

## Rony Figueroa Interview, Los Angeles

Ben: First of all, let me have you say and spell your name.

Rony: Rony R-O-N-Y Figueroa F-I-G-U-E-R-O-A

Ben: Perfect. And Rony tell me um. Tell me about your involvement in... well, give me give me, a really brief history of who you are, where you come from... you know you don't quite look like the rest of them here.

Rony: (laughs) That's right.

Ben: Tell me about yourself

Rony: I was born in Guatemala, uh. I'm a hybrid as well. My my, grandfather was Chinese, came from Can-ton China to Guatemala and he married a Guatemalan lady. My dad was born, my my uncle in Guatemala and they were.... they grew up as Chinese you know, own a business, kept the traditions, did the annual new years dance uh dragon parade and everything and uh. For the first six years of my life I grew up with both my mom and my dad, so I had a little bit of the chinese experience growing up. Um... later on my dad and my mom separated you know, but um, I was lucky enough to be able to grow up with my mom who used to work for the government of Guatemala and we travelled to different places and during the travels we were able to end up in a Garifuna town called Livingston in Puerto Barrios and that was my first exposure at a early age to Garifuna people uh. To um the food and the drumming and all of that. And from that point on you know there was that interest that grew within to learn more about Garifuna people. When I came to the United States in nineteen ninety three I lost track of everybody and I focused on going to school. I got my bachelor's degree in business here at the University of Dominguez Hills and I have a degree in Guatemala in marketing and advertising and that's where the radio comes from. You know, I I'm fond of uh radio uh dj-ing. I have one of the largest collection of Garifuna music, on vinyls, cassettes and CD's now. Of course a lot of downloads that I've been able to acquire through different bands, which take the time to send me music uh via email and I'm able to preserve it and not only that but to be able to play it and showcase it on the radio station twenty four seven. So, I reconnected with Garifuna people in the early nineteen nineties. I would say nineteen ninety I was able to reconnect with Flavio Alvarez in the Garifuna community of Livingston here in Los Angeles and I started working with them uh in different projects, you know, raising money for umm.. different causes you know to send money back to Livingston to Puerto Barrios uh there was one time uh we wanted to build a um clinic um in Livingston you know for public health and so on and so forth uhm. From that point on I was able to to um socialize more with Garinagu, not only from Guatemala, but Hondurans and Belizeans, that are the majority here in Los Angeles um. Being a DJ, I specialize in Garifuna music. I used to play at parties for Garifuna people and every time they saw me and they they saw me DJ, mostly from Guatemala and Garinagu. Hey I want that DJ from labuga. And therefore labuga DJ, that's how my name was acquired DJ labuga because I was a DJ that played music from Labuga, labuga, the music.

Ben: let me stop you for just a sec Rony. We got..

Rony: ... and I think Martin would really give us a greater view of what, what we call Labuga.com radio, which started as a website for the uh people of Guatemala, the Garifuna people. And back in two thousand eight, uh we decided to to make the website into the radio because we were able to find out that uh you could play music through the website and then since Martin Bermudez is a computer geek, he was able to program the radio station and uh be able to broadcast to uh thousands of people online uh through umm a website called [www.labuga.com](http://www.labuga.com), so we have been able to maximize the uh ummm technology through the internet to be able to reach out to thousands of people uhm from as far away as St. Vincent we have uh had uh communication with people in the island of St. Vincent which happens to be the motherland of the Garifuna people and um places as far away as Guatemala, people are listening in in the Garifuna villages and they usually send us a note on facebook, a text or call us, sometimes we get phone calls from from far away and uh people are very excited to know that we support Garifuna music and and that we do what we do be... because of the love of the culture you know. We don't get paid for this, nobody does. And, as a matter of fact, we invest into it. But the one that is investing the most money out of this project called labuga.com radio is the owner, Martin Bermudez. Because he um, the bandwidth gets maximized and and we go beyond the numbers you know we end up paying more. And when I say we, it's mostly him (laughs) even though I send in my little contributions here and there, just to be able to be on the radio. But um, he is the one that pays for all the expenses incurred on the website you know and we don't advertise, we don't sell uh advertisement to anybody so it's basically a cultural radio station on the internet so. How's the audio?

Ben: Sounds good.

Rony: Ok ...and we used to do fundraisers like dances and raffles and all kinds of food sales and and you know to be able to fund raise and get monies to go toward the cause you know, the Garifuna cause. What attracted me to the culture, I think it was through music. I love Garifuna music and I became so interested in the language because the way to get to any ethnic group or any culture is through the language, you know, I think that if you speak the language you are able to understand from the inside out, instead of just being an outsider. And so that was my uh attraction to the culture and to be able to work for uh and to be able to uh uh uh uh create this organization called GAHFU with my wife Cheryl and the fact that we have a child. His name is Jisani and I said you know what, I don't want Jisani to grow up just being uh a regular kid, you know. I want him to know about who he is. About his Chinese heritage, about his Garifuna heritage and expose Jisani to the different aspects of the culture, especially Garifuna. Jisani uh was also my inspiration, my son you now, to get involved with the culture because we saw the trend that a lot of Garifuna Americans were easy to adapt to the African American culture and listen to hip-hop and just be a regular African American. You know what I mean? They blend in easily, but uh, we saw that they were uh drawing away from their culture and from their roots and we said, you know what, we could create and organization that would target the re-acculturation and the education of of Garifuna Americans through opening a school and being able to teach the language

and the drumming and the music and all of that. So, we've been very fortunate that in two thousand five uh we started uh this organization called GAHFU with my wife uh because we saw the need to create a uh an academy a school to be able to have children as well as adults attend classes and to reconnect with the culture. And through the school we have been very lucky to have had many Garifuna leaders from Belize, from Guatemala from Honduras, even from Nicaragua to come to our class and talk to our children talk to the uh adult students uh about what they're doing in their own respective communities. We have had Garifuna leaders from New York, from Chicago, from Florida, from all over the United States come and talk to us and do um presentations. And it's a way to connect you know, and and keep informed and and to be part of the diaspora you and do good for the people and do good for the uh for the for the Garifuna nation, so we have a commitment now that uh we are not going to sit down and relax that we want to be able to tell the Garifuna story from the Garifuna point of view and by doing that we are reassuring that the generations to come will be able to not only get the real story behind the Garifuna, but be able to be Garifuna within, you know be able to speak the language to have resources, to have a museum, to have a gallery, a art gallery where they could come and see the pictures that we have, that we have been able to collect. The statue of Shatuye, you know that we got awarded by the Garifuna folklorico ballet of Honduras and in the future maybe do field trips to Yurumen to the island of St. Vincent to bring not only children but also adult to reconnect with the Garifuna in St. Vincent and to help them reacclurate and to acquire the language as well.

Ben: I love it. You've said a ton of stuff and you said a lot of stuff in your radio stuff that I want to use as well and since we're kind of on a time schedule, I'll ask you a couple more questions and then we'll do some more, but I want to know what you hope, I mean you're you're involved in everything Rony. I I've been here three days and I can see that you're all over the place. First of all, in short what motivates you?

Rony: Wow that's that's very difficult to answer um. My motivation is... I think it's just a love for the for the Garifuna people. I think it's a special feeling that I've developed throughout the years and and my family is my motivation as well. My wife Cheryl uh and see how Garifuna people are so few but they're so rich in their heritage and to be able to do the things that I do, you know to be able to play the music and through the music we are also teaching because the music has a message, even though the message might be in Garifuna those people who do speak the language and who do understand are able to to reconnect as well you know what I mean, so I think that's what it, what motivates me just to be able to give and and to see that we are doing something for the progress of of the people you know. I don't know if I was able to answer.

Ben: Perfect, I love it. And my last question for you is, where do you want to see, what is your hope for the Garifuna in twenty years, fifty years, what is the future of the Garifuna. You know, because there are people who would say this is going to be gone, the language is going to be gone, the culture is going to be gone. What is your hope for...

Rony: I think um being the way that Garinagu are I'm not afraid that the language will disappear. I think they're very like we say stubborn people in a good way. Uh because they

are fighters, they don't let up and when it comes to retaining their culture and they're traditions, the food, the language uh they're doing what it takes to keep it alive. Even though we see the influence uh in Honduras and in Guatemala where children are basically going to schools to learn Spanish because that's the official language of their uh host nation um I think that um that leaders are doing uh a lot work to try to counteract that. I think that by opening the Garifuna school here in Los Angeles is setting the pace to other places other than Belize. Because the country of Belize that's have a Garifuna school called Galisi in Dangriga so they're doing their part. In Guatemala there was a project called projecto Garifuna. Proyecto Garifuna, but I never saw anything going on there, but at least they know that by looking at the example of Los Angeles through GAHFU, I think they will pick it up and be able to open a Garifuna school, which is already in pro... a project already going on in Livingston. And in Honduras of course they have uh uh in the thirty six Garifuna villages uh they have always something going on to maintain the culture and and the language alive. So in twenty years I would like to see the effort redouble. I think that we're doing not enough, but I think that the wave is is growing and is getting... people are getting the ripple effects as far as St. Vincent where they are reacculturating and relearning the language now. You know, so that's progress Yeah.

Ben: Very good.