

## ARTS &amp; CULTURE

## PAUL NABOR PRESERVES AN INDIGENOUS FOLK SOUND, AND AWAITS A SUCCESSOR.

By IRWIN LOY  
CONTRIBUTOR

PUNTA GORDA, BELIZE

Paul Nabor sits huddled against an unseasonable chill outside his simple wood and thatched roof home. Every one of his 80 years seems etched on the face of this man, among the last in a line of artists dedicated to an indigenous musical form.

He painstakingly tunes his guitar – a recent purchase from Los Angeles, he notes proudly. From Mr. Nabor’s lips fall words he can’t always enunciate clearly.



IRWIN LOY

## THE LAST ‘PARANDERO’

When he sings his old melodies it becomes clear this is the same vivacious man who, as a teenager, kicked against the sea to right an overturned rowboat, then jumped in and paddled back, soaked – but with a story.

“Salva Vida,” Nabor says, laughing. “That’s the name of the song. Because my dory [was] named Salva Vida.”

It was the first song Nabor composed; a ballad, called a *paranda*. There would be countless more. Most, he says, were forgotten with time. This musical storyteller, the one they call the *parandero*, didn’t step into a recording studio until he was almost 70.

Nabor begins to strum his guitar. Out pour the minor keys of a Spanish ballad. Between chords his palm beats against the body of the guitar in an African rhythm. It is a rich blend, mirroring Nabor’s people, the Garifuna of coastal Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua.

While Garifuna people, or Garinagu, identify with their African ancestors, escaped slaves shipwrecked off the Caribbean island of St. Vincent, their language is predominantly that of the Arawak and Carib Amerindians with whom they mixed, peppered with colonial French and Spanish.

So the *paranda*, at its core a traditional West African beat, is fused with Spanish guitars and Garifuna instrumentation – mahogany drums, shakers, turtle shells, call-and-response vocals – to form a haunting blend. It is the blues of the Garinagu.

“The guitar is not for the Carib people, you know,” Nabor explains. “The *drum* is for the Carib people. Guitar is for the Spanish people. But you can mix it.”

He sings in Spanish: “I love this woman.” He finishes the song, drawing his finger up the frets. “Now listen,” he says, strumming the tune again. “The same beat.”

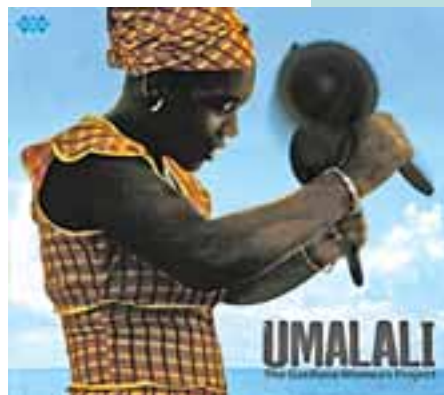
This time, however, his Spanish is replaced by full-bodied Garifuna.

Belizean record producer Ivan Duran first heard that raspy tone more than a decade ago on a cassette recorded by Andy Palacio, then a home-grown star of Punta Rock pop.

It was the first time Mr. Duran had heard the music straight from its composers. At the time, frenetic Belizean Punta Rock bands peppered their repertoires with these slower *paranda* ballads. But it was rare for the songs’ composers, the *paranderos*, to perform beyond Garifuna villages. Duran set out to search for more of the music. But he could only find traces.

“People knew some songs, but the art of composing *paranda* songs had almost died,” Duran recalls. “The social function of the music had almost died.”

Still, Duran invited into the studio the few *paranderos* he found in scattered communities.



The resulting album, simply called “Paranda,” documented the sounds of the *paranderos* and drew international attention.

A decade later, the traditions of village troubadours like Nabor are still on the decline. Nabor remains the only *parandero*

in Punta Gorda. There is a handful of the musicians across Central America.

“The style won’t die, because recording artists will keep recording *paranda*,” Duran says. “But [as for] the post of *parandero* in town, once Nabor dies, there’s no one to take that post.”

There was a time when Nabor tried to pass on his skills to youths. There was little interest. Their tastes ran to bolero. Then swing – then to rock, reggae, pop, even hip-hop. Sometimes the shift seems irreversible. “My time has passed,” he says softly.

Down at the shoreline a lone fisherman skims the water in a canoe. Nabor looks out across the bay. “Everyone gives me my respect because I’m the one keeping up the

**TROUBADOUR:** Nabor has kept alive the ‘paranda’ sound – Spanish guitar backed by local instruments and a West African beat – for decades in his Belize village and through recordings.

## African rhythm, Spanish guitar: a taste of Garifuna music

PAUL NABOR is touring the US and Europe as part of the Garifuna Collective, a tribute to the late Andy Palacio, the Belizean star who fused traditional rhythms with modern production and pop-song structure. Mr. Nabor’s producer says this is probably his final tour beyond Latin America (see [cumbancha.com](http://cumbancha.com) for dates and venues). Three influential CDs that showcase the genre:

**PARANDA (VARIOUS ARTISTS)**

Nabor sings three songs on this seminal recording, which documented the sound of the ‘paranderos,’ an enticing mix of African rhythms with simple Spanish guitar.

**WATINA (ANDY PALACIO & THE GARIFUNA COLLECTIVE)**

Palacio’s fusion presents Garifuna music as it had never been heard before. Nabor contributes two songs on this album.

**UMALALI (THE GARIFUNA WOMEN’S PROJECT)**

Seen as a companion piece to *Watina*, this Ivan Duran-produced album was a decade in the making and focuses on prolific female singers within the Garifuna community.

– I.L.

*paranda*, right until now,” Nabor says as the rain taps a rhythm on his roof.

“When I go, I don’t know who will take it over.” Then he pauses for a moment. “But somebody will take it over,” he says. “I know somebody will.”