

Education and the Power of the Power-Chord

Neil Fernandes

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Distinguished guests, good morning and welcome to Perth for this conference. I am Neil Fernandes, Managing Director of Central TAFE. We're the only TAFE college, or indeed post secondary institution in the State with a School of Contemporary Music. I'll come to that later.

When Paul Bodlovich contacted me recently and asked if I would consider delivering the keynote address to this conference, I must admit to immediately wanting to decline. What have I got to say, I thought. Paul went on to refer to the eminent speakers at earlier conferences, and this confirmed my doubts about the wisdom of accepting. But Paul, being the persuasive diplomat that he is, suggested that there was an opportunity for me to talk about something that I am quite passionate about – the role that contemporary music (and the arts more broadly speaking) could play in successfully engaging young people in learning. I guess that through my position as Managing Director at Central TAFE, I could purport to add some credibility to what is, after all, a view.

Let me at the outset be clear about what it is I mean by contemporary music. I guess if I used the term 'rock', perhaps most people – or at least the cohort of people with whom I'm concerned - would understand what's meant.

What I am going to do today is express a strongly held view for which I am sure there is scholarly evidence; however, I have not drawn on it for the purpose of making the points that I wish to make. I am going to draw, to a large extent, on my own experiences, those of my friends, and on those of many young people with whom I interact and observe on a daily basis.

Thus, what I've got to say today is based on hypothesis, conjecture, anecdote, supposition, assumption, intuition, but heartfelt belief.

Perhaps a bit of context to start with: Many, many years ago (1976), in a past life, I was part of a group of teenagers who, arguably, initiated the birth of the contemporary music scene in Perth (I say 'arguably' quite deliberately, as websites abound contesting the veracity of this!). I must say at the outset, that my own role in this was extremely minor, and I wouldn't want this overstated. However, I was amongst a group of friends who believed that what was happening overseas, particularly in Detroit, the East Coast of the States, and London, meant that musicianship, as you'd all probably understand it, was not prequalification for forming a band, making a racket, and pulling girls. Earning money was never a consideration.

Upon leaving school, my parents inquired as to my chosen pathway. I wanted to study philosophy at the University of Western Australia – no more, no less. My father looked askance, and said: 'As long as you recognise that there is not a burgeoning labour market for philosophers, we have no objection'. Grateful though I was for their support, it would have made no difference had they objected. It was all I wanted to do.

Then, as is the case now, offerings in the classics were few, and far between. You could not progress through as you would in engineering. As a result, after two years of full time study, I took a year off and got a job working as a cashier in the Crown Law department, collecting traffic fines.

I met Kim Salmon (Kim is revered in some quarters as the godfather of what's referred to as 'grunge music' the world over, and a staple of the music scene in Seattle in the early 1990s). He played me a record (remember them?) by a New York band called the Ramones, and he asked me to be in a band he called the Cheap Nasties. I also heard Blondie, the Talking Heads, the Damned, the Sex Pistols, Television, the New York Dolls, Iggy and the Stooges, the Flamin' Groovies, the Hearbreakers, and the Buzzcocks (whom I saw playing last Sunday, 30 years after their first album was released).

Life, as they say, would never be the same. This was my own musical epiphany. These bands to me shared an aesthetic – they were all (to varying degrees) revolutionary, definitive, primordial, brutal, anarchic, sexual, trailblazing, and yes, spiritual (in a brutal, anarchic and sexual way).

My music consumed me, and consumes me to this day. For five or six years after that, my music was all I lived for. It was the air that I breathed; it was the dreams and nightmares that I dreamed; it sustained me; it differentiated me; it gave me confidence and self esteem.

I recall a family friend, upon hearing that I had formed a band, saying, 'why would you form a band if you can't be the Beatles?' What sort of question was that? What sort of distorted understanding did that silliness emanate from? I preferred the Rolling Stones anyway.

Back to the Ramones. The Ramones played no more than three chords, and no song lasted for more than two-and-a-half minutes. Each album came in at just about 30 minutes. No bonus tracks, just what mattered most. The first Ramones album roared with power and primitiveness, and a precision and simplicity unheard of at the time (or since). The first album I bought at the time, was by a band called the Damned (who had a drummer called Rat Scabies, and a bass player called Captain Sensible which, for those of us who know, may be an oxymoron).

The Cheap Nasties, Kim, Ken Seymour, Mark Betts and me, covered songs by the Ramones, the Velvet Underground, Lou Reed, the Modern Lovers, the Troggs, the Kinks and the like. We played with passion, but apart from Kim, had never played before. I bought my first electric guitar so that I could rehearse with the Nasties. We rehearsed in Kim's bedroom. What is significant though, is that we wrote songs. A punk rock literacy - we could write but we could not read. We were not musicians, but we could write, arrange, and play songs. My first was a song called *Vegetation*, which celebrated sloth and self-indulgence. We played few chords loudly, on cheap equipment. Sadly, we didn't play often, as no one would book us, but there were some venues.

Hernando's in East Perth (a hitherto jazz haunt – we soon put paid to that), Trades Hall, and the Governor Broome Hotel, which Ray Purvis described as something like the urine-drenched corridor to hell. This is now the site for Perth's new theatre complex! We may have had a part to play in the Guv's demolition!

At the first Nasties gig, Dave Faulkner met James Baker, and the rest, as they say, was hysteria. The legendary Victims formed, and assumed ascendancy of the nascent Perth punk scene. We wanted equal time but never got it. Kim left the Cheap Nasties, arguing that my predilection for melody was anathema to his aesthetics, and formed the legendary Scientists. I gathered the Remnants (which is how we were known for a while), and reformed as The Manikins (a Shakespearean synonym for the word 'punk'). We had a slogan, Models for Mankind, which we hardly were.

The band had four, perhaps five, phases in its lifespan. I was a part of three, between the years of 1978 and 1981. The Manikins was my band between 1978 and

1981. By 1981, the band had toured Western Australia, Melbourne and Sydney, recorded three singles and a cassette, and gigged relentlessly. I hated the idea of touring, or selling out to a record company, though the offers didn't roll in for an independent band in little old Perth, and wouldn't if you continued to reside here. I wanted to continue on my own terms. By now, Kim had formed the Scientists, and his well deserved reputation began to grow, Dave had left to form the Hoodoo Gurus, and a long career as one of the country's best and most gifted songwriters, and I realised a long held secret ambition to join the public service!

I continued to play, but soon left the band due to illness. I did nothing musically between 1981 and 1995 when the band briefly reformed for a bit of belated fun. I've done very little playing since, though hope to do so again shortly.

During my early career in the public service, promotion was often reliant upon performance at work and qualifications. It was always apparent that I'd taken seven years to complete a straightforward arts degree. My major in philosophy, not what one would have thought of as a relevant qualification for clerical work in the service, always attracted a bit of interest. At interview after interview I inevitably had to parry two questions – what is it, and why would you want to study it. But what drew more attention were the frequent withdrawals from study. I soon learned that claiming to have worked in the private sector was a much-regarded advantage and revered quality in the public service.

'I worked in the private sector', I'd claim. 'Doing what?' 'I played in Perth's first punk rock band.' That's when the interview would move to other, more relevant, prerequisites.

Of late, upon giving more thought to those other, more relevant prerequisites, I began to contemplate how my brief, but less than brilliant career in the music industry, might have led to where I am. Let me posit the following.

The Manikins, as I said previously, was my band. I wrote the songs. I arranged them. I booked the roadies and lighting crew. I dealt with the media and the booking agents.

I booked the advertising spaces. I organised rehearsals, booked the recording studios, oversaw the sessions, the mixing and production, arranged for the pressings, the distribution and meagre sales and more meagre radio coverage, the sleeve artwork. I hired the door-men and bouncers, ensured their payment, stayed behind after the gigs and collected the takings (meagre at first but not insubstantial towards the end). I paid everyone, and banked the rest – to pay for the recordings. I kept the books and saw the accountant at year's end. I did say that it was my life. I did all this, in retrospect shouldering what was a fair degree of responsibility. I was 22 years old and I was in effect managing a small enterprise. The private sector indeed!

What is remarkable about my experience is how unremarkable it is.

The fact is that there are, and always have been, thousands of young people doing the very same things – forming bands, writing songs, playing gigs, recording and distributing, more easily now than ever before, with the advent of relatively cheap, accessible, user friendly technology and the ubiquitous internet.

What's more, nowadays you can make it big without leaving Perth like Dave Faulkner did, to form the Gurus, like Kim did with the Scientists and Triffids did, if you wanted to.

You could be born, and remain, sandy devotional, like (in no particular order) Gyroscope, Eskimo Joe, End of Fashion, The Sleepy Jackson, Little Birdy, John Butler, The Waifs, Downside, Jebediah, the Panics, the Panda Band, the Flairz, and

my good friend, Dom Mariani, who continues to play the stages of Europe and Japan as he has for 20 years.

The State Government too has recognised the contribution that contemporary music has made to the State's economy. For consecutive terms the Government has allocated \$5M in support of contemporary music. A contemporary music taskforce charted the contribution to the economy and the multiplier effect. We made a series of recommendations to support the development of an industry struggling for legitimacy in the broader community. In the face of all the evidence, the interest, the participation, the successes and the significant direct and indirect contribution to the State's economy, it is difficult to argue that such legitimacy is not warranted.

I was asked to represent the training sector along with my colleague and friend, Phil Warburton, who heads Central TAFE's music school. You may be aware that in the training sector we pride ourselves on the fact that we have training packages for each of the industry sectors, each containing a suite of nationally recognised competencies, skills and qualifications. We argued in the taskforce that training and skills enhancement are integral to the development of this industry, like any other.

Just by way of illustration: The Central TAFE music program enrolled 220 students in 2006, 30% of whom were female. On average the students were aged between 18 and 22.

120 students are completing performance based programs (writing songs, performing and recording). These students also learn about copyright, distribution, how labels work, and the growing role that the web has begun to play in the industry. The school is planning to run a new program in music business management to equip students to be band managers, entrepreneurs, events promoters, and label magnates!

Another 70 are enrolled in technical production programs, this part of the course having grown from 20 students three years ago. These students learn about analogue and digital recording, and live band mixing. The skills are easily transferable to recording bands, film sound, computer game sound, web sound and podcasting.

The school is proud of its alumni – members of Eskimo Joe, Karnivool, Sleepy Jackson and Gyroscope, and Shannon Noll. I'm also told that the Panda Band, Downsyde and Gyroscope developed their industry game plans while enrolled at the school.

We're in the process of redeveloping the school to provide a central focus for contemporary music training throughout Western Australia. At present, there is a small but very successful vocational program for school students who attend the school one day per week to study technical production. The program, as you could imagine, has a long waiting list.

We also oversee the delivery of a number of Certificate II and III vocational qualifications in schools, where the number of students undertaking programs in contemporary music is rapidly growing.

Again, by way of example in the schools sector itself, as part of the school curriculum, there are currently approximately 300 students in year 11 and in year 12 studying music for tertiary entrance, but over 900 studying a subject called *Music in Society*, which maintains the rigour of the TEE program, but allows students the flexibility to select an area of interest, such as rock, jazz, vocal music, world music, or traditional Western classical music. The course offers assessment based on music appreciation, performance and composition. Students are able to meet the requirements of the course through their areas of strength and interest.

As the curriculum reforms in the school system are progressively implemented, there will be a Music Course of Study primarily aimed at tertiary entrance. But this

will be complemented by a vocational version, resembling the current vocational qualifications offered in partnership with TAFE. These courses will also count towards a student's completion of a Western Australian Certificate of Education. The skills taught will be reading, performing and composing music, setting up and using music technology, organising a public performance, and assisting with staging – skills that are not dissimilar to those found in the training packages we use in the vocational sector. I expect there to be considerable interest and demand from young students.

Where might we ask are all these musicians going to end up? Where are the skills shortages in this industry? I'd argue that this is not entirely a relevant question.

The reforms in the school system are happening at a time when the Government has raised the compulsory school leaving age to 16 in 2006. This will be raised again to 17 in 2008. There remains a challenge to actively engage young students in learning.

There is a significant cohort of students who are currently, or at risk of being, disengaged from the institutional education and training system. With our young indigenous students throughout the State, sadly, this problem is more pronounced, with disengagement occurring much earlier.

There is a variety of strategies in place to deal with this issue. One such example, targeted particularly at young indigenous males, is a establishment of a number of football academies around the State.

The Commonwealth government, recognising the success that these academies are having at engaging young Aboriginal boys at school in WA, is currently in the process of funding a number of sporting academies for indigenous students around the country. The aim is not to engage young people in sport, but to use sport - recognising that many indigenous young people are passionately fond of, and excel at, sport - as a strategy to engage young people in learning at school. The objective is completion of 12 years of schooling. I have no doubt that this strategy will have a measure of success, if the success of the football academies to date is anything to go by.

Getting back to the skills I learned during the days of my relatively brief involvement in the music industry. The skills I developed during those five years included the capacity to plan and organise, communicate and negotiate, manage people (and situations).

Anybody with a similar experience would realise the not insignificant interpersonal skills required to deal with variously temperamental artists – the need to be tolerant, innovative and creative in dealing with a range of difficult situations, show initiative, and have a sense of humour at all times. I developed my numeracy skills, though at least in the early stages, not needing to count above a few hundred, and my literacy skills (though a couple of verses for each song sufficed for a while). There was a need for teamwork, always, and time management (no song could exceed three minutes if we were to stay true to the spirit).

These skills are now embedded in training qualifications and packages. Discipline-specific skills (hard skills) are considered to include technical ability, knowledge and qualifications. Employability skills (or soft skills) identified by employers are considered to include initiative (being creative, adapting to new situations), communication (negotiating, empathising, persuading, being assertive), teamwork (working as part of a team – true for all but lead singers), technology (IT skills), problem solving, self-management (evaluating and monitoring one's own performance), planning, and learning (being open to new ideas and techniques).

The best learning is said to occur in context. Some anecdotes that illustrate the point:

Someone recently told me that you have a greater propensity to remember what you do rather than what you're told. I certainly do.

One young Aboriginal student who is enrolled in an events management class at Central TAFE recently told me how much she enjoyed TAFE over university study, saying, 'The things that I am studying here are the things that I like doing'.

A survey by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research indicated in a report a few years ago that, of the number of students enrolled in vocational education programs in school, the largest cohorts are in retail, IT, and hospitality; however, they don't reportedly seek employment in these industries after school, but gain from the range of soft skills similar to those I've outlined above, and get jobs in a diverse range of occupational areas.

Let them form bands, I say. They'll be learning from the things they like doing, all of those soft skills I've mentioned above.

A couple of years ago in the Department of Education and Training, there was an analysis done to show the very low rate of retention in education of young people in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, a group of towns locate in the Central Desert, some 600 kms north east of Kalgoorlie. The department has been giving consideration to a range of mobile teaching facilities or laboratories that would move between the townships, fully equipped with relevant equipment. There were discussions about what these mobiles should contain.

In a casual conversation I suggested that we should equip them with musical equipment (guitars, drum and keyboards), microphones and digital recording gear, and some digital cameras and computers, not expecting to be taken all that seriously. A few weeks ago, I was asked to a meeting at the department to further discuss this with the Director of Training for the Lands. He advised the meeting that the overwhelming response from young people in the towns was that music was the most important thing that they wanted to learn about. They wanted to learn about the things they like doing.

I've seen draft designs for a fully equipped performing arts mobile. The proposal is to be considered by the Council in the next month or so. If acceptable, Central TAFE will be asked to build a structured learning program around the mobile. Music, contemporary music without doubt, and media will be the hooks and the context for the learning.

What we'll be aiming for is for the young people to develop a range of skills in teamwork, organisation and planning, technology, literacy and numeracy, initiative, creativity and innovation. They'll be enjoying themselves, leaning and developing. Above all, they'll be doing something they're passionate about; they'll gain confidence and self esteem. They'll be engaged. It'll be something that can be built on. I do hope the program goes ahead, because I've got a premonition that it will succeed – just like football.

I've talked today about a brief time I had in the music industry playing in the Manikins. We achieved some moderate local success. We left a little mark on the history of Perth's contemporary music scene. Of that I'm quite proud.

The legion of much more successful bands that have since emanated from Perth has been nothing short of exceptional, given our isolation and relatively small population. The industry is strong and growing, thanks to the efforts of WAM and our own Centre for Music Industry Training, I might add.

We're actively building talent and an audience. That many young people aspire to success in what they perceive as a successful industry is not such a bad thing. That

most of them won't, is a reality and a pity; however, what we have now is a training framework whereby they can learn by doing what they like doing, while they aspire, and gain skills that are applicable in a wide range of workplace settings. And heaven knows, they could realise their real lifelong ambitions and become public servants.

As for my own passion for the industry, it has not faded. It burns bright. I still long to write, play and record. I get the occasional chance. I'm still a passionate fan. I get a huge thrill from hearing a new band, or buying a new CD, just as much as I did when I was 16. I still attend live gigs, though the lateness of the gigs is starting to take its toll! It's inevitable that I raise the average age of most audiences.

No so long ago, I went to see a band called the White Stripes. It was 11 o'clock before the band came on. The place was packed, and I was jammed up against the bar close to the front of the room. The lights reflected the whites of people's eyes and the dust or dandruff on their predominantly black clothing.

I was chuffed that there was no dandruff showing on my clothes, until some young thing looked up at me and said, 'Hey, I can see all the white hairs in your beard'. 'Where's your dad,' I thought. 'Tucked up in bed after a warm milo, I bet.'

I took solace in the words of the indomitable Keith Richards, who said (*before* he fell out of the palm tree, I suspect) something to the effect of, 'Growing old is inevitable, growing up isn't'.

Thank you.