

Transcript Movements & Sounds Podcast with Lez

Charlotte 00:00

Hi and welcome to *Movements & Sounds*, a podcast focussing on contemporary Indigenous musics and sounds in Australia, and issues related to this topic. Thanks so much for listening to *Movements & Sounds*. I'm Charlotte, the facilitator of this podcast. It is important to know that I am a non-Indigenous person. However, I support decolonisation, and giving land back to Indigenous Peoples.

You're about to listen to a conversation between Lez and me. Lez plays music at Circular Quay, also known as Warrang, in Sydney. I asked him if he was up for a conversation, and he told me he wanted to tell me about his background specifically. That's what you're about to listen to. Enjoy.

Would you like to start with your background? Yeah?

Lez 00:34

Okay, well my English name, they call me Lez, and my traditional name: I come from two great nations. Zenadth Kes, you might know it as the Torres Strait but original name for that place is Zenadth Kes, and what Zenadth Kes means, it means the four winds within the 165 islands within the Straits. My father's side come from the central region, a place called Iama, the English call it the Yam Island. And my people are Tudulaig people from the central region, Tudulaig, and with my father's side.. When the invasion came to the central islands, with my father's Tudulaig people, survival was very hard because it was only five families that survived the holocaust of invasion. So I'm one of the survivors of that through my father's side. Also, he's, his connection to that country. He's a great grandson of a king called King Kebisu. So I'm a royal blood through the central region of Iama/Tudulaig people. My connection to the mainland, comes from a place called Butchulla community which is in Fraser Island. My great great grandmother was taken from there, to a place called Erub - Le, which is called Darnley today in the eastern part of the Torres Strait. My connection to that particular area is through my grandfather who comes from a place called Murray Island. There is also related to the Eddie Koiki Mabo who fought for the freedom of First Nation people and proved that terra nullius was a lie when captain Cook came in the country. That's my Uncle, my mother's first cousin. So I come from a very fact, or, political background through my ancestors and my relation to the people of Country. Also, I'm connected through songline from the east coast of Australia, all the way down to Fraser Island, Maryborough areas, which is in the northern part of Queensland, central region. So I'm also a Kabi Kabi, Butchulla, Iama, and also another nation called Kawrareg Nation, which is around Thursday Island it might called today, we call it Waiben. The island is a gateway to Zenadth Kes, and the people there are Kawrareg nation people, the Aboriginal people. So I'm very much connected to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Or Zenadth Kes people, I might say the correct word for it.

Charlotte 03:18

And what brought you to Sydney?

Lez 03:21

What brought me to Sydney. Well, my sister came down here, and she had a special child. Say I come from a family with different sort of family group. My mother sent me down here to help her with her kids. So I come down here, and the same time, dance was also a part of my culture because was the language of engaging a bridge between non-Indigenous people and Indigenous people to understand the system, how we work. And then my family circle, I have more than one mother: I have about seven mothers and nine fathers each one teach me different things. This mother teach me how to.. About woman law woman business, for example, delivering children. I have delivered my own children in Sydney in a hospital called Camperdown hospital. And it was really very special because the nurses at the time, you came to the hospital in a big hospital in Sydney, couldn't do a water birth and we were taught how to do these things when small how to, help deliver children. So I came and did all that kind of stuff.

Charlotte 04:38

Fantastic. He learned that from your mom, your mothers. Yes. Wow. So you play here at Circular Quay every weekend?

Lez 04:51

Every weekend. If the weather is good. I'll come down and play. The reason I play down here is to practice my songline and to also presenting my song through educating people about Country, how it works with our people who work with it, not against it. So when I explain the songs of how the songs fit into certain things, people start to realize that we were not nomadic people, we were farming our Country in a different way, unlike today, and we use stick fire farming. The reason why we use stick fire farming is because the native seeds of Australia needs the heat. And heat comes from the fire. So to open the seed to produce new growth again, you have to burn the country to preharvest or refarming your areas. So everything was done by moving from place to place as we did it. And by doing that, we'll have to have a sense of sustainability to preserve and to reproduct our resources.

Charlotte 05:50

Yeah. And do you feel like Circular Quay is a place where, like, is it important for you to come here for the certain audiences or? Why here? Why here of in all of Sydney?

Lez 06:03

Well they all come to Circular Quay. Every nationality come here. Whether you're from France or from Europe, or from Eastern Europe, or Arab country, they all come here. And they all have questions to ask about our people. And they learn about how we, before and after.

Charlotte 06:23

Yes, yeah. Amazing. And yesterday, when I asked you when I told you I've seen you busking here before you corrected me and you told me: "I'm not busking. This is a ceremony!" Can you, can you explain a little bit what you..?

Lez 06:37

For hundreds and hundreds of 1000s of years. This place here, Wurane, was actually an initiation ceremony grounds for young boys become men. They have to go through their manhood. In a family circle when you are first born, if you're male, you're given to the mothers. To a certain time, the

mothers teach you all about the women business, when you become older, becoming a man, that's when you're given to the men, and the men teach you all about the man cycle and go through all that cycle. The initiation begins.

Charlotte 07:10

Yes. Okay, that was here.

Lez 07:13

That was here.

Charlotte 07:14

How do you know it was here?

Lez 07:16

Passed down by people, from Gadigal people from this area. Passed information down to generation to generation. See, most things are passed down through song, or through storytelling, or through talking in a conversation between Elders and young people.

Charlotte 07:32

Yeah, yeah. Beautiful. And I saw yesterday, you were really explaining people a lot about the sounds. The kangaroo sounds. How, how have people responded to it here?

Lez 07:47

First thing, okay it's very hard to play this instrument what the people know as the didgeridoo, but we call it yidaki. Yidaki. It originally comes from a place called Arnhem Land, Yirrkala, it grew up from the ground from a place called Beswick. The people discovered the instrument there. And then it was shared only in the northern part of Australia, all the way to Western Australia, up to the Kimberleys. And coming down from West, as far as Uluru, which you might know as Ayers Rock, past Uluru, towards the east coast. They didn't play the instrument, because they didn't play the yidakis.

Charlotte 08:25

Yeah yeah. And it's now sort of embraced really, right, as like a sort of national, First Nations instrument. Who taught you?

Lez 08:36

Well, I can't say his name, because in our culture when he passed on, we call him Kumanjayi is respect of the person that have gone to the next life. So Kumanjayi taught me when I was small, I learned to play. When I first learned to play it, I played it in the rivers with the way we were taught when you were small, when you're first time learning how to do the circular breathing sort of stuff, people find really hard. We put our children under water, and nose above it, and the lips underneath. So when they start to breathe through the nose and they're blowing bubbles. And they're doing that technique, they learn to catch up that circular breathing, is one of the oldest techniques.

Charlotte 09:20

Oh! How amazing.

Lez 09:22

And only the boys will play. Not the girls. But only in certain areas, women do play, but only in that particularly area because in this country, there's about 700 different nations of First People and each one has their own law. Because the land is different from each other, so the law is changed. So the women can only play in their particular area. That's why you don't see a lot of Aboriginal women play and you probably will never will because they have their own secret ceremonies that only they can do their business in.

Charlotte 09:49

Yeah it makes a lot of sense. I've been having conversations with mainly men, so yeah, that'll make sense. Do you do you like like, are you settled now in Sydney? Are you based here?

Lez 10:01

I'm still here with my sister. Until she goes back north that's when I go home. I can't I miss my.. Because I promised my mothers and I have to keep their law.

Charlotte 10:16

So you can't go back? You'll stay here?

Lez 10:18

Until she says when.

Charlotte 10:22

Do you like living in Sydney, do you feel home here?

Lez 10:27

I feel home, because the ocean is.. There are two types of people in Country there's yiridja and duwa, freshwater people, saltwater people, I am saltwater people, connected to the whale clan, the whale that travels from Tasmania all the way up to a place called Murray Island and that's the whale clan. I'm part of the whale clan I'm connected to the sea. The sea, that is just around the corner for me.

Charlotte 10:49

Yeah. Where in Sydney are you based? Which which area? Close to the sea?

Lez 10:56

Central station, Ultimo

Charlotte 10:58

Yeah.

Lez 11:02

I find it very easy for me to come by transport, the train is straight to Circular Quay.

Charlotte 11:06

Yeah. Well, thank you so much. I don't want to take up too much time because I know you, this is your living. Do you, is this your your main way of making a living? Or do you have another profession?

Lez 11:19

Dance, song, people from different companies hire me to do shows for them. I'm a songman, I sing. I do dances. I've been dancing for 35 years I've been to every country all over the world. 50/60 countries even more so, for example Japan, China, France, Italy, Spain, Germany, Russia.

Charlotte 11:41

Do you have examples? Like what companies do you work with sometimes? Bangarra?

Lez 11:46

Before Bangarra begin, there's a company called AIDT company. And it come out from a place called Glebe. Which is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dance Theatre, that's what it was called. There were two companies come out from a place called Black Theatre, that was in Redfern. One was called Redfern Dance Theatre, and the other one was AIDT, Aboriginal Islander.

Charlotte 12:08

That's what you danced with?

Lez 12:10

That's what I danced with. And Bangarra came out of there in 89. I was part of the first dancers, 'cause when I came here, also I was trained at a dance school for five, six years. As a dancer, I try new forms of dance: jazz, ballet, modern, tap. All these sort of things. We had the best teachers in the world, from different parts, even African and American teachers, Malaysian teachers, Russian, French teachers, ballet teachers, dance mistress, and dance masters. A person called Paul Sodique so maybe he was Martha Graham's pupil, and she was the founder of modern dance. So we had people like icons, people like him. They taught us all kinds of dance for six years. So I've danced in many, many theaters and stuff for six, six years. And also when I damaged my knees and stuff, my, my, my dancing career is over, but I kept going with traditional dancing, learning songs and dance from every part of the country connected through the song lines.

Charlotte 13:14

Yeah. Amazing. Thank you so much for sharing that with me.

Lez 13:20

Yeah, no worries, and safe journey home.

Charlotte 13:22

Thanks for listening to Movements and Sounds. This is a not-for-profit podcast. However, thanks to the SOAS Student Enterprise Fund, for every episode a donation will be made to Seed Mob, an Indigenous-led organization in Australia fighting for climate justice. Find out more about this incredible organization on seedmob.org.au. See you at the next episode!

