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The Pigram Brothers: a top Aboriginal band talk about their Filipino heritage

by Deborah Ruiz Wall at the Dreaming Festival, Woodford, Queensland



I didn't know the Pigram

THE PIGRAM BROTHERS WITH DEBORAH RUIZ WALL AT THE DREAMING FESTIVAL, WOODFORD, QUEENSLAND, JUNE 2007

Brothers. But on our first night at the Woodford Dreaming Festival, my friends and I simply could not resist dancing till past midnight at their concert. I just had to meet them and find out a bit more about this fabulous seven-member band who I was told has Aboriginal, Filipino, English and Irish ancestry. At the back stage at the close of their second concert, I chased them with a digital camera and a tape recorder.

From the pearling town of Broome in Western Australia, the Pigram Brothers — Alan, Stephen, David, Colin, Philip, Peter and Gavin formed their seven-piece country folk/rock band in 1996. They come from a family of twelve, 3 girls and 9 boys. I found out later how famous and highly regarded they are for their originality and talent. Their work, *Saltwater Country* won a Deadly at the National Indigenous Music Awards in Sydney for 'Best Debut Album' in 1998. Last year, they picked up another Deadly with their hit song *Moonlight*. The boys were also involved in "Bran Nue Dae" and "Corrugation Road", classic indigenous musical plays that toured nationally. A critic praised their music as 'exceptional', 'original' and 'of the highest standard that enlightens and consumes audiences of all nationalities.'

But what fascinates me is the Filipino influence in their culture. As a child, Colin remembers having pork 'adobo', a Filipino dish that was served to them on special occasions. He remembers his uncle who played ukulele with strings made out of fishing lines. They grew up with 'a whole mix of people' in Broome — Malay, Japanese, Chinese and all this influence could have crept into their music. In the group, Colin, Stephen and David are the creative drive for lyrics and composition.

In our yarn, I mentioned that before Federation (1901), Australia was predominantly populated by Aboriginal, Asian and non-Anglo people, especially at the Top End. So, it is pertinent to ask in terms of a period in our history, 'who really is *Australian*?' (The brothers laughed.) I reported that in western Sydney, some second generation Filipino immigrants feel they don't quite fit into either Australian or Filipino culture. The Pigram Brothers said: 'We grew up in our grandmother's country so we are all right. We don't have an identity crisis.' While growing up, they felt free wandering around in the bush, fishing and hunting. 'Now Broome is like a suburb. Tourism is all right. It all depends what goes with it. It's bursting at the seams,' Stephen said. The Pigram Brothers sing 'records of times written on times of change' such as country, lifestyle, things that happen everyday. 'We don't have to say too much. We make people aware in more subtle ways,' Colin said. He gave the example of *My Land*:

...Local fisherman gotta bagful, gotta big gang, plenty mouth to feed/ Man with the badge say hey you, you're breaking the rules/ Don't care what your rule is/ You know a thousand politicians couldn't change my ways/ My law is the sea and pull of the sun and the moon/ My land by the water, my land by the waterside/ Jirr, milgin-ngurru [1] Feeding on the rising tide.

Indeed the lyrics indicate how from the sea-eagle bird's eye view, land and nature could be approached. And the Pigram Brothers' indigenous music teaches through the incorporation of tradition into the twenty-first century using some words from their Yawuru language.

And their multicultural legacy is also acknowledged from their recollection of their mother's cooking of fish and rice: 'the cheapest thing you can eat!' so they have it served 2 to 3 times a week, cooked with garlic and lemon grass. Definitely Malay or broadly Asian influence, they said, and this memory appears in their song of nostalgia, *Going Back Home*:

...I feel like going back home/Right now while the mangoes are ripe/ Frangipani starting to bloom/And the bluebone starting to bite/ Hey mum I can just taste your fish soup and rice/I'm coming back home to you/Can't hack the pace of this city life/Sooner be dreaming in Broome...

(lyrics: Stephen Pigram)

What about the Filipino connection? They mentioned a few names. 'San Diego' on their mother side. Their great grandfather, who came to northeast Australia in the 1880s — 'Thomas Puertollano'. I gasped, 'Oh yes, I read about him. He was a pioneer, a natural leader who made an enormous contribution to the setting up of the Catholic missions at Disaster Bay and Lombadina. Historian, Regina Ganter wrote that Filipino Catholics were at the interface between missions and Kimberley Aborigines right from the outset.'^[2]

In the case of



PHOTO: DEBORAH RUIZ WALL, 2007

Puertollano, Ganter is critical of the lack of acknowledgment by church historians who record the missionaries as the pioneering agents on Dampierland Peninsula. Ganter argues that the breakthrough for the missionaries was based on Puertollano's pioneering work. Puertollano had already established fruitful contacts with Aborigines.^[3] Indeed, Ganter's research method is laudable having supplemented existing archival records with oral history obtained from Theresa Puertollano, Thomas' daughter.

Puertollano came to Australia in the 19th century from Mindanao. According to his daughter,

Theresa, the Fishermen's Bend outside Broome across Roebuck Bay was leased to her father for 99 years. She said her father was well educated and spoke English well and was a 'headman' who helped build the church with all Filipino people—many were tradesmen. They built houses, ran barber shops, had fish traps around Broome. Puertollano met many Aboriginal people who lived in little humpies and he employed them. He married a young Aboriginal girl who was traveling with her mob. She was about 14 or 15 years old. There were French priests and Trappists who wanted to build a mission. Theresa said that her father gave up to the priests the place which was already well established, and he moved further up north. With other Filipino people, he cleared the next place in the bush and called it Lombadina. He had goats and cattle there and set up gardens. Once again, he gave this to the mission and moved to Broome.

But there is another side to this story: church and state politics. A.O. Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigines in 1915 argued that Lombadina should be closed because the property of 20,000 acres (8100 hectares) belonged to a Manilaman (Puertollano) who was technically employing the Aborigines. This was a breach of regulations as 'Asiatics are not allowed to employ Aborigines'.^[4] In May 1916, Fr John Creagh, Rector of the Redemptorist Monastery in Perth was appointed Superior of the whole Kimberley. His brief was to safeguard the mission from threats from a powerful government agency (the Department of Aborigines and Fisheries, to which Immigration was added in 1915).

Fr Creagh's brother and a partner bought the land for £1100 and the lease was transferred from Thomas Puertollano to Creagh's brother. On a personal note, Fr Creagh thought highly of Puertollano. He wrote that this was ...a man to whom I am under the greatest obligations. He was the former owner of Lombadina and for years he kept the Mission there going.^[5]

And so the Pigram Brothers' great grandfather, Thomas Puertollano was truly a legend in the annals of Australian history. And through their songs in their subtle ways, the Pigram Brothers today point out the significance of connection to traditional land. Their vision, one of the Pigram Brothers said, is 'to make people aware. Songs don't go from one side. They jump from all angles. Have a look around!'

Endnotes:

[1] Jiir — small sea eagle; milgin-ngurru — big sea eagle.

[2] Regina Ganter (2006), *Mixed Relations: Asian Aboriginal Contact in North Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, p. 102.

[3] *op. cit.*, p. 101.

[4] Note: People from the Philippines were called 'Manilamen'; see Margaret Zucker (2005) 2nd ed., *From Patrons to Partners*, University of Notre Dame Australia Press, p. 58.

[5] *op. cit.*, p. 59.

The Pigram Brothers latest release on DVD is titled *Pigram Brothers Live* and their three classic albums, *Saltwater Country*, *Jiir* and *Under the Mango Tree* can be obtained from:

Pigram Music : PO Box 1012, Broome WA 6725 Australia.

Phone: 61-8-91922487

and on their web site at <http://www.pigrambrothers.com.au/>



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