

The American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress presents

# HOMEGROWN 2013 *The Music of America*

Traditional Ethnic and Regional Music and Dance that's "Homegrown" in Communities across the U.S.

AN ACQUISITIONS & PRESENTATION PROJECT

# Libaya Baba



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(singer and dancer)  
Georgette Lambey  
(singer and dancer)  
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from NYC)

Garifuna Music and Dance from California



**Tuesday**  
**July 2, 2013**  
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# Libaya Baba

## Garifuna Music and Dance from California

### Garifuna Music and Dance

#### Michele Goldwasser

The Garifuna people have a vibrant history and distinctive culture. Descended from West Africans and South American Indians, the Garinagu (the plural form of Garifuna) call St. Vincent their homeland. During the colonial era, the British attempted to force the Garinagu onto reservations. They resisted and fought for their freedom. In 1797, they were exiled to an island off Honduras. From there, the Garinagu established villages in Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Belize. Since the late 1950s, Garinagu have also migrated to the United States. Garifuna history is the story of struggle and survival. They continue this struggle today, fighting to keep their culture alive. In 2001, UNESCO recognized the importance of their struggle by naming Garifuna language, music, and dance “a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity.”

Music and dance permeate every aspect of Garifuna life. Work songs accompany such activities as grating cassava, building canoes, and constructing houses. Celebrations, wakes, and ancestral rituals merit specific forms of music and dance. Musical traditions, though, do more than entertain. Through music and dance, Garinagu narrate their history, provide social commentary, affirm cultural values, and plead for aid in their continuing struggle to survive. Songs often utilize a call-and-response pattern. Individuals literally sing their concerns, using songs as a form of emotional release from their problems and pain. The group responds, providing communal support through music.

Garifuna indigenous musical instruments are handcrafted. Drums play an essential part in both secular and sacred performances. Two types of drums exist, the *segunda* and the *primero*. Identical in construction, they differ in size and musical function. Drums are constructed from hollowed-out hardwood with animal skins stretched over one end. The *segunda* drum can be medium or large in size, and it provides the basic rhythm. The *primero* drum is smaller and higher in pitch. The *primero* drummer may improvise, but he must stay within the repetitive pattern of the *segunda* drummer. In some dances such as the *hüngühüngü* and *punta*, the dancers dance to the beat of the *primero* drummer. In other traditions such as the *chumba* and *wanaragua*, however, the *primero* drummer must follow the steps of the dancer. Calabash rattles and conch shells are also widely used. More recently, turtle shells have become a popular addition. Non-indigenous influences can be seen in the use of the acoustic guitar and the harmonica.

Music and dance are closely related in Garifuna culture, and multiple styles exist. Some dances such as the

*hüngühüngü* have their origins in ancestral ritual. In the *hüngühüngü*, a shuffle and step dance movement is performed to songs about historical or social events. In another dance, the *chumba*, women sing about everyday activities. In the Spanish-influenced *paranda* tradition, men sing while playing acoustic guitars. Though traditionally performed during the Christmas season, *paranda* songs address social concerns rather than religious themes.

Processionals flourish during the Christmas season. In the *wanaragua* (or *jonkunnu*), masqueraders accompanied by drummers and singers travel from house to house. Wearing costumes, headdresses, masks, and shell rattles tied around their knees, these dancers perform “the warrior’s dance” invoking memories of their ancestors. In the past, the *wáriní* marked the beginning and end of the *wanaragua* season. In the *wáriní*, masked men dressed in dried banana leaves dance while carrying a canoe paddle or axe. The *charikanari* processional is also performed during this time and features masked performers portraying stock characters.

The most popular dance tradition today is the *punta*. This dance is characterized by a rapid movement of the hips while holding the upper body motionless. *Punta* songs, traditionally written by women, comment on relationships, family problems, and unacceptable behavior. *Punta rock* is a contemporary version of the *punta*, combining traditional instruments with modern electric guitars, drums, and keyboards. Pen Cayetano is often credited with creating *punta rock* and first using turtle shells in his band in the early 1980s. Today, *punta rock* is highly popular and helps to keep the younger generation involved in their Garifuna culture.

The Garifuna culture is struggling to survive in the twenty-first century. The strongest weapon in that struggle may well be the ability of Garifuna music and dance to embody the vibrant history of this distinctive culture. Their musical heritage deserves UNESCO’s designation of masterpiece.

*The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to “preserve and present American folklife” through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>.*

