



ROLEX / MARC LATZEL

'Forget politics - music is the way to reach people'

Aurelio Martinez left the Honduran congress to take Garifuna music to the world, he tells Jane Cornwell

The soulful, beach-strolling music that Aurelio Martinez makes is the sound of the Garifuna - a community descended from escaped African slaves and Caribbean natives. Singer, composer and percussionist, Aurelio, 40, plays the Womad festival next week. Along with his second album *Laru Beya* (On the Beach), his magnetic stage persona is helping to bring his little-known people into the international spotlight.

The Garifuna have long been beleaguered: washed up on the island of St Vincent after a shipwreck in 1635, their African forefathers mingled with locals and fought British colonial forces before being deported en masse to Central America, where they settled in Belize, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras, where Aurelio is based.

Their traditions, undiluted by slavery, have survived; today, despite receiving Unesco heritage status in 2001, the Garifuna battle evangelists bent on eradicating their Afrocentric religion, and governments keen to commandeer their beachfront land for tourism.

A breezy, percussive mix of Caribbean, Central American and West African elements, the Garifuna music is gorgeous. And as one of nine children born to a singer mother and troubadour father ("He taught me chords on a guitar

I made from a fishing rod"), Aurelio is steeped in it.

Music was life's soundtrack in the tiny village where many of his siblings still live, an eight-hour drive and three river crossings from the nearest town. "Garifuna music brings us attention, which we hope will bring us action," says Aurelio, his cornrow plaits flying.

The Garifuna's traditional rhythms, distinctive language and culture were highlighted by Aurelio's lauded solo debut *Garifuna Soul*. A mix of original and traditional compositions that combined evocative vocals and fluid guitar, it was one of the biggest Afro-pop sellers of 2004 and positioned Aurelio as a superstar in the making.

But by the time the Grammy-nominated album *Waina* was released in 2007

He learnt to play on a guitar made from a tin can and a fishing rod

by his Belizean friend Andy Palacio, Aurelio was off the radar. He'd gone into politics - spending four years in the Honduran congress, the first politician of African descent in the country's history.

Four years was long enough: "Corruption, discrimination, everywhere. No one was interested in indigenous rights, only in getting rich. And I had no time for music," he says. "But through music I can reach out to everyone."

Palacio's death in 2008, at the age of 48, hit Aurelio hard. The two artists had bonded a decade earlier over their hopes for the future of Garifuna music and culture;

they'd shared a producer (guitarist Ivan Duran) and a bold vision. But while Palacio had been feted as "the next Bob Marley", for many Aurelio was by far the more talented.

When he picked up his guitar again, there was excitement throughout world music, so much so that Aurelio was offered the chance to be part of an initiative by watchmakers Rolex that matches mentors and protégés. And so to make his new album he was teamed with Senegalese superstar Youssou N'Dour.

Recorded in a studio in Dakar, Senegal and a beach hut in Honduras, *Laru Beya* features contributions from N'Dour and Afro-Cuban veterans Orchestra Baobab.

Spending time in Africa was an emotional as well as an enriching experience: "I sat on the beach and looked at the island of Goree [a former slave-trading centre] and cried. But I brought the history of the Garifuna back to its roots," he says, brightening. "It was my dream, and Andy's. I got very close to the music Youssou plays. It felt natural."

On his return, a reinvigorated Aurelio founded the Sol Garifuna Foundation to support and promote the arts of the Garifuna. "We don't have any schools. We don't have anyone teaching the language or the music. I want to set up something on the island of St Vincent, to establish the Garifuna culture there again. I want to reconnect all the Garifuna cultures in Central America. There is a lot to do."

○ Aurelio plays with Danyel Waro at the Barbican, London EC2 (0871 971 6107) tonight; and at WOMAD, Charlton Park (0118 960 6060) on Fri and Sat