

Didge takes world on Dreamtime journey

Western sensibilities of contemporary music and the oldest culture on earth come together in a voice from modern Aboriginal Australia, **ASH DARGAN**.



An Australian Indigenous recording artist, world renowned for his mastery of the didgeridoo, has been pushing the boundaries of contemporary world music for the past 10 years.

A member of the Larrakia Nation, the traditional land owners of Darwin, Ash Dargan is an ambassador for his culture through his music, story-telling and live performances. His music has been described as the soul of the Australian Dreamtime landscape, with a timeless quality reflecting a deep connection to and reverence for his spiritual ancestry.

Classically trained in the trumpet from the age of eight at Queensland's prestigious Southport School, Ash developed an early respect for historical composition. He was an adopted child and raised without an awareness of his cultural family. But at the age of 20, he had the first opportunity to immerse himself in his cultural heritage through a reunion in the Top End.

"Coming up to the Territory and really getting into my culture was a defining point in my life and creative direction," he said.

Ash credited Grandmother Joan Fejo and great uncle Wally Fejo, both traditional elders of the Larrakia people, as being instrumental in his uptake of the didgeridoo and appreciating its deeper cultural significance. "Through them, I came to know of the didgeridoo's history and unlimited potential for the expression of rhythm, and its ability to represent the power of the natural and spiritual worlds," he said.

"Some of my best memories were living out in my grandmother's donga on the Acacia Reservation, fishing the Manton River, hunting kangaroo, geese and sitting down with the 'old fellas' in Kakadu and just listening to their rhythms and wisdom."

The opportunity to experience what he had been missing for so long gave Ash more than a sense of belonging, it provided the vehicle to both express and bridge his culture to the mainstream music world.

By merging the sensibilities of his western musical background with his cultural music and heritage, Ash had a foot in both worlds and produced a sound and genre previously unheard. "Cultural music is foreign to most

TEXT

Richie Hodgson

IMAGE

Courtesy Ash Dargan

ABOVE

Ash Dargan in action

people and completely goes over their heads. But when you incorporate classical instruments such as strings and guitars, it becomes much more accessible to a western palate. Indigenous music, just as classical, is about relating story, so really the two ideas are coming from the same place.”

In 1997, Ash tasted his first major success when he recorded with world music producer Jim Wilson on a compilation album entitled “Tulku Season of Souls”, a Polygram release that went to the top 10 in the US World Music charts.

After touring abroad in 1998, Ash returned to Australia and was snapped up by the most successful Indigenous recording label in the country, Indigenous Australia, creating a body of work over the next few years that has sold more than 500,000 units. He explored world fusion rhythms with his releases *Earth Rhythms*, *Ash Dust & Dirt* and *Sticks Bones and Song Stones*, each becoming popular in Australia, Japan and the USA. In 2000 Ash’s release through Sony Australia, “Indigenous Rhythms”, was nominated for Release of the Year at the Australian National Indigenous Music Awards.

After a sell-out national tour of Japan in 2001, he returned to the Territory and during the following two years created his seminal work, *TERRITORY*, a multi-media live performance show that takes audiences from around the world on a journey into the creation myths of the Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime. He has toured *TERRITORY* internationally for the past six years.

Traditional music was integral to ensuring the wider Aboriginal culture was maintained and honoured, he said. “The Larrakia people are a very modern people. Most of us are living in town and, essentially, we’re not living a traditional life. I didn’t get the opportunity to grow up with my culture, but I’ve endeavoured to use my background and upbringing to honour my ancestry with the skills I’ve acquired, the mediums available to today’s artists and the love I have for it,” he said. “I do this in a contemporary way because I’m from a contemporary world and my artistic context is representative of this.

“I think we’re all blessed that traditional Aboriginal music still exists, considering the impact the culture has come under over the last couple of hundred years. When people hear that true unadulterated music, it gives a link to that lineage that is still alive. It’s a very potent form of music because it so honestly represents what is sacred and it’s a voice from the past that still exists today.”

Ash said that because he was able to deliver aspects of traditional Indigenous culture in a contemporary way, and in a context accessible by western audiences, it was an important step for many in understanding and accepting Indigenous culture. Indigenous music had experienced a changing of the guard during the past decade, reflecting the positive change in Indigenous affairs, he said.

“Ten years ago, Indigenous music had a very hard, political edge because it was a voice we had to honour. From cultural misappropriation to land rights issues, our music had to reflect the issues that were impacting us at the time.

“Many young Indigenous artists are becoming a voice of positivity. Things are getting better in Indigenous Australia and that hard-edged voice is, in turn, becoming softer. The arts are always going to be reflective of where we are as a community and the stresses that are upon us.”

The launch of his latest CD, *STORIES OF WIND* at the Toronto World Music Festival in 2005, unleashed his upbeat didge/eco tribal beat-driven grooves laced with live vocals and sensuous ethnic flutes to an ever growing world audience.

In a career that has spanned 10 years, Ash Dargan has become one of the industry’s most successful Indigenous recording artists, playing in some of the most revered concert halls in the US and Europe.

His interests have grown to encompass community work and education, as he works to give back to his culture. “I’m currently working with youth and men’s groups in larger capital cities with modern ‘backfellas’, people like me, who need the opportunity to voice what’s happening to modern Aboriginal people living in the larger centres around Australia.”

He said he believed that these voices were as valid as the traditional voices originating from the Territory. “These voices from people with mixed blood, who have a history of assimilation and who have been displaced, are just as valid and as precious because it is all of who we are as a people. Both stories are equally important for the history of the culture and our national identity.”

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