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Diaspora Sounds from Caribbean Central America

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Garifuna Drum Method. Produced by Emery Joe Yost and Matthew Dougherty. English and Garifuna with subtitles. Distributed by End of the Line Productions/ Lubaantune Records, 2008. DVD. Approximately 100 minutes, color.

The Garifuna: An Enduring Spirit. Produced by Robert Flanagan and Suzan Al-Doghachi. English and Garifuna with subtitles. Lasso Productions, 2003. Distributed by Lasso Productions. DVD. 35 minutes, color.

The Garifuna Journey. Produced by Andrea Leland and Kathy Berger. English and Garifuna with subtitles. New Day Films, 1998. Distributed by New Day Films. DVD and study guide. 47 minutes, color.

Play, Jankunú, Play: The Garifuna Wanáragua Ritual of Belize. Produced by Oliver Greene. English and Garifuna with subtitles. Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources, 2007. DVD. 45 minutes, color.

Trois Rois/ Three Kings of Belize. Produced by Katia Paradis. English, Spanish, Garifuna, and K'ekchi Maya with subtitles (French-language version also available). Distributed by Amazone/ Domino Films, 2007. DVD. 88 minutes, color.

Bearing a proud, militant history of resistance to slavery, the Garinagu¹ comprise a unique African-Amerindian maroon people dating to the early seventeenth century, when indigenous Carib- and Arawak-speaking peoples of the eastern Caribbean took in Africans escaped from bondage. In their native St. Vincent, the Garinagu (or Black Caribs, as they were known during the colonial era) resisted French and English forces who sought to take control of the island's cultivable lands.

Defeated by the English in 1796, the following year the Black Caribs endured mass deportation to the Caribbean coast of Honduras. The English hoped to unload this unruly people upon their Spanish rivals, part of a design to achieve hegemony in the western Caribbean. Instead, some 2,300 survivors adapted by taking advantage of weak effective Spanish authority in the coastal region, and gradually established beachfront communities that stretched from Nicaragua to British Honduras (today,

Belize), where the early nineteenth-century timber industry absorbed all available labor.

The Garinagu took a pragmatic interest in relations with the Spanish-speaking mestizo population, the region's indigenous peoples, the English, and Jesuit missionaries, and they were quick to adapt foreign cultural practices, linguistic borrowings, spiritual elements, and industrial goods to their cultural repertoire. Yet, identified as "black" and culturally African, speaking an indigenous language, and having never been enslaved, the Garinagu remain a striking cultural anomaly in Caribbean Central America.

Today the Garinagu number an estimated 300,000 people (no one knows for sure), concentrated in Caribbean Central America and in New York, Florida, Illinois, Texas, and Southern California. The Garifuna saga constitutes a singular chapter in African Diaspora historiography, a remarkable tale of cultural survival variously addressed in several provocative and timely documentaries.

Reflecting upon the dramatic human consequences of massive involuntary displacement inscribed in the history of the West Indies, when Sidney Mintz observed that the "[Caribbean] present is, for better or worse, much of the rest of the world's future" (Mintz 1989: xxi), he could well have been speaking of the Garinagu. A human precipitate of the forced cultural, socioeconomic, and political encounter of the European New World adventure, the Garinagu represent, from their very genesis, one of the world's first truly modern peoples.

As these videos document, the African-indigenous Garifuna people have long endured discrimination in Central America. But today the Garinagu face additional, if familiar pressures: the structural poverty endemic to Central America, the destruction of local animal and plant species, the degradation of local habitats, attacks on communal land rights, attendant pressures of tourism development, the effects of HIV-AIDS, violence related to cocaine transshipment from Colombia, and a process of emigration to U.S. inner-city destinations whose beginnings predate World War Two. Together these phenomena have undermined local community integrity in the form of social corrosion, language loss, and cultural atrophy, impeding the inter-generational transmission of cultural heritage.

Simultaneously, Garifuna activism and artistic creativity have sparked a cultural renaissance at home and in expatriate communities in the United States. Recognizing the cultural threat, in 2001 UNESCO proclaimed the Garifuna language, dance, and music to be among the "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" (Cayetano and Cayetano 2005). Acknowledging a heritage worthy of recognition and cultural protection, UNESCO's intervention has reinforced

local efforts to promote Garifuna expressive culture, bringing renewed dedication (at home and in expatriate communities) to teaching the Garifuna language, dance, and music, particularly targeting young Garinagu at home and abroad.

This revival also has gone hand-in-hand with the emergence on the world-music stage of such prominent Garifuna musicians as Belizean cultural ambassador Andy Palacio (1960–2008), and Aurelio Martínez, who is also the first Garinagu elected to the national congress in Honduras. Likewise important has been the work of Belizean producer Ivan Duran, whose Stonetree Records has brought these and other Garifuna artists to global attention, with recordings that have topped the European world-music charts, and have won major world-music awards from BBC-Radio 3 and WOMEX (the Berlin-based World Music Expo). Finally, we have the films presently under consideration, which each address vital questions of the production of knowledge, issues of power, community cohesion and identity, and the matter of cultural survival. Taken together, these titles comprise an excellent introduction to Garifuna music and spirituality, and to the broader cultural context and social history that inform a resurgent sense of Garifuna identity and cultural recuperation.²

In the late 1990s, Andrea Leland went to Belize on a documentary mission. Seeking to create “a first-voice testimony celebrating the resilience of the Garifuna people and their traditions,”³ she enlisted over a dozen Garifuna scholars and activists to develop and consult on the script of *The Garifuna Journey*. A Garifuna woman wrote the documentary narration, Garifuna technicians served on the film crew, numerous Garinagu were interviewed on camera, important cultural celebrations were portrayed and explained by Garinagu themselves, and numerous community leaders had a say in shaping the final product.

The care with which the producers executed the project is exemplary, and their engagement with Garifuna tradition bearers, scholars, clergy, teachers, artists, writers, musicians, activists, technicians, community members, and community organizations anticipated the grassroots perspective variously manifest in the other, subsequently produced documentaries examined here. Endorsed by the National Garifuna Council (with support from Cultural Survival, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and private donors), the project sought to tell the story “from the ‘insider’ Garifuna point of view, with little if any ‘outside’ perspectives” (Leland 1999:2). A teacher’s study guide for students in grade eight through college complements the DVD, and for future research and documentation purposes, the unedited audio and visual material was deposited with the Center for Black Music Research, Columbia College (Chicago). Altogether, *The Garifuna Journey* sets high ethical and

research standards that model the best work in the field of documentary filmmaking.

A range of native voices informs *The Garifuna Journey*, and the absence of an omniscient narrative voice is striking (as it is for all but one of the documentaries reviewed here). From the opening series of quotations from Garifuna poet Rhodel Castillo ("Our children must know the truth about / their history and culture / our survival / themselves / our exodus from St. Vincent / the truth that we were never enslaved"), the film constitutes an emphatic declaration of cultural identity.

Footage follows from the annual dramatic re-enactment in several coastal Belizean Garifuna communities of their November 1832 arrival from Honduras, fleeing political retaliation against Garifuna communities there. The narrative tone is intimate: "I'd like to share with you the story of our people, one of resistance, the survival of our culture, and the triumph of the spirit." Viewers quickly sense the importance that Garinagu assign to their bicultural origins, the equivalent value of indigenous and black African expressive and spiritual traditions, and their strong identification with other peoples of the Caribbean and the African Diaspora. As one Garifuna interviewee declares, "[Garifuna history is] testimony to our resistance and our link to our African ancestors."

In capsule form, Leland and her interlocutors outline Garifuna history from its St. Vincent origins, tracing the struggle there, the forced move to Central America, and ensuing efforts to reproduce a sense of Garifuna identity in succeeding generations. A Garifuna teacher talks about fighting negative self-stereotyping among Garifuna students, and efforts to valorize the language and cultural heritage among the young. Says another female commentator, "It is our [obligation] to learn and talk Garifuna, and to hang on to our culture."

The film depicts Garifuna celebrations, and the attendant singing, drumming, and dancing. In particular, it emphasizes the importance of Garifuna spirituality, especially the sacred communal *dügü* ceremony, wherein the ancestors—summoned by singing, drumming, dancing, and offerings of food and drink—possess afflicted participants, healing and offering advice to restore balance in family and community relations.⁴ Students of the African Diaspora will recognize the affinities between Garifuna and counterpart forms in Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, Trinidad, Brazil and elsewhere. The deep connection between Garifuna expressive culture and the ethical and spiritual dimensions of traditional life is clear, yet the film resists an easy temptation to idealize the Garifuna past and fret over contemporary fortunes. The stakes remain high of course, as the people well understand. In the words of one woman, "If the *dügü* disappears, you can say that Garifuna culture is finished."

The emergence of new, popular forms of music such as *punta* rock

(which builds on a traditional Garifuna dance rhythm called punta, combining the music's time-honored percussive foundations with modern amplified instruments) holds promise in this regard.⁵ Viewers look on as revered cultural activist T.V. Ramos (now deceased) is honored in a punta rock song by popular Garifuna punta rocker Chico Ramos, while another artist, Mohobub Flores sings an instructive punta rock send-up titled "My Culture." The work of more traditionally oriented dance and music artists, painters, and writers is portrayed in equally respectful and informative terms.

Contemporary Garifuna cultural production must be seen in the context of the historical tensions and displacements of communal experience, the circumstances of a population whose long conditioning to transnational forms of existence continues to inspire emergent pragmatic strategies—in service of persistent, forward-looking values of social cohesion, spiritual communion, and cultural survival. As a commentator remarks with respect to the British colonial-era recruitment of the brightest Garifuna students to become teachers (teachers who did not return to work in their home communities), and to emigration's more generalized impact on community solidarity, "We have paid a heavy price for our freedom [but] we need not abandon our past to move forward."

This upbeat attitude is likewise manifest in Flanagan and Al-Doghachi's *The Garifuna: An Enduring Spirit*, which takes a more conventional documentary approach than that of Leland. Filmed from an outsider's impressionistic perspective, with a voiced-over narrative, the film covers much the same historical and cultural territory as *The Garifuna Journey*, and by virtue of necessity (the total Garifuna population numbers only about 10,000) consults many of the same native experts and commentators.

Flanagan and Al-Doghachi are deeply committed to the culture they portray; they live and work in Belize's rural Toledo District, the southernmost part of the country that is inhabited primarily by the Garinagu and two Maya-speaking groups. They also address a critical issue in Garifuna social history and contemporary life, the effects of emigration to the United States, and the Central American poverty that underlies the phenomenon.

The filmmakers interview a couple who returned to their native Garifuna community after 20 years abroad, which exchange underscores the vital role that savings and remittances play in sustaining families and communities at home. We hear native concerns about the corrosive effects of global popular culture, television, the Internet, emigration, and globalization, but again, the Garifuna perspective is remarkably philosophical and positive. Observes one returned Garifuna expatriate: "The experience of living in the melting pot, especially in places like New York, can help Garifuna people realize and appreciate who

they are. They hear all the world's languages spoken in the street, and they rediscover their own language. It defines who you are." Remarks a Garifuna woman: "You cannot be what you are not. Be proud of who and what you are!"

Finally, Flanagan and Al-Doghachi interview two legendary Garifuna *paranda* (ballad) singers, Paul Nabor and Gabaga Williams (now deceased, and rarely recorded).⁶ Nabor is a witty octogenarian fisherman, farmer, and former boxer who still tours abroad occasionally with the renowned Garifuna Collective. Caressing the strings, smiling infectiously, Nabor informs the filmmakers that he wants to be buried with his guitar, and the filmmakers poignantly end the film with his inimitable solo singing. These intimate moments with some of the Garifuna greats constitute valuable historic footage for those who seek to comprehend the roots of Caribbean Central America's traditional and popular music genres.

Oliver Greene's *Play, Jankunú, Play*, a careful, scholarly treatise on Garifuna dance forms, has been screened widely in the United States and Central America, in native Garifuna communities, public settings, and at the Society for Ethnomusicology. With funding from the Center for Black Music Research in Chicago, and the Georgia State University School of Music, and based on extensive research (Greene 1998, 2004, 2005), the producer taps a wealth of oral, visual, and textual sources, and interviews indigenous and scholarly informants alike, setting the Garifuna jankunú (also "John Canoe," or in the Garifuna language, *Wanáragua*) dance and celebration in a broad African Diaspora perspective. He engagingly explores connections with analogous forms in far-flung locales including the Bahamas, Bermuda, Belize, the Bronx, England, Ghana, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Nigeria, North Carolina, St. Kitts-Nevis, and St. Vincent, using maps, graphic materials, paintings, and music to complement live footage from Caribbean Central America.

Jankunú is a Christmastime street-dance procession with carnivalesque variants in the previously noted New World locales. Jankunú constituted a key folk element in celebrations at the year's end in the English-speaking Caribbean, reflecting in part the influence of English Christmas mumming traditions. Pre-emancipation accounts (e.g., Long 1972 [1774]) describe the enslaved converging on the towns during the Christmas holiday to visit, frolic, and partake in the festivities. Released from work, people took to the streets to enjoy an extended bacchanal that included a studied mockery of European musical, dance, and theater forms in a symbolic inversion of the power relations inscribed in slavery.

In one theory related by Greene, the name commemorates one John Conny, the influential African overseer of three European trading forts on the Ghana coast in the 1720s, with a reputation apparently well-

known to many enslaved Africans in Jamaica. Imposing men performed in arresting masks and inventive costumes topped with ox horns or huge headdresses in the form of ships or model houses, sometimes with boar tusks to fiercely accentuate the mouth. Masqueraders often wielded wooden swords, and crowds of euphoric women trailed the energetic dancers, singing and dispensing anisette to fuel the men's procession. These threatening masked figures advanced from one master's house to the next, dancing vigorously until the proprietor sent them off with a small gratuity. Street routines might also include mimes, informal companies of players irreverently enacting scenes from the English folk theater, and musicians playing "fife-and-drum" (or, in Belize, "boom-and-chime") music on handmade instruments. Echoing colonial reporters' observations, contemporary performers say they do so for the pleasure of dancing, the immediate personal gratification of money and drink, and for the prestige their dancing skill brings.

Greene's Belizean informants add that jankunú "reminds us of our struggles, and of who we are as [Garinagu]." There they have sustained a variation involving elaborately masked and costumed dancers dressed as women, together with singers, and sometimes stilt-walkers. Dancers are outfitted with cowry-shell leg rattles, and percussionists playing a variety of handmade Garifuna drums, jawbone rasps, conch shell trumpets, and turtle shells. While jankunú's origins in the Garifuna communities of Caribbean Central America remain obscure, Greene notes that the traditional rhythm is well known to Garifuna drummers and dancers alike.

Greene also demonstrates the jankunú and related *charikanári* ("two-foot cow") dance traditions' palpable relationship with analogous forms documented in African-descent communities in many parts of the New World, and shows how jankunú serves to engage and inform Garifuna youth about their cultural heritage. For instance, on Three King's Day, January 6, children are the featured jankunú dancers and drummers. And as a bonus, Greene examines the European country dance influence of the "Grand Ball" quadrille tradition among African-descent peoples in Belize, another generalized form widely documented in the Caribbean.

A painstaking work of scholarship plainly attuned to indigenous sensibilities, *Play, Jankunú*, *Play* is a thorough and informed introduction to the Garifuna variant of this widely reported African Diaspora tradition, and a more general assessment of the quotidian process whereby African, Amerindian, and European folk cultures engendered the hybrid aesthetic and cultural forms that arose from the European adventure in the Caribbean, and the enforced interaction of diverse peoples from three continents under conditions of categorical inequality.

As Greene demonstrates, the African cultural influences evident in

the history and practice of jankunú—from Honduras to North Carolina, from Belize to Bermuda—must be seen more broadly against slave society's abiding legacy of psychosocial repression and material deprivation. In its historical genesis as in the contemporary context, jankunú constitutes a creative ritual symbolic response, and an opportunistic application of the sundry expressive repertoires carried in the minds of African peoples on the Middle Passage. Borrowing, adapting, and elaborating upon novel expressive practices encountered in the Americas, jankunú represents an affirmative effort to render meaningful the structural brutality of slavery and its social legacy in the culturally multiple, creatively destructive New World milieu.

Shifting gears, *Garifuna Drum Method* is a remarkable collaboration between three top traditional Garifuna drummers, the Garifuna drum-making Rodríguez family, additional Garifuna musicians, scholars, translators, local engineers, and two North American producers. The latter set up a modest recording studio in southern Belize several years ago and consigned it to local control. After a brief introduction to Garifuna history and culture, this instructional DVD's "Basic" menu introduces the Garifuna drum ensemble: the *primero* or lead drum, and the larger, deeper-toned *segunda*, which provides a steady rhythmic accompaniment to Garifuna sacred and secular music. Spoken narratives in Garifuna are accompanied by stark full-screen English-text translations, while English-language narration is heard over similar titles in transcribed Garifuna. The effect is to valorize the Garifuna language, while easing the student into a new and inviting cross-cultural learning milieu. Thus the viewer hears Paul Nabor speaking in Garifuna about the significance of the *dügü*, in an expression of the communal attitude of sharing and equality that informs traditional Garifuna culture: "This is when we Garinagu celebrate; after that there is nothing left to do except to talk with each other and laugh together as one."

In another effective visual technique, the drummers appear frontally on one half of the screen, while a close-up of the drummer's hands on the drumhead appears on the other half. This enables the student simultaneously to see and to hear the techniques as they are explained and demonstrated. A similar strategy introduces each of the seven fundamental Garifuna dance rhythms, with a brief cultural and historical orientation to each: *punta*, *paranda*, *sambai*, *wanáragua* (jankunú), *gunjei*, *hüngu-hüngu*, and three variations on the sacred *dügü*.

The second menu, "Lessons," proceeds similarly, going into detail on each of the preceding rhythms, explaining their context and application, with on-screen rhythmic notation. (While the student can always pause the DVD to study the notations, a helpful addition to future editions

would be a book with notations.)

"Improv," the third menu, provides numerous examples of improvisation upon the basic rhythms, while the fourth menu, "Songs," presents a variety of Garifuna performances in which Garifuna traditional rhythms figure centrally. A useful adjunct is the list of scholarly citations for further study. Another critical dimension of this project, not mentioned in the DVD, concerns the producers' efforts to reinforce the Garifuna drum-making economy in Belize, and to establish a market for the drums abroad. This effort has run into all the predictable social contradictions and structural constraints that impinge upon local Garifuna economies and community resources more generally. Efforts by the producers and other Garifuna cultural organizations in Central America and the United States to draw in young Garinagu and interest them in traditional music and have been buoyed somewhat by the international success of artists like Andy Palacio, Paul Nabor, and Aurelio Martínez. Indeed, and not surprisingly, the Garifuna diaspora in the United States (where exposure to a range of popular musical influences clearly impacts Garifuna tastes, particularly among the youth) may prove to be among the strongest audiences for this and the other DVDs reviewed here.

Likewise reflecting the readiness of Garifuna artists to incorporate new elements into their work, and to engage in a dialogue with the wider world of music, award-winning Belizean producer Ivan Duran recently told me,

I didn't set out to do an anthropological or ethnographic [documentation of] Garifuna [music] in Central America. We look for striking songs to develop, but with a contemporary twist. To me, this is the best chance we actually have to preserve the culture. If we can engage Garifuna youth by making the traditional somehow modern, cool, and accessible, we might just show them that people outside the community, internationally, recognize and value Garifuna culture. We see that happening already with the international success of Andy Palacio and the Garifuna Collective (Duran 2006).

Yet a certain tension persists as locally successful Central American musicians make their way onto the world-music stage. The smallness of local music markets, endemic regional poverty, and the unforgiving economics of touring traditional musicians abroad means that even the most talented and revered of tradition bearers faces serious challenges in making a living as a full-time musician, even when their recordings and touring appearances gain a degree of international attention and acclaim.

This is one of the many lessons of French Canadian filmmaker Katia Paradis's sensitive and affecting portrait of three elderly musical masters from Belize, *Trois Rois/ Three Kings of Belize*. Paradis takes a deliberate

risk in providing absolutely no contextualizing narrative, allowing the musicians to tell their own stories, developed in a series of impressionistic, interwoven takes on the lives of her three subjects. Creole accordionist Wilfred Peters is Belize's foremost proponent of Creole boom-and-chime and *brukdown* music; like his film counterparts, his most successful recordings have been produced by Ivan Duran. Now in his 70s, notwithstanding his national celebrity and some distribution of his recordings abroad, and having been named to the Order of the British Empire after playing for the Queen upon her visit to Belize, Peters is largely retired, not a matter of age so much as the declining popularity of the music he plays, particularly among younger Belizeans. Equally at home with blues, bolero, brukdown, mazurka, polka, quadrille, and waltz ("If you play for a dance, you have to play everything," he observes), Peters still turns out a crowd in rural Belizean communities. As one dancer observes wistfully, "When Peters leaves this world, everybody going to miss him." Peters relates, "I was born with the accordion in my house. I learned by watching others play. It just stuck in my head. I'm the only accordion player left in Belize. But you have to study your own culture—that's yours! People say its old people's music, but I [get to] go where they don't go!"

Indeed, Paradis follows Peters to the Carrefour Mondial de l'Accordéon (International Accordion Festival) in Montmagny, Quebec, where he wanders through the grounds talking with musicians, squeeze-box dealers, and the public, later swapping songs with Acadian musicians on stage to the delight of the entire house. But back at home, Peters is wistful. Paging through a family scrapbook, looking at photos of his three grown daughters, he says, "They all live in the U.S. now." Sighing with apparent resignation, "Old home Belize. No place like home," he offers an a cappella rendition of one of his signature tunes, "Old Home Belize."

Looking around his family compound in Belize City, musing about making various repairs and improvements, and wondering where the money might come from, he smiles ironically, "Big name and small pocket. It should have been big pocket, small name. Or big name and big pocket—I think it's better that way." Playing a beautiful Gabbanelli accordion in his living room, surrounded by music awards and trophies, Peters observes, "I love playing. When I don't play, I suffer. As long as I can play, I won't stop. But after you pass 75 it's all downhill. I won't make it to a hundred." Paradis cuts to scenes from Peters' 75th birthday party, an old-time Belizean "jump up." He cuts the rug with a younger woman, then sinks into a chair, visibly winded, but happy.

K'ekchi Maya musician and instrument maker Florencio Mess⁷ is known throughout Belize, but he lives alone in a remote Maya village in

southern Belize, tending his *milpa* (garden plot), playing music with his colleagues, and building K'ekchi violins, guitars, and harps from native hardwoods. He recalls attending a Maya fiesta at a young age. "I saw the music man playing with his eyes shut, it sound good. I say maybe someday, God willing, I would like to do that. I went to his house and asked about lessons. First I learn to knock the drum, then guitar, violin... then I asked him to teach me to make instruments."

He pulls out some of his music trophies ("Like those boys who play ball," he says) and recalls, "I was born in 1938. My teacher beat me because I couldn't learn the lessons. I left school at age seven, but I learned four languages" (K'ekchi and Mopan Maya, Spanish, and Belize Creole English). We see him in his workshop, quietly intent upon the violin taking shape in his hands. In another scene, he peels a grapefruit from one of his many fruit trees. "Why go to the shop [to spend money] for things you can produce for yourself. See this calabash gourd? You don't have to buy scoops and dishes in the shop. I see these Maya girls, they go to Belize City and get a job. I don't want to clean sewers like they do. That is not a job for me," he laughs cheerfully.

More somberly, he remembers his wife, struck down by cancer. Playing the K'ekchi harp outside his house, he relates, "I dream that she's right there with me. But I wake up and don't see anybody. I start to cry, but I said, crying is not going to help me." He laughs with manifest sadness, "Getting angry might help me. Because when you are angry you forget everything." Later we see Florencio Mess and his band members carefully wrapping his harp for a trip to the Venice International Ethnic Folk Festival. They travel by small launch across the bay to Puerto Barrios, Guatemala, taking the long bus ride to the capital, and on by taxi to the airport. He and his fellows look from the plane window as they approach for landing. Mess wanders the street of Venice, respectfully greeting passersby in the Maya manner. He ducks into a church, lights a votive, says a prayer in K'ekchi and crosses himself, quite at home with himself in this very different world. Performing outdoors in the evening, Mess diffidently welcomes audience members to the stage to dance with him. Back home, sorting drying coffee beans in his yard, he reflects almost metaphysically, "After I got back, I just remember [Venice], but no one [here] saw it. Only you know what you dream." The striking separation between his experience as an international artist and his modest life in rural Belize resonates with that of musicians in the other videos reviewed here.

Paradis's third subject, octogenarian Garifuna *parandero* and *buyei* (Garifuna healer-priest) Paul Nabor (already encountered in some of the preceding documentaries) enjoys a considerable regional reputation in Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras. Reclining in his hammock, he relates,

"I forgot most of the songs I wrote. Then I hear someone singing one of my songs and remember, 'Oh, yes, that's my song'."

We see Nabor in the bush, machete in hand, chopping wood, hoisting a stout log onto his shoulder, walking home. "I worked in the forest [cutting timber] for two years, then as a fisherman for five. That was when I decided to become a musician. I don't work for anybody. When I was young," he recalls, cradling his guitar, "I walked all about singing. But for young people today, music comes out of a [boom] box."

Nabor lives in rural coastal southern Belize, in a palm-thatch hut. His household altar, replete with religious photos and icons, candles lit to the ancestors, marks the space as a Garifuna temple as well. Nabor sprays a rum offering and blows smoke across the altar. A passing thunderstorm brings water splashing through the roof into plastic buckets and tubs lining the dirt floor. Sitting outside after the rain, Nabor drinks beer from a gourd and comments, "I'm tired of it. The rain comes in and I have to keep moving my hammock. I need to replace the palm with zinc. But I'm happy every day I wake up. The good Lord gives us a new day. I'm always busy with something to do. Why should I wait until tomorrow?"

Paradis captures the relaxed yet directed pace of Nabor's daily life, sweeping the house, in the bush, on the sea, throwing out and retrieving his nets, smoking, singing, and playing his guitar, watching a TV boxing match in a local bar, reflecting on his career as a one-time boxer. At home, taking a break from singing, he recalls, "I had several women. When they decide to go, if I haven't got love, my lady can go. No problem. Love is very serious. If you have it, you can kill on account of love. I love my guitar. When I sing and play, it's almost like someone talking with me. I can't part with my guitar. I told all my family to bury me with my guitar."

The quotidian immediacy of Nabor's life, and his vocation as a Garifuna healer, are manifest when he sings, "Sickness refuses to leave me. What will become of me?" In another scene, paddling his dory along the shore, he remarks prophetically, "When I look at it, everything have an end, everything." In the closing scene, Nabor visits Mr. Peters at the latter's Belize City home. Peters plays the accordion and sings; a grandchild asks Nabor if he might also sing. Nabor obliges with a song that declares, "When I die, there must be a band at my funeral." Catching the drift, Peters counters with a singular rendition of "Amazing Grace." Nabor listens intently, and smiling broadly, exclaims, "That's a pretty one, brother. I love that one. You have to show me [how to play it] before you go. But maybe I'm going before you," he laughs.

Offering no cultural or historical context, the naturalistic approach Paradis has taken requires of the viewer a universalistic acknowledgment of the humanity of her subjects.⁸ Of course, allowing her three

subjects to speak for themselves is an approach that elides cutting-room editorial decisions, but insofar as every documentary necessarily entails a process of selection, what remains is an insightful tribute to three remarkable musicians, among the last representatives of their respective musical traditions. Most notably, and despite their local fame and successes abroad, these distinguished musicians live in modest, retiring fashion. For all the goodwill engendered by their recordings and overseas appearances, as they each contemplate their own mortality, neither the fleeting character of the unique traditions they represent nor their material wellbeing have been much ameliorated.

Certainly, the preceding observations are generalizable with respect to traditional artists whose talents have taken them beyond the local milieu into the international arena of world music. Indeed, in recent years, numerous films have document elderly artists from diverse world-music traditions, as perhaps most popularly illustrated in the celebrated Buena Vista Social Club project. All too often, listeners in the global north discover a consumer's taste for native talents only in the artist's twilight years. These films gently if insistently remind us that the casual interest of Western listeners in music from elsewhere represents only the most limited, aestheticized engagement with ways of life whose traditional endurance is by no means guaranteed under the regime of globalization. The socially enlightened, well-intentioned consumer "choices" made by such listeners-as-consumers are largely without socioeconomic and political impact in the communities that these musicians represent.

Even so, documenting artists from little-known places such as Caribbean Central America remains critical in revalorizing, to the extent possible, the vital expressive traditions that inform contemporary music-making and a broader sense of indigenous cultural identity, both within the community and without. But there is more to these films than their manifest documentary value, and their essential tribute to the musicians. These works testify to the wellspring of vital if endangered cultural traditions, and to the efforts of native peoples to make their way in a world that, if not entirely of their own making, takes shape according to a resilient sense of creative engagement with the negotiable imperatives of an unfinished modernity.

Notes

- ¹ The Garinagu are more commonly called Garifuna, which properly is the name of their native language, and the adjective used to refer to all things Garinagu.
- ² The community of scholars and producers working on Garifuna

music and culture is small, but ethical standards require that I acknowledge my personal acquaintance with the producers of each of the videos under review, and the fact that I am credited on two of the titles, *Garifuna Drum Method* and *Trois Rois/Three Kings of Belize*.

- ³ This phrase appears on the DVD cover, and in the opening titles of *The Garifuna Journey*.
- ⁴ For a culturally faithful enactment of the Garifuna dügü, as performed in a Garifuna village in Honduras on behalf of a Garifuna woman living in Los Angeles (in a dramatic film not reviewed here), see Allié (2003).
- ⁵ Belizean Garifuna musician and painter Delvin “Pen” Cayetano is widely recognized as the pioneer of the now-ubiquitous punta rock sound (e.g., Original Turtle Shell Band 2001 [1983]; cf. Greene 2004). A brand-new documentary by Belizean-American director Nyasha Laing (2008), *Punta Soul* addresses the history of punta rock comprehensively.
- ⁶ The first professional recordings of Nabor and Williams appear on *Paranda* (Various Artists 2000); Nabor is also featured on Palacio et al. (2007).
- ⁷ See Mess (2000).
- ⁸ Also worth noting is Paradis’s documentary in progress, made in coordination with Ivan Duran’s *Umalali* project, which features the artistry of gifted Garifuna women singers from Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras; for a preview, see Various Artists (2008).

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