

Erica Zuniga interview Los Angeles

Ben: um... first of all, go ahead and say and spell your name.

Erica: Ok. My name is Erica Zuniga Chipman E-R-I-C-A Z-U-N-I-G-A C-H-I-P-M-A-N

Ben: And is that hyphenated?

Erica: No, it's not hyphenated. I actually moved Zuniga to a middle name now... because I have to keep it

Ben: Perfect. While we're talking, you'll just talk to me. Don't even worry about the camera.

Erica: Ok great.

Ben: It just seems more natural that way.

Erica: Ok

Ben: First of all, tell me a little about who you are, where you're from. That sort of thing.

Erica: (sigh) where do I start?... ok... um. My father came to America... um and then my mom came about a year later. And then I was born here, so I'm my parent's first child born here in America. My dad's from Hopkins. My mom's from Dangriga. Um... my older brother is from Orange Walk and my older sister is from Dangriga (laughs). And so my father swore up and down that his children would know the language, the culture... we could only speak Garifuna at home. He didn't want to hear English. If he heard English, he would correct us. With mom we could go back and forth... and with each other of course. And so my mom was a teacher in Belize and my dad was a cop. So, she taught us English and Garifuna, so I was actually able to go into the first grade when I was four years old. And then I turned five because my birthday is in September, but actually she talked to the principal and that's how I got into the school. So, fast forward to high school... I graduated when I was sixteen. I went to the University of Notre Dame. I actually did a few years there, came back. Then I went to USC... I took a few years off and started working full time... then I went to USC and graduated in English and theatre... a double major in English and theatre. So I've been dancing, acting, singing. I actually have my own business as well with my husband and we make natural and organic food products and the name of the company is Weila, which is a Garifuna name, which means this is the sun or this is the pathway. And weila together means today. So... (laughs)

Ben: I want to ask you a little bit more about um... your parents and how they wouldn't let you speak English. I mean, it kind of sound like marshall law that they wouldn't let you do that. Tell me more about it. What was it like?

Erica: Umm... it was interesting because like I said, my older sister and older brother were born in Belize, so they had a heavier accent than we did. We had a slight accent, just because we spoke Garifuna at home and then... I was also telling you that a lot of the kids would tease us because our last name was Zuv±iga. You know, they were like "what is that? African?" Like, and then we always had to explain, no it's from, It was British Honduras back then. And they were like "where's that?" and we'd have to show it on the map, so it was like a teaching tool for us too. But... me being shy was a little embarrassing, but then sometimes I had to come out my shell just to tell people, no. You know, Central America. It's like not like Africa way over there, it's Central America. You know, next to Guatemala, right underneath Mexico, so. You know, geography.

Ben: So, I mean. Were you different in school? Like, tell me more about that.

Erica: They always said that if children know several languages it kind of triggers the brains, so I was actually an A student. You know, so B's, but I was smart. So, and shy on top of that... but. I never had any problems at school academically. Socially, ya because it was hard to relate to other people because they didn't have other Belizean students there. You know, it was mostly African American students with me. It was kind of hard to talk to people about us and my family. Like OK my older brother and older sister were born in another country and my parents. How do you tell somebody whose parent's were born here? You know... so. It was little difficult.

Ben: Did you ever feel any sort of embarrassment? I mean, you were trying to explain something that people just don't grasp.

Erica: I don't know because my father always said and stressed just about the language and about the culture, you know that it was important that we were never slaves and it was just like somethin' to be proud of, so I was never embarrassed about the culture or trying to hide it. I mean, I couldn't. I mean, my last name would always tell people that I was different anyway. You know and then even if I had a slight accent, people were just like ok like where is that from. But now that a lot of people know about Central America and about other countries, you know, I can say Belize and they'll know where it is. If I say Garifuna, they have no clue. If I say I speak the Garifuna language, they're like what are you talking about... they've never heard of it. And back then they really didn't hear about it definitely.

Ben: So, here in Los Angeles and the U.S... I mean, you've grown up here. People had never heard of it back then now is it... kind of give me like... are things getting better as far as visibility for the Garifuna?

Erica: I think so... um... especially like with GAHFU. Umm... because I came to the Garifuna lessons in January when they started the first session this year and umm... I learned a lot. Because I wasn't sure if I should be in the beginning class because I didn't know how to write Garifuna because growing up my parents always said oh just spell it phonetically and you can write it. I was like OK, but I never did. Umm.... then when I took the classes it was like the standardized way of writing Garifuna, I'm like OK. It was a little difficult because even when Ruben was telling us the native Garifuna speakers would actually guess the

word because we would look at.. it was like, we know what that word is, but then the people that were learning how to speak Garifuna would actually phonetically sound it out, so that was interesting. And then ummm... I know the Garifuna dances too, so there was an opportunity where one of my cousins couldn't participate in an event and Rony... bless Rony (laughs). He asked me.... he's like you're a dancer right? I'm like yeaaaa... and he was like oh can you dance? I was like oh what type of dancing... he said folklorical, Garifuna dances. I was like ehnnn (laughs) I don't know. Then he asked me again later on and then he was like can you. Well what kind of dancing? Haguhugu, punta, piranda, and I was like yeah I can do that. I was like I just need to go over it with the drummers and that's how I got in GAHFU. Because after we did that performance, me being the only dancer on stage with the drummers, which was phenomenal, then they... when we had a another function they asked me to be the director of arts and cultural performances for GAHFU. And I was like that's what I was looking for... I was looking for a way to learn the Garifuna songs, all the Garifuna songs, all the Garifuna dances, the original way. And then we can play around with it, of course, but a lot of the artists like to sing just a piece of the original song and for me I wanted to learn all of the original songs, so this is my opportunity to do it and teach other people too.

Ben: What motivates you to... why? What motivates you?

Erica: I'm proud of who I am... I mean... when I talk to other people about what I've gone through and the fact that my father just stressed just the importance of being a Garifuna woman, you know and then lookin' at my siblings as well because we can speak Garifuna to each other. Versus, if we go and hang out with my cousins, they don't speak Garifuna. I mean, which is sad and there was also something on Facebook where there was a question that asked who was the first Garifuna-American child to be born in the U.S. that can speak Garifuna? From Honduras, Guatemala and from Belize. And people were saying I was the one from Belizean parents. And I'm like, I'm the first one here to Belizean parents? I was like how sad is that, that I'm the first one. I mean, it's an honor, but it's also kind of sad because I remember my cousins didn't really speak Garifuna either... so... so far, nobody's said anything besides me being the Belizean, you know they have the Guatemalan ones and they have the Honduran ones, but so far it's my I think. (laughs)

Ben: Tell me more about the dancing and what about... um... what is the dancing, where did it come from? Kind of give me a history of it.

Erica: With the huguhuga, the punta, paranada, gunchai... with all those dances, the root of them are the drums. It's always the drums, umm... and you have the vocals too that add the foundation, so it's always easier when you have the drums and the vocals when you go to a function as well... um... the drum is the heartbeat. It's always been the heartbeat of the earth too, so... whenever I've done functions with the guys and they've done the drumming, there's just a visceral reaction that you can see when people.... they're just like ok like, what's gonna happen.... what's gonna happen and because they're used to electronics when it comes to that, but I don't know I just.... when I hear the drums it's so totally different than hearing the electronic part cause it just calls here. I kind describe (laughs) I don't know.... I just can't describe it.

Ben: I've seen the punta, I've seen all these different things, it almost seems like there's kind of a purity in it as far as music... musically quality. Talk about the dancing, the drums, how these things go together, that sort of thing.

Erica: Hmmmm.... When you say there's a purity with the drums. When I hear the drums it reminds me of just listening to nature like you can hear the birds now... umm. I don't know there's just an earthiness to the sound that just penetrates, like if I hear it I just want to get up and dance. It doesn't matter where I'm at, it's just like... even if I'm listening to it in the car, I just want to get out and dance. Umm... and I think people get that connection and the group that I have with GAHFU. I ca... whenever we have rehearsal you can just see, they just want to get up and start dancing from the beginning of the drums starting to play and eventually we do get up, you know. We learn the words and we're learning the words to all the traditional songs, but just that connection knowing that this is our culture and we grew up listening to the songs, but we never really learned the songs. And so we know pieces of different songs, but now we're learning them and understanding what we're singing and what we're dancing about. You know, some of them are sad of course, but when you hear the drums it's almost like you just want to celebrate with the song, even though it might be a lamentation about something, but it's just a celebration of life.

Ben: Tell me umm... cause there's... who was I talking to, we were talking about how there's this connection between...(not in the recording, but I asked about the connection between the drums and the dancers)... How... how do you just feel it?

Erica: That's a good question, I don't know. I mean I grew up listening to Garifuna records with my parents, so my father, my mother dancing, so I didn't really dance Garifuna... punta, piranda, whatever when I was younger like in public (laughs), so I think the first time I did was the first time I went to Hopkins. And my father was videotaping because he videotapes us all the time, you know, like Christmas, whatever. So the first time I went to Hopkins to see my cousins, my relatives, whatever, my father was like everybody's going to dance and I'm like (sound) what? Like in the sand and this and that, so that was the first time that I actually remember dancing punta and I was made to. Yeah.... (sound) I just feel the beat, I just feel it. (laughs)

Ben: I love it, I love it. Umm.. you're obviously accomplished... nobody goes to Notre Dame and then USC if they don't have good grades and that sort of thing. Do you feel like you are the exception within the Garifuna? Or do you feel like anyone can do what you've done?

Erica: Anyone can do it. Umm... for me, my father always stressed education. Of course, my mom supported that too and he always said, you can have friends later, but education is important for you to move on and do things. So... it's interesting because when I went to Notre Dame, I was going to major in astrophysics, because I was like, I'm going to be an astronomer or you know, I'm going to be a scientist and now I'm actually more of a creative person and when I think about it, I'm like hmm... I wonder what my path would have been because for me English was always a hobby. You know I can write. I can write poetry, write stories, write music, and I think I was kind of trying to stay away from the easy stuff,

because I was like OK that's easy for me. I can sing, I can dance, I can do this or whatever. It was just always easy instead of I can actually do that because I love it. And that's how I ended up majoring in English and theatre at USC (laughs) from astrophysics.

Ben: So tell me about umm.. you've got... you've got a lot going for you. What is your hope for your future? As a Garifuna person?

Erica: Umm... When I was talking to Cheryl and Rony about the direction for the Garifuna ensemble, I said, we're kind of the missing link. My generation is the missing link because we do have the older Garifuna people that know the songs, they know the culture and then we have the younger ones that actually... you know, we have the younger groups as well, but we never really have like the young adults ummm participating with the traditional aspect of the Garifuna culture. And so I told her that's my goal. I was like, we need to learn the traditional dances, original, traditional dances, the original traditional songs. And I was like we're not just going to be dancing and singing, we're also going to learn how to drum. I don't care if we're females or not, or men or whatever... if you've never touched a drum in your life, I was like that's my goal. Because I needed to be interchangeable, so that if we go to a function and somebody doesn't show up, you're not like oh my god who's going to do that. We're going to learn the call and responses, so that you're not just used to doing responses, you're also used to doing the calls as well. So I need a group that is all-encompassing and I told them, I was like that's my goal. Because that's what I wanted to do for myself too. And i was like, I need a group that can do that as well. So, and they're excited about it. They're scared about the drumming part. (laughs) yeah, but everything else, they're up for it.

Ben: Tell me how many people are like minded like you where they (helicopter noise). actually have the same.... (desire to preserve the culture) as you do.

Erica: I think people a lot of people are talking about it more. Cheryl and I were talking earlier with you about umm... there's a disconnect sometimes with being here in that we see Belize as like oh my god, they're so into the culture or Honduras, or you know Guatemala. And we have that disconnect that we want to preserve the culture here, but we also need to connect with them there as well. Ummm... and I think we're talking about it a little more because for some reason we're all being drawn to each other like my generation, like Cheryl's generation, Rony's generation. Ummm... and we're talking about it. And then discovering, Oh yeah, that's what we want to do, yeah that's what I want to do. You know, and our goal is to push it forward and kind of publicize that yeah, we're still here and we still need to preserve the culture even though we're here in America, in L.A.

Ben: What draws you together?

Erica: Common goals. Umm... like I said, I came to the class for GAHFU and then umm... I wasn't sure if I was in the beginning or advanced class because I didn't know how to write Garifuna, but they were like if you know how to speak it then come to the advanced class and I'm like OK (laughs). And so when I sat in class and they were like oh yeah we know about your parents because they had never really seen me... they know my family, so just

sitting in class and (noise) oh yeah, your father was a cop and da-da-duh and your mom and yeah... grandpa duhn and you know, just everybody's related somehow or they knew my family somehow. And that was almost like coming home because I hadn't really been around the Garifuna culture in a while besides my family and my relatives. So just coming to people like oh yeah I was a classmate with your mom. You know, I went to school with your dad or I was born here in Hopkins with your dad. It was just like and just hearing the stories that you never get from your parents of course. (laughs) So, it just feels like coming home because I can talk to people that look like me, sound like me, you know, talk like me. yeah.

Ben: It's fascinating to me because it seems like this, this Garifuna nation.... I mean you've got Honduras, you've got Guatemala, you've got L.A., New York...

Erica: Chicago

Ben:... all over.... Chicago, New Orleans,

Erica: yeah, yeah.

Ben: But, I mean, it's like the same sort of people. What is keeping this culture together? What is keeping these people together?

Erica: I always wondered about that because we do have a unique language. And a unique culture. And umm... I remember reading something I think online and they said we are like one of the rare cultures that actually preserved the language, you know, preserved the dancing, preserved the foods. Ummm.... and other cultures have kind of assimilated into other, you know, races, but our is kept strong for some reason. And I don't know if it's because of our parents, our ancestors, umm... yeah it is (laughs). It is.

Ben: I guess final question here: what is your hope for the future of the Garifuna?

Erica: I want us all to come together and understand each other. That no matter... like I was born here in America or somebody's born in Honduras or born in Guatemala, born in Belize umm.... that we're all still the same and that we all have something to offer each other, you know, different insights. Ummm... into life because people are like, oh you speak Garifuna and you were born here? It's almost like they're taken aback like how did that happen. Umm... and I think there should be an acceptance and an opening of people's minds to realize that yeah, we all came from different backgrounds, but we're all still the same people because we all came from St. Vincent and beyond you know, South America to St. Vincent to Honduras, you know. And we're all scattered, just like we're all scattered in the U.S., but we're all still the same people and we do have that connection. Whether through our ancestors, whether through family, it doesn't matter, we still have a connection.

Ben: I love it. Is there anything else you want to comment on?

Erica: I just want to say thank you for this opportunity. I'm going to blame Rony for everything (laughs-- heartily).

Rony: Are you going to do Cheryl tomorrow by the house?

Ben: Ok

Rony: because we've got to go, we've got another commitment right now

Ben: let's do it, let's do it, no worries

Athena: She can talk about how like media is helping the Garifuna. Because she talked about Facebook... so one of the things that his professor is looking at is how media is affecting the Garifuna because some people say these kids come to the u.s. they watch T.v. and they get this western influence and then they lose that culture. And I like what you talked about... you talked about Facebook, you talked about on the net, so maybe she could talk about how the internet is helping Garifuna connect

Erica: Ok, Ok

Athena: Or... does that make sense? Are you ok on time? Just because I think that she already brought that up

Ben: Yeah, you definitely did and I apologize because we've been asking those questions, sometimes I forget

Erica: (laughs) you make me laugh

Ben: So, talk about media and how it's helping with your goals and that sort of thing

Erica: Oh, you know it's funny ummm... because I never really wanted to sign up for facebook because uhnnn (noise) facebook. However, when I put... I have my company on Facebook as weiula, so of course people that is a Garifuna name if they're Garifuna and it was just I've connected with people across the country and even like my cousins that I haven't seen since I was little... the last time I went to Belize was 87, nine-teen-87, so I haven't seen anybody and now my cousins have children and I'm seeing pictures of my cousin's children, you know, my aunts and uncles in different states or countries and ummm... just spreading the culture because even like on my connect to Rony or Ruben or ummm... Cheryl and people are just like requesting me on Facebook because they're Garifuna people, you know, as well. Like somebody from Guatemala or somebody from Honduras. And i'm like wow, look at this, so we're all connecting to each other, so I think I have like 40 close friends on facebook that are just connected through Facebook, just because we're all Garifuna. Yeah and then I think somebody contacted me from Bakersfield because they're like oh you have a dance group, you know, can you come and do our opening? You know, in Bakersfield I'm like... sure... I'll contact you so, we're definitely connecting through Facebook that way too.

Ben: So what would you say are the most important media, forms of media for the Garifuna?

Erica: I would say ummm... the internet, online ummm... facebook is good ummm... skype of course to communicate. Ummm... it's less expensive than buying a calling card. (audio cut out)

Athena: Do you want to speak Garifuna to your kids?

Erica: yeah, I hadn't planned on having children, but if I do yes, oh of course

Athena: that was my other question

Ben: OK... umm... we were talking about YouTube, facebook that sort of thing. Tell me more about what's going on there.

Erica: Well... umm... I know YouTube allows us to also get the videos umm... of performances ummm... I'm connected to facebook all the time, so I've seen functions that people have done just through facebook alone and also just connecting through youtube.

Ben: sweet

Erica: yeah

Ben: And then you personally, what types of media are you using... obviously facebook, that sort of thing.

Erica: oh my goodness... ummm.... word of mouth (laughs) ummm... I just started getting into dancing last year even though I do... I've done dancing, but I started taking formal dance training flaminko, tap, swing, ummm.... I just did lindy hop yesterday at the music center because they're having dance every other Friday and it was lindy hop yesterday, so of course I'm exhausted. My legs hurt. Ummm... but what I want to do is actually incorporate some of that into the ensemble as well ummm... so I'm marketing that because I have some of my stuff on Facebook that I've done. (laughs) Sorry (laughs) that I've done, so I want to do that with the Garifuna ensemble too. I mean Rony's used to doing it as well, but the group's not used to kind of being showcased because we just started, so it'll be fun to explore that avenue through facebook, through YouTube, you know and I know... I know some of the group members also twitter, you know and skype, so...

Ben: Very good, I guess you're probably online every day right. How often...

Erica; yeah, especially because I have my business, so I do need to check online, umm... I don't know, I need to talk to Cheryl and Rony about having probably a separate website for the group because we are featured you know, with GAHFU as well ummm... but it will be

nice to have a website too and I do my website for my business so, yeah, I've got some new avenues to explore.

Ben: very cool. ummm... do you see any changes in the behavior... actually, why don't we ask your question about teaching her kids.... oh yeah we already did that. ummm... do you see any changes in the behavior of people who use a lot of western media, so America's media. Do you see people within your culture drifting toward that culture?

Erica: Ummm... yeah, yeah.

Ben: Tell me more about it.

Erica: somewhat in the music ummm... the videos that are sometimes featured on Youtube are sometimes inappropriate ummm... but it's also up to the parents to make sure that some children aren't exposed to it I guess, or that their children aren't exposed to it. Ummm... so sometimes the envelope's pushed just a little too far ummm... with some artists, but of course that's their choice and like I said it's the paren't choice to make sure that their children aren't watching you know, something that's not appropriate for children. so.

Ben: Ummm... I've already asked what's the future of the Garifuna culture, that sort of thing, we talked about that. ummm... are there people in the culture who really don't like this western media where it's so saturated here in the U.S. or even in Honduras, that sort of thing?

Erica: Ummm... i haven't really heard it personally from people umm... i think they like the fact that they can connect to different people in different countries, but I haven't really heard about Western influence being bad. I there are a lot people in you know, Belize, Honduras and Guatemala that want to come here and experience what they've seen on TV, ummm... but I think that's the only thing that I've heard. Yeah.

Ben: Ummm... that's all. Anything else Athena that you thought of?

Athena: Erica, you were great.

Erica: Oh thank you, I was like oh my gosh.

Athena: no, you did a really good job.