworthy trait of Andy was being able to form networks with persons whom he knew. During the past few days many of us in the audience have formed networks around the events in which we have participated. Let us strengthen them as we set to give shape to the vision that Andy left with us.

It is appropriate that at this time I ask that we stand, hold hands, and observe a minute’s silence in his memory.

*Mabuiga (warmest greetings), namule (my little brother) Andy!*

## **Appendix 1**

### **Tribute to Andy Palacio Concert Tour Featuring the Garifuna Collective, Umalali, Aurelio Martinez, and more**

**April to May, 2008.**

April 4	New York, NY	Symphony Space
April 8 -10	Louisville, KY	Kentucky Center
April 18-19	Atlanta, GA	Rialto Theater
April 20	Miami, FL	Carnival Center
April 23	Chicago, IL	Old Town
April 25-26	Lafayette, LA	Festival Internationale
April 27	Houston, TX	International Festival
April 30	Burlington, VT	Higher Ground
May 2	Philadelphia, PA	Annenberg Center
May 3	Washington, DC	Lisner Auditorium

### **Awards Given to Andy Palacio in 2007\***

UNESCO	Artist for Peace
World Music Charts Europe	#1 Album of the Year
World Music Expo	WOMEX 2007
BBC Radio 3 Awards for World Music	Best Artist in the Americas
National Public Radio – Banning Eyre (USA)	Top 10 World Music Album 2007
Global Rhythm (USA)	#1 Album of the Year
The Beat Magazine (USA)	Best Album of the Year 2007
Songlines (UK)	Best of 2007
National Geographic Music (USA)	#1 Album of the Year
Froots BBC 3 Critic’s poll (UK)	# 2 Album of the Year
The Guardian (UK)	Top 1000 Albums to Listen to Before You Die
Vibrations (FR)	Top 25 of 2007
L’Humanité (FR)	Best of 2007
The Belize Times	Man of the Year
Stylus Magazine (USA)	#41 Top Fifty Albums of the Year
Afropop Worldwide (USA)	Top Album of 2007
Amazon.com (USA)	#1 International Album of 2007
Voir (Canada)	Top 10 World Music Album of 2007
PRI’s The World (USA)	Best of 2007
The Boston Globe	Top 10 of 2007

\* My thanks to Yasser Musa. This is only a partial list.