

# Sounds of the Street

## Graham Baynes interviews John Kilbey

*Hello John, could you tell me about your background and how you got into this business.*

**John:** I was brought up in a musical family. I started writing songs, got my own band when I was 13, went through the whole band thing and had records.

I had a friend who was working at Sounds of the Street. He was looking for somebody to fill in this position and asked me if I was interested.

With the people we work at there, when we started the course, we just referred to them as street kids. I had a preconception of who they would be, and thought they would be a gang of youths who had decided to run away from home and be naughty. What I actually found was a whole bunch of different individuals, forced out of their homes at an early age for a lot of different reasons, but normally relating to problems with their parents.

So now we like to say from diverse and challenging backgrounds, because I think that there is this myth of a genre of people called street kids by choice and I don't think that it is true.

*How did Sounds of the Street evolve?*

**John:** A guy called Phil Nunn was working with young people, and he realised that they were much more open to communication when they got out their guitar and started playing. He started the course, got funding for it, and it went from there.

*What sort of backgrounds do they have?*

**John:** They come from different backgrounds, some have mental health problems, some are people who have left home because of family problems, some are recovering drug addicts.

*Do you use song writing techniques in the course, and any games as a catalyst?*

**John:** Well the course is a song writing and recording course. We show them how to use the equipment and then they record the songs. We put them out on CD at the end of the course. So the whole course is based around song writing and recording.

Sometimes I have to trick myself into writing songs, and sometimes I use the same ideas with other people. By playing a game or somehow moving the focus from "I'm writing a song" to just playing a game, allows people objectivity, that their ego does not feel under pressure. I play any number of games to get people writing. The people at Sounds of the Street know, by and large, what they want to do, and I don't need to prompt them as to the song writing process.

*You also work with people at Bondi Wave.*

**John:** That's where I use games, because it's a group situation, it's more 1:1 at Sounds of the Street. There's a whole room of people at Bondi Wave where people are often nervous, and you need to break up the tension, and get them interacting in a creative way.

*What sort of people do you work with at Bondi Wave?*

**John:** I think they are people just interested in music, there's no criteria for people to do the course, no age limit, people just interested in music.

*Can you give me an example of a game you might use with Bondi Wave?*

**John:** I've got so many I do, and I always change them, just make up new ones as I go along. I try not to do the same thing twice.

A really good one I like is where you get people to write a set of lyrics as if they were another famous lyricist. So they take on that persona, they write out that set of lyrics and pass them on. Another person then plays the song but in the style of someone else. So you might have lyrics in the style of John Lennon played in the style of Bob Marley.

Again it just takes people's minds away from the fact that "I'm doing something creative" and should be worried in case it's a failure.

*Do your clients have to have musical proficiency to be involved?*

**John:** A lot of people have no musical experience, have never written a song or played an instrument. With Sounds of the Street and Bondi Wave, you find ways and show them that they can play an instrument as long as they try and play something simple, work around their limitations, or if need be help them play the music for them.

*Have you noticed any changes in people since they have been on the courses?*

**John:** Well people change more in personality and in their musical ability, so you know their songs are getting more musically developed, harmonically interesting, lyrically clever. Often they become more sociable people.

*With Sounds of the Street, have you noticed if they have been able to deal with their difficulties through their work?*

**John:** We have a very high success rate, success can be if they are still alive at the end of the course, or if they have got a job in a supermarket for example.

Success for us is just them feeling better about themselves and being able to function in society a little easier. Some people have gone on to work with music.

*Do you work on your own at Sounds of the Street?*

**John:** Sounds of the Street has 5 separate recording suites, equipped with computers. We write as we record, and this is a continual process, and we finish the course and release the CD.

Bondi Wave is more performance and song writing, so we spend more time writing songs, and at the end they record them all in one block. They have a concert at the end of the year at Bondi Wave, and a CD launch at Sounds of the Street.

*Do you have plans for the future with Sounds of the Street?*

**John:** We've just moved premises, we've actually been left money to buy premises from Mission Australia (a charity organisation). These would be stable, purpose-built premises for music and art.

The challenge will be making it bigger and more efficient without losing that personal interaction which is making it work.

*Was funding easy to get?*

**John:** No. The programme used to be 90% government funded until the current government, and then it went to zero funding. So there's been a struggle, and we were on a knife-edge to see if the programme would survive. But thanks to Mission Australia and other groups, we have been able to continue.

*How did Bondi Wave come about, has it evolved?*

**John:** Bondi Wave started about 13 years ago. I've been involved 4 years. It's changed, become more contemporary, a broader community project.

*Have you had feedback from people in Sounds of the Street?*

**John:** They regularly say that they wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for the course, and how much it's meant for them. I know that to be true, by relating to them just how much they've got out of it.

The creative process is helping them to express themselves and gain their own self-worth by realising that they can do something, and at the same time they are having positive interactions with staff. Just being able to talk to someone without fear of violence is a big thing.

Quite a few have had success, and gone on to bigger and better things. The talent that comes through Sounds of the Street is phenomenal. People are so open and honest they give amazing performances and songs. Occasionally somebody from the music industry hears something they like.

As well as my community work I run an independent record label called Karma Kid. Through my constant involvement with music I've begun to realise how undervalued music is in our society at the moment, and that the positive benefits are great. The actual emotional benefits can come through listening or playing music, and needs to be explored. Because in my experience, music has some beneficial aspect to it which seems to enhance the soul or make you cope with life a bit better.

The present view of musicians as being like scumbags of society or big celebrities should be modified to encompass the old minstrel role of song writing whereby the community looks to the song writer to record what was going on around them, and reflect and comment on their own lives.

That's why I think community music has more resonance than a lot of commercial music because the people who are doing it are doing it as a form of pure expression rather than the financial benefit.

*Thank you John.*

**Graham Baynes is a psychiatric nurse and works as a community music facilitator on a part time basis. He is involved in organizing concerts performed by psychiatric patients in the Westmead area.. For the last four years he has worked at the SEE Foundation in Parramatta holding songwriting and music workshops with adults with severe physical and intellectual disabilities.**

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