



From Veranda Jams to Toka Bo'ots

– community music in East Timor

Australian musician, educator and facilitator, **Gillian Howell**, gave a presentation on her work with rural communities in East Timor at last year's International Society for Music Education (ISME) World Conference. Here, she reports on how a project which started on her veranda grew to include over 500 participants.



Learning to play chord progressions on the veranda in Lospalos. Photo © Gillian Howell

When I was awarded an Asialink Artist Residency in Timor-Leste (East Timor), I imagined creating a large-scale, site-specific composition in the rural landscape (I pictured lush, green jungle), collaborating with local musicians and learning about the local music traditions. Accompanied by my partner, Tony, I was to be based in the remote town of Lospalos, six hours from the capital city of Dili, creating community music projects with my host organisation, Many Hands International.

As a music workshop leader, my work in Australia takes place in community settings on behalf of symphony orchestras and arts education providers. My projects range from short-term intensives to weekly engagements over a six-month period, resulting in group-devised compositions and performance pieces.

However, the challenge in a community-based residency is to allow the community to tell you – directly or indirectly – what it

wants of a foreign musician in its midst. When I first arrived in Lospalos, the ideas

I shared about collaborative projects were received with smiles and nods – but not with practical support. My host organisation was at a loss (it was their first-ever arts project in Timor-Leste) and, in confusion, I retreated to my rented home to ponder my musical options and play my clarinet.

My clarinet-playing on the front veranda generated interest. At first, I would hear halts in the neighbours' nightly bingo game (family bingo is a regular entertainment for Timorese families – they sing the numbers in bluesy patterns and play for money) as they listened and, frequently, small groups of children would gather in front of the house, watching intently. One day, they felt bold enough to venture closer and thus began the Veranda Jams.



The first experiments with freshly cut green bamboo – blowing tubes and tapping sticks together. Photo © Gillian Howell



A quiet moment to explore the chime bars.
Photo © Gillian Howell

Veranda Jams

Veranda Jams took place daily and everyone was welcome. They were impromptu and unscheduled – children would appear whenever Tony or I entered the veranda with an instrument – and the music we played came from rhythms that the children would beat on the buckets we used as drums.

We tried to gather more instruments so that everyone had something to play. Neighbours sold us slender trunks of bamboo (Tony cut it down with a machete and the children and I carried armfuls home) which we used to make claves and experimental three-note instruments.

Later, another neighbour showed Tony how to make a kakalo – a bamboo log drum traditionally played by children to scare foraging animals away from crops. We held a working bee to make a further ten kakalos.

With bucket drums, claves, kakalos and chime bars donated by an Australian percussion supplier, the Veranda Jams soon accommodated groups of 40+ children, each taking turns and teaching each other new riffs and rhythms.

Kindergarten workshop

News about the musicians in town spread. My landlady's daughter attended a kindergarten in the town centre. I offered to lead a workshop there. The Veranda Jam children borrowed two wheelbarrows from other neighbours to help us transport the instruments into town.

The kindergarten workshop involved soundscapes and rhythmic work. Some of the children burst into tears at the sight of Tony – with his 6'3" frame, almost twice the size of the average Timorese man and his strange, loud saxophone – but they were intrigued by the chime bars and eager to play the kakalos. Their parents crowded around, delighted to see traditional instruments being introduced by foreign musicians.

English songwriting

A local teenager told me about the English language classes he attended every day. I offered to drop by occasionally to help. In the conversation classes that ensued, the students described the local myths and legends they had grown up with. These classes became a two-way exchange – English language practice in return for this rich source of traditional stories and local information. I suggested a songwriting workshop to the students. They were curious and spread the word among their peers.

'What shall we write a song about?' I asked and they listed suggestions like 'heartbreak', 'love' and 'difficult times – because the life here is hard'. In the end, they decided to write about heartbreak and new love!

*I'm happy because
I found another love
We met at the market
Buying some bananas*

The students worked in small groups to create the lyrics. Tony accompanied on guitar, suggesting a funk-rock feel that gave everyone confidence to sing out with heartfelt expression.

Further afield

We hired a 4WD and explored the district. In the village of Cacavei, we created a street parade, gathering children as we progressed and fashioning instruments from found objects – coconut shells,



Local children participating in one of the early Veranda Jams. Photo © Gillian Howell



Toka Bo'ot – a large Community Jam in Lospalos. Photo © Gillian Howell

smooth pairs of stones and a ridged metal rod. We stopped in the village centre and sang a local song that our guide had taught me on the drive up.

One day, our car broke down and we hitched a ride back to Lospalos with a group of nuns. They told us that their convent on the outskirts of town offered weekend activities for local children. We later visited, leading music workshops for over a hundred children and using the legends that the English language students had taught us as the stimulus for the music.

Finale

To end my residency, my hosts and I conceived a Toka Bo'ot – a Big Jam in the town centre. The local Ministry of Culture provided a PA system and chairs and we publicised it via local radio and with printed flyers. Around 500 people turned up, instruments in hand, and we jammed on songs in the local language, interspersed with riffs from the Veranda Jams. Later, several rock bands performed and people milled around the space for the rest of the afternoon. It seemed a suitably spontaneous and community-driven end to my residency.

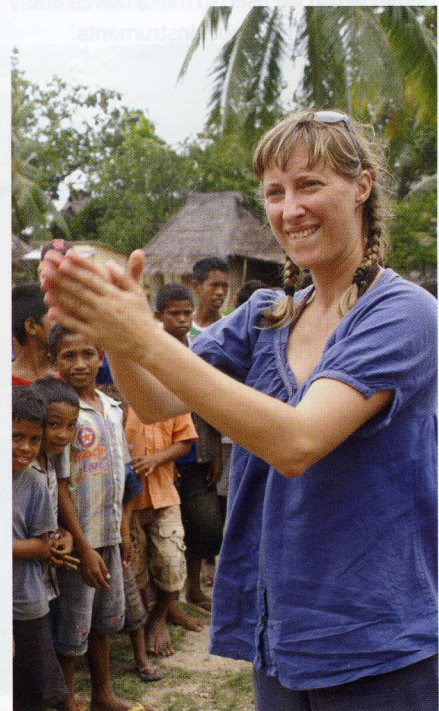
I realised that while I hadn't created the jungle music of my imagination, I *had* created something large-scale. I'd learned about local music traditions and incorporated these into my work and collaborated with local musicians in all sorts of ways. In the end, the community had shown me what it wanted from a Community Musician with activities that were characterised by local resources and reciprocity.

Postlude

One evening in my last week, while lighting mosquito coils and sipping gin and tonic,



The collection of kakalos we made in the instrument-making working bee. Photo © Gillian Howell



Body percussion and songs in Cacavei. Photo © Gillian Howell

Tony observed, 'We haven't heard the bingo game in a while'. We sat and listened. 'I guess they have had other things to play these last couple of months,' I offered in reply.

Many Hands International
www.manyhands.org.au

Asialink Arts Residencies
www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au/our_work/arts/Arts_Residencies

Project videos
Toka Bo'ot
<http://youtu.be/62X7JsfslwM>

Songwriting at Esperansa
<http://youtu.be/oKkgnAvgyBY>

Learning and teaching traditional song
<http://youtu.be/McD4R72HWbY>

Convent workshop
http://youtu.be/Fi7mFf_mxCA

Instrument-making
<http://youtu.be/rLPWgxXvml8>



The end of the street parade in Cacavei. Photo © Gillian Howell



Nose rub from a village elder in Cacavei. Photo © Gillian Howell

About the author

Gillian Howell is a musician, educator and facilitator of diverse creative music projects in communities and schools. She has established and directed the community outreach and engagement programmes for both the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and the Australian National Academy of Music. She devises and leads composition projects, residencies and collaborations throughout Australia and overseas, including with many of Australia's flagship orchestras and festivals, with newly arrived refugee communities and in post-conflict and developing countries.

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