

Music

Solomon Islands band Narasirato have been stealing the show at music festivals across the world and are now heading to Womad New Zealand. BY JANE CORNWELL

Bamboo instruments – pan pipes, log drums, stomping tubes – are not what one tends to associate with the Clash, the legendary 70s band at the vanguard of Britain's punk movement. Their late frontman, singer and guitarist, Joe Strummer, never got about in body paint and a bark loincloth, either. But it is partly thanks to Strummerville, a charity founded to assist projects that help change the world through music, that a Solomon Islands collective named Narasirato have been touring the major music festivals of the world, including this March's Womad New Zealand.

Last year, Narasirato (Nara-sir-ato, which means "Cry for sunshine") stole the show everywhere from the Roskilde Festival in Denmark and Fuji Rock in Japan to England's humongous – and rain-soaked – Glastonbury Festival, where Greenpeace was so impressed it invited the band to record the song *Totoraha (Belief)* in its onsite Cowshed Studios.

"I can't get Glastonbury out of my mind," says Donation Manu'asi, Narasirato's musical director and lead pan-piper. "It was big, like a city. When we started playing, everyone started moving ..." He pauses and smiles. "Everyone," he says, eyes twinkling.

A sprawling group of farmers and fishermen from Oterama Village (population: 142) in the Solomons' remote southern Malaita province, Narasirato sing songs that praise nature, revere ancestors and reflect on contemporary concerns. They sing these songs over music so frenetic and funky they've had crowds of all ages and persuasions wiggling out, and hipsters such as London-based reggae producer Nicky Manasseh begging to remix them.

With a new album, *Warato'o*, out in March and tips for the top from BBC Radio, British world music magazine *Songlines* and other salubrious outlets, Narasirato are on a roll. They are even achieving the unthinkable and making pan pipes cool. But although some of the



Spreading the seed of goodness

group's members – 10 in total when touring; the whole village, more or less, when at home – have found new inspiration in the heavy metal and reggae acts they've encountered overseas (drummer, vocalist and dancer Andrew Manerou has "Slayer" emblazoned across the back of his sleeveless denim shirt), their aim remains the same. Narasirato are fighting for their culture, their land, their existence.

"We aim to revive and maintain our traditions," says Manu'asi of the group, who with the rest of Oterama belong to the Are'are people of Melanesia, whose oral historians trace their clan lineage back over 100 generations (their Are'are language wasn't recorded in writing until the 1960s).

"We want to assist our youth, fight poverty and support our subsistence economy," Manu'asi continues. "We want to draw attention to rising sea levels, to

logging and mining and other threats to our society. We want the world to see that our culture is our life."

Manu'asi is saying all this as he sits on a clover-covered hill above the village, where an open-sided A-frame Culture House has been built next to a wall of vine-entwined rainforest. The women of the village are off digging yams in a nearby garden; several members of Narasirato have gone fishing in the dugout canoes that are moored in nearby mangrove-scrumpled wetlands, on a narrow river that leads out to a turquoise lagoon. That Manu'asi happens to be wearing a Strummerville T-shirt only makes things seem more urgent, if not a little surreal.

"We did not know who Joe Strummer was," he says of a man who refused to sell out, who loved music from elsewhere and whose songs made him the musical and political inspiration for a generation. "But

now that we do, we think he would have liked our music. He would have liked what Narasirato are about."

So just how did a bamboo band from the Solomons – a volcanic and coral reef archipelago that stretches 1400km across the Pacific and boasts more than 900 islands and 87 different languages – come to the attention of the Joe Strummer Foundation for New Music? A foundation that was established shortly after Strummer's death at age 50 in 2002 and has so far supported over 60 bands with recording and touring in places as far flung as Bogota and Malawi?

As with much in life, it all comes down

to serendipity. Or as Narasirato would have it, to Warato'o. The Are'are people live lives that are governed by this belief system (and

At the Glastonbury Festival, Greenpeace was so impressed it invited the band to record in its onsite studio.

to a lesser extent by the Catholicism brought in by Christian missionaries in the early 20th century), a concept that bows to the wisdom of their ancestors and loosely translates as "the little seed of goodness in everything". Everything happens for a reason, that reason being Warato'o: healthy crops, abundant fish, sunshine. Not to mention the fact their UK-based manager, Jason Mayall, had been one of Joe Strummer's

best mates.

"When we play music, when we work in the garden, when we do fishing or

Frenetic and funky: Narasirato has hipster London producers begging to let them remix their music.

hunting in the bush, anything at all, we have Warato'o with us," says Manu'asi. "He is with us when we are overseas. He was with us when we met Jason Mayall."

The eldest son of guitarist John Mayall, the man seen as the father of British blues, Jason Mayall was a delegate at the 2009 Australasian World Music Expo in Melbourne, when he was blown away by Narasirato. With their upbeat choreography, arresting traditional get-up (although they also perform in hoodies and jeans) and instruments that range in size and power (the giant bass thong-o-phone is played with a pair of rubber thongs), it was no wonder.

Back then, the band had a different manager, a different lead singer and a different sort of aesthetic. The Narasirato Pan Pipe Association was originally founded in 1991 in Honiara, the capital of the Solomons, as an educational tool; a way of giving the island's disaffected youth the chance to learn about their own Melanesian culture and its unique pan-pipe music. As cultural ambassadors for the Solomons, the band were wheeled out at official events everywhere from Taiwan and Canada to the UK and New Zealand.

After hitting the No 1 spot on ABC Asia Pacific's top 10 with their song *My Culture is My Life* (one of few they sing in English), the group disbanded in 1999, when the so-called "tensions" – a five-year period of severe civil unrest – pulled them back to Malaita. When they reformed in 2008, they chose their line-up from Oterama and its neighbouring villages; the band's members now all live in Oterama, aside from charismatic frontman Aloysius Mauhana, who travels two hours to band practice by canoe.

Last year's live EP *Tangio Tumas* (that's "thank you very much" in pidgin) won them critical praise. The forthcoming full-length studio album, *Warato'o*, which features age-old melodies and traditional sounds shot through with traces of dub and reggae, is what they think will really put them on the international map.

"We are on a big journey," says Manu'asi, sitting back in the clover and folding his hands behind his neck. "A big journey with the spirit of Joe Strummer and many others travelling with us. We want to bring people here as they listen."

He pauses and looks around. "Here," he says with a smile. "To our home." ■

WOMAD NEW ZEALAND, New Plymouth, March 16-18.

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