

Roots of a psychic revival

Ian Cuthbertson | The Australian | April 22, 2010 12:00AM

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XAVIER Rudd was devastated last year following the sudden collapse of his marriage. Music was the last thing on his mind. "I didn't want to play music any more, I was done," he says. "I didn't want to be alive."

To make matters worse, in the thick of his grief, the Australian roots music star was away from home at the time, on tour in the US. Luckily his new South African bandmates, bassist Tio Moloantoa and percussionist Andile Nqubezelo, who had bonded with the young Australian through music, revealed themselves to be towers of strength.

"I don't know what I would have done if Tio and Andile hadn't been out on tour with me," the 32-year-old says. "They really held me up."

During a phone call to Tio's wife in South Africa, Rudd asked if there were any Zulu words for the way he felt about the men with whom he had formed such a close bond. She explained izintaba meant mountains, and Rudd jumped on the word for his new band. "If I close my eyes when I am playing with them I feel like I am standing on mountains," he says.

TIME TO SMILE

Until the connection with Izintaba, which he describes as "powerful, and spiritually heavy," Rudd mostly performed startlingly rhythmic one-man shows with three didgeridoos (he prefersto call them yidaki, the term used in northeast Arnhem Land) fixed in front of him, while singing, playing his beloved Weissenborn lap slide guitars, tootling on harmonicas and belting a range of percussion instruments with his feet.

"People ask me why I played solo for so long, and it's because my music has always been an intimate, personal space," he says. "When I play I enter a kind of trance state. Quite often I don't even remember it."

His one-man blend of world, reggae, blues and folk styles, with an Aussie accent as broad as his own, has seen Rudd headline solo tours here and in the US, Canada and Europe. In the past five years he has also become a fixture on festival circuits in Australia and across the world.

The new trio met in Austria at the Wiesen Nuke Festival in the European summer of 2008. Solid friendships were forged when they played on the same bill. "My music hit them pretty hard, and they were incredible - they had both been with [Afro-reggae legend, who died in 2007] Lucky Dube's band," Rudd says, with a touch of awe.

A year later, the three decided to work together. The Africans flew to Australia to rehearse with Rudd "in an old chook shed", and soon after went on tour in North America. On their return to Australia, the band, forged in the fire of Rudd's despair and subsequent emotional rescue, settled into a studio in Byron Bay to record their new album *Koonyum Sun*, which was released yesterday.

"This record is a reflection of all that time and our connection and the beginning of this wonderful new journey," Rudd says. "It's the other side of the valley of despair. It's fruitful and plentiful. The sun has come out again."

Following his personal storm, Rudd devoted himself to making music with Izintaba.

"Tio and Andile are inspirational characters in many ways," he says. "Anyone who went through apartheid knows what suffering is. The things that happened to Tio when he was growing up were just horrible."

After two years of being "pretty distracted", the singer says he is now more focused on the things he is passionate about. That includes campaigning against the West Australian government's threat to forcibly acquire land from Aboriginal people in the Kimberley over a proposed liquefied natural gas gas project. "I'm pissed off with what's going on in the Kimberley, and I had a bit of a slanging match recently with [WA premier] Colin Barnett over it," Rudd says. "He really got to me, he was disappointing and upsetting. I just want to get stuck into that, I want to make some noise about it."

But Rudd's musical resurgence is perhaps the real bounty of his rebirth. "I have this whole new energy on stage," he says. "I went from not wanting to do it any more to it being all I want to do. And the strange thing is I feel like I'm just beginning now, I'm just starting."

Rudd gives much of the credit for his musical re-energisation to Moloantoa and Nqubezelo, though he says he hasn't much changed what he does. And he expects the band to be enduring. "I basically presented the songs on this record to them and they added their feel, their north and South African rhythms to whatever it is I do, and we worked on it," he says. "But I think I'll probably collaborate more on the writing with them in the future because they are so talented."

As admiring as he is of Moloantoa's bass playing ("he's a monster, the best player I've heard in terms of tone, rhythm and funk") Rudd had to make an unusual threat to get the man to sing. "I said to him if you can't sing I will eat my arm; now he sings beautifully so we have these great African harmonies in the music," Rudd says.

Shows later this month in Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney will be followed by a world tour that kicks off in Canada, then heads to Europe, the US and, for the first time, South Africa. "That will be amazing," Rudd says. "I've always wanted to get down there, and I'm going with the right mob, too," he says, grinning. "I've always wanted to surf Jeffreys Bay so I'm hoping to do that. Then we're coming home at the end of the year for a big Aussie run, which I haven't done for few years now."

While Rudd has had some difficulty convincing his new bandmates that Australia is a "black country", he has high hopes for their inspirational appeal on the forthcoming tour.

"They've started to connect with blackfellas here through the shows, but I think they might become more inspirational," he says. "Being people who have come through extreme oppression and who got back on top and got their country back, there's a pride that sits with them as black Africans that's been washed out of Australian blacks. Now I don't know if those seeds can be sown through two men in my rhythm section but, as Paul Kelly says, from little things big things grow."

Xavier Rudd and Izintaba play Brisbane April 28, Sydney April 29 and Melbourne April 30.

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