

Carlos Domingo Alvarez, Los Angeles, California

Ben: Okay let me have you first of all say and spell your name

Carlos: Okay. My name is Carlos Domingo Alvarez.

Ben: Perfect. And tell me, uh, what is your role in the Garifuna community?

Carlos: Well, I'm a Garifuna, um, educator. I'm a Garifuna cultural activist. Uh, I've been involved with this since I was little. And I make drums from scratch and, um, that's my hobby now. And I sell them for virtually what it cost me to build them. So I'm not doing this for profit. But if you ask me about my own life, yes, I was born in Honduras, my full name is Carlos Domingo Alvarez but everybody knows me by Mingo, M-I-N-G-O, the master drummer. And I started building drums since I was 6 years old from elementary school way back in Honduras.

Ben: (helicopter) okay let me have you stop. Tell me when you started building drums again?

Carlos: I started building drums since I was 6 years old way back in Honduras and... so... I was fascinated about, not only the drums but also the whole culture, because my mother was involved actively in the culture. So, uh, I was really really sensitive about Garifuna duol. Garifuna duol is the way of Garifuna period. And um I went to school in Honduras, I became elementary school teach way back in nineteen seventy two in Tegucigalpa, Honduras and, uh, I taught Spanish in Instituto Compilio uh Ortega en the Nueva Cortez which is about ten minutes drive from San Pedro Sula. And from there, in nineteen seventy four I came to do, to the US. Uh, I went to school to learn how to speak English, a little bit (laughs) and um, from then I've been in and out of the school. Graduated from Los Angeles Tech College as a electronic technician of computer mentoments. From there, I got my biomed program from Los Angeles Biomed College and continued my education being an out, like from colleges, university. And I've been to several states, I've been to Medina, New York, I've been to Dallas, Texas, um, I took special courses in electro-surgical generators and uh, by the way, my trade here in Los Angeles is biomedical electronic technician. I repair, evaluate, install, fix, medical equipments, all kinds, starting with anesthesia equipments, um, defibrillators, telemetry transmitter, and also we specialize in networking. And we're talking about computers communicating with each other and, 'scuse me internet, ethernet also.

Ben: Very good.

Carlos: So going back to my involvement in the Garifuna here in Los Angeles, it started way back since nineteen seventy four when I got here.

Ben: Hold on just a sec. So you got involved when?

Carlos: In nineteen seventy four when I got here to Los Angeles in February. And I started right away, got in with the Garifuna movement here, we started a movement here in Los Angeles, I was part of it. And we started a group from... of people from Belize, Guatemala and Honduras. (cough) 'scuse me. We started the Garifuna Settlement Date Committee and it exists up to today. But not only that, we also started the Preservation of Garifuna Culture Society and also I play soccer, in the past, and uh, started uh, several soccer teams like the Lempira soccer team which still exists and one team from, um, Guatemala also. Um, mostly people from Guatemala. So I was really active, not only on the culture, at the same time I was going to school and I was playing soccer also. And uh, so we started the celebration of the Garifuna settlement date which is the November nineteenth and this was due to the effort of, uh, Thomas Vincent Grahams from Belize. He was originally born in Honduras. So, I am the first Garifuna who started playing drums in church. Now we have incorporated drums to the Catholic rituals um, masses, in Garifuna and incorporated some rituals of Garifuna to, uh, Catholic church. I was one of the pioneers doing that way back in nineteen seventy six and I've been teaching Garifuna in the school, off and on, for non-profit organization, for free, teaching the language and teaching drumming.

Ben: That's great. So tell me what, what motivated you to get involved in this cultural preservation?

Carlos: Um, mainly because I have it in my blood. And not only that, I want to see so many Garinagu take advantage of the enrichment of the culture. The root itself... like, look at me, yes I look Black, I am black, however I have some, uh, American Indian blood on me. Like, somehow our ancestors, the Arawak indian, the carib indian, is in our blood. And with of course, black people that came, from the West coast of Africa. And so we have this culture together. Let's say, for instance the language is sort of like a dual, why I say dual? It's, it's, for me it's fascinating to talk about this because woman speak, like you would say different language, and the men use different expression. But yet, it's the same language. I, as a man, I would say, "Au". But a female, to say I, say "Naguaia". Two different languages. Interesting, however um, as I grew up, I, it fascinates me even now that I know, am dipped into the culture. It fascinates me that every day I keep on learning more and more. Now we have books, before we didn't have books but I, since early age, liked to hang around all the people and most of the stories that I know about Garinagu, Garinagu is plural for Garifuna, I know it from all the folks that they pass this history, traditionally, from generations to generations. So then when I start reading the books that been published, and I rejoice. How this is now happening, it's like awakening. I always say in Garina... in Garifuna "Hagana chuna, Garinagu". We are awakening. The time is now, this is the time. This is an invitation for all Garinagu to get involved so we can preserve... not only preserve our culture to motivate everybody, I'm talking about every Garifuna there, wherever they are, to get involved with this movement of "Garifuna duo" or "Way of Garifuna".

Ben: Tell me about the music, tell me about the drumming, where does it come from, what, what does it mean?

Carlos: Okay, the drumming, the music basically is African. The rhythm. I'm going to give you a little flavor

Ben: I'd love some flavor.
(Drumming)

Carlos: We're going to start by saying the segunda, which is called bass drum. We call it segunda in Garifuna, and this is what set up the pace. Let's say for instance we were to do the hahunha, the traditional Garifuna dance that is performed mainly by women, it used to be only women dancing, but the drummer's always man, or men. Let me give you a flavor of hahunha. (Drumming) That's the hahunha. And let me give you a flavor of gunche. (drumming). That's how the bass is played on the gunche. And the gunche is not a dance for every Garifuna or every, anybody or everybody, this is a dance that is performed in Garinagu community for only those that are chosen. Okay, this is again the gunche. (drumming). And also the segunda for what we call Sambe, with a more joyful dance. We have the wanaragua, that's another more, uh, the war dance. The war dance. This is the dance that Garinagu used to perform before they used to go and raid the British and the French when we already got confined to, um, reservations, after we got defeated. After Joseph Shatuye got killed in seventeen ninety five. Okay? And the wanaragua goes like this (drumming). Okay, that's the wanaragua. And another one is the punta. The punta perhaps is the most celebrated Garifuna dance there is. And this is very important, it's very, um, funny in a way, because it's a funeral dance. This is a funeral... this is a dance that is performed mainly by women. Hay a couple trying to out dance each other when, there is... uh, when someone's died and that somebody corpse uh body is laying, in the middle of the house and then we, uh, slap our hands, originally was done just only hands then they incorporated what we call gafu, and in the 60's, 70's we now incorporate garown, which is the drum. We call it garown. Um, the punta is... I'm gonna give you flavor from Belize (drumming) you see how the segunda go and in Honduras it's different (drumming). Even though they are different but they are the same, at the same pace and it's called Punta. Uh, we can talk about each one of these dances because they have the origin history itself. But this is not what we are here for so, I will show you the primera. This is in Africa what they call the token drum. This one set up the pace, and this is like the flavor. In other words, let's put it this way practically, when you cooking a piece of meat or anything you put herbs, you put pepper, onions, okay, this is what is spice and makes the dancer get flavor. And also, I'm gonna put this in context. That most of the Garifuna dance, the dancer are the one that command the drums, the beat on the dance. So I give you a little flavor on the music. (drumming). Okay and the huguhungu go like this. (drumming). That's the answer to the hahunhungu that I show you. And the gunche (drumming) that's... and from the punta it go (drumming). That's the punta. Okay, now...

Ben: Can I ask you, I want to ask you a couple more questions regarding, our light's changing out here...

Carlos: Okay, my involvement in music and recording and stuff like that?

Ben: Well I want to know about.... you're teaching it now

Carlos: Yes

Ben: And I think you're teaching it to kids too right?

Carlos: Yes

Ben: Why is, tell me a little bit about it, what you're doing with it and then tell me why it's important to do that.

Carlos: Okay, now when I'm teaching the drums I want to pass along part of our heritage. That's my motto. Uh, to share this information, to share this experience with new generation, even for all the people, it doesn't matter. If you are a Garifuna or anybody, anybody for that matter that wants to learn how to play the Garifuna drums I'm happy to do it. That's my motivation, pass along something that I consider very very important. Yes, I have done many recordings before and in the past with the best drummers there are, or they were. Let's say, for instance, I made some recordings with Andy Palacios and I made recording with the best drummer that every came from Belize, Isabel Flores. I played from Machete with Machete, late Machete from Belize and the original Machete from Honduras Angel Garcia which was my mentor. He is, to me, this is my personal opinion, I'm not trying to alienate anybody, he was the best Garifuna drummer I ever seen playing the drum. I've known a lot of many good, excellent drummers. I know you guys, they are there, you are there, I know that, I'm not putting anybody down, but also I have played... um, done some recording with uh, the Costenos band from Honduras, the group Chatue with Sidney Mejilla, We made a few albums, CD's and um, uh, we were represented in the olympic of nineteen eighty four here in Los Angeles. I was part, the choreographer, a part and choreographer of the walagante dance group that represented the Garifuna people in the nineteen eighty four olympics here in Los Angeles. And in nineteen ninety six also, with the group Chatuye in Atlanta, Georgia, way back in nineteen ninety six. So, like I said...

Ben: Do you have pictures of that?

Carlos: Oh yes, of course.

Ben: Could I get 'em from you?

Carlos: Oh man I forgot them...

Ben: Not here but...

Carlos: Yes yes, I do have pictures

Ben: I'll get your contact information when we're done. I'd love to get those and put them in this documentary.

Carlos: Oh yes, definitely. I'd be more than happy to.... matter of fact, uh, a couple of days ago I sent a few pictures to Mr. Jerry, um,

Ben: Castro Calletano

Carlos: Uh huh, yeah. Jerry Castro, I sent some picture for him about the Olympics, participation of the Garinagu. And uh, the Garifuna movement, way back then in nineteen eighty four here in Los Angeles. Yeah.

Ben: Let me ask you one more question. then I want to try to get in there and film some more. You said this is so important to pass it along,

Carlos: Yes

Ben: Why?

Carlos: Why? Whoa. Yes I would like to say this. If you have an identity, what's an identity if the culture itself, if the language, okay? We are Garinagu, that's what we are. And I'm proud of being Garifuna and if I could be or ask what to be, regardless of what, um, regardless of what uh professional or academic achievement I might of had, I am a Garifuna and I'm proud to be Garifuna and that... and I prize this and I know the price of this it's priceless and that's what I want to pass some of it or all of it to the new generation.

Ben: That's good. Perfect. Um, I think that's all.

Carlos: So any Garifuna, whatever you are, okay? Regardless of where you are, whether you feel you are a Garifuna or not, hey, let me give you a closing statement (drumming and singing). Thank you very much.

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