



Drum Atweme – a rhythm that's theirs

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'Atweme' means to hit the drum. It was never supposed to be a performance group. It was supposed to be just a learning thing about rhythm – a program to get the attendance up. The idea was that if the kids came to school every day, then on Friday they could have the drum program. But it sort of grew.

I remember the first gig we ever did. It was the Steiner fête. Well, we got to this fête and the kids took one look and they wouldn't get out of the back of the troopie for two hours. They were too shy. I said, 'It's just a fête, what's wrong?' And they went 'No, no, no there's too many people.' And I said, 'Look there's about 300 whitefellas there, that's all.' And eventually they got out and they got on stage and drummed and they got this huge applause. You don't see Indigenous young kids performing in town anywhere normally, there are no opportunities. But now they do. It started off with that and then six months later we got a gig at a conference. And now they're totally self-funded. These kids, they'll turn over \$15,000 or \$20,000 dollars a year. Last year, they did about 60 shows.

We put all the money into a trust account which we set up through Tangentyere Council Inc and we say to the kids,

'We'll save it for the greater good.' They fund their own clothing, equipment repairs, travel and if it's someone's birthday, we'll celebrate.

We've had 80 kids actually play with the group over the four years and now 64 of those are still in education, right up to the 15 and 16 year olds who have left to go to school in Darwin and Adelaide. These were kids who the teachers couldn't get to school and they couldn't read or write or get their heads out of the desk. Shy. Within a month of starting to drum, the attendance at the school was increasing.

You very rarely see young girls doing any musical activity. They don't get access to music in the communities. It's usually dominated by the fellas. But it was the girls who really took the drumming on and one girl, who's been with the group almost since the beginning, she's the leader now. She's still a really shy girl but she'll get up in front of 8,000 people and perform.

Our drumming is based on Afro-Cuban-Brazilian rhythms. You learn to sing a rhythm. So in the beginning we might have sung *Leaves falling on the ground*, boom-kadaka-doom-baka but now these kids, they change it. They adapt it. It was the shy girl who started it. She came up to me one day and said 'We should sing it kwatye apetyeme uterne alheye.' This means *the rain is coming, the sun is going* in their language. So all of a sudden we've got a rhythm that's theirs.

These are kids who are socially marginalised, you know. They come from really hard backgrounds as in there's a

lot of alcohol and violence around them. People in Alice Springs would judge those kids and go, 'They're some of those kids from the town camp,' because all they hear about is trouble. But now in Alice Springs if they go out and perform everyone from the people at K-Mart to the police go, 'Oh the drummers, they're fantastic.' So we've made this giant bridge in the community. People come and talk to these Aboriginal kids who never would have before. And this means the kids' confidence goes up. They know they can go out and perform in the community and they feel like they're part of the community, the whole community.

The families are so supportive of it. They love it to the point that some of the grandmothers, the Elders who do the traditional dance things with some of the girls, they've come up to us one day and one of the senior Elders, she's said, 'You know what? We should paint the girls with white under their eyes.' And I've gone, 'But that's for traditional dancing.' And she goes, 'Yeah, but *Drum Atweme* is something really special. The drum is like hitting the earth.' And so the girls went out to perform with white headbands on and painted faces and that is a very big thing.

Last year, we did a big workshop with some executives from National Australia Bank. We got 50 executives in a big circle and the kids taught them drumming and dancing too and these executives loved it and they emailed and said, 'What do you need?' And we said, 'Well, we need a bus because we borrow buses all the time.' So now they've turned around and started to raise the money. And for every dollar they raise, the bank will match it.

But we're standing on our own feet. We're making our own money so we're self-reliant and that's wonderful. There are a lot of great arts programs but they might only last a week or two weeks or a month and there's no continuum. We want *Drum Atweme* to have a long, long, long life. I want those girls who are 12 and 13 to have something in the future to build on. They can make their choices now and pass on their knowledge. The older ones teach the younger ones just as they would traditionally in their culture.

The drumming is one thing but it's what comes out of the drumming that will make the difference.

