

ARIA nominees in family harmony

By Andra Jackson
September 21, 2006

Broome in the 1960s had a population of only 1000 and one of the few forms of entertainment was sitting about at home having a family sing-along.

The Pigram family of 12 children had a ready advantage in that their mum was a keen singer in church and at home, where the nine boys and three girls formed a ready-made choir.

Now, seven of the brothers who form the group Pigram Brothers, and known for their lush vocal harmonies, have helped put the tropical town in the north of Western Australia on the musical map. They have also given voice to a new, distinctively Aboriginal sound that has emerged in recent years.

The group's latest recording, *Under the Mango Tree*, has just been nominated for its first ARIA in the world music category.

Speaking from Broome yesterday, the oldest brother, Stephen, 46, said: "There was always music around our house. Dad used to make music instruments and there were always instruments lying around . . . odd-shaped guitars."

Like Broome itself - Australian's first truly multicultural town, with Japanese, Chinese, Malays and other groups drawn to work in its pearl industry a century ago - the Pigrams had a diverse range of backgrounds to draw on for their music. From their father came an Irish influence, while their mother, with her Filipino background, injected Broome's typical Asian-Aboriginal mix, Stephen said.

Being taught by Irish nuns and singing in church was another influence; yet another was the area's country music passion.

The harmonies just happened from them being a family with similar voices, he said.

"We tell the boys to find their own harmonies. They know who can do high and low and medium harmonies."

They blend so well together that in the creation of their three CDs they have been able to dispense with the usual separate recording of each voice and are recorded bunched around the microphone "as one voice".

Stephen was the first to take music outside the family, performing with two friends in the 1970s, and then with brothers Alan and Philip, forming a covers group called *Scrap Metal* in 1983.

The Pigram Brothers were formed in 1995 as an outlet for the music they were starting to write, and Stephen acknowledges the influence of Broome songwriter Jimmy Chi in threading words from their local Yawuru language in the lyrics.

He also credits singer songwriter Shane Howard, who produced their first album, Saltwater Country, with raising their profile in the music world.

Howard introduced them to former Dingoes guitarist Kerryn Tolhurst, who produced their second album, and to Irish singer Mary Black, with whom they have performed.

"We're connected up like a great song line because we all like the same music," he said.

The Pigram Brothers perform tomorrow night at the Noise Bar, Railway Hotel, Albert Street, Brunswick, with support from the Joe Geia Trio and Tonchi Trio.

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