LOCAL NOISE

Local Knowledge

12/08/05, Manning Bar, Sydney Uni.
Predator, Wok, Weno, DJ JT, Tony Mitchell, Nick Keys.

Summary:

"Music, learning and teaching is apparent. But in our communities it's the only form of communication; storytelling, music, dance, creative arts. All that sort of thing is the way we've communicated and passed our knowledge, and that's one of the big reasons why hip-hop is huge in Aboriginal communities. There isn't one Aboriginal kid who doesn't like hip-hop because it's that oral communication that we're so used to over the thousands and thousands of years. And you can also dance to it, which is a bonus." [Weno]

Local Knowledge, who have now split into two different groups [Street Warriors & Last Kinection], were for a time the strongest force in Indigenous Australian hip-hop. Local Knowledge spawned after the two Wright brothers, Predator and Wok, approached Weno, who was already into hip-hop at the same time as working as a health lecturer at the University of Newcastle. The raw passion and powerful stage presence saw them gain immediate attention. This interview, which took place backstage at the Manning bar before a gig with The Herd and TZU, covers everything from Local Knowledge's beginnings to their ideas about representing Aboriginal issues and working with communities.

About:

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Local Noise is an ARC-funded research project from the University of Technology, Sydney. Its focus is on Australian hip-hop, and the localisation of hip-hop in different cultural, societal and educational contexts.

W: Wok
P: Predator
JW: Weno
D: DJ JT
TM: Tony Mitchell
NK: Nick Keys

TM: Well, I guess the obvious place to start is Local Knowledge seems like a really great name to have, where did it come from?

W: Joel's [Weno] wife!

JW: Yeah, my missus pretty much. We were trying to think of a name for the group and she said, 'What are you all about?' I said, 'Well, we're about teaching all the cultural knowledge in a way that's appealing to our young fellas, try to teach about traditional ways, and that life isn't about what a lot of young fellas think life is. And being a local mob, being an Indigenous mob here from Australia'. And she said, 'Well, how about Local Knowledge'.

TM: And you're a lecturer at Newcastle Uni in Health Sciences, is that right?

JW: Yep.

TM: So there's a direct connection between what you're doing as a hip-hop group and the teaching that you do?

JW: Oh, definitely. At the start we were doing a lot of health promotions songs that I was using in schools as well.

W: We really kicked off as an attempt to address a lot of the problems.

JW: Things like sexually transmitted infections, alcoholism...

P: What was one of the raps from that song for the sexually transmitted diseases?

JW: Oh, it went "*don't be silly, cover your willy, all you fellas can you hear me? All that thatch will make you scratch, in ten days you'll have a scab patch*".

W: We ripped a lot of the Condonman slogans which are promoted through our community, just about safe sex practices. But with Joel and his background in teaching and whatnot, the general knowledge about our community that we've got between the three of us, me and Abie [Predator] are brothers and Joel [Weno] has been a good friend of ours for years. So we just put our heads together and that's where it all started from. We just wanted to get positive messages out and use hip-hop as a good tool.

JW: And that's the kind of way we communicate and learn anyway. That kind of formal learning style is a lot through written language, whereas for Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal people the communication is oral.

TM: That was another thing I was going to ask. Do you see an affinity between Aboriginal storytelling and Aboriginal forms of knowledge and hip-hop?

JW: Definitely. And not just with us mob, any mob all over the world. Music, learning and teaching is apparent. But in our communities it's the only form of communication; storytelling, music, dance, creative arts. All that sort of thing is the way we've communicated and passed our knowledge, and that's one of the big reasons why hip-hop is huge in Aboriginal communities. There isn't one Abo-

riginal kid who doesn't like hip-hop because it's that oral communication that we're so used to over the thousands and thousands of years. And you can also dance to it, which is a bonus.

TM: And are you involved in workshops, teaching kids the skills as well?

JW: Yeah yeah, we do heaps of workshops all over the country. When I first started years ago, I was approached by the domestic violence taskforce in the New England area, and that was funded by the Premier's department. They wanted me to do some hip-hop, 'cause they were at this camp in Tamworth, a camp with about 100 girls and they were just trying to do some research on some of the issues there and they found out that 70% of them had been sexually assaulted in one way or another, in the one area. So they set up this big task force thing and heaps of the kids who were in juve [juvenile detention] were into hip-hop so they wanted to use that to teach these kids – not just offenders, and they were all mainstream, not just Indigenous kids – what is sexual assault, that it's not just rape, but it's also things like saying stuff about females that are inappropriate. So I came in and got them all to put it into songs and it was really successful because then the songs got put on radio. So the kids themselves became the ambassadors for this kind of issue, and it was good, especially when a lot of them were themselves offenders. And a lot of them just honestly didn't know how serious it was, they kind of knew it was wrong, but it was accepted by everyone else, but now they were standing up and saying it's not acceptable anymore. That's just one of the workshops we do. Now we're doing one out at Walga, we did this really big one there where we taught them all how to perform as well, which was another whole thing all together.

W: That one was more instilling pride I think.

JW: Which is one of the big factors we have, which is identity, and not just in Indigenous communities but in Australia in general. What is Australia's identity? So we try to get kids to look at their families, where their parents come from and so on. And these kids weren't just Indigenous, there were a lot of white kids there as well. [And we'd say to them] 'Where's your family from? You were born here, but you're not like us 'cause we've been here for thousands and thousands of years'.

W: Just tryin' to smash a lot of the stereotypes down, like the thing that says to be Aussie you got to have sunscreen on your nose, a singlet on, a Caucasian background, you know, all that stuff...

NK:: Barbeques and beers....

W: Yeah, we have barbeques and that's all cool, but it doesn't mean that Peter Wong from down the road whose family may be from overseas isn't as Australian as you or me. And that's the thing we are trying to push. I think our country is so beautiful because it is so diverse. We've got white people, we've got black people, we've got brown people, we've got all these different and beautiful cultures all in one. And the blackfella way we're taught is to accept and embrace, and if you go to a lot of reserves and missions where people live, you'll always see whitefellas there and you might see a young Italian kid who's been taken in off the streets. That's just part of our culture, that's just our way, and we're really trying to push that. You may not fit the stereotype of what a lof of people think is Australian, but just because you're not sipping on VB or acting like a yobo or going to the TAB doesn't mean you're not Australian. Do what you gotta do and don't forget where you're from. You ancestors may have come here from Europe or Asia, or where ever, but just be proud of it. I think that's the main thing, we've got to look at our history and look at where we come from, so we don't make the same mistakes in the future again, I guess. That's what we try to do for the little kids, make them feel good about themselves and make them proud.

JW: Yeah, instil a bit of confidence and how to perform. In reference to the Walga ones, we had kids from 10-14, and the older kids thought they were too cool for it, which was all good, but we eventually got them going and taught them about mic angles and presence on stage and performing for

an audience. So we ended up having this night down at the underage disco. About 300 other kids rocked up and then these 10-14 kids got up and just ripped it to peices.

W: It blew everyone's mind. Backflips, somersaults, and they're rapping, and they've never performed before.

JW: You could see all the older kids looking on all jealous. And a lot of them couldn't read, we'd say 'Write them lyrics down', and they'd be like 'Ah... I can't read it anyway'. So we had to record the lyrics for them so they could take the CD home and just listen and then pick it up. And then seeing these kids up on stage just blowing, it was great...

W: The beautiful thing was, you'd have a little kid rapping about being an Aboriginal and he's doing the traditional dance. And then we had another group of girls and what they liked doing was going down and shopping at the mall and giggling a lot, so that was their expression, and that's what we try and encourage. The diversity of the kids and the songs they came up with, yeah, that was a really good experience that one.

NK:: I know when Morganics and Brotha Black do workshops they are quite strong on trying to get the kids to rap in their own accents. Do you guys do that?

JW: Yeah, it hasn't really been a major issue because a lot of the kids we work with haven't rapped before anyway, so they don't try and put one on. There is always those references to Americanised forms of rap, where they copy the style, and we pull them up but....

W: We don't get bogged down with the negatives.

P: It's more about what they are saying than how they are saying it.

W: Yeah, definitely.

P: If that's how they feel more comfortable... As long as they are saying the right things.

W: Most of the time we are just trying to get them to express themselves and open up. We're really strong on rapping in our own accents, we call it Aboriginal-English and use our sort of words and that. But if some little kid is going to identify with some American rappers or European rappers or rock singers (where they want to scream into the mic) well, I mean, if it gets their message out then we don't really get anything out of pulling the kids up. So however they want to express themselves, we say good luck to them, and that goes for a lot of the artists out there as well. It's easy to point fingers this and that...

JW: And rap always gets it and I can't understand why. Country music man, I mean every single country singer has got that American twang to it. I don't really understand what the big problem is, so we always say, 'If that's who you are and that's how you feel comfortable, then no one else can say otherwise'.

P: Who's got the right to pass judgements, there's only one person really.

TM: Another thing I wanted to ask you about, because I know you were involved in 'Indigenous Down-Under' in Wellington with Te Kupu...

W: That's the shirt Weno's got on there now.

TM: Can you talk a bit about that because?

W: Predator's just stepped out of the room, but I think he spent the most time with Te Kupu. The whole experience was just completely mind blowing. We look at that mob over there and our people

have been trading with them for tens of thousands of years and we look at them like long distance relatives. So it was great to go over there and share a lot of our experiences. It was interesting when we started talking to people, we talked about a lot of the creation stories and dreamtime stories from over our areas. It was funny because the stories from all those mob over there we quite similar stories about the creation of the landscape in their culture. [Predator re-enters the room] These fellas were just asking about Upper Hut Posse, and about all I can say is that they are very staunch, very proud fellas, but you could probably say more.

P: Yeah, they are deadly lads and they are pretty staunch about their culture, their history and their identity. And they stand up and say what needs to be said, which is basic human rights as far as they are concerned.

W: But another crew that was over there that was deadly were a Maori crew from Hamilton called Native Suns. They were mind blowing, they have a full band. I think we do a lot of similar things, I mean they are more of a band and we are more straight up rap, but they incorporate the haka into their live show. So we got to hang with them fellas as well.

TM: Hip-hop just seems to have just taken off in Aotearoa and the Pacific Island countries.

W: Way bigger than over here.

TM: And it's mainstream.

W: Yeah, it's all showy now isn't it, with Scribe and all that mob, they are just running amok and then coming over here and showing everyone how it's done. Good luck to 'em. But yeah, that Native Suns mob really touched me, rapping about their families and children, wives and a lot about the positive stuff that goes on.

TM: So is there a feel-good dimension to what you do as well, all though it's not all educational, of course?

P: That's what we've been trying concentrate on lately, it's a feel-good thing where people can relax and enjoy themselves and not get the political thing pushed in your face the whole time. It's about pride, about who you are and where you come from, and that's not only for Aboriginal people. We get up there and basically get up there and try to inspire people to be themselves and not be somebody else.

W: We just recently got DJ JT, he's a non-Aboriginal dude and he's really into the whole Aussie hip-hop underground scene, aren't ya?

D: Yeah.

W: And that's a whole new element that we are trying to incorporate into our show.

D: Just because I DJ in clubs so much, I have to drop the mainstream stuff, because that's really what everyone wants, that's all they want to hear, but whenever I get a chance to do something original – and I'm particularly partial to the Oz hip-hop scene just because it's more real than people who are reaching for the American hip-hop. Because this is happening in our country, it's happening around us, and the whole thing about hip-hop is telling stories about what you've been and where you've come from. The problem with trying to emulate American hip-hop is...

TM: It's completely alien to us.

D: And the thing with Oz hip-hop is that it's spawned into a whole new genre. It's still hip-hop because the fundamentals are there, but everything else about it is so different from the American stuff.

TM: So you have been working in Sydney?

D: No, I've been working mainly in Newcastle, at the main club up there, and I do still enjoy the stuff that comes out of America because good stuff is always coming out from there, and I think you've got to remember when dealing with hip-hop that it still is the place where it was born. What it's turned into now in terms of what gets played on the radio is quite disgusting really, and I kind of have to deal with it on a daily basis because I'm working in a club. I do a lot of production as well, so like Wok was saying, anytime I can get these boys to take on a more Oz hip-hop angle, I do. It took me a while to get into Oz hip-hop because when you do listen to hip-hop and then you switch to see what's happening in this country it is a hard thing to take on at first because you've kind of got to let go of what you're used to hearing. And I think the Hilltop Hoods album was the turning point for me, it had a lot of A Tribe Called Quest buried in it, and a lot of that jazz feel, I think now everyone has found themselves as far as accents go and it's all reached a nice middle ground, and that album was what really turned me onto it, and after that I could really listen to anything.

TM: And is there still things happening at the Palais [in Newcastle]?

D: I think they are about to tear it down, aren't they?

P: They still go around there and make beats at the youth centre.

W: But it's more so at the Bandroom at the Leagues Club now days, all the gigs are there. There's good crews coming out of there. Left of Centre, they are a good crew. Suicide Boys.

TM: Blades of Hades?

W: They move down to Melbourne.

P: Yeah, a few of the boys have gone down there with the Blades boys and the Blades boys have looked out for the Newcastle boys, getting them gigs and looking out for each other.

W: We had tats done by one of their brothers in Newcastle, so it's not that big of a place really.

TM: So it's a kind of scene that strongly identify with?

P: Oh yeah, we're Newcastle always...

W: Well, first and foremost we're Aboriginal and we're really proud to be reppin' the red, balck and yellow all the way. But as we've got into the game we've just come across cool people you know, and we never ever thought we'd have a white DJ. When we first started we were getting a lot off our chest, dealing with a lot of racism and a lot of anger built up inside. But as this music journey has gone on I think we've met a lot of people and grown as people. It's a good scene back at home.

NK:: It's a good community, the Oz hip-hop scene...

W: Isn't it!

P: Everyone gets in and is supportive.

W: We're really lucky that we've got the Brotha Blacks and the Wires and The Native Rhymes in the Indigenous community.

TM: What made you decide to go into hip-hop, did you two approach Joel?

W: It was Abie's idea actually. Joel was already doing it.

P: We were heavily involved with the Indigenous community in Newcastle, and we saw a lot of the

young kids identified with Americans, and African-Americans, all the slang as well...

W: African-Americans are very strong people, and we identify with them, and we've picked up a lot of the stuff they've done, and what they are doing is phenomenal...

P: With all the marches, the freedom riots...

W: All that type of stuff, so we always give it up to the African-Americans.

P: A lot of our people did a lot of that stuff in the early days, long before our time, and it was the thing of seeing black man rising up and saying 'Here I am, I'm proud of who I am'. And that gave our people confidence, and we started doing that stuff as well.

W: But unfortunately our kids have got caught up with some of the negative things that were portrayed, the disrespect, the violence, all of which gets plastered all over the media. Who's to say, it probably doesn't happen all that much over there, who knows? But our kids were relating to that, hats on the side, 'Motherfuck this, motherfuck that', and just being disrespectful, and it's not our way... You ask them who Biggy Smalls is and they will give you his date of birth, this song and that song, but if you ask them who Murrandoo Yanner is, they say 'Murrandoo who?' So, they've just got no idea, and they don't wanna know, so a lot of our early stuff was just rapping about straight-up, hardcore issues; about the Stolen Generation, about being hassled by coppers, death in custody, all that sort of stuff. We just wanted to make the kids know that there is still a lot of work that needs to be done, and we can't lose them to drugs and alcohol, just to tell them they do have a role to play.

P: Yeah, so we spoke about that with Joel, because we already knew him through the Aboriginal community. Joel was all keen for it, keen to start writing music and start recording, so we thought we'd make our own rap group, the three of us. So we just started doing that...

W: We gave a couple of CDs out to our cousins...

P: Sent a few CDs around and next thing you know we're...

W: Starting to get bookings! We didn't even know what we were doing.

TM: How long ago was this?

W: Oh, this was... we only started writing, we probably had about five or six tracks that took us six-12 months. And we'd give it to a brother or a cousin and next thing you know Kempsey are ringing up 'Can youse come and do this gig?' and we were like, 'Sweet.' Our father has always taught us to be proud and stand up and have a go, and if you get knocked down then just get up, dust yourself off, and go again. We got knocked down a lot when we first started off 'cause we just didn't know what we were doing. We just kept persisting at it, and kept going.

TM: But you had experience in performing with your dance history?

W: Yeah, we do the same with our lives shows. Me and Abie laugh about it a lot because we try and structure our shows like we used to structure our corroboree shows. We'd start out with a bang, with a spectacular dance, and then we'd slow it down in tempo, then we'd go to a strong dance, a slow one, and then we'd go into something leftfield – a hitchhiker's story on a didgeridoo.

P: It's a roller coaster ride.

W: We'd take the audience on a journey and that's what we all do now. It's not pace with us, you'll hear a ballad which has been influenced by Nesian Mystik and then you'll hear a hardcore heavy crunk track which has been influenced by Little John. Soon you'll be hearing music influenced by Hilltop

Hoods. And that's the thing, we listen to a lot, we listen to punk. Everyone's got a story to tell and everyone like different kinds of stuff.

P: It seems to be the way our people have always done things. Instead of writing things down, we get up and perform and do a corroboree, and explain the story through the corroboree. It's the same with our music.

W: Just on our musical influences that we were talking about earlier, the New Zealand guys who we relate to. But we also listen to other stuff, Abie loves crunk music, do you know much about that?

NK: No.

D: It's just the latest thing that's come out of the States. It takes elements of dance music, I guess, and it's actually made it's way into the mainstream as anything good usually does in America. It's just really a lot of yelling and really high energy, but it's still got that hip-hop element.

P: It's been explained by artists from the South, they call it 'Dirty South Southern', and that's where a lot of the slaves were actually originally sent too, and it's a form of hip-hop, but it's repetitive and lots of screaming. It's sort of like Zulu chanting...

W: And they repeat it over and over and over and there is a heavy bass going through it. To a lot of people it might be like 'Gee, they are saying the same thing over and over', but to us it's like 'Fuck, this is like when we were sitting around singing corroboree songs'. It's a way that they get stuff off their chest. They don't go out and shoot someone, they go and the have their big crunk nights or their big hip-hop nights. It's yelling and chanting and screaming and they let all their anger out. The guy who actually explained it, is a guy by the name of David Benner who is from Mississippi, and he says, 'All the bad spirits are still there in Mississippi', with all the slavery and everything like that. It's their outlet. We love it, and we couldn't work out why. Our heads were bouncing as we were driving along, 'Oh fuck, this is deadly you know', and then it just all made sense to us. Them fellas with their Zulu chants and us fellas with our old people sitting around and stomping on the ground, 'Boom boom boom'. It saves us from letting our aggression out through our fists, or whatever...