



Ngarakuruwala (we sing songs)

GENEVIEVE CAMPBELL
artistic director, musician



A relative of mine was telling me about an event he had been to on the Tiwi Islands and this fantastic singing he'd heard from a bunch of ladies. He was saying that their response to a community event is to get into a group and create a song on the spot for it. The more he talked about the Tiwi Island ladies, the more excited I got. I really don't know whether it was a kind of artistic midlife crisis or something that made me suddenly need to go. I just really, really wanted to hear them.

I contacted Teresita who was the boss woman of the group and asked if I could come up. I spent a few days sitting around with them, listening and recording some songs just on a dodgy little mini disc and I decided that this was what I wanted to do. Work with the Tiwi Island songs. I had the idea of maybe taking a small group of musicians up from Sydney to play with the women. I'd been working with a jazz band (not in a French horn players' natural comfort zone!) and the correlation between improvisational jazz and the living breathing Tiwi songs struck me straight away. There were five of us: bass, drums, two saxophones and French horn.

The Tiwi songs are not set in stone. They might change a bit each time. I thought jazz musos would be quite good at coping with this and yet when we went up for a development workshop week in May, I found us musos were not quite as confident as I thought we would be. Because even though you improvise with jazz, you've still got charts in front of you. You still know how many bars there's going to be in a phrase, for example. With Tiwi songs, it's always different. One time they might sing, 'and he jumped into the river and when he came up he was a crocodile,' and that could take eight bars to sing. Then literally the next time, maybe two hours later, they'll sing 'he jumped under and came up and instead he looked like a crocodile,' and that will only take five bars. To them it's the same song but to us suddenly we're three bars out. We're completely thrown.

And what made it trickier was that there was no conducting, of anyone! Conducting is the same as pointing for the Tiwis and a lot of Indigenous communities. It's quite rude, you would never point at someone. I tried to copy some of their signs: there's an open hand raised up that is used like 'follow me' or 'we're going to sing now'. And there's a great kind of nodding where they point their lips – it's very hard to describe. There's a lot of eye contact, the group is very zoned into each other. Basically they're all shadowing the person who 'owns' the song or we might say, created it. This made for some fairly chaotic rehearsals, but fun.

The starting point was always the Tiwi songs. The women sang and the band responded and sometimes the women loved the ideas and sometimes they hated them. When I contacted the artistic director of the Darwin Festival about the possibility of a performance he was really keen and helpful and took us on board for August 2007.

I'd got all the budgeting done for 12 women, booked the hotel rooms and everything and then literally the day before we were flying out Teresita said, 'Here's a list of the extra women who are coming.' I just about had a heart attack. There were eight extra women and we had to find the money to get them across. But Teresita took the reins. She said, 'I'll get the money. We need this money. It's a really important thing for the strong women and we need it today!' And that's pretty much what happened. She asked around and the boss of the club came on board with the cash to get the extra ladies on the ferry.

Darwin was terrific. We had an over sell-out crowd. And then we played the following night at the Indigenous Music Awards. The women really loved it even though performing is not what they're about. They're more interested in having fun and singing for themselves and us as a group. We had to persuade them in fact to open up their circle and sing for the audience. The jazz musos on the other hand are the opposite. They're always aware of the audience and wanting to make it right. The collaboration was fantastic. Plus the experience has given the women a lot of kudos back on the island.

The younger women are interested now. We've been invited to play at the Opera House this year and that's what I'm working on, getting the money to bring the ladies down to Sydney. I'm getting better and better at writing applications... and staring the money down!



LEFT TO RIGHT:
Leonie Tipiloura, Clementine Puruntatameri (holding spear), Eugenie Tipungwuti
Regina Kantilla
Karen Tipiloura and Regina Kantilla
PHOTOS: FIONA MORRISON