



# Desert Calling



## A POSITIONS VACANT AD LEADS TO A TOUR WITH TJINTU DESERT BAND.

BY NICOLA PITT,  
COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER - CAAMA MUSIC  
CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL MEDIA ASSOCIATION

**“**I’m thinking of doing the tour on the Greyhound,” I announced to my manager who blinked at me, thought for a second, and said slowly, “But what about all the... you know... the stuff you’ll need? Where will you put it all?”

“Oh, we’ll just stow it under the bus with all the luggage. Each person gets to stow two items, and then there’s hand luggage on top of that!” I breezed, as I walked out of his office to get on with planning the rest of Tjintu Desert Band’s 10-day tour to Barunga Festival; the longest running Aboriginal cultural festival in Australia.

As I was to discover, a touring band travels with an awful lot of stuff. Far more stuff than a solitary author takes on a book tour, that’s for sure.

For six years I had lived in Sydney working at three major publishing houses and arranged many book tours to literary festivals around the country. But after living for an extended period overseas, we returned to Sydney feeling that it wasn’t the right fit anymore. One morning we were sitting in a cafe in Erskineville when Jorge passed the *Sydney Morning Herald* over to me and pointed to a large advertisement listed in the classifieds saying, “If you like the wind in the your hair and exploring dusty desert roads then apply now to work at CAAMA Music, Australia’s first Aboriginal record label located in Alice Springs, the heart of Central Australia.” Forty-eight hours later I was to become that person.

During the interview I was asked, “And what do you think about living in Alice Springs?” I said “Well we’re looking to move someplace else, and Alice Springs is probably just as good a place as any” - although what I was really thinking was, “One step at a time. I’ll cross that bridge if I come to it.” As it happened, that bridge came up quite suddenly when

the very next day I got a phone call at my parents’ house. I heard my mum pick up the phone and say, “Sorry, who did you say it was?” She passed me the phone without covering the mouth piece, saying “It’s someone called Miko. Sounds like he’s phoning from Timbuktoo.”

Well, not quite Timbuktoo. But Alice Springs, which is about as far away as you can get from anywhere else. Sitting at 1,500 equidistant from Darwin and Adelaide, in the red centre of the continent, it’s the furthest away you can get from any Australian capital and the rest of the world.

Facebook helped me to get in touch with friends of friends who had good reports about Alice: the pubs had swimming pools; you were actually allowed to light your own fireworks one day a year; plus there were lots of quirky festivals in the winter - like the Camel Cup races and the Beanie Festival.

All of which sounded too good to resist, which is how I came to now be planning the tour of Tjintu Desert Band, whose debut album was getting radio airplay across the country and reviews in newspapers nationally. The *Canberra Times* had said, “Tjintu Desert Band one of the most exciting of the reggae bands to emerge from Central Australia. They do it with such force you could imagine them reaching out to a national and international audience. They would light up a stage at Bluesfest or Woodford with their rocksteady grooves and soulful voices.” But first they were going to light up the stage of Barunga Festival once we travelled the 1000km to get there, thanks to a grant from the Australia Council. The matter of *how* to travel there still remained undecided though.

Apparently we couldn’t just travel with a suitcase and a pocketful of plectrums. I was told we’d have to take a variety of guitars, keyboards, mics leads, guitar stands, merchandise -

until I conceded that maybe I *would* have to drive the modern camel of the desert (a Toyota Troop Carrier) and would pile the extras on the roof. But even that dream was dashed when I saw the size of the keyboard case. There would simply be no room for fitting five guys in the back of the ‘troopie’ and all the equipment we needed to take. So I’d have to tow a trailer, which I’d never done before. When I asked my colleague, Mark, if he could show me some pointers on how to reverse a trailer, he said “Nope. It’s just one of those things you’ve got to learn from experience.” Great.

So off we drove the next day, and a bunch of excited musicians who don’t sit still or quietly for very long. Soon the whole car was singing and drumming on any smooth surface they could find - to CAAMA classics like Blekbala Mujik, Coloured Stone and Letterstick Band - as well as to new sounds I wanted to introduce the guys to; like the fusion of Latin styles that is Manu Chao, South Africa’s Juluka and the Aboriginal-electro-world mixture that is OKA. Isolation is one of the hardest things Aboriginal bands like Tjintu Desert Band face in Central Australia, making it difficult to come across the new sounds and influences which are such an important part of songwriting. I don’t think they had ever heard the version of ‘Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood’ by Santa Esmerelda (made famous again recently by Tarantino’s *Kill Bill*) but the ten-minute song was a huge hit in the car, with everyone taking turns to drum on the esky lid in time to the syncopated flamenco rhythms of the song’s long instrumentals.

“Tea bag?” was the first question I was faced with the next morning in Tennant Creek.

“Sorry Joseph, I only thought to buy cereal and milk last night. But we’ll get to a cafe at some point.”

A few steps further.

“Tea bag?” asked Kieran. Same question in the kitchen from Jeffrey, who looked bewildered and lost at the news that there was going to be no tea that morning.

“Ohh,” he said with a soft sigh. “It’s just that... every morning I have a cup of tea.”

At which point I realised I had made a serious mistake on my first morning as tour manager and if this trip was going to be a success I needed to make sure my band had a steady supply of tea to hand. I’ve since learned that there is a huge tea-drinking tradition in remote Aboriginal communities today, passed down from the days of the first missionaries to the area. And the bigger the cup, the better, which is why I saw the large peach tin I had discarded the previous night sitting on the counter again the next morning. Joseph, in his never-ending quest for a larger tea cup, had rescued it because it made the perfect billy can.

That night’s performance at Jackson’s Bar in Tennant Creek was unlike anything I had seen before. The old sandstone saloon was packed, with a queue even stretching down the road. The crowd sang along at full volume to the Luritja words, twerked way better than Miley Cyrus ever could, and caused the security guards constant problems by jumping up on stage every few minutes to dance beside the band. At one point I saw an infatuated girl point to the stage, wild-eyed with excitement, and scream to her friend, “The bass player, the bass player!” The crowd wouldn’t let them go until they had played every single one of their songs, finally closing the set with the most popular cover song in the desert. Incongruously, it’s the surf rock classic of the ‘60s called ‘Wipe Out’ - and every self-respecting bush band can play it. None so well, though, as Tjintu Desert Band, thanks to Kieran Multa’s impressive drum solo which lasted for 10 minutes - long enough to tire the crowd sufficiently that the guys could



sneak off stage and out of the bar intact. The band had long lost 'family' members claiming them all night, and back at the hotel Joseph said, giggling, "This morning I didn't have any family in Tennant Creek and now half of Jackson's Bar is my family!"


The next morning I found Terry Marshall, lead singer and rhythm guitarist for the band, transfixed by James Blunt performing on *Sunrise TV* with a ukulele. Turns out that Terry is a big fan of James Blunt and so I joked that maybe he should try putting some ukulele into their next album. He had never seen this mini-guitar with only four strings, but didn't have to wait long because that same morning when we visited Tennant Creek High School to perform for the students I spied a pile of ukuleles in the corner of the music room and asked the teacher to show Terry a few chords. Two days later the band were jamming together in Katherine when they attracted the attention of a passing grey-nomad who came to listen to the guys singing together in Luritja. What instrument did he bring along to jam along with the guys? The ukulele of course. All he had to do was point out which strings were which to Terry before he was playing as if he'd been doing it all his life.

The ukulele theme continued into Barunga Festival where the guys met Nicky Bomba, the talented songwriter and charismatic performer whose instrument of choice at the moment is... You guessed it. The band took part in a special music workshop with Nicky and had their perspective on music turned upside down when he showed them how to pick apart their music and turn it into something completely different. With incredulous grins and some bemused head-shaking they listened to their traditional campfire song 'Dreamtime Story' turn into a Caribbean calypso with the additions of a different bass progression and a bongo beat.

Barunga Festival was a treat for the guys, who got to watch a lineup of their favourite bands perform on the main stage - many of whom they had grown up listening to. Bands like Lazy Late Boys, Lajamanu Teenage Band, Yatulu Yatulu, Lonely Boys, Sandridge Band, Nabarlek, and also Saltwater Band who reunited with Gurrumul especially for the festival.

The legendary Blekbala Mujik, who in the '90s toured internationally and supported for artists like Van Morrison and Tina Turner, was their favourite, with the whole crowd joining in to sing their famous hits like 'Don't Worry Be Happy'.

The night for their own performance arrived and although the fans at Tennant Creek were a pretty hard audience to follow, Tjintu Desert Band were excited to be singing their own language in front of a different crowd in the Top End, a crowd who didn't know them and spoke other languages. They didn't understand the words but appreciated the new sound coming from this desert band, with Terry Marshall's Luritja lyrics telling the story of his 'grandfather's country' and Jeffrey Zimran's Spanish guitar solo in 'Tjamuku Ngurra' unlike anything else heard from the stage that night.

Driving back to Alice Springs after the festival, with the red dirt road under my wheels and the dust in my hair, I thought back to that original job advertisement I'd read in the Sydney cafe. At first I considered Alice "as good a place as any," when the real truth of it is that it's better a place than many. It's the very heart of the country - the Australia everyone associates with being the 'real' Australia, yet few actually visit. It's the place of quirky wildlife, and improbable rock formations, red sand dunes and wide blue skies. Most of all though, it's still the place of an ancient indigenous culture that is evident all around you, where musicians and artists are sharing their stories to try and make a connection across the divide. So listen to the Luritja words of Tjintu Desert Band while imagining the places they sing about - their 'tjamuku ngurra' or grandfather's country - and you'll be transported to the heart of Australia and the heart of the people here. They want to share it through their music, their lyrics, their guitar, and maybe in the next album... their ukulele. 



*Tjintu Desert Band play AWME at Shebeen on November 14 and Woodford Folk Fest.*

Tjamuku Ngurra is available through [www.caamamusic.com.au](http://www.caamamusic.com.au)

## BLEKBALA MUJIK GREATEST HITS LIVE – SOMEWHERE IN THE DREAMTIME

CAAMA

desert reggae

Singer, songwriter and rhythm guitarist of NT band Blekbala Mujik, Apaak Jupurrula has done a lot of road miles over thirty years. Not only are the roads and highways in better nick than they used to be, touring in general is way more comfortable. The recent Sand Tracks tour took the band to remote communities in style. "Well of course it was time consuming, a lot of miles to get from one community to another," says Jupurrula from CAAMA's Alice Springs office. "Luckily enough we had access to a four-wheel drive air-conditioned bus to get around. When you do a lot of shows, it's always good to relax in an air-conditioned vehicle. Back in our early days it was a struggle even to find the right equipment to take on the road. We were really lucky this time having access to professional support staff on the road. You can't describe how you feel. The positive energy of professionals working alongside us... people to cook for us, look after us, make sure we had everything at the right time. The preparation that it takes to walk on stage, the gear you need... Just little things but it's great to have those people at your disposal."

'Local' communities voted for Blekbala Mujik to headline this year's Bush Bands Bash concert in Alice Springs. Fronting BM since 1986, Jupurrula was thrilled with the punters' choice. "I was just stunned that we got the nod. We hadn't been to some of these communities at all and that was a highlight of the tour. We had the best time!"

His band from Burunga ('Gulin-Gulin', Arnhem Land) mix distinctive desert reggae/rock with traditional instruments and language. Their messages reflect indigenous and universal human experience. Band members include the frontman's son Shang Miller on lead guitar, a former New Yorker on drums, plus bass and litung (didgeridoo) players. They mentored young bands at the Bush Bands Business camp over four days. From the 2013 Bash, Running Water Band (from Kintore, NT western desert) was chosen to join the Sand Tracks tour. "They'll treasure the experience of learning what it takes to be professional every time they play or record an album," Jupurrula says.

Blekbala Mujik's success has included an ARIA nomination, a Deadly Sounds award and international touring. With the spread of the internet and easier travel, fellow iconic indigenous acts - Coloured Stone, Warumpi Band, Saltwater Band, No Fixed Address, etc - are finally enjoying wider recognition for their pioneering sounds. "The industry has gone ahead in leaps and bounds," Jupurrula says. "We've just released a *Greatest Hits Live* album on the CAAMA music label. Everywhere we played during this tour is like when we did the recordings of this live album. We were playing a one-on-one kind of feeling at the grassroots level (With pyro-technology, dance and dreamtime storytelling). The energy, you can hear it and feel it."

Workshops and talks on the recent tour revealed potential stars. "You know these little kids are so amazing with the talent that they've got. The sky's the limit. We were probably exposing up-and-coming Beyonces and young Michael Jacksons out there. Fantastic!" A schoolteacher by trade, Jupurrula talks in classrooms about respect, culture, keeping stories alive and how music can keep you on the right track. He speaks several desert and Top End languages. Many Australians would be surprised to know how commonly English is spoken as a second language in the outback.

"I was very saddened by the NT bilingual education program being stopped. Australia is multi-lingual, multicultural. People really want to maintain their links to their culture, language and performing arts. When governments pass legislation that overrides these initiatives... it's not right.

"Here we are, wanting to close the gap by giving positive messages. The maintenance of culture and links to the past will take this country into the future, I would've thought! What we have in Australia is unique. Right in our backyard we've had an amazing cultural platform for thousands of years. In our hands, together as a collective. [Listening to our old songs] the message is timeless. It's not getting old."

A great grandson of Albert Namitjira, the multi-instrumentalist and teacher is also a painter. "Indigenous culture isn't dead and gone," he reminds us. "It's a living culture. That's where the magic is that will take this country into the future. It's just the bushfire feeling. You strike a light in one part of the earth, it's gonna take off like a wild bushfire. That's what it's all about."

Chris Lambie

Blekbala Mujik's *Greatest Hits Live - Somewhere in the Dreamtime* was recorded during a six-week tour called *Closing The Gap*, for a quitting smoking campaign.