

# INQUIRER

## In tune with the rhythms of learning

The Queensland Music Festival facilitates a crucial component of the Cape York curriculum

NOEL PEARSON



WE'RE getting the band back! The revival of the Yarrabah stage band was announced in Brisbane last week by jazz virtuoso James Morrison as one of the highlights of this year's Queensland Music Festival. Like a surprising number of indigenous communities, this former Anglican mission in north Queensland had a stage band for most of the 20th century, starting in 1900, which toured the countryside. This musical tradition was lost for the past 40 years, but when Morrison took over as festival artistic director, the QMF ignited the revival of the old stage band.

A premiere concert with Morrison and vocalist Darren Percival from *The Voice* is slated for July 22 in Yarrabah.

I sat with brimming pride in the Powerhouse audience as Morrison announced this year's festival program. On cue, the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy school band at Coen beamed in and played samples of its burgeoning repertoire, including, on the eve of the State of Origin program, a horns rendition of that not-exactly-jazz classic, *Eye of the Tiger*. To see our students in full swing with Morrison's brother John leading

them brought tears of joy.

There has been a lot of focus on our school reform work in Cape York Peninsula, particularly our use of Direct Instruction as the centrepiece of our new approach to literacy and numeracy. What is less known is that our schools offer two learning domains other than the mainstream staples of literacy, numeracy, science and social studies. Through an extended school day that ends at 4pm, we have a culture domain that teaches traditional languages and cultural knowledge. We also run a club domain that offers sports and music programs.

We employ music teachers who teach an instrumental music program in partnership with QMF. QMF provides intensive training sessions in Cairns for our teachers to support our bands. QMF staff visit our schools to jam with the bands and run mini-concerts for community members and visiting dignitaries.

If you are ever lost for musical accompaniment at a ribbon-cutting ceremony in Coen, Hope Vale or Aurukun at any time, our stage bands are now ready for weddings, parties, anything.

They started with *Hot Cross Buns* and quickly moved to *When the Saints Go Marching In*, and are preparing for their appearance at the Yarrabah Music Festival.

Let me make three points why I am excited by our stage bands.

First, our school reform agenda includes the aim to provide our children with a "best of both worlds" education: to celebrate and learn about their

own culture and to engage in the cultures of the wider world.

We were strongly influenced by American sociologist Annette Lareau, who researched the foundations underpinning middle-class educational success. Across a variety of cultural and family backgrounds, her research shows there are basically two models of child-rearing. The first is the "natural growth" model, where parents from disadvantaged backgrounds largely leave their children to their own devices after school hours. It was the way I grew up, playing with my mates at the footy oval or down the creek.

The second model Lareau calls "concerted cultivation", where advantaged parents engage their children in an array of enriching, extracurricular sporting, cultural and musical

activities. Guess which children succeed the most?

Our academy is committed to concerted cultivation, and to exposing our students to opportunities taken for granted by middle-class students in urban Australia. So I asked my team, what do our students need in these remote communities so they can exercise a full range of choices when they go away to boarding schools down south?

One of the clear answers was the opportunity of learning to read music and to play a musical instrument. If students are not exposed in primary school, they will almost certainly not take up music in secondary school.

That is why we value so highly

the music teachers who are prepared to come and teach our children in Cape York. They are as rare as diamonds, and more valuable.

My second point is music is critical to education. When I told the founder of Direct Instruction, Siegfried Engelmann, of our plans to introduce his program in Cape York, he exhorted me to ensure we had lots of music in our schools. Music undoubtedly is crucial to the intellectual development of children.

In all the debates about Gonski and literacy and numeracy, there is hardly a word said about music. We need music teachers in disadvantaged schools as urgently as we need maths and English teachers.

My third point is music is both an expression and driver of our creativity as humans. Former Labor leader Mark Latham recently deprecated classical music and opera as boring. Apart from a Lutheran mission

upbringing that included Bach and Handel on Sunday, I come from the same disadvantaged "natural growth" side of the cultural tracks as Latham, but I do not share his disdain.

You cannot understand Paul Keating's immense creativity as treasurer and prime minister of Australia without understanding the role of Mahler, Wagner and Shostakovich in developing the man and his ideas. In Keating's case it is classical music that separated the mere politician from the virtuoso leader.

One Aurukun mother, Maree Kalkeyorta, noticed her children have grown in confidence since joining the school band: "My boy and my girl were performing on the Wik Awards night. My boy was a trumpet player and my girl played saxophone . . .

"They learned a lot through (the) club and culture (program) and they got up on the stage in front of half of Aurukun and they were there, and visitors arrived on that night. I could hear my son say 'Mum, I'm a bit nervous' and my girl said 'I'm a bit nervous', and I said 'Why?' and they said 'Because we have to play our instruments in front of the crowd

and we going to be shame', and I said: 'You have to be brave'.

"Everybody saw what they were doing. I didn't know they were having the lessons learning these instruments and it was a big shock."

People often talk about the digital divide separating advantaged and disadvantaged communities. There is also a musical opportunity divide that is ignored but just as decisive. The Morrison brothers have lowered the drawbridge on this divide and welcomed our children into the world of Miles Davis, Frank Sinatra and James Morrison.

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*Noel Pearson is chairman of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership.*

**In Keating's case, classical music separated the mere politician from the virtuoso leader**



**The Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy school band at Coen is proud of its growing repertoire**