



THE LOCALS



ARTS

Robbie James, musician and producer, Scattered People and GANGgajang

“ ONE OF THE SINGERS, SAHARNAZ, WOULD LISTEN TO PINK FLOYD IN PRIVATE BECAUSE IN IRAN, SUCH MUSIC WAS BANNED AND THE PENALTIES FOR POSSESSION WERE UNTHINKABLE ... ”

In an industry dominated by songs about booty calls and lost lovers, Scattered People sings of international injustice, the plight of refugees and hope for humanity. The diverse collective is made up of asylum seekers, refugees and local kindred spirits who come together to collaboratively write songs that give a voice to the voiceless. One of the kindreds is Robbie James from iconic Australian band GANGgajang. A successful performer and producer, Robbie has been lending his talents to the collective for four years and recently produced Scattered People's third album, Sugarmill Road. The Weekend Edition Gold Coast had a chat with Robbie about changing the world and the power of music.

Tell us about Scattered People?

We are a collective of asylum seekers, refugees and local kindred spirits who write songs together with the goal of not only sharing experiences in a happy environment, but to give a voice to the voiceless. It's wonderful to see hope and confidence growing stronger within the realm of music.

How did the collective come together?

Scattered People grew out of the asylum seeker centre in West End, Brisbane in 1998. Traumatized refugee claimants from many countries used music to create solidarity with one another and to fortify their hopes. From this an album eventually resulted in 2000.

Congratulations on the collective's third album Sugarmill Road! What can listeners expect from the record?

The music has flavours of world including classical, folk and pop. The musical composition supports the unique poems of the detainees, giving free expression to their haunting beauty. My aim was to seamlessly merge Western and Middle Eastern music and language, and this marriage particularly shines in the songs that feature the string quintet. This natural hybrid could almost be a new genre.

The album features a rendition of Pink Floyd's anthem 'On The Turning Away', what was the symbolism of this song?

'On The Turning Away' is the only cover song on the album. We chose this song because of the powerful lyric which challenges the tendencies of first world nations to turn away the 'weak and the weary ... the pale and downtrodden' in order to preserve their privileged lifestyle. For one of the featured singers on the track, Saharnaz, the music represents freedom and defiance against unjust systems she experienced since childhood. Saharnaz would listen to the music of Pink Floyd in private because in Iran, such music was banned and the penalties for possession were unthinkable. It is a dream come true for Saharnaz to at last not only be allowed to be a singer, but to have recorded a Pink Floyd song on our album four years after boarding a crammed open boat to journey through treacherous waters to Christmas Island where she spent many months in detention before finding her way to Brisbane.

Many of the collective's members have personally escaped persecution and unthinkable adversities. How has music helped bring people together to share their stories?

We named the album Sugarmill Road because that is the name of the road in Brisbane where the Brisbane Immigration Transit Accommodation (BITA) is. We visited the centre many times with our guitars and it always brought much joy and hope to the detainees. It was here that we were given their poems and stories and were asked if we could turn them into songs. I believe music can change the world, one person at a time. I saw this transformation occur many times in my studio as refugees got involved in the recording process and stepped up to the microphone to sing. It gave them a real purpose and a way of being heard, a way of expressing themselves in a deeply passionate, free and happy environment. It changed my world too. It's such a humbling experience to make music with these people, to make music that can actually change lives for the better.

How can readers get involved or help the Scattered People reach its goal?

I think the best way to help is to spread the word about these wonderful people who, just like us, want a happy, safe and enriched life for their families and themselves. Spreading the word about the album, sharing the music, buying the music, it will all help. Money raised will go towards future projects to help marginalised people.

What compelled you to personally get involved?

It was about four years ago that I became involved with Scattered People. I'd reached a point where I wanted to give something back, to create music that went far beyond entertainment. I'd always tended to write music about displaced people and cultures, but it was always in third person. Scattered People is first person, it's real. They are people who have fled their homelands for a better and safer life. To write and record with them is the ultimate honour and musical experience for me. I'm very grateful.

What inspires you?

The unknown. The search for absolute beauty. The masters of music who have sent shivers through my spine from across the centuries. Love and friendship.

You've also achieved incredible success as part of iconic Australian band GANGgajang. What have been some of your personal career highlights?

I guess with a band that has a 30 year history and is still going as strong as ever, the whole thing is a highlight. A couple of months ago we filmed a video for our new single 'Circles In The Sand' at Uluru. We set the band up upon the red dirt directly in front of the rock. It was a privilege to be given permission to do this and it was a very moving experience. Our many tours of Brasil were pretty special, especially in 2001 when I played in both GANGgajang and Yothu Yindi during the tour.

The song 'Sounds Of Then (This Is Australia)' is still, to this day, considered an unofficial anthem for Australia. How do you feel when you're out and about and you hear one of your songs?

It never stops being a thrill. I'm often taken back to the days in the studio when we recorded the track. 'Sounds Of Then' is 30 years old and the band still has its original members apart from our dear friend, bass player Chris Bailey who sadly passed away in 2013, so these memories are very special. I feel pretty lucky to be a part of this group of friends and the music. The song has its origin in Bundaberg when our singer Mark Callaghan wrote the lyrics sitting out on the patio of his parent's house. Just last month a street was named after the band in Bundaberg, GANGgajang Way.

You've experienced the ups and downs of the fickle music industry. What are some of the biggest lessons you've learnt on this journey so far?

I've always stayed true to the music I've heard in my heart. It might not always pay the bills but you are richer because of it. I'm not sure if I could call this a lesson as such because I've always known this to be the right path for me.

Finally, can fans expect any new music from GANGgajang in the near future?

They can, we have recorded a new single and are in the process of recording the rest of the album. We hope to have it out early to mid next year.

IN SHORT ...

NAME: Robbie James
KNOWN FOR: being part of GANGgajang
OCCUPATION: musician and producer
scatteredpeople.com



MEET THE LOCALS

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