

Musical Ancestries: Central America Script

PART 1

Sophia, Fernando, Eva and Carlos had the greatest music teacher EVER! Señora Cruz taught at a university in San Jose, Costa Rica, and also coached their marimba group, *Los Estudiantes*. Through her, they'd learned how to read music, music theory, and how to play **marimba** and **percussion instruments**. They worked hard and began to be noticed at local music festivals. So Señora Cruz put their group up on social media, and the invitations started coming in.

Señora Cruz wanted her students to be aware of how every country's voice is shaped by its history and culture. She explained, "This '**Big Blue Marble**' – Earth – is a living thing that is home to us humans. Ever since we lived in **caves** as **hunters and gatherers**, we've learned how to adapt, and how to **express ourselves through art** – starting with **cave drawings** and **music**."

"Finding we could do more if we worked together, we formed tribes, then larger groups of **native (or indigenous) peoples**. The art and music reflected the culture of each place that we gathered. Over many centuries, communities grew into countries, each with its own unique **cultural heritage**, reflecting each group's individual art."

"We've also moved (or been moved) to other places in the world. When that happened, each group's own cultural heritage became part of the "new" community...like a beautiful colored thread woven into one huge piece of cloth."

The students were wide-eyed. They'd never really thought about what made their own music and art so unique. "Is that why we hear so many stories about the **Mayans** in **Belize**, **Guatemala** and **Honduras**?" "Yes, Sophia, and we see the Mayans'

influence there. Here in **Costa Rica**, we have influences from *our own* ancient indigenous peoples – the **Cabécar**, **Maleku** and **Borucas**, plus later influences – like **African** and **Caribbean**.”

“We live in ‘**Latin America**’, but what is that, exactly?” “It’s Mexico, Central & South America...where the Spaniards settled.” “Excellent, Fernando! Class, can you name all seven Central American countries?” They all chimed in, “**COSTA RICA! Belize! Guatemala! El Salvador! Honduras! Nicaragua!** And...**Panama!**” “Yes!”

“Central America has a huge number of cultural influences, from as far away as Europe and even Africa. Many cultures blended with **indigenous** peoples who were already here, and the cultural heritages are reflected in the rich exciting music, dance and art, which is **different** in each country.”

“So, my brilliant ‘*Estudiantes*’, where’s the best place to experience Central American music?” Silence. “Where’ve you’ve been playing?” “**MUSIC FESTIVALS!**” “Exactly! And I have a huge surprise! Your parents have given you permission to play in three of the best music festivals in Central America – in Belize, Panama and Costa Rica!” The class erupted. “*Really? Seriously?!?*”

“Yes! So, we’re going to learn about the music, history and traditions of those three countries. But we’re also going to research the other four countries as well. Each of you will take a country, learn about it, and then share. It’s an incredible opportunity to appreciate our Central American cultures all the more! Ready?” “**READY!**”

PART 2

Señora Cruz began “**BELIZE** is a true melting pot with an incredibly rich heritage. The **Mayans** are **indigenous** to **Belize**, plus other countries. **Cave drawings** show them playing instruments like **trumpets** and **rattles**. But there’s much more...”

“Over the centuries, Belize was a subject of **Spain**, *then* **Britain**, and then other **Europeans** came, adding their musical influences to Belizean music. **Creoles** and the **Mestizo** people also contributed their music. “Gosh, that’s a LOT!” said Eva.

“Yes, it is, but there’s one more culture that’s probably *the most important* in Belizean music...the **Garifuna** people. Originally from **South America**, the **Arawak** and **Carib Indians** moved to **St. Vincent’s Island** in the Caribbean. In the 1600s, two Spanish ships carrying hundreds of enslaved **West Africans** sank nearby, and *those* survivors also merged into the **Garifuna** culture. Over the next 200 years, political unrest threatened to wipe out everyone on the Island. In the 1800s, many **Garifuna** relocated and settled in **Belize** as an independent nation.

“Because of this *very* complicated history, **UNESCO** declared the **Garifuna culture** to be a “*Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*”. Garifuna music contains **Afro-Indian**, **Hispanic**, and **English Creole** influences, but probably its *most distinctive* element is **Garifuna drumming**. The drums, made from local hardwoods and covered with the skin of a wild pig or deer, and are often played with **siseras** or **shakka**, a type of maraca in a style steeped in African origins.”

“Two types of drum, the **primero** (tenor) and **segunda** (bass), provide **rhythms** and **polyrhythms** for **ceremonial dances**. The music often includes **call and response chanting** which overlaps, creating a constant stream of sound. Some **Garifuna** tunes are simply for listening...and are sung with gentle strumming. **Garifuna** styles can include **drums**, **banjo**, **accordion**, **guitar**, and a **donkey’s jaw bone** (played like a saw or zither), and **Mestizo** styles add **marimba**, **double bass**, and **drum sets**.

“Other *popular* Belizean dances are: **cumbia** (related to salsa and merengue), and a Creole style called **brukdown** (breakdown – a sort

of calypso with percussion). Brukdown's *newer* form (**boom and chime**) features **electric guitars, congas, and bass guitars**. There's also **paranda** –related to **punta** and **punta rock**, developed for social events. Punta's traditional rhythms and dance steps mix with modern lyrics, and it sounds very similar to **reggae**."

"Like all of Central America, Belize has year-round religious festivals (mostly Roman Catholic), with the largest ones at Christmas, New Year's and **Semana Santa**, which is Holy Week. But I think the one *you'll* be most interested in is **The Battle of the Drums** at the **Belize Garifuna Music Festival** in Punta Gorda. *THIS* is the festival you're playing in November, along with some of the best drumming groups in Central America!"

Señora Cruz also arranged for them to stay three extra days for **Garifuna Settlement Day**, which celebrates Belize's founding with music, drumming and reenactments. There's also a lively procession, **Yurumein** (Homeland) that celebrates the culture's history with drumming and singing. What an incredibly exciting few days for them all!

PART 3

The students then began studying **Belize's neighbors** to the west and south, **Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras** and **Nicaragua**.

Sophia reported on **GUATEMALA**. "Its popular musical styles – like **cumbia, salsa, bolero, rock** and **pop** – are shared by most Latin American countries. **Rock** and **hip hop** came from the USA and New York City, but Guatemala also enjoys **bachata and merengue** from the Caribbean."

"I learned *traditional* Guatemalan music shares **Mayan and Garifuna** background like Belize. They have **traditional dances** that tell stories, with names like *Monkey Dance, Dance of the Deer, Cowboy Dance, and Dance of the Mexicans*. But I thought you'd like

to know that one of *THE* most significant things about Guatemalan music is the **marimba!** Its ancient roots go all the way back to Africa. An instrument known as a **balafon** was originally made from wooden bars and gourds for resonators. Over the years, it's evolved in different ways through many different cultures.”

“Guatemala’s national instrument *is* the **marimba**. Having embraced it many centuries ago, the **Mayans** still use it in their cultural ceremonies, but it has an even deeper meaning for them. Ever since the Spanish came to Guatemala 500 years ago, Mayans have been discriminated against. **The marimba is the Mayans’ symbol of resistance.** It allows them to express their culture through music, and *that* shows that they will *not* be dominated, no matter what.”

“Most of Guatemala’s **festivals** are religious holidays, but they have one incredible example of art blending with faith...the tradition of villages creating “**alfombras**” (or carpets) of artwork made from sawdust, fruits, flowers and different materials. They are breath-taking – just look at these pictures!” The other students were amazed by the beautiful, colorful designs, and applauded Sophia for her fabulous report.

PART 4

Fernando researched **EL SALVADOR**. “The smallest and most densely populated country in Central America, it has many cultural influences, including the **Cuzcatlan** and **Lenca**, the **indigenous** peoples from El Salvador and Honduras.”

“El Salvador’s *popular* music is mainly **salsa**, **Salvadoran cumbia**, and **hip hop**. Lots of their popular music is played on the **xylophone**...which is also considered a *folk* instrument...and there’s a **marimba de arco**, which got its name because it’s curved in an arch and played by hanging the instrument around the player’s neck.

“Their *folk music* includes **xuc, danza, pasillo, marcha and canciones**, but *my* favorite was **xuc!**” said Fernando. “The name “xuc” comes from an antique Salvadoran wind instrument called a “**JUCO**”...but I didn’t have any luck finding a picture of one.”

“El Salvador’s also known for its **chanchona** music, named for an instrument that’s from the low hills of **Morazán**. They fit a double bass with a **media caña**, a cylinder made from tin cans filled with pebbles or seeds, and they sound like rattles. Originally, **chanchona** was played by two violins, two guitars, and the **chanchona bass**, but the *Modern* style adds in **accordions** and **percussion**. The lyrics talk about “*campesino*” – the farming life.”

Fernando continued, “Another dance I really liked is ‘**Zafacaite**’, and it’s similar to a **fandango**. Its name comes from two words – *zafa* (loosen) and *caite*, a Salvadoran term for shoes. I thought its name was funny, because the fast dance steps make your shoes fly off! **Zafacaite** is usually played by trio of guitar, accordion, and violin, and it’s *always fast!*”

“Most of El Salvador’s religious feasts are celebrated with **tubular bells** and **chimes**. There’s also a real popular non-religious festival, **Fiestas Agostinas**, in August. In San Salvador, the capital, a marching band wakes the whole city up at 4 in the morning! The rest of the day is filled with parades, sports, food, and art exhibits...and LOTS of music! It sounds like a total blast!” The class agreed, applauding Fernando’s report.

PART 5

Eva spoke next. “I had **HONDURAS**. The most popular forms there are **punta**,

Caribbean salsa, merengue, and reggae. Most of these we already know, but the **Honduras Punta** is also called “**banguity**” by the

Honduran folk dancers. (The term means means “new life”.) It flows directly from the Garifuna tradition.”

Eva continued, “Hondurans *really* must love to party! They celebrate all year long with colorful festivals and **Ferías Patronales** (Patron Fairs), where each town has its own customs and traditions. In February, thousands travel to Tegucigalpa to pay reverence to the Patron Saint of Honduras, the **Virgin of Suyapa**, celebrating with the **alborada** (dawn chorus) plus music, fireworks and traditional foods. Other celebrations are scattered throughout the year, but two really stood out.”

“In April, the Bay Islands and north coast of Honduras celebrate **Garifuna Settlement Day** – like the Settlement Day we’ll see in Belize! The Garifuna festival is said to ‘pop and hum’ with their distinctive music and dancing...it just sounds like such fun!”

“The second festival is so big, it goes for *two whole weeks* in June! **Feria Juniana**, in San Pedro Sula, honors the city’s patron saint, Peter the Apostle. It’s a month of art exhibits, folk dances, carnivals, fireworks, and concerts. I want to go sometime when I get older...maybe when we graduate we could all go together!” The class laughed and agreed, clapping for Eva’s information and her great planning.

PART 6

Carlos reported last. “I’m glad you mentioned the Garifuna in Honduras, Eva, because **NICARAGUA**’s *another* country that’s associated with the **Garifuna**. Like **Punta** in Honduras, the Nicaraguan version is very similar, especially in its dance movements.”

“But since we’re all into marimbas, I thought you’d like to know that marimba is so popular there, it’s the national instrument...but they play it *differently!* Get this – **Nicaraguan marimbas are played with**

the performers sitting and holding the instruments on their knees! Wild, huh?”

“Nicaragua has both Caribbean – “Carib” – and European influences. They have a **Maypole** dance “**Palo de Mayo**”, and a **Mayo Ya festival** on the Caribbean coast, which welcomes the rain and the harvest with music and dancing.”

“Many Nicaraguan festivals are Christian, but not all. The **city of Masaya, cradle of national folklore**, celebrates the **Procession of the Agüizotes** and the **Gran Torovenado del Pueblo**. Both are based on myths, legends and superstitions...which sounded super-cool to me. I bet we’d have fun there, too, after graduation!” The class clapped for Carlos, laughing and buzzing about their graduation plans.

PART 7

Señora Cruz agreed that a graduation trip together was a terrific idea, but reminded them that since they were all 12, graduation was still a little way off. “But in the meantime, let’s explore **PANAMA**. Its musical contributions are huge and include the usual styles, but there’s also **jazz, saloma, pasillo, tamborito, mejorana, bolero, calypso** and **xuc**.”

“Many of the **folk** traditions come from the heartland, the **Azuero Peninsula**. One of these is the **Panamanian Típico Dance**, with beautiful costumes and choreography. In folk music, the **accordion** is one of the most important instruments, as well as the **mejoranera** and **bocana** (five- and four-stringed guitars), **tambores** (wooden drums), and **guáchara** (played by running a stick across carved notches). Singing is a large part of folk music, and one style, **saloma**, is similar to yodeling. When the folk music is mixed with upbeat rhythms and pop forms, it’s called, **música típica**.”

“Live folk music in Panama almost always involves dancing. The most famous dance, **el tamborito**, is rhythmic and drum-based.” Sophie’s hand shot up. “Señora Cruz, my *Lita* (my Grandma) is from Panama and she taught me **el tamborito!** She has a hand-embroidered **pollera** dress, and *Grandpa’s* **embroidered shirt** and **sombrero pintado**, the traditional painted hat. They’re gorgeous!” “They must be, Sophia! And that’s a perfect example of how music and art become such a large part of everyone’s heritage! You’ll have to teach us all **el tamborito.**”

“They have big carnivals in Panama – like the **Carnival of Panamá** and the **Carnival of Las Tablas**... And there’s **The Tribal Gathering** where sixty tribes from around the world come see international musical acts, tribal bands and indigenous musical projects. As for folk dance, the **Festival de la Mejorana** is HUGE!”

“But the one I think *you’ll* be most interested in,” said Señora Cruz, “is the **Festival Nacional del Manito Ocueño**, because *this* is the one you’re *playing!* It’s been officially declared **The National Folk Festival of the Republic of Panamá!**” The class had no idea. What an honor to have been invited to play!

PART 8

Los Estudiantes saved **COSTA RICA** for last! By now, they’d studied so much about the rest of Central America’s music and culture, they saw their *own* music in a completely different light! They knew that today’s most popular Costa Rican music combines rock, Latin sounds, jazz and traditional folk music, and they were familiar with the popular styles as well as **calypso**, **soca**, and **merengue**. They also loved the dances that went with those styles.

“Our **folk music** uses several unique instruments that set it apart from other traditions,” Señora Cruz began. “One is the **ocarina**, an ancient flute-like instrument shaped like a sweet potato. But the *Costa Rican* ocarina, known as the **dru mugata**, is unique because it’s made

of *beeswax*! There's another traditional wind instrument, similar to the oboe, called the **chirimia**, which you'll also find in South America."

"One particularly unique folk instrument is the **quijongo**. It's a 55-inch tall wooden bow that has a metal string stretched between its two ends. A gourd sits in the middle of the string, and is a resonator.

Musicians create tunes by hitting the metal string with a stick and using their fingers to cover holes in the gourd. There are variations of this instrument in different regions. But if you *really* want a taste of Costa Rica's original folk music, visit **Guanacaste province**. You can actually hear ancient **pre-Columbian style of music** played with **ocarinas** and **quijongos**."

Señora Cruz continued, "There's another important festival called the **Fiesta or Danza de los Diablitos (Little Devils' Dance)**, held by the **Boruca** people. Celebrating their Ancestors, the festival depicts an historic three-day battle between the Boruca Indians and the Spaniards. Only Boruca *men* participate, dressed as 'diablitos', each wearing a wooden mask that he carved himself. One man dresses up as a bull, representing the Spanish Conquistadors. (Spoiler alert!) The Diablitos always win, just as they did in real life, centuries ago."

"And finally, class, here's the one you're playing in October...**Limón Carnival!** Held in the city of Limón on the Caribbean coast, it showcases our Costa Rican culture with a *full week* of music, activities, regional foods, and exhibits of local artists. A **Carnival Queen** is crowned on the first day, and a **Children's Parade** features gigantic handcrafted masks. The **Día de las Culturas**, honors *all* the local cultures, including the Spanish, African, Chinese, Italian and indigenous peoples. There's singing, dancing and calypso."

Wow! *THIS* was the event that Señora Cruz had arranged for them to play! "**The Day of the Cultures!**" How perfect after all they'd learned about Central America's music and cultural heritage!

Nothing would ever be quite the same for the four students again. Music, the language of the world, had changed their lives forever, and they recognized it. They gathered around their teacher, surprising her with a lovely blooming plant and a note that read, *“Thank you, Señora Cruz, for helping us discover our cultural heritage – and ourselves – through music. You are part of our hearts forever.” Signed, Los Estudiantes.*