

## **Bee Gees to Boat People**

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# Bee Gees to Boat People

Written by Julie Ballantyne & Don Lebler

'What is it about music education in Queensland?' This question is often asked when Australian music educators gather. Everyone seems to come from Queensland and everyone wants to go there. Perhaps part of the answer is that Queensland has a thirty-year history of compulsory music in the classroom, together with a vibrant and strongly supported instrumental program, unequalled elsewhere in Australia. No other state has produced as many successful international musicians, and popular media would have us believe that the other states are agog with disbelief. *Billboard* magazine named Brisbane in the 'top 5 international music hot spots for 2007' due to the number of emerging artists it boasts.

This is nothing new; in fact, there is a long sequence of Brisbands who have achieved success and prominence, from the Bee Gees through to The Veronicas. The litany of names includes such artists as The Avengers, The Saints, The Go-Betweens, Savage Garden, Powderfinger, George, Regurgitator, Custard, Resin Dogs, Butterfingers, The Butterfly Effect, The Boat People, The Grates, Andrew Morris, Pete Murray, Katie Noonan, Kate Miller-Heidke and Kate Bradley. If the extraordinary standard of the current crop of people studying popular music in programs like Griffith University's Bachelor of Popular Music is any indication, this flood of talent will not dry up any time soon.

Other factors in Brisbane have enhanced the impact of what happens in school music. There is a long tradition of bands having a supportive attitude towards each other, rather than the cut-throat competition that is often found in larger places where the fruits of success might encourage a more competitive approach. In the 1960s, it was common for bands to share equipment on gigs where more than one band was playing, just as it is today in the thriving Fortitude Valley music scene, where mutual support is the norm. Even if the formal music education systems can't take all the credit for the development of these artists, there is some value in identifying what it is about this system that enables these creative people to prosper.

Since the 2005 national review of school music education, there have been many references made to the 'Queensland model of music education'. The state has been held up as an example of best practice in Australia, mostly due to the history of compulsory classroom music in primary schools, and the excellent band programs that have persisted over the last three decades. Over this time, students attending Queensland state schools have had unequalled access to music education opportunities, in both a sequential and detailed program throughout primary school (at least) and through instrumental music lessons and ensembles. This has created a culture where music in schools is valued by successive governments, school systems and ultimately by the students. Not only has this ongoing investment in music education produced many capable musicians, it has also arguably instilled an appreciation of music in those Queenslanders who have not continued with active music-making.

This valuing of music within school cultures extends to music activities beyond the official curriculum, such as student involvement in the self-directed making of music of many kinds.

It is not uncommon to find students who play classical instruments and repertoire alongside popular and world music instruments and songs, with all of these activities being undertaken on school premises. These students do not see such musical interests as contradictory, rather as different aspects of the same activity. However, the instrumental program in Queensland is focused on the established forms of classical and jazz music and is a major contributor to the relatively large numbers of students applying for music programs in higher education in the state – institutions like the Queensland Conservatorium seem to be comparatively unaffected by the falling numbers of applicants for post-secondary music programs elsewhere in Australia.

In exploring the impact of the 'Queensland model', we contacted Katie Noonan, a Queensland Conservatorium graduate who rose to fame in the band George, and was educated in Queensland schools in the 1980s and '90s. We also contacted Kate Miller-Heidke, another successful graduate of the Conservatorium, who has made her way in the popular music world. As professional, popular and successful musicians, their reflections on their own education experiences were revealing. Noonan said: 'I had a great music teacher at primary school – Mr Mangan. We did the Sing books and all of that kind of fun stuff! ... when I went to Stuartholme [a Brisbane secondary school], they had a fantastic music department and we did a lot of great music – lots of modern difficult material which really started my love of modern music. We toured to Sydney and played the Opera House in Grade Twelve which was a wonderful experience for me. I also did the music extension course – I believe this was a new music initiative at the time and I loved that also.' Kate Miller-Heidke shared a similar experience: 'I studied music and music extension with a focus on singing and piano. I was in two high school musicals, as well as the school choir.'

Clearly, both women were highly engaged with the formal music education offered at their schools and later at the Conservatorium, but Katie also credits the influences of other musicians for her musical development: '[I learnt much] in the "real" world of gigging and putting on my own gigs and learning the ropes through work experience, recording and touring a lot. Mainly I met like-minded people who I learned the ropes with and I still play with now. I also learnt about different musical styles and had the opportunity to hear lots of excellent musicians from different backgrounds.'

With education on the government's reform agenda, a decision is expected soon about whether music education will be included in the new national curriculum frameworks. It is timely, therefore, to consider the potential influence of the Queensland model of supportive music specialists and compulsory music education for all students in the design and support of a national curriculum. It is also appropriate to consider how the Queensland model might be improved to take into account the changing nature of students in the broadband world. How can we ensure that this national music education curriculum is built on the successes of the past and looks towards an even brighter musical future?

While classroom music in Queensland schools is generally able to accommodate a wide range of musical styles, the instrumental music program is often focused on group performances of established works. Only a few programs feature student-led ensembles that include much by way of improvisation, self-determination of artistic content and performance of student compositions (as seen in many non-school, informal musical groups). If we are to contribute to the thriving popular music culture, there is a need to seriously consider adding

to the existing menu of music activities in schools. Europe provides some examples of how this might be done. While popular music and informal learning have been well established in some Scandinavian settings for decades, school music in Britain has recently taken up self-directed engagement in popular music through its Musical Futures program. This has grown from an activity in a handful of schools to be embraced in over a thousand schools in just four years. Far from sounding the death knell of more 'proper' music, this innovative approach has produced a substantial increase in the number of students engaging with traditional music studies in the later years of secondary education.

Traditional classical music has long relied on the 'masters' and 'apprentices' model of teaching. This modernist notion of teachers being solely responsible for the development of the musical skills and abilities of their students lies in direct contrast to the traditions of popular music (and indeed much non-Western classical music). In these traditions, students are encouraged to teach themselves in an informal manner, often surrounded by others who are interested, and who practise and learn alongside them. This process can be seen to be exemplified in the garage band ideology and has been documented by writers like Lucy Green. Similar processes are found in many community music settings such as brass bands, where more experienced players help their band mates learn by offering advice and feedback, rather than by systematic formal instruction as is found in most one-to-one music teaching situations. Research into music education has often noted that students view school music as irrelevant to their lives, and as such they do not really engage beyond compulsory music – and even then, arguably do not really enjoy it. Conversely, engagement in informal music-making, using tools such as online composition and recording software and playing in garage bands, has continued to be very popular with these same students.

In a bid to get future teachers intersecting their curriculum with the musical engagement already occurring in their classes, to explore the potential of student-centred informal learning in formal settings and to assist students in learning a new instrument, we have utilised the vast experience of students enrolled in the Bachelor of Popular Music at Griffith University on the Gold Coast. Over the last two years, students enrolled in this program have volunteered to assist education students to 'teach themselves' in the same manner in which many popular musicians learn.

As part of this initiative, students explore issues surrounding teaching music, and strategies to enable their own (future) students to engage with music. As part of their coursework, students are encouraged to learn a new instrument of their choice from scratch. In the past, students have chosen to play a wide variety of instruments – from African djembe drums to the didgeridoo, the harmonica and the electric guitar. As they learn their new instrument and work towards completing a collaborative performance piece, students can experience the frustrations and triumphs associated with learning an instrument. What is particularly different about this approach is that the university students are encouraged to teach themselves, drawing on the resources available (often other students) to assist them as they progress.

Interestingly, this process has been viewed as valuable by both the Conserv-atorium students and the education students. Focus groups were conducted with those directly involved and, in order to get another point of view, classical music pedagogy students viewed videos of these discussions. On the whole, students with classical music backgrounds were highly supportive of traditional ways of teaching music and the notion that behind every successful musician there is a teacher guiding musical development, commenting that 'We should still put the

most focus on traditional knowledge, techniques and classical repertoire'. As most music teachers in Queensland have gone through similar classical music training, it is likely that these perceptions are also reflected amongst many practising teachers. However, these students also acknowledged the importance of motivation in students: 'I think if you choose the right repertoire you can get them motivated in the first place and then also you can keep them motivated by letting them know what they have achieved.' Their awareness of the range of teaching methods available has been enhanced by their observation of the focus group videos, and they list independent learning along with peer learning among the behaviours they have noted as significant topics in the focus group videos. In observing the videos of the students involved in the project, the classical music students commented that it was impressive that 'they learn to teach themselves and then later on, they will be able to keep playing and learning without getting help from teachers'.

The education students (who were learning new instruments), while a little nervous at the start of this learning experience, felt very proud of their achievements towards the end of semester and were pleased with the outcomes. They stressed the importance of students having real choice in their music studies – 'We chose the song rather than the song being dictated to us' – and the importance of those in control of a music-learning experience being responsive to student needs. They commented that after the experience they had a richer understanding of 'how important it is to pay attention to what they [our future students] want to learn and what they are struggling with individually'. These future teachers, who had little musical knowledge and few skills at the beginning of the semester, concluded the semester able to perform popular music on their choice of instrument. Most of these students indicated they would continue to play their new instrument for many years to come.

Kate Miller-Heidke agrees with the notion that student-led and self-directed music learning (such as that modelled by students who are engaged in popular music ensembles and emulated in the Musical Futures program) is valuable and enhances motivation. She commented that really good music education should 'be something different for each student, with a focus on individuality, confidence and creative expression'.

Music education needs to be viewed broadly and a multiplicity of music types and pedagogical approaches should be embraced in school environments. The potential benefits of informal and collaborative learning, supported by formal music time and teaching, will be invaluable in the development of a truly creative nation. This is not to deny the many strengths of existing formal practices in music education in Queensland, but our suggestion is that new pedagogies should also be embraced by music teachers and generalist teachers alike to further enrich the musical experiences of students. In this way, the formal practices of the past and less formal contemporary practices can be merged within a single model. It is highly likely that students will be more engaged in this way and more motivated to continue their musical engagement throughout their formal schooling and beyond.

Evidence produced at the 2007 National Creativity Showcase suggests that creativity will be enhanced through enriching the scope of choices available to students, where school tasks have more than a single correct solution. Enhanced creativity is also related to students composing, performing and reflecting on their own works and the work of others in a range of collaborative and supportive contexts.

In Queensland's year of 'creativity', the time is right to move music education in our schools and universities towards a better model – building on the successes of the past, in both formal and informal music education. If we focus on what the students enjoy, letting them have some determination and leadership in the direction of music engagement, we will be able to foster greater creativity and a more sustainable artistic culture for the future.