

THE dinghy's outboard motor slows to a steady putt-putt as we leave the coral lagoon and hang a left up a narrow river flanked by mangrove swamps. After a five-hour journey across open ocean from Honiara, the capital of Solomon Islands, we're finally close to Oterama. The hamlet (population 142) on remote Malaita island is home to one of the most extraordinary bands this side of paradise, Narasirato.

A sprawling collective of farmers and fishermen, Narasirato play an array of bamboo instruments — stomping tubes, slit log drums and that most misunderstood of ethnic instruments, the panpipe — in haunting, funky and compelling ways. Their stage shows, which see them body-painted, shell-adorned and barefoot in bark loincloths, have wowed audiences everywhere from Roskilde in Denmark to Fuji Rock in Japan and the Glastonbury festival in England. Next month they play WOMADelaide's 20th anniversary and release their new album *Warato'o*. In the meantime they've invited us here, to their (nearly) lost world.

"If you visit us, you will understand us," said Narasirato's musical director and lead pan-piper Donatien Manuasi, speaking at a festival in Norway where I met the band: a 14-piece group when touring and up to 50 musicians when at home. After coming offstage to a standing ovation the band's members — charismatic lead singer Aloysius Ma'asinorao; dreadlocked thong-o-phone player Willie Aitakara; burly dancer and panpiper Peter "Peter the Great" Hahau — had changed into hoodies and jeans and were sitting in a huddle in the festival bar. Most questions were answered Melanesian-style: silently, with a backward tilt of the head and a swift raise of the eyebrows.

"You will see how we live," said the 45-year-old Manuasi, a good-natured father-of-five. "Our lifestyle is under threat from logging, mining, climate change. We want the world to sit up and take notice. To see that our culture is our life."

So along with Narasirato's manager Jason Mayall (son of the British blues legend John Mayall and programmer of Fuji Rock, Japan's largest music festival), two of his friends, four returning villagers and a week's worth of supplies, I set off in an early morning rainstorm from Honiara's port, the World War II graveyard that is Iron Bottom Sound. The few Westerners who have visited Oterama in the past (anthropologists, musicologists, missionaries) have done so on the once-a-week, 24-hour slow boat called Small Mala. Hitching a ride on an OBM (outboard motorboat) is a treat.

The past few hours have been spent in blazing sunshine. Which seems only fitting: Narasirato means "cry for sunshine" in the language of their Are'are people, a distinct tribal grouping within tropical, mountainous southern Malaita. "Every time Narasirato play the sun comes out," says rock'n'roll-hardened Mayall, 50, dragging on a roll-up. "Glastonbury was so wet that Willie stepped on a nail while walking around barefoot and had to have a tetanus shot. But when the band played the clouds parted."

But right now, as we chug alongside mangroves, the sun is obscured by thick virgin rainforest, and the river criss-crossed by shadows. The air is heavy, moist. By the time the boat pulls up next to a sandy landing pad, as we unlock our legs and step into calf-deep water, something doesn't feel right. Aside



Here comes the sun

from the odd noise of the jungle — bird song, mosquito buzz, the splash and scuttle of mud crabs — it's quiet. Too darn quiet. When a conch shell blows and a flimsy spear comes hurtling out of nowhere, hitting the side of the boat with a tink, there are giggles. Children's faces daubed warrior-style peer out behind trees; other spears are hurled equally ineffectively. "Don't hurt us!" we say, grinning. "Just take us to Narasirato."

The members of our pipsqueak welcome party holler, turn tail and bolt off down a muddy track, a bare-bottomed toddler windmilling his arms behind them. "That's one of my boys," says our skipper, panpiper Michael Manepaewa, 40. "He already plays the pan."

Then just as suddenly, we hear them. Panpipes trilling. Stomping tubes stomping. The thwack and bounce of bamboo percussion. The same polyphonic sounds with which the Are'are (pronounced ari-ari) have entertained each other for more than 75 generations, using unique tunings, melodies and sounds that mimic those of nature and village life.

Panpipe orchestras are well known in the Solomons, an archipelago of nearly 1000 islands (and more than 70 languages)

Enraptured by Narasirato's music, **Jane Cornwell** accepts the band's invitation to travel to their remote island homeland to see where it all began

stretching 1400km across the southwest Pacific (Honiara is a three-hour flight from Brisbane). In a place where customs are handed down through generations, where Are'are culture wasn't recorded in writing until the 1960s, theories on the origin of the Melanesian panpipe vary: maybe a prototype came in with Spanish explorers in the 1500s. Perhaps someone heard the wind blowing over a piece of broken bamboo in the forest.

The great Swiss-French ethnomusicologist Hugo Zemp, who lived with the Are'are people in the 1970s, was told of the myth of the purple swamp hen, a bird that pilfered garden produce until it was lured by the sound of a flute cut from bamboo stalk and killed. Tubes of various pitches were then tied together, creating the first panpipe — the "tradewinds bamboo".

Today's panpipes range from small soprano instruments to huge blown bass pipes that swivel on stands. Some pipes are for ensemble playing; others are played solo. The humongous thong-o-phone, which features open-ended tubes hit with rubber wedges (a legacy of the sandals worn by American soldiers in the 1960s, which replaced coconut husks), can be wielded by up to four people at once.