

From Outstation to Out There

Nabarlek – a music industry case study

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Nabarlek is a group of twelve Aboriginal musicians from the tiny Outstation of Manmoyi, 215 kilometres from the remote community of Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) in western Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. Over a five-year period, Nabarlek has become a successful performing and recording group, which now owns its own recordings and equipment and has established its own music industry enterprise. This unique achievement has come about through an equal and collaborative partnership over the last five years involving Nabarlek, Skinnyfish Music (a Darwin-based independent record label and distributor committed to the development of Aboriginal music), and Demed Outstation Resource Centre in Gunbalanya as Manager of Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) and community support organisation. Also involved are two Registered Training Organisations (RTOs): Charles Darwin University (CDU), formerly NT University, and private provider Stringybark.

Nabarlek's biography is impressive. They have supported Midnight Oil, performed with the Darwin Symphony Orchestra, with Yothu Yindi, and played at several Darwin Festivals, the Adelaide Festival in 2000, and the Port Fairy and Brunswick Music Festivals in 2001. Robyn Archer recognised their special qualities and invited them to perform over six weeks at the International World Expo in Hanover, Germany in 2000. They were nominated for several awards at the Deadlys – the National Indigenous Music Awards – in 2002, as well as an ARIA nomination for Best World Music Album in the same year. More recently they performed at the inaugural NT Indigenous Music Awards in August 2004 where they received the award for Excellence in Music Industry Training.

In May – June 2004 Country Arts WA toured Nabarlek into regional and remote Western Australia. In 7 weeks on the road the Nabarlek tour covered 20,350 kilometres, performed 19 highly successful shows and engaged an audience of nearly 4,000 people, many of whom were seeing their first ever presentation by a professional band in their area.

A veteran of 25 tours for Country Arts WA, Touring Manager Jenny Simpson stated that:

“...I thought I had seen it all, but on this tour Nabarlek and Skinny Fish Music were absolutely phenomenal. I have never encountered such a high degree of professionalism, talent, motivation and positivity – EVER! WA audiences turned out in droves and Nabarlek was pretty much mobbed by fans everywhere they went – their concerts were utterly exhilarating. I reckon that they have given a whole generation of young performers a boost; you couldn't ask for better mentors. Also, gaining an understanding of the developmental path that Nabarlek has undertaken with Skinny Fish certainly explained how this group, from a remote and socially disadvantaged background, has been able to realise their creative potential and build a successful business as a professional working band”.

However, Nabarlek's beginnings were long and difficult, facing the practical disadvantages of remote communities with extreme isolation from the music industry support, skills, technology, equipment and services that musicians in other parts of Australia take for granted.

The musicians in Nabarlek started playing together, and teaching each other, originally as a gospel group with a couple of acoustic guitars and had their first experiences performing while touring around the Top End with the Christian Fellowship. They were helped by a visiting outstation teacher and went on to their first public performance as dancers at Gunbalanya Open Day in 1992, where they won first prize. With the prize money they bought their first set of musical instruments. Back home at Manmoyi they practised solidly, though initially they could only play in the daytime as the outstation ran on solar power. As they started to write their own songs, the majority in their language, Kunwinjku, the old people began to tell them stories. Their original songs then evolved from a traditional format to integration with contemporary music styles — songs about the past, their people, land and culture. Once Manmoyi had more permanent electricity, with a generator, the band refined its performances and consolidated a repertoire of original material. They first performed as Nabarlek (the Kunwinjku word for rock wallaby) in 1995.

The Band members - Ross Guymala, Terrah Guymala, Marshall Bangarr, Leon Guymala, Berribob Watson, Rodney Naborlhborlh, Winston Guymala, Lester Guymala, Stewart Guymala, Peter Mylaynga, Garrad Naborlhborlh and Benjium Burrunali - are all very clear about the importance of music in their lives. As they say, they take music work very seriously, and it has changed their lives for the better: we are 'not throwing our life away', 'sharing our life and culture and Dreamtime stories', 'being able to go to new places, meet new faces, have opportunities we wouldn't have thought about', 'it makes our old people really proud', 'music is important to keep our culture strong and pass stories to the younger generation', 'we will be doing good things into the future'.

Delivery of the Contemporary Music course by CDU in 1998 was a turning point for Nabarlek. The musicians were involved in fourteen-hour working days, commencing early in the morning and, with breaks, continuing until 11.00 or 12.00 at night. The production of their first, highly successful album was an outcome of this course. The album achieved extensive airplay and quickly sold the first 1,000 run with the band selling CDs at performances wherever they went. The tour and performance at the Adelaide Festival, a high profile event, was actually used as part of CDU's course assessment process.

The second, and more advanced, training course was planned with Demed Outstation Resource Centre and the local Training Coordinator from Gunbalanya. Trainers Michael Hohnen, Matt Cunliffe and Tony Gray, working with RTO Stringybark, delivered this more advanced training, which had a strong music technology focus, over a three to four month period. By this stage, with their own PA system located at Manmoyi together with instruments and a computer with the ProTools recording system, the musicians started to make their own demo recordings.

Nabarlek members are also playing an important part as role models for the younger Rock Wallaby Band (15-17 year-olds) and Wild Flower (14 – 15 year-old girls) from Manmoyi. The Rock Wallabies, who have been playing only for one year as a result of music industry training, are now often engaged as support band for Nabarlek, with one of their members occasionally sitting in with the main act.

The band has been committed to saving as much money as it can from its performances, CD sales and royalties. This has placed it in the extremely rare position of totally self funding the recording, mastering, artwork and manufacture of its second album, *Binninj Manborlh*, Nabarlek is now in the position — also rare in the music industry — to cover the costs of manufacturing new runs of their CDs.

Nabarlek's long term aim is to control their own future and achieve economic independence. They have now established their own small business, Manmoyi Music, and, with the advice and mentoring of Skinnyfish Music have recently completed a 5 year business plan. They have purchased a concert PA system to reduce costs for their own performances as well as to generate income from hiring it to others. Skinnyfish will now work with the musicians to develop a new training plan as an essential framework for achieving their music performance, technology and industry business skills requirements.

The way Skinnyfish, Nabarlek and Demed work together provides a unique business and training model because it operates as an equal partnership. Key features of the partnership are:

- effective consultation processes for planning the content and delivery of training
- high quality training delivery, involving trainers with high skill levels in music and related technology as well as appropriate cross-cultural knowledge
- industry support which has linked music training to actual industry practice at local, national and international levels
- high quality music performances and products, which generate employment and income as outcomes of training
- an equal relationship between the parties, which has cultivated long term mutual trust
- a commitment by all parties to training related to long term industry/economic outcomes and development
- the support of CDEP employment for band members throughout training and enterprise development stages
- the support of CDEP management with administrative and resource assistance
- a commitment to income generation for Nabarlek and ultimately financial independence and control
- a commitment to social and community development outcomes.

Skinnyfish Music

Skinnyfish Music commenced operation in Darwin initially as a CD distributor but then expanded to a record label, music publisher, music industry promoter, advocate and adviser, business mentor and tour manager for several NT Aboriginal Bands and performers. As well as Nabarlek these include the Saltwater Band from Galiwin'ku, Yugul from Ngukurr, Yilila from Numbulwar, Shellie Morris from Darwin, and George Rrurrumbu, lead singer of the famous Warumpi Band.

Skinnyfish currently distributes Indigenous recordings to most areas of Northern Australia and is seeking to develop a much more comprehensive national distribution network. Skinnyfish Music, whose directors are Mark Grose and Michael Hohnen, is also very active in promoting Aboriginal albums and live performances overseas.

Michael's first contact and work with Nabarlek, Manmoyi Outstation and Demed was made in 1998 when he was planning and delivering the Certificate I in Music Industry for CDU at Manmoyi. Mark's contact and involvement came later, when Demed approached him regarding distribution of Nabarlek's CDs. Mark also assisted as tour manager for the band's trips to Germany and Adelaide.

Skinnyfish now spends large amounts of time forward planning with Nabarlek and Demed, developing performance and tour plans as well as timelines and budgets for pre-production and recording. A live album with DVD is due for release in November 2004 with Nabarlek's third album planned for release in May 2005.

Demed Inc

Demed Inc is an Outstation Resource Centre based at Gunbalanya (Oenpelli). Its role in the band's development has been crucial from the outset, not only as their CDEP Manager but also in providing a wide range of support and assistance. In the early years, rather than do the organisational work for Nabarlek, Demed staff encouraged the band to take responsibility for coordinating its own activities, following up gig opportunities and making industry contacts. This empowered Nabarlek members to commence control of the band business themselves.

Former Demed staff member Deb Mason provided administrative support to the band. She observed that, while Demed had initiated a range of enterprises and programs for income generation on outstations, including a poultry farm, most of them had failed because of lack of interest and relevance. Music work, however, was completely different, with people involved fourteen hours a day if they were able. Deb observed the lives of band members change dramatically for the better over time, as their motivation and commitment to serious participation in the music industry developed.

Demed has enabled Nabarlek to be supported to perform and has provided extensive assistance with accommodation costs and travel from both Manmoyi and Gunbalanya. It also built a storeroom for the band at Manmoyi so that instruments were kept safe and accessible, rather than stored in a shed at Gunbalanya.

The other support provided by Demed includes day-to-day business and some of the band management role, helping with communication, instrument repairs and accessories, authorised deductions from members' pay to build up the band's fund for touring and other expenses, and management of Nabarlek's trust account. Band members have decided to build up this fund, rather than put all of their income into their own pockets. Decisions about expenditure from the account are made by Nabarlek and Demed, with input from Skinnyfish Music where relevant. For Nabarlek's tour to Germany at the World Expo in 2000, Demed assisted and negotiated a major financial contribution of \$25,000 from the Gunbalanya Sports and Social Club and sponsorship of \$10,000 from mining company ERA. The NT Government subsequently contributed \$45,000 to the tour.

Demed also plays an ongoing coordination role, negotiating with government agencies and applying for funding to cover the band's next stages of training and enterprise development. Funding is currently being sought to build a suitable band room at Manmoyi to overcome the difficulties of maintaining equipment and rehearsing in a tin shed — heat, ants, dust and noise. Nabarlek's set of professional instruments are kept in Darwin at Skinnyfish Music while their practice PA and instruments benefit other young musicians at Manmoyi, where they are used by the Rock Wallaby and Wild Flower Bands and for music training at the school.

Demed considers its support for musicians, and its contribution to Nabarlek's success, as a valuable and relevant service within its charter of remote social, economic and community development. It is well aware that on remote outstations there are generally no jobs or opportunities available for people to move from CDEP to real employment. However, in the longer term Demed will need to consider how many bands it could effectively manage or support — even with the partnership and strong back-up from Skinnyfish—or whether it would need to establish some type of music department or centre.

A Model for Music Industry Training

After ten years of delivery of contemporary music industry training in remote Aboriginal communities in the NT, principally by CDU and then a few private RTOs, and the commitment of substantial funds by government over this period, it became apparent that there had been no serious analysis of industry outcomes nor a strategic approach to future development and investment.

It was not surprising that demand for music industry training in remote communities would be always be high, particularly in the absence of alternative relevant education and training programs, and given the high levels of participation in music activity in Aboriginal communities. However, outcomes were variable. It was disturbing to learn that, after quite a few years, the same course had often been delivered several times in the same community, often to students who had already completed the majority of course modules. From these musicians' points of view at the time, the credential may well have been secondary to the benefit of access to professional musical and audio equipment in their remote communities and the chance to further develop their skills. However, many were aware that they were not achieving their aims in terms of participating in the industry through employment, or through income generation from high quality recorded product for sale, and professional performance and touring opportunities.

While the community development and social benefits of this music training could rarely be doubted, it appeared that, for some years, monitoring of vocational and industry outcomes, and rationale for funding decisions, did not take place within current industry frameworks. The shift to client driven funding of training, and the diminished role of Training Advisory Councils in identifying industry training needs and endorsing training proposals, could certainly have been a factor.

In 2003, in a climate of much discussion, as well as uncertainty, about music industry training for Aboriginal musicians and associated workers in the Northern Territory, the NT Cultural, Recreation and Tourism Training Advisory Council (CHARTTES) believed there was significant merit in documenting the partnership of Nabarlek, Skinnyfish Music and Demed — its processes, long term planning and holistic approach — particularly in terms of a presenting a model for future development and application elsewhere.

CHARTTES successfully sought Special Projects funding from the NT Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) and engaged Gillian Harrison as consultant to research and write the case study. The report, *>From Outstation to Out There. Nabarlek, a music industry case study* documents the ways in which the partnership operates, its developmental stages, the range of income streams available to Nabarlek and provides a framework outlining three stages of music industry training and development. The framework and templates can be used as a guide by Indigenous musicians and their communities, Registered Training Organisations, music industry agencies and by government in determining policy and funding.

The report also provides a snapshot of government and other funding support of Aboriginal music in the NT, documentation of music industry training and outcomes in the NT as well as an overview of NT Aboriginal Music. The full report and its recommendations, along with video footage filmed at Manmoyi of Nabarlek's own description of the partnership, as told by lead singer Terrah Guymala, is available on DVD free of charge from CHARTTES, GPO Box 359, Darwin NT 0801, tel: 08 8941 1956 or email info@charttes.com.au

For more information about the Nabarlek band, or their recordings, contact Skinnyfish music on 08 8941 8066 or visit their website www.skinnyfishmusic.com.au

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