

## BEGINNER'S GUIDE



Ali McKeech

# David Bridie

**Jane Cornwell** gives us the lowdown on the Australian singer-songwriter who has been helping Pacific First Nations artists share their music and culture

**D**avid Bridie isn't flashy. But over the last 40 or so years, thanks to a combination of talent, drive and Zeitgeist-reading smarts, he has become one of Australia's most respected songwriters, composers and producers. Based in Melbourne, Victoria, the country's southernmost state, his career is multifaceted, often collaborative, his sound dappled with light and shade. His curiosity for other cultures, like his sense of injustice, is palpable.

The recipient of seven ARIAs (Australia's Grammys), Bridie has been a staple of Australia's alternative music scene since the 1980s. His ambient alt-pop group Not Drowning, Waving and whimsically-titled acoustic side project My Friend the Chocolate Cake were remarkable for their idiosyncrasy – the former was influenced by the music of Melanesia, that south-western Pacific region above the northern tip of Australia – as well

as for their productivity. Featuring Bridie on vocals, piano, synthesizer and percussion, Not Drowning, Waving released six studio albums and two soundtrack works, while My Friend the Chocolate Cake can boast several soundtracks and seven studio recordings, two of them ARIA-awarded.

"I have a low boredom threshold, but also being a musician in Australia means you have to multitask a little bit," Bridie has said. And diversify he has: his solo projects span piano works, songwriting, soundtracks (he has scored over 100 films) and multimedia projects. Recent highlights include the current *It's Been a While Since Our Last Correspondence*, a collaborative spoken word and music album featuring the likes of human rights activist Arnold Zable and Kurdish musician and activist Farhad Bandesh, who was incarcerated in Australia's cruel refugee detention system for nine years (see August/

September 2020, #160). There's his 2019 solo album *The Wisdom Line*, a work that tells stories of Australia, from its suburban streets and lounge rooms to its red deserts, wild oceans and tropical thunderheads. There's also a decolonisation-themed, gallery-touring installation *A Bit Na Ta*, which is centred around a film that Bridie made with the Tolai people of East New Britain province (an island area of Papua New Guinea), among them videographer Gideon Kakabin and the musician George Telek (whose debut album *Telek* was released in 1997 by ORiGiN).

Papua New Guinea was the first place Bridie visited overseas. "I was a musician and Not Drowning, Waving were doing pretty well," he says of the cult band he founded in 1983 with guitarist/sampler John Phillips, and which briefly featured producer Tim Cole of Small Island Big Song fame on vocals. Critically compared to Brian Eno's electro-ambient



masterwork *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, NDW's seminal fever dream album *Tabaran* was recorded in 1989 in Rabaul, a township in East New Britain, with a clutch of local musicians including Telek and his colleagues in the Moab Stringband (whose cassette recordings had been a siren's call to Bridie and Phillips). *Tabaran*'s dreamscapes, samples, chants and strings drew Australia's attention to its close but oh-so-mysterious neighbour.

"I remember sitting on a bench in Rabaul with Telek, eating chicken and drinking lager and deciding to make a record together. George started saying, 'there's all these other artists here we should be doing records with as well'."

With Papua New Guinean-Australian percussionist Airileke Ingram, Bridie co-founded the not-for-profit foundation and record label Wantok, whose name in Tok Pisin, the Creole language used throughout PNG, means 'One Talk,' and, by extension, kinship and family. Celebrating their 21st anniversary this year, Wantok's holistic approach includes helping Pacific First Nations artists to share their music and cultural perspectives, thereby transforming lives and communities.

The list of artists whose careers have been championed from the get-go is vast and wide-ranging: Australia-based, PNG-born soul singer Ngaiire; the Vanuatu Women's Water Music group; Indigenous Australian singer-songwriter Emily Wurramara; Tongan hip-hop-reggae-soul man Radical Son; The Black Rock Band, from the small community of Jabiru in the Northern Territory; and Maubere Timor, an ensemble of Timor-Leste veterans singing of occupation and the resistance movement (see June 2021, #168).

"A lot of the artists we work with have agendas outside their music," says Bridie. "It could be environmental concerns or indeed, political concerns when it comes to some of the West Papuan musicians and musicians from Timor-Leste or East Timor." Indonesia occupied West Papua in the early 1960s and continues to do so and occupied East Timor from 1975 to 1999. "We have artists from Bougainville [the most remote island/part of PNG's 19 provinces], which is about to become a newly independent nation."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many Wantok artists function as social commentators and/or advocates for their countries and communities. For example, George Telek has recently penned a song about gender-

based violence in Papua New Guinea, where, according to a 2021 report in *The Guardian*, nearly every woman has experienced some form of domestic abuse. "We are working with various NGOs based in PNG, who are doing some amazing work," Bridie says.

Having successfully recovered from mouth cancer surgery in 2018, Telek is among more than 20 artists featuring on the current, celebratory *Wantok Music Vol 3* compilation, delivering a track from his forthcoming album *Kambek* (Comeback). Another major Wantok artist, Indigenous singer-songwriter Frank Yamma, a Pitjantjatjara man from Central Australia, has his declamatory 'Pitjuli Wankanye' remixed into a beats-driven wonder that conjures the feel of the scorched

Outback, the connection to land, to country.

Bridie is there too on the closer 'Baba', part of a meditative musing that originally soundtracked *Marni*, an immersive slow TV art experience in which *Ngarndu Marni*, an intricate dot painting of Ngarluma country in

bloom after the rain, is created by Allery Sandy, a Pilbara Yindjibarndi artist and elder from Western Australia.

Like, say, Peter Gabriel and his Real World Records, Bridie is an enabler, a facilitator. The ease with which he encourages artists to be their best then steps away to allow them to do so is all part of his appeal.

While Australia and Melanesia have long been his focus, Bridie's next project will send him south, to the icy climes of Antarctica. The recipient of the 2021 Australian Antarctic Territory Fellowship, his 2022 trip postponed by the pandemic, Bridie and video artist Keith Deverell will travel to the ice continent in February 2023 to record footage for a live art performance and an audio-visual projection installation to be presented in festivals, schools and museums. "The artist's role is to translate the science into emotion. The deafening quiet. The frightening repercussions of a melting ice shelf. We will provoke thought and action. Because we must act," continues Bridie, for whom action is everything. "That is a given." ♦

**+ ALBUM** *The latest Wantok compilation, featuring a diverse range of First Nations artists from the Oceania region, is available on Bandcamp: [www.bit.ly/WantokVol3](http://www.bit.ly/WantokVol3)*

**+ LISTEN** *Hear 'Permanent Water' from David Bridie's album *The Wisdom Line* on this issue's covermount CD, track 11*

**"A lot of the artists [Wantok] work with have agendas outside their music"**

## BEST ALBUMS



**Not Drowning, Waving and the Musicians of Rabaul, Papua New Guinea**  
*Tabaran*  
(WEA, 1990)

The masterpiece that kickstarted Bridie's journey into the textures and spirits within Melanesian culture. Featuring the haunting voice of George Telek and several musicians from the north coast of PNG, *Tabaran*'s combination of traditional songs and chants, dreamy synths and delicate chamber pop still feels original, mysterious and even shamanic.



**David Bridie**  
*In a Savage Land (Original Soundtrack)*  
(EMI Music Group Australasia, 1999)

A double-disc soundtrack to a work partly filmed in the Trobriand Islands off the east coast of PNG. Trobriand Islanders are lent agency by Bridie's raw approach to texture and decoration, the result of eight weeks' living and recording in a beach shack. The album received several awards.



**David Bridie**  
*Act of Free Choice*  
(Chrysalis, 2000)

Bridie's first solo recording debut used his gift for moody atmospherics and compositional adventure to highlight the injustices and genocidal atrocities wrought on West Papua by its Indonesian invaders. All royalties went to the Institute for Human Rights.



**David Bridie**  
*Wake*  
(David Bridie, 2013)

Bridie's knack for capturing the Australian landscape weaves in and around a vital political theme: the heinous treatment of Australia's refugees. Guests including PNG singer Ngaiire and a female choir from Sinasina in PNG buoy the emotional immediacy.



**Various Artists**  
*Wantok Musik Vol 3*  
(Wantok, 2022)

A range of First Nations artists from the Oceania region celebrates Bridie's Wantok label's 21-year anniversary. Velvet-voiced Mutti Mutti singer-songwriter Kutcha Edwards gifts 'Singing Up Country' and George Telek tells of a bird spirit in 'Ramkuk'. A must have.

## IF YOU LIKE DAVID BRIDIE, THEN TRY...



**Shane Howard**  
*Goanna Dreaming*  
(MGM, 2010)

The mainstay of classic folk rockers Goanna, Howard has released successful solo albums including this anthemic country-infused blend pushing personal manifestos on matters environmental and Indigenous.