

Saltwater soundtrack



Tourist drawcard ... the Pigram Brothers attract crowds to their Broome shows. Photo: Helene Jedwab

Bruce Elder
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A family of seven brothers makes music that captures the spirit of Broome, writes Bruce Elder.

Did you know there is a special kind of music called the "Broome Sound"?

It is easy to guess that, like Broome itself, it is a bright and breezy mixture of styles with a little bit of reggae, a lot of sunny sounds that seem to echo the music of the Caribbean, some hints of country and a little bit of pure West Kimberley indigenous.

It is the music of Jimmy Chi (the man responsible for the hit musical Bran Nue Day) and the Pigram Brothers and most of it is created in a tiny recording studio, Pearl Shell Studios, in a quiet backstreet of Broome.

The sound has become so popular that every winter (which is the high season in Broome) the Pigram Brothers perform regularly on the deck of an old pearling lugger across the road from the Roebuck Hotel. It has become one of the town's major tourist attractions.

"The concert season has become so popular and we have become so popular that I get lots of emails from people who want to know exactly when we are playing so they can time their visits to Broome to coincide with our appearances at Pearl Luggers," Alan Pigram says.

Broome has become a hub for Aboriginal music and culture in the West Kimberley. Stephen "Baamba" Albert, the one-time star of Bran Nue Day, lives in the town and is involved in promoting indigenous music from the area through a range of concerts and festivals. He sees music as an ideal way for young Aborigines from the outback communities to connect with their culture.

Broome is home to the remarkable Goolarri Media Enterprises, an Aboriginal initiative that started with Goolarri Radio in 1991 and now includes a TV station, which broadcasts local indigenous stories. Goolarri has state-of-the-art equipment, which provides indigenous people with access to world-class recording and broadcasting facilities.

The Pigram Brothers' hugely successful 1997 album *Saltwater Country*, produced by Shane Howard of Goanna fame, was recorded on equipment provided by Goolarri.

"Goolarri had all the equipment in boxes but no one to put it together," Pigram says. "We managed to get it all working in less than two months and then we were the first to use it and we recorded *Saltwater Country*."

This led to the creation of the Pearl Shell Studios. And the studio's name? Well, the studio walls are covered with real pearl shells that have been signed by the musicians who have used the recording studio.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Pigrams lie at the heart of the Broome sound. There are seven brothers. Lead vocalist, guitarist and songwriter Stephen is now so well known and admired that he recently appeared twice at the Sydney Festival, as a guest for the Kev Carmody show at the State Theatre and with the Black Arm Band in Murundak at the Sydney Opera House. Stephen is supported by brothers Alan (electric guitar, mandolin, ukelele), Colin (acoustic guitar and vocals), David (acoustic guitar and vocals), Phillip (drums), Peter (bass guitar) and Gavin (percussion).

Broome people refer to the west Kimberley indigenous community as either desert people, bush people or saltwater people. The Pigrams are saltwater people. They refer to their unique blend of folk, rock and country as saltwater music. What makes their music such a vital part of Broome's culture is its passionate commitment to the land. The songs are infused with a deep, enduring commitment to Broome and the Kimberley. In *Going Back Home*, for example, Stephen writes: "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."

Listen to the Pigrams on a pearl lugger on a balmy evening in Broome and such songs, sung with happiness and nostalgia, will guarantee you dream of returning to the land that all seven Pigrams regard as a true paradise.

Sound advice

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