

Music in Karratha

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Following a trip from England to Australia during 1996 involving solo performances, adjudicating and masterclasses, I was offered a job by the WA Education Department in Karratha. As I had long harboured an ambition to live and work in Australia, this was just the opportunity I'd been looking for. Despite many friends and colleagues living on the East coast advising me not to move to Karratha as it was 'outback' and I would be 'lost and bored,' I nevertheless accepted the position. I was supposed to be here for two years and then I would be transferred to Perth. Seven years later, after declining that transfer, I'm still here and loving every minute.

Karratha is 1600km north of Perth on the Pilbara Coast. The weather is glorious, sun shines every day and temperatures range from a pleasant 25C on a winter's day to 50C during the hot summer. We're right on the Indian Ocean, and a number of islands are very easily accessible. Although a bit warm at first, I soon got used to it and have to say that 20C is now cold to me..... not bad for a Pom! With a hugely transient population fluctuating usually between ten and fourteen thousand people, many people come to town to work on projects associated with off shore gas or iron ore. The North West Shelf is home to some of Australia's biggest export business. Despite this transience however, many people like myself have arrived for a short term, fallen in love with the place and are still here many years later.

When I first arrived in July 1997, there were about 6 students doing music. Music teachers had come and gone, and parents were very sceptical about getting their children involved in a program that had offered so many broken promises over the previous few years. It took me a while to convince people that I was willing to hang around and wouldn't leave them in the lurch. With parent support growing, the program has built up over the last six years to around 40 students learning brass through the School of Instrumental Music this year. On top of this, around 100 young people receive private piano or other instrumental lessons. I introduced Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music examinations to Karratha in 1999 and we now have over 75 entries in May of each year.

As we are rather remote, I try to promote the music program here and am not ashamed of using all my contacts to expose the local students to all possible opportunities. During my time here, Karratha has hosted a number of visiting clinicians along with the International Brass Quintet and Danbury Brass Band (Connecticut, USA). Had the demise of Ansett in 2001 been only a couple of weeks later, Australian Brass-the National Brass Band - would also have been here.

There are a few musos in town and earlier this year I reformed a swing band - SwingShift - that was originally set up back in 1997. The band is currently 13 players strong and includes a number of my brass students along with the grown ups.

A trend has emerged over the last couple of years for students to develop their musical interest and gain music scholarships to schools in Perth. Having 'lost' two such students at the end of last year, another two will follow at the end of this year. Although this means that I constantly have to start again, I am more than happy to be a breeding ground for students who want to develop themselves.

Teaching music in a small community means that everybody knows you. This can be both a good and a bad thing. Being able to run things your own way though, with subsequent good results means that work is pleasure. The hardest thing about teaching is always having to convince parents that the opportunities I try to offer my students should be grasped with both hands. There's nothing worse than some half hearted logistical excuse as to why little Johnny can't be involved.

If there's one thing I could change about my teaching, it would be the ability to educate parents enough for them to understand that these such opportunities need to be greeted with open arms and that they need to do anything possible in order for their children to be involved.