

The Greatest Show on Earth

Friday 12 September 2014, A Taste of Broome, Goolarri Creative Precinct, Blackman St, Broome



Stephen "Bamba" Albert & Stephen Pigram

Stephen Pigram is Australia's greatest contemporary troubadour. Many people in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide might cast Paul Kelly in that role. But I think Kelly himself would dip his lid to Pigram. Whatever Stephen Pigram does should be on the national cultural agenda. His every performance should be studied and reviewed with the highest level of thought and analysis. It should be a national priority to ensure that he lives a long, prosperous, happy life. As a live performer and musical craftsman Pigram is awe inspiring. He has a repertoire of 800 songs and his corpus of new songs is something that the whole nation should be awaiting, nurturing, revering.

In *A Taste of Broome* Pigram makes his debut as artistic director with Lorae Coffin as musical director. The show has been running for two years now and it just keeps getting better.

On Friday 12th September at Goolarri – the creative industries precinct of Broome - Pigram and his latter day creative team bring memories of the famous Kuckles band, his family members and the equally great improvisario Stephen "Bamba" Albert gave the greatest show on earth. Hang the West End of London or Broadway in New York, I have consulted all the critics and they agree that Goolarri was the best place to be on earth on that very special night. The show had everything: a new moon, the famous Broome stairway to heaven, a million stars, a gorgeous balmy, Broome dry season night, the extraordinary Broome seafood and culinary delights. But most of all it had Stephen Pigram and

his latter day Kuckles influenced creative team. Each segment of the show, which featured three generations of performers, including Stephen's daughter Naomi, focused on historical periods of Broome life.



Naomi Pigram

Broome is the New Orleans of Australia. It is a unique melting pot where the white Australia policy had limited effect. The performers sang songs of the past to light up the future. It was simply breath taking, moving and entertaining all at once. The performers were also celebrating. It was the 25th anniversary of Broome Aboriginal Media Association BAMA – formed by musicians – because they had no place to air their unique talents. So there were so many electric pulses running through the crowd and the performers and even the old veteran Pigram found tears streaming down his face. All

this held in a unique, unexpected, very special heart land place of Broome, Goolarri. The whole show was conducted in the extraordinary creative precinct that has been created from Lord Mc Alpine's zoo storage sheds. Now it is the best venue in Broome.



Some of the BAMA Collective with their 25th Anniversary Cake

The feeling of the show on the 12th of September emanated from this collective of innovation that is Broome. The musicians put out and the audience charge going back produced a special feeling. BAMA was formed because there was no public way of transmitting the music that was being produced. It was an audacious dream to have a Broome radio station that would transmit local music and content. That seemingly audacious dream resulted in the formation of not just a radio station, but a television station, a creative industries hub – Goolarri Media Enterprises - that in my view is not replicated in any other part of Australia. There is an air of independence, confidence and pride that is transmitted to the young ones. The harvest of future decades will be bountiful.

Its important to reflect on just what has been achieved in all this. Broome has always had its charm. It was voted no 1 tourist destination in Western Australia last week. But to create a world class show that would be the envy of any of Australia's capital cities and would be the toast of any city internationally is something above and beyond the norm. In a way the BAMA/Goolarri mob has made it their quest to radically exceed normal expectations. I remember Dr Dot West talking to me about making television for no-one else but the Aboriginal community as one of her dreams. That is what Goolarri have done, dream it, feel it, do it. They are limited only by their imagination. The ingredients in the mix is a kind of street practicality that is the heart and soul of the Malay, Japanese, Chinese, Timorese Aboriginal cultural mix of Broome. When a government dollar comes to BAMA/Goolarri at least twenty more flow from it that benefits the local community. Other film and television organisations have been funded with hundreds of times the funding that BAMA/Goolarri have received. Yes they do present outstanding series of television, music, film out of capital centres... but there just is not the special flavour of community mixed with creativity that you feel

and see in Broome. The ownership and pride of especially the old Broome community of their local talent and their songs and their shows is like a strong solid hand shake. Governments just do not get it. They will entities and organisations who are flagships or icons or they will fund entities and organisations that are new often with no experience or just because of a perceived need. Meanwhile innovation goes unfunded and often unrecognised. It is almost as if the politicians say well BAMA/Goolarri will always survive and do well not matter how much we give them. The work that has to be done is on enhancing the creativity and even exporting the content to places like Tokyo, New York, Paris, London.

My view is that there should be a success quotient for organisations that perform above and beyond the norm. Such organisations and entities should not have to go through the normal bureaucratic processes to receive project funding. It should be available to them provided they can demonstrate local employment, content, support, co-investment and enterprise. Instead in the Aboriginal policy context it is often the case that funding will be taken away because of success. So instead of chasing excellence funds chase poverty, inequality and continual failure. Yes that is part of what it is all about but not at the expense of achievement for all. The great lesson is to ensure that organisations like BAMA/Goolarri are part of the process of developing new entities. We must for example understand how important it is to have a creative industries hub in the North West of Australia with links to every part of Asia and with a heart of local Aboriginal culture.

The same is true of people. The Japanese have a system of investing in people who are national treasures. This does not mean that they are mentioned in the local press and given an award. They are given, a house, an income, a library for the rest of their life. They are the Professors and Gurus of Culture and the investment in them is an investment in all.

In all this you cannot disturb the hungry creative culture of Broome. The whole ethos behind the common gate creativity is something that the big housing developments and projects of Broome are challenging. The recent great debate over the creation of an lng gas refinery at James Price Point/Walmadany divided the town about where it is going and what its character was. Thankfully the power of old Broome and the traditional Goolarabooloo and Jabirr Jabirr traditional owners won over the idea that the place where the dinosaur footprints are still visible in the rock should become an industrial service port. It remains a very tense and ongoing issue to reconcile these ongoing pressures.

Perhaps government will not wake up and understand these things. Perhaps it is the nature of politics to not be able to understand issues as intangible as spirit of place. In this respect then perhaps the lesson is that BAMA/Goolarri must hold on to their independence. While others may have greater financial capacity, the spirit of excellence and place, which has seen the capital assets of the original fledgling amateur association grow at a rate that would make any business manager smile, is perhaps what will remain the proud and defining spirit of Broome.

All this is about the Australia of tomorrow. Do we want local innovative civil spaces and dreams that are part of the ancient make up of this place to start to become important? Or Do we have this Canberra and capital city driven ethos that even when it is well intentioned creates a blau mange? What ever governments of Liberal or Labor persuasion do in Canberra or the capital cities I think I have seen the future and it is not a question of the politicians allowing things to happen it is a matter of them understanding where the power and life is. If they are not get behind the qualities that made the Taste of Broome great then they will simply be asterisks of history, big talkers who people do not remember.

I am confident that no matter what happens people like Stephen Pigram and Stephen Bamba Albert will be remembered in a spirit of great good will. They will be carried in peoples' hearts and souls and their music will be played and played if not in the world in the nurseries of creative talent in Broome. In that garden a thousand flowers are already growing.



Jada and Adi Cox

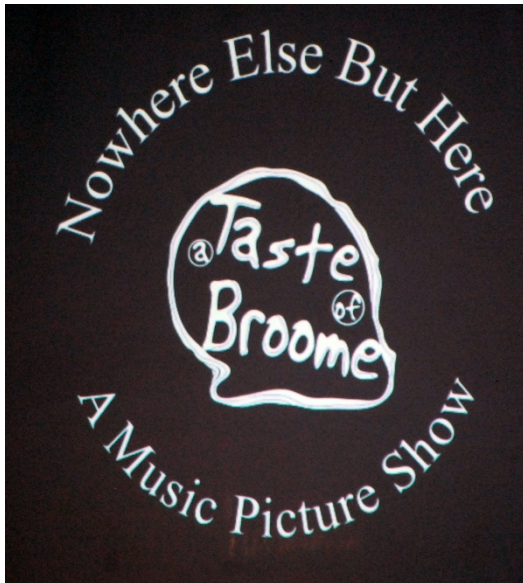


Bo Jesse Shipway

What is that made the performance so magical? Stephen “Bamba” Albert is the Mr Bojangles of Broome on one leg. He can’t dance as well as he once could with his legs, but he dances with his stories and his words and his warm presence. When he is alongside Pigram magic happens. The ladies of Broome cry and recall the days when Bamba was the local teenage pin up singer. He could move effortlessly from the South Sea standards to *Begin the Beguine* with a ukulele, Quando Quando, Quando to Elvis to Hank Williams. When there was a party in Broome Bamba was at the helm with young musicians like Stephen learning their chops, doing their apprenticeship and learning their craft.

The brilliance of A Taste of Broome centres on Pigram and Bamba. It is a long story to explain why Stephen Pigram is not regarded as our latter day national poet laureate/songman/ministrel or why Bamba, who is recognised in every Aboriginal community in the country, is not more widely utilised in film and television. Part of the reason lies with the quality of life in Broome and the Kimberley – Australia’s last great pristine wilderness. Its also part of the greatness of Stephen and Bamba that they are loathe to separate themselves out from their fellow Kuckles. The young and old ladies of Broome who swoon and attend their performances think of them as a collective unit. You cant have Bamba without Stephen without Mickey the master musician and without all of the non-musicians and workers who are part of the ethos of Broome.

Then of course there is the great extended Pigram family, Stephen’s brothers, daughters, sons and grand daughters all carrying on the musical traditions and all are inspiring, innovative and carrying on and creating new songlines and traditions.



Its all summed up in one of the lines from a famous Broome song “Nowhere else but here”. If you want to see, feel, taste, touch, hear – the greatness of Stephen Pigram and Bamba and the Kuckles – then you have to go to Broome.

Taste of Broome itself was an innovation. Its electricity and charm comes from the traditions of music – Timorese, Malay, Torres Strait, Japanese, Chinese, Yawuru, Bardi, Swing, R&B – that emerged from the hot house of pearling and its aftermath. With pictures of luggers, divers, pearl shell, sand dunes carefully choreographed behind each song and with the rays of the moon lighting the whole scene it was spectacular. You missed it! Well here’s good news, Its on again next year. But I can tell you the secret is getting out fast so you had better book your tickets a year in advance. In the middle of the Southern winter head to Broome on a full moon night and you will be in for the greatest show on earth, a show that you will never forget a show that will change your concept of Australia, warm your soul and make you walk away happy and content with the world. It’s a show for the young and the old, for the world weary and for those who are looking for inspiration. Most of all it’s a show that has come from the collective efforts of the people of Broome. It tells their story and it just envelops you in the magic of the North West.

