



Oud player from Kous Kous Kazbah, performing at Camden Haven Music Festival in 2008

# Festival heaven in Camden Haven

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The local music festival that started with home-made tickets and posters at the dining room table has gone on to win a major national award. What's the secret to their success?

by ALVENA FERGUSON

**Earlier this year, the 2006 Camden Haven Music Festival was awarded an APRA, one of the most prestigious awards for music in Australia, for Outstanding Contribution To Australian Music In A Regional Area. The judges raved. Camden Haven's program of artists and music from across the spectrum of Australian musical life was, they said, "extraordinary."**

"Run by a committee of volunteers, and directed by Trish O'Brien, the ten day festival presented a varied program of jazz, classical and alternative styles of music," the judges observed. "This outstanding project demonstrated commitment from the artistic director, local businesses and sponsors, and the artists themselves."

The judges' decision to award the prize to Camden Haven was unanimous. "I wish I'd been there," said one, "it sounds so exciting, it would more than rival any metropolitan equivalent."

How do you go from making your own tickets and posters at the dining room table to winning a national award for your local festival?

Let me tell you.

The Camden Haven Music Festival began in 1996 when a few members of the local arts council decided to try and fill a gap of fine music in a picturesque corner of the mid north coast between Taree and Port Macquarie. I'm sure they had no idea what they were unleashing. With next to no money they somehow managed to put on an ambitious four day program of concerts, workshops, art, photography and a literary dinner. The artistic director of that inaugural event was Goetz Richter, violinist with the resident ensemble, Novalis, who filled the role until 2004.

In early years the format remained similar: chamber music at the core but with regular forays into world music and jazz. By 2000 the Festival had grown to a nine day event.

With government funding getting more competitive, the Festival realised the way to go was to expand the audience base outside its local boundaries: to become a visitor destination in its own right.

## January

22 January  
Australian Bush Laureate Awards  
These awards recognise excellence in published and recorded Australian bush poetry. **TAMWORTH** Tel 02 6755 4300  
Website [www.bushlaureate.com.au](http://www.bushlaureate.com.au)

24 January – 10 February  
HSC Major Works An exhibition of work by local students who have completed the HSC in 2007. **GRIFFITH** Regional Art Gallery Tel 02 6962 5991

25 January – 1 March  
**ConVerge: Northern Rivers Touring Ceramics Exhibition.** Showcasing the work of the finest ceramic artists, both emerging and established, from the Northern Rivers Region of NSW. **LISMORE** Regional Gallery Tel 02 6622 2209

26 January – 2 March  
**The Bald Archy Prize**  
The parodic and popular alternative to the famous portrait prize. **Museum of the Riverina, Historic Council Chambers site.** **WAGGA WAGGA** Tel 02 6926 9100

After a changing of the guard with a new coordinator (me) and Trish O'Brien as Artistic Director, we set about a deliberate strategy of corporate renewal. We took a critical look at our direction and rationale, produced a mission statement and strategic objectives and formalised a structure which could guide our future development. And we committed to re-doing the exercise every few years to check on our past performance and plan future directions.

The task now was to get visitors coming but without sacrificing local support. 'Slowly and over time' was clearly the way to go. Targets were set, along with a decision to focus on three geographic areas for increased promotion: the New England, Sydney and the Central Coast.

Three main programming objectives were adopted: to be inclusive of marginalised groups, to promote Australian composition and to encourage local performers.



*In good company. L-R: composer Matthew Hindson, Camden Haven Music Festival committee Chrys Bouffler, Alvena Ferguson and Ian Ferguson (behind), with composers Sarah Hopkins and Ross Edwards at the APRA Awards. Photo courtesy APRA.*

To support the first, a visionary project was commenced in 2004, when a special piece of music was commissioned to celebrate the region's iconic Three Brothers Mountains and the peoples who have lived within their largesse and protection. After a residency consulting with local Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, didgeridoo virtuoso William Barton produced the stunning composition 'Ancient Souls Ancient Land' which was premiered at the 10th Festival in 2005. So evocative and emotional was the music — and the experience — the standing room only crowd had tears running down their cheeks. The work has since been launched as a CD available through visitor centres, tourist outlets and direct from the Festival.

Knowing it would be a challenge to promote contemporary classical music to a largely conservative audience, in 2007 we decided to take the bull by the horns and showcased Australian composers

## January — February

27 January

⌚ 35th Toyota Golden Guitar Awards  
The Australian Country Music Industry's night of nights. A gala concert featuring the cream of country music artists. **TAMWORTH**  
Tel 02 6767 5300.

31 January — 3 February

⌚ Bungendore Australian Country Music Muster A great weekend of Aussie Country and Bush Ballads **BUNGENDORE**  
Showgrounds Tel 02 6238 0224

in a discussion forum, followed by a concert series where each composer presented a selection of works. It was a brave experiment, not altogether successful in terms of audience numbers, but a great way to state our support for the wealth of talent among Australian composers who represent us on the world stage.

Local Wauchope-based Bago Magic Theatre Group provided the happy satisfaction of aligning the other two objectives. This fantastic group, originally formed to assist young disabled adults to access recreation activities, has developed and presented numerous original, high quality and very successful performances for the wider community. They were a stunning success as part of the 2007 Festival program, with wonderfully colourful masks and costumes they had made, plus a "flying by the seat of the pants" performance that endeared them to the audience who gave them a standing ovation.

There are, I believe, six key elements that have brought a modest regional festival to this point in its story — achieving national recognition and having its 13th program already in place for 2008. They are:

1. Having the same two passionate and committed people at the helm for the first five years, with the sage guidance of its artistic director
2. Solid support from the local business community.
3. High class and professional promotional tools, made possible with substantial funding in 2000 from Tourism NSW and again for 2008.
4. Introducing change slowly, so that the local community did not wake up one day and not recognise the festival which it had helped to establish.
5. Being on at the end of April, outside the peak holiday-makers' season, so that the Festival can enjoy fine, mild weather, conducive to indoor and outdoor events.
6. Cutting the 'apron strings' from the arts council (by mutual agreement), which allowed us to apply for our own funding support, and provided the freedom to pursue our own destiny.

The passion and commitment continues in the current Camden Haven Music Festival management committee, and there is a constant movement to improve and innovate. In 2007 a performance tent hosted three days of diverse performances to wind up the Festival, in sharp contrast to the opening weekend of classical music. The format enabled us to attract two distinct groups of audiences taking short breaks to indulge in great entertainment in a sublime corner of the north coast. In the words of the current artistic director Trish O'Brien, "good music festivals are like living breathing organisms. If the right ingredients are present, each festival experience provides the nourishment for growth into the next year." The Camden Haven Music Festival plans to keep on getting the mixture just right. ■

**Alvena Ferguson is the current Coordinator of the Camden Haven Musical Festival, 25 April — 4 May 2008  
Website [www.camdenhavenmusicfestival.org.au](http://www.camdenhavenmusicfestival.org.au)**

1 February — 30 March

⌚ The Lost Arts of the 1970's A group show by Karen Golland (visual artist), Michelle Stockwell (musician/composer) and Tracy Sorensen (video artist). **BATHURST** Regional Art Gallery Tel 02 6333 6555.

2 February — 1 March

⌚ A Day in the Life of Cowra Photographers will be invited to contribute to *A Day in the life of*, a companion show to *Making Hay* **COWRA** Art Gallery Tel 02 6340 2190