

Culture and Development

## **Case Study: From Outstation to Out There: NABARLEK - a music industry case study**

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### **Introduction**

*We are 'not throwing our life away', 'sharing our life and culture and Dreamtime stories', 'being able to go to new places, meet new faces, have opportunities we wouldn't have thought about', 'it makes our old people really proud', 'music is important to keep our culture strong and pass stories to the younger generation', 'we will be doing good things into the future'.*

Nabarlek is a group of twelve Aboriginal musicians from the tiny Outstation of Manmoyi, 215 kilometres from the remote community of Gunbalanya (Oenpelli) in western Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. Over a five-year period, Nabarlek has become a successful performing and recording group, which now owns its own recordings and equipment and has established its own music industry enterprise.

This unique achievement has come about through an equal and collaborative partnership over recent years involving Nabarlek, Skinnyfish Music (a Darwin-based independent record label and distributor committed to the development of Aboriginal music), and Demed Outstation Resource Centre in Gunbalanya as Manager of Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) and community support organisation. Also involved are two registered training organisations: Charles Darwin University, formerly NT University, and private provider Stringybark.

The demand for music industry training in remote communities such as Manmoyi was high, particularly in the absence of alternative relevant education and training programmes, and given the high levels of participation in music activity in Aboriginal communities. While the community development and social benefits of this music training could rarely be doubted, it appeared that, for some years, monitoring of vocational and industry outcomes, and rationales for funding decisions, did not take place within current industry frameworks. The shift to client-driven funding of training, and the diminished role of Training Advisory Councils in identifying industry training needs and in endorsing training proposals, could certainly have been a factor.

### **Activity**

The musicians in Nabarlek started playing together, and teaching each other, originally as a gospel group with a couple of acoustic guitars and had their first experiences performing while touring around the Top End with the Christian Fellowship. They were helped by a

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visiting outstation teacher and went on to their first public performance as dancers at Gunbalanya Open Day in 1992, where they won first prize. With the prize money they bought their first set of musical instruments.

Back home at Manmoyi they practised solidly, although initially they could only play in the daytime as the outstation ran on solar power. As they started to write their own songs, the majority in their language, Kunwinjku, the old people began to tell them stories. Their original songs then evolved from a traditional format to integration with contemporary music styles - songs about the past, their people, land and culture. Once Manmoyi had more permanent electricity, with a generator, the band refined its performances and consolidated a repertoire of original material. They first performed as Nabarlek (the Kunwinjku word for rock wallaby) in 1995.

Nabarlek's long-term aim is to control their own future and achieve economic independence. They have now established their own small business, Manmoyi Music, and, with the advice and mentoring of Skinnyfish Music have recently completed a five-year business plan. They have purchased a concert PA system to reduce costs for their own performances as well as to generate income from hiring it to others. Skinnyfish will now work with the musicians to develop a new training plan as an essential framework for achieving their music performance, technology and industry business skills requirements.

The way Skinnyfish, Nabarlek and Demed work together provides a unique business and training model because it operates as an equal partnership.

### Impact

In 2003, in a climate of much discussion, as well as uncertainty, about music industry training for Aboriginal musicians and associated workers in the Northern Territory, the NT Cultural, Recreation and Tourism Training Advisory Council (CHARTTES) believed Nabarlek members were also playing an important part as role models for the younger Rock Wallaby Band (15 to 17-year-olds) and Wildflower (14 to 15-year-old girls) from Manmoyi. Following music industry training, the Rock Wallabies are now often engaged as support band for Nabarlek, with one of their members occasionally sitting in with the main act.

Participants in the first pilot, the young women's Wildflower Band, have produced great results with performances at major festivals, a video clip with national TV broadcast, features on national radio and their first professional CD to be released on the Skinnyfish Music label in 2007.

### Lessons

- There is significant merit in documenting partnerships. Its processes, long-term planning and holistic approach help to present a model for future development and application elsewhere.
- Demand for industry training in remote communities will always be high as there are generally no jobs or opportunities available for people who live in such communities.
- Based on Nabarlek's case, key features of successful partnerships in the music industry are: effective consultation processes; high quality training delivery; high quality music performances and products, which generate employment and income as

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outcomes of training; an equal relationship between the parties; a commitment by all parties to training related to long-term industry/economic outcomes and development; a commitment to income generation for Nabarlek; and ultimately a commitment to social and community development outcomes.

- The model described in this case study, with checklists and templates of essential elements of the partnership, was used by the NT Department of Education, Employment and Training as a basis for funding pilot music training projects in remote communities. It is therefore a model that is replicable elsewhere.