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Ten years on, something to smile about.

HEADLINERS

A spiritual hero

Andy Palacio was on the verge of global stardom when he died, says *Peter Culshaw*

The great Belizean singer Andy Palacio died of a massive stroke and heart attack last month, just as a global audience was starting to discover his music. He'd already been picked as one of the winners at the Radio 3 Awards for World Music. UN leaders were among those who mourned his passing at the early age of 47.

Three weeks earlier, I'd reported on a trip to Belize to witness two 'homecoming' gigs; the piece, published on Abba to Zappa, OMM's website, was headlined 'A New Marley in the Making?'. The shows in Dangriga and in Hopkins Village had provided the people of this English-speaking Central American country the chance to celebrate one of their great cultural ambassadors.

While Palacio spoke English well enough, he was first and foremost a Garifuna – a descendant of former slaves exiled in 1797 from the island of St Vincent by the British. The singer had spent 20 years championing their threatened culture with its mix of African and indigenous Indian

elements. His album *Watina* proved the breakthrough. An early champion, Charlie Gillett, reviewing it in this magazine in March last year, wrote 'whatever people mean about music being universal, surely this is the perfect demonstration of their argument'; *Newsday* called it 'as revelatory as Paul Simon's *Graceland* or the *Buena Vista Social Club*'.

The show in Dangriga took place in front of an adoring crowd who knew every word; as I wrote, 'it felt like one of those great pop moments where something greater is being invoked than mere music.' The gig the following day at King Cassava's Bar in Hopkins Village was a more low-key affair, but dancing continued even when the heavens opened.

I spoke to the Prime Minister, Said Musa, who was well aware that Palacio was putting Belize on the map, while the singer himself told me: 'When I started out, Garifuna culture, which to me is something precious and full of spirituality, was seen as something not worth exposing or passing to



Andy Palacio with musicians and Umalali singers. Photograph by Tony Rath

the next generation. I really feel we're changing things here.'

He had assembled a terrific band including up-and-coming talents as well as elder Garifuna statesmen like singer Paul Nabor. This 'Garifuna Collective' will

tour internationally later in the spring, while Ivan Duran, *Watina's* producer, has also recorded an album of women singers called *Umali* to be released next month. A film of Andy Palacio's life, too, is planned.