

Pan-Pacific

Narasirato from the Solomon Islands have brightened up our soggy festivals these past few summers with their fearsome panpipes and log drums. Christopher Conder met them in a green corner of Wiltshire.

Like many of my best musical discoveries, I first stumbled across Narasirato at Glastonbury Festival. It was Friday the 24th of June 2011, and a wet afternoon. Scanning the programme, nothing struck me as unmissable, so it seemed a good time to take a trudge through the rain to the festival's infamously hedonistic south eastern corner and see what I could find. Tucked away in a small patch of the Unfairground, I found Strummerville, a pleasant nook, centred around a camp fire and dedicated to the memory and spirit of the late Clash and Mescaleros frontman. Crammed onto the tiny stage and leading a crowd of 30-or-so mac-wearing revellers were Narasirato, making a fearsome racket on their panpipes and percussion, the singer out in front and sheltering under a huge black brolly as he chanted. I danced like a loon, grinning from cheek to cheek and promised to myself that I would find out more about the band when I got home.

Narasirato, it turned out, are from the island of Malaita in the Solomon Islands, to the east of Papua New Guinea. Their meeting with now manager Jason (son of John) Mayall at the Australasian World Music Expo 2009 in Melbourne was a stroke of luck that catalysed funding from

the Strummerville Foundation, international touring and their fantastic album, *Warato'o* (see fR348).

A little more than a year after seeing them at Glastonbury, it is my delight to talk with the group after a workshop at Womad Charlton Park. After some meeting and greeting and a few snaps with Ms Burrows, I leave the majority of them to load their bulky instruments back into their van while I speak to their leader, Donation Manu'asi.

Many of us will automatically associate panpipes with the Andean countries of South American, so I begin by asking Donation if there is any connection.

"Thank you, thank you very much. It's an important question, and it's a nice question as well," he politely replies. "Panpipe music belongs to our people and it's natural. We have lots of history, and we don't know any connections to US or Bolivians or Peru or whatever."

Narasirato are of the Are'are people, renowned locally for their proud history of panpiping and singing, and the group draws on this tradition, as well as some of the practices of the islands' bamboo bands that emerged in the 1970s beating out boogie-woogie rhythms on the ends of larger bamboo pipes rather than blowing them. But, as Donation points out, Narasirato's sound draws on more than native music alone. "It's contemporary music," he tells me. "That is why we include bass and drums and other things in the music." Nothing as mundane as bass guitar and drum kit of course; this bass comes from huge, mounted bamboo pipes and the drums are made from logs.



As is so often the case with indigenous traditions, panpipe and bamboo music in the Solomon Islands is under threat from encroaching Westernisation and government indifference to traditional ways of life. This can be dated back a hundred years to the arrival of Roman Catholic missionaries on the Solomon Islands, who initially banned the panpipes, before agreeing to bring them into the churches with western tunings. Narasirato play with both the original and Western tunings, often strapping both types of instrument together. Donation expands on the threat to their music: "People didn't stop playing panpipes, but [the music] is there to lose from our old people. The people that know panpipe, they [may] have to die with the knowledge of playing panpipe, because we don't have any documentary record in our music. We are just inheriting. That is why we try to revive and play it, so that we have cultural music. The most important is that we don't want to lose it from our culture."

The Narasirato Pan Pipers started as a youth group in 1991 in Honiara, the capital city of the Solomon Islands, located on the north-western coast of Guadalcanal Island. They have since reformed in their home of Oterama Village, Malaita, a jungle community of 143 people, living off the land and fishing. In the village they speak the Are'are language, but are also fluent in Pijin, the lingua franca of the Solomon Islands, which, though descended from English, is hard for an outsider to understand. Extraordinarily, I'm told that around half of the population of the village has some degree of proficiency on the

panpipes, and Narasirato support the endearingly-named Narasirato Juniors.

At home, a full line-up of the group would have a front line of eight musicians playing panpipes to cover the full spectrum; two players on large blown bass pipes; two 'keyboard' players (who hit a panel with a paddle, which strikes four pipes at once to form a chord); two playing oversized, mounted panpipes; a log drummer and a singer. The financial reality is that they can't take so many musicians on tour, and the front-line is often down to five when abroad.

Narasirato's home life shapes the songs they sing. "You know," Donation says, "some songs in our programme have been sung by our ancient people. Like the one that we call *Roromera*, that's a lullaby. Our ancient people, our grannies, when she want to make that baby sleep, she carried that baby and sing that lullaby."

Other songs in their repertoire, Donation tells me, are composed by the group. "He's our song writer," Donation says, pointing out the young Jimmy, who I had been talking with earlier. "He's a great man. We have some talented people in our band." One of Jimmy's songs is *Rawako*, about the plight of the native flying fox. "We live in a forest and logging companies from the Asian people, they come to the Solomon Islands and they do logging there. And you know the flying fox? It just fly out on our sky, crying out loud because the trees all gone. And that is where they find their shelter. That's why we wrote that song, because they are homeless, you know?"

And where is the government in this? "Politically, the government is also

involved. And I can tell you, our government doesn't help us in one way or the other. They didn't help us with cash money, for food or whatever. Never! We have to remember our culture, and that's why we're here, in some ways, to raise funds, some money. To help our association so we can complete our houses. We are building a small eco-tourism [centre]."

I can't finish the interview without asking about one recent visitor to Narasirato's home, Take That's Gary Barlow. For the Royal Jubilee, he travelled the Commonwealth, recording with artists including the African Children's Choir, Ayub Ogada, Gurrumul, the Jolly Boys and Narasirato. In the accompanying documentary, Barlow came across as a genuine and humble individual, but sadly the resulting single, entitled *Sing*, was a bland creation that had most of the traditional artists so low in the sound mix as to be barely audible above the bombast of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Gareth Malone's Military Wives Choir. The *Independent's* Tim Walker reviewed it with the spot-on backhanded compliment that 'It's testament to Barlow's songwriting that having elicited contributions from Australia, Africa, Jamaica, the South Pacific and the House of Windsor – he has managed to produce something that sounds like a Take That track.'

Controversy was sparked in the run up to the showing of the documentary when Laura Caroe quoted Barlow in the *Sun* newspaper as saying that he "thought we were going to be killed and eaten" by the Solomon Islanders, who greeted him in the traditional manner... with spears! The *Solomon Times* responded the same day,



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saying that Solomon Islanders were angered by the statements, with an anonymous source noting that "we made a lot of effort to show him the beauty of our country, the diversity... and all he could talk about was that he was scared we might eat him." Though accusations of insensitivity and even cultural imperialism hold some validity, I suspect that Barlow's main failing was simple naivety with respect to dealing with non-Western cultures.

Whatever the rights and wrongs, the single was good publicity for the group and Donation is gentlemanly about the experience. "He's a good guy. His team, it's a good team. They were friendly and we [got to] tell stories and share a bit of our culture with him. But if it happens that you come across him," Donation notes, perhaps overestimating the diversity of my music writings, "tell him that we miss two things. The first one is that we were hoping that he will do a song for us. Sing anything, maybe with his guitar, but he didn't."

"And two is that we really want his company to help us, to promote our cultural centre. Please tell him, so that we can finish with our eco-tourism. We will build so many houses so that if you wish, just come there, there is a house for you. We can keep you like our children. Gary Barlow knows we have no electricity, no trucks, no nothing. We just live very simple, we just do our farming with our families, planting our crops like yam and potatoes. We go fishing from the lagoon. We have no factories, no supermarkets."

"We know that Gary Barlow has a great vision for this project. Please tell

him, so that he can help us. We need to complete our project." So, Gary, if you are reading this...

Once back from Womad, I realised that speaking to Donation and seeing Narasirato's home on the screen has left me determined to visit them at some future date. So before finishing this piece, I decided to talk to someone who has been there as a visitor, so Skyped their manager Jason and asked him if it was as beautiful as it appeared.

"It is like paradise, but it takes a long time to get there and it's very poor," he notes. "They live very simply, in harmony with nature. They're very family orientated, the kids are let free. There are pet birds in the village and a couple of dogs, and they play football every day. The people are really friendly, but they're very quiet, everyone talks in a whisper, which is unusual for us foreigners who talk all the time! They sit around not talking for ages, it's quite difficult." But overall, he says, it's not surprising that "the Solomon Islands is known as the Happy Isles. When sailors used to drop by it was like, "Yeah, fucking go there 'cos everyone's happy." You would be happy if you lived in paradise!"

www.narasirato.com



Photo: Judith Burrows



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