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Drug Cartels Blamed for Murder of Folk Singer Facundo Cabral

by Louisa Reynolds

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"I have already thanked you....I leave everything in God’s hands because he knows what he’s doing." With these words, which sounded cruelly prophetic four days later, Argentine folk singer Facundo Cabral bid farewell to Guatemala before his last concert.

Cabral arrived in Guatemala on July 4. His short visit to the country began with a concert in Guatemala City’s Tikal Futura Hotel, where he said goodbye without knowing that this would be where a chance encounter with Nicaraguan promoter Henry Fariñas Fonseca would lead to his death.

The 74-year-old singer went on to perform in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala’s second-largest city, three hours from the capital. The following day, he returned to the capital, where he spent the night at the Tikal Futura Hotel.

At 5:00 a.m., he went down to the lobby, accompanied by his manager Percy David Llanos, to wait for the hotel minibus that would take him to the airport. Cabral was supposed to return to Nicaragua for the last concert of his Central American tour.

It was at this point that he bumped into Fariñas, a lifelong friend, who offered to give him a lift to the airport as he was traveling on the same flight.

Although it was originally reported that Fariñas had hired Cabral to perform in Guatemala, it later emerged that it was the EC Music Corporation owned by Enrique Castañeda who had organized the tour.

What Fariñas and Cabral did not know was that every single move they made was being closely followed by two men sitting on the lobby’s sofa, pretending to be guests. One of them, Wilfred Allan Stokes Arnold, was arrested on July 11 by the Guatemalan police; the second has yet to be identified.

Fariñas and Cabral exited the car park in Fariñas’ white Range Rover, followed by a second vehicle with his two bodyguards. Cabral traveled next to Fariñas in the front seat, and Llanos sat at the back. Fariñas soon spotted three vehicles in the rear window. While two positioned themselves on either side of his car, the third overtook him and swerved in front of him, forcing him to slow down.

Fariñas was trapped and had no means of escaping. Then the hail of bullets began. Forensic experts said the 18 bullets fired at Fariñas’ vehicle came from the driver’s side, which means that the attack was aimed at him. Cabral was hit by three bullets and died instantly.

This is the sequence of events that investigators were able to piece together after examining CCTV footage from the Tikal Futura Hotel and the Policía Municipal de Tránsito (PMT).

The vehicle on Cabral’s side shot at the vehicle traveling behind and then escaped, chased by Fariñas’ bodyguards. Fariñas, seriously injured, seized the opportunity to escape and drove into
a nearby fire station, where he crashed into an ambulance. He is in a coma in a private hospital, surrounded by police agents.

On Sunday, July 10, Guatemalans awoke to the news that one of Latin America’s most well-loved singers was dead. A crowd soon gathered around the fire station where Cabral’s body still lay and where investigators in search of clues were gathering more than 50 bullet casings scattered across the road.

Anger, indignation, and shame spread through those who had come to leave floral tributes at the scene as Guatemala once again made world headlines for its rampant violence and lawlessness.

**Fariñas and the Guatemalan brothel scene**

Hours later, during a press conference, President Álvaro Colom said that the attack "bore all the marks of professional assassins."

An investigation team was quickly put together that included the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC), the Ministerio Público (MP), the Ministerio de Gobernación, and the Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala (CICIG)—a UN-sponsored commission set up in 2006 to help Guatemalan authorities root out corruption and organized crime.

Two days later, the police had arrested Stokes Arnold and Elgin Enrique Vargas Hernández. The latter is believed to be the middleman who hired several assassins, among them Stokes Arnold.

But who masterminded the attack? Mexican daily newspaper published a report that, according to a DEA source, the Sinaloa cartel sought to have Fariñas killed. The presence of Mexican cartels on Guatemalan soil and their bitter turf wars with local mafia bosses is no secret. However, Guatemalan authorities have been reluctant to comment on the possible involvement of Mexican drug traffickers in this case.

During a press conference held when Stokes Arnold and Vargas Hernández were arrested, Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz said that "a Central American man" was believed to be behind the attack and added that the police were working closely with Nicaraguan authorities to solve the case, without giving any further details.

Fariñas, 40, was a music promoter and owner of a strip club called Elite, in the heart of Guatemala City’s clubbing district in Zone 10. Elite was a chain with other clubs in Nicaragua, Panama, and Costa Rica.

The MP swiftly raided the Elite club after Cabral’s murder in search of clues, and Fariñas’ bank accounts have been frozen.

Prior to the attack on Fariñas, there had been a series of attacks on strip-club owners and managers that would have gone unnoticed had it not been for the international notoriety of this case, in which one of Latin America’s most famous artists became a collateral victim.

One of the most recent cases was the murder of Alexis Antonio Juárez Delgado, owner of Zeus, a strip club almost identical to Elite, a month before the attack on Fariñas.

The owners of these brothels, whose regular customers include politicians, businessmen, and drug traffickers, work closely with people-trafficking networks, which supply them with sex workers from Eastern Europe, Central and South America.
The police also estimate that significant amounts of cocaine are sold in the capital’s luxury strip clubs as well as considerable amounts of illegal alcohol and cigarettes, smuggled into the Guatemala in containers brought in through the country’s main ports.

The proceeds of these illegal industries are then laundered through a wide range of legal businesses, from car warehouses to expensive clothing boutiques in the city’s main shopping malls.

Was Elite used to launder money from the Sinaloa cartel? This is one of the questions that investigators are currently seeking to answer.

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