

# Honouring the man who gave the world the gift of Garifuna music

*Peter Culshaw  
reflects on the legacy of  
Andy Palacio and his  
'Watina' album*

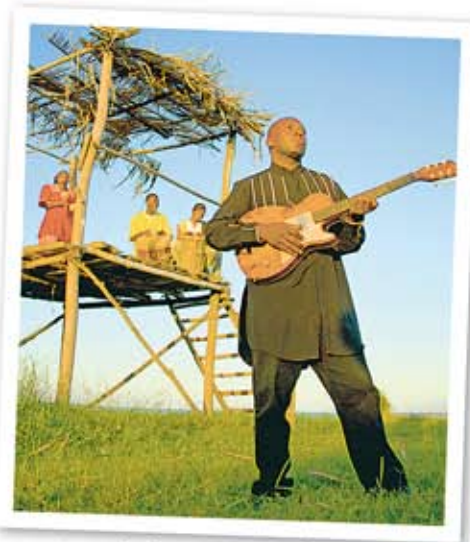
This was supposed to be a very different story – of a musician's triumphant homecoming. I was invited to witness Andy Palacio and his Garifuna Collective's concerts in Belize last November, where he was greeted as returning hero. The concerts were extraordinary – a year on the road internationally and his band had become hair-

raisingly good. My review at the time was headlined "A New Marley In the Making" and said "Palacio has become a bona-fide man of the people. There were shades of a Bob Marley or Fela Kuti gig – something greater is being invoked than mere music." What none of the thousands of adoring fans could have guessed was that these were his last ever concerts. He died of a stroke and heart attack in January, aged 47 – just as he was about to really take off, with a bigger global tour planned for this spring and summer.

His album *Watina*, which will be awarded the BBC Radio 3 World Music Award for the best album of the Americas tonight, had made him into an overnight success after 20 years of struggle. The reviews of

the album were unanimous raves – *Newsday* called it "as revelatory as Paul Simon's *Graceland* or the Buena Vista Social Club". The awards flowed in: Unesco Artist for Peace, the Womex award, Man of the Year in Belize. I met the prime minister of Belize, Said Musa, who was excited that Palacio was putting Belize on the cultural map – he spoke at Palacio's funeral.

The first concert I witnessed, in Dangriga, was for thousands in a basketball arena, but the next night Palacio played for friends and hangers-on in the King Kassava bar, in Hopkins village where he had recorded *Watina*. The rain poured down outside the bar, but people



On a mission: Andy Palacio

carried on dancing. The album was recorded in what looked like a beach shack with highly accomplished production by Ivan Duran. If *Watina* sounds difficult to place culturally, that's because it is a reflection of Garifuna culture, a distinctive mix of African and Amerindian elements.

Palacio spent his life dedicated to this culture. He was highly articulate in his advocacy for the Garifuna, and had something of the air of the teacher he'd once been.

The Garifuna culture that Palacio championed is thought to have originated when escaped slaves from a sinking

ship ended up in St Vincent in the Caribbean where they mixed with the local Arawak Indians over generations and were often called Black Caribs. They ended up in Belize and elsewhere in 1832 having been evicted by the British.

The temples where the Garifuna worship have Indian, African and Christian iconography and many of Palacio's band when I talked to them had a mystical outlook – including the backing singers, who started out singing in the temples and are the focus of a new record, *Umalali*, a pet project of Duran, which features some powerful women Garifuna singers.

Palacio had many local hits in his twenties and thirties with a style called punta rock, but *Watina* was a departure. "We wanted to

concentrate on the more soulful elements of Garifuna music," said Duran, who added non-Garifuna elements such as guitars and saxophones over the local rhythms.

When I spoke to Palacio, he was keen to emphasise his mission to revive Garifuna culture, a mission that it will now be for others to take forward. "This is a snowball effect of something that started 20 years ago," he told me. "Garifuna culture was seen as something not worth exposing or passing to the next generation. We've turned a corner, things are changing."

*Andy Palacio and the Garifuna Collective's 'Watina' and 'Umalali' are released on Cumbancha records. The BBC Radio 3 World Music Awards will be broadcast on 'Performance on 3' tomorrow.*