

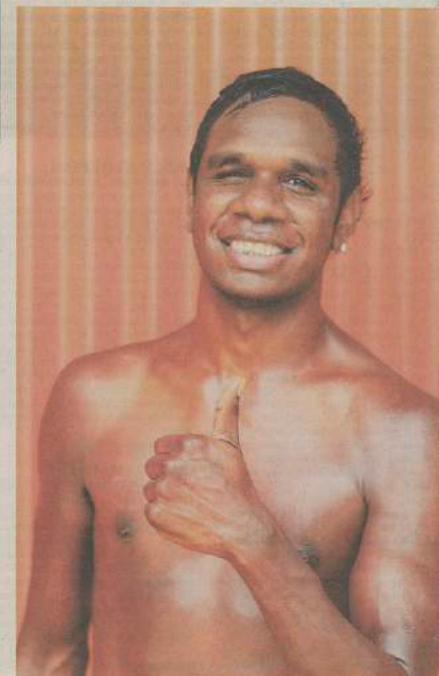
arts

Happy feet



Busting a move (clockwise from left) Djuki Mala rehearse at Mission Beach, Arnhem Land; new recruit Baykali Ganambarr; and producer and director Joshua Bond.

PICTURES ADAM TAYLOR



YouTube sensations, the Djuki Mala dancers are taking their unique moves from the Top End to Australia and the world, writes **VICTORIA HANNAFORD**

AMID the lush green of Elcho Island, it's day three of rehearsal and the Djuki Mala dancers are slowly filtering into the morning session after a punishing couple of days. Baykali Ganambarr is first to show up, as a new recruit in the group, the rising star is showing dedication. The indigenous posse was known as the Chokey Dancers in 2007 when a YouTube clip of them dancing to a techno version of Zorba The Greek at a local basketball court became a viral sensation. The cheeky video defied cultural expectations as the dancers, covered in white ochre and wearing lion cloths, looked ready to perform a traditional routine. But as the song kicked in, the men broke out moves that would have looked more at home in a nightclub. The clip gave the local heroes global recognition, racking up more than two million hits in the process.

Now Djuki Mala, who changed their name to their Yolngu language version last year, are about to embark on a 45-city venue tour around mainland Australia. Before the journey starts, preparations are taking place at home on the remote island, 550km northeast of Darwin in East Arnhem Land, and there's a lot of new choreography for the dancers to master.

Producer and director Joshua Bond is sympathetic to his belated weary charges. "Late start today. It's hump day — I'm certainly feeling it," he says. It's the height of the wet season, and the island is hot and humid. The exuberant foliage partially hides the entrance to the unassuming building where the young men are rehearsing.

Once the dancers walk through the door, island life and its traditions give way to demanding routines. Led by guest choreographer Nikki Ashby, they're put through their paces.

"We're just working through some of the numbers," Bond says of preparation for the self-titled show. "It's going to be an hour, so we've got a lot of new repertoire — it's exciting."

"Step, pump, step, pump," Ashby bellows behind him as she demonstrates the moves for a New Jack Swing section. It's sweaty work for the dancers, but the vibe in the room is so infectious, tour manager Rosalee Pearson jumps up from her desk and joins in with the routines.

"There's also a Motown mash-up where we take it right back, with everything from the Temptations to the Drifters," Bond says. "They're all in suits with centre parts and they've got the full look going on."

The producer and director adds some of the routines have been influenced by the work of Bangarra.

"Stephen Page's choreography is majorly informed by traditional dance in the Top End, so these guys will be a genuine combination of indigenous contemporary dance with Northern Territory traditional dances."

Bond, who grew up on Elcho Island, says the musical selections for the show weaves in with the dancers' tastes. "They're young guys, but they all play and love this music," he says.

"With techno music, there's no nightclub, but there's discos every weekend. They have them on the basketball court and there's kids everywhere."

It's the same basketball court where their viral YouTube clip was filmed, and Bond says everything from dance music to the latest R'n'B is played, and it's a chance for young people on the island to cut loose on the dance floor.

"There isn't cinemas or nightclubs. There's not a lot else to keep busy with apart from fishing and hunting," he says.

We're interrupted by the opening bars of C&C

Music Factory's *Everybody Dance*. Now blaring from speakers in the room, and pause for a moment to watch the routine.

While the dances have a joyous quality, Bond adds that there's a more serious side to the work of Djuki Mala.

"The mortality rates in indigenous communities are through the roof, some of the highest in the world. That also being youth suicide, which is why these guys are quite remarkable. They're leaders," he says.

While they break for lunch, dancer Lionel Dumanaway Garawirritja, whose father Frank founded the company, explains he's excited to showcase Yolngu tradition on tour.

"It's our culture and how we dance," he says. "It makes a better community, and to all the people show how we dance. We like dancing and also the traditional way — a mixture. That's why I'm interested."

While Mitchell Rang Garawirritja, Lionel's cousin, like the company's focus on healthy lifestyle, he also had a pragmatic motivation for joining Djuki Mala. "I wanted to show myself the world, and what it's like to



be overseas," he says.

Ganambarr echoes Mitchell. He's just returned from a run with a couple of other Djuki dancers in La Soiree's Sydney season, and adds that it gave him the chance to connect with other artists in the ensemble cabaret show.

"It was deadly, especially with the other performers the shows gave us more confidence."

Wakara Gondarra, who was also in La Soiree, has been to the Solomon Islands and Canada with Djuki Mala but says there's nothing that compares to returning to Elcho Island.

"It's nice to come home, that moment, that feeling you have. It looks different from when I was living here and when I came back, but I just relax."

The Djuki Mala national tour began in Darwin this week. Victorian destinations are Geelong (April 24), Shepparton (April 29), Traralgon (May 1), Ballarat (May 2), Hamilton (May 3), Warrnambool (May 5), Colac (May 7), Williamstown (May 8), Dandenong (May 9-10), Mildura (August 28).

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