

Izzy Brown + Porobibi

Carly: In this conversation, I speak with Poro Bibi and Izzy Brown. Poro Bibi is a West Papuan, based in Narrm. human rights, activist and campaigner. So make West Papua safe. Izzy Brown is the lead singer and MC of combat wombat. And is the founder of the united struggle project in this conversation, we talk about political organizing, performing in public spaces and the importance of creative, autonomous zones.

Poro: Yep. Um, thank you. And good day, y'all look down nation. Um, I'm here. Um, I am a bright man from Piru nations West Papua I'm here in, Narrm as a human rights activist. And, uh, thank you so much for the Kulin nations people allowing us, our West Papuan struggle and I'm also, uh, creative producer with a United struggle project and I'll be in invoke creative organizing, and also I'm also fighting the West Papuan struggle here, uh, in Narrm um, Australia. Yeah, I'm looking forward to getting my ... share my story. And, um, yes, you have the knowledge of a mobilizing with, uh, creativity.

Carly: Great, and Izzy?

Izzy: Hi there, Izzy Brown and I live here, the Collingwood Housing Estate here on Wurunderji Country here in Narrm, and I'm the co-founder of United Struggle Project and many other activities.

Carly: Great. Um, so Poro, you said that you're a campaigner with, um, Make West Papua Safe and you're also a part of the United struggle project. Can you talk a little bit more about the make West Papua Safe campaign?

Poro: Oh yeah. Thank you. Um, to Make West Papua Safe campaign is a campaign for, uh, stopping, uh, international, investor to the military in West Papua and yeah, one of the big, uh, strategy that we've been using is, uh, to have a direct in, towards all of this weapons and, war companies such as, **dollies** and **bullying** and also...

Carly: **rye metal**?

Porobibi: yeah, so on, so forth. So I know also at the moment we are trying to investigate those Indonesian high chief, high ranks, the very forces that have been trained here in Australia. to use Australian taxpayers money and, um, without a consent of the first nation community here, allow them to have this join military training, and which have been deployed to West Papua to use as a killing agents towards the West Papua first nation people. And yeah, that is what the project or campaign is about.

Carly: Um, Poro. Do you want to talk a little bit about some of the fundraisers that Make West Papua and Free West Papua have put on in Narrm?

Porobibi: So West Papuan struggle and mobilization and also West Papuan history creative has been the true essence of human life, West Papuan life. The music creates such an intense feeling also it's a tool of cultural diplomacy and storytelling, and it builds connectedness and it motivate us to do more, to, to connect. And now, um, we, as a West Papuan community, we have been doing it in, since the arrival of 43 and, uh, and also the new campaigns coming. We always sing our elderly song, uh, I don't know, uh, um, life is a mystery, which we found an inspiration for this movement. And that's actually motivating, motivating me as the new generations of activists, especially for West Papuan people, so how can I, uh, create a space or project that invoking this story, the story that can be embedded in my life, or any other first nation next generation life that, you know, we are really thirsty of having this presence because it's within already. And, um, it's just a matter of how we experiment and explore it. And, um, that's why, I wasn't really excited to see, um, any other, uh, first nation creatives. And from there, uh, we knowing that there is this, um, gap, a void in our community and our society. So we need to have the space. So when I started on 2018 and I realized that West Papua without the help of what do you call it formal infrastructure like within the system and in here in Victoria, we need that, you know, if you're registered as a formal group or association, but it's, again, it's holding up each and everyone of us who have struggled in English. So how can we make this really creative space? Um, uh, first thing I did was connect with Daisy with United struggle project. And I know the vision is really pure and to be able to create more space within that space for different, uh, first nation, creatives or artists, or even we can help to do workshops with them who, you know, who already have a story but to find a tool.

So, with United struggle project, we have, um, uh, music workshop and also in here, music comes with different genres. So, um, we're able to networking, connect with, the current, punk scene in Melbourne, hip hop scene, DJ scene. And, um, yeah, from there, I'm involved as a poet for it and then performer, 2018, and then, uh, working with different community spaces. So when we talk about, uh, free creative autonomous basis, and what I can think of is, uh, two space with different meaning of autonomous space, which means that first it can be an empty space warehouse somewhere, you know in the empty building, for example, in Brunswick where we can, you know, with our creativity, we can start to organize, uh, the facilities inside, where do we need, so who people we need to contact to.

And then the second space is the community space that already established, but, um, they are able to, um, provide that space for us to to be open with our, um, political pitch and creativity, freely. Um, so yeah, that's the two different space, which I think that I've been involved in and, the most famous one in Melbourne creative scene is, the underground car park with Collingwood neighborhood house. So in there, uh, shout out to Richie, um, who has been working with, um, all these different, this community that yeah, having annual projects and open the space for refugee community, for west Papuan community.

Carly: And Izzy. Can you talk a little bit more about the United struggle project of which you're a founder of?

Izzy: Um, so, you know, the United struggle project started maybe 2010, 2011. So I guess it's nearly 10 years old now began, uh, when I was traveling a lot overseas and I met really inspiring artists in refugee camps and prisons, um, in remote areas that had no access to recording and telling their stories. So I put the word out for people to donate beats and then travel back around to all those places And in many others from Kenya, Afghanistan to Palestine all around and made music, videos, and documentaries, recorded songs and got others to collaborate on all those tracks, um, to kind of unite their different struggles and to kind of bring together you know, voices from all around the world to talk about the shared commonality of their struggles through a creative way through music and film. So that kind of evolved into, um, a whole series of other kind of events and, um, networks. And I guess, um, through the West Papua issues as well, different theater projects and protest, festivals out in the desert, just finding different ways to creatively express our resistance to the stuff that was going down and the shared oppression that people are facing.

Carly: Yeah. And I'd really like to talk about the importance of place-based community when you are doing this work, and when it comes to both creating and organizing, especially working with networks of musicians and activists. So, um, yeah Izzy, did you want to start off talking about some of your experiences when blending music and art with activist spaces all across so-called Australia?

Izzy: I guess for me, uh, being in a hip hop group, like combat wombat, um, and working a lot in remote communities, doing music workshops, um, with indigenous youth and stuff, um, I found like so much inspiration and found that that was like an amazing way to communicate people's issues and stories and stuff. So, um, when it comes to organizing events, they meant that we had an amazing network of crew people to involve whether it's fundraising for different campaigns or whether it's just kind of educating the broader community about certain issues. You know, we've got a wealth of different kinds of platforms and mechanisms to be able to communicate that stuff. So, so yeah, so using that, um, in places like Narrm, where there's a wealth of talent and the amazing activists and creative people, it's fairly easy to bring together a good crew to be able to put on a fundraiser for you know, whatever, cause it is that tends to be happening at the times. So, yeah, I guess it's, it's like finding spaces and places, whether it's a squat, whether it's on the frontline in front of the uranium mine, whether it's, um, in an underground car park on the housing estate. Now there's all these different places and spaces that you can utilize to become creative, autonomous zones, even just for one night, um, where people can find that, I guess, moment of liberation and creativity, and also educate themselves about, um, a whole variety of issues.

Carly: Yeah. I love that creative autonomous zones. And, uh, can you talk about maybe some times when you've felt like you have created those creative autonomous zones?

Izzy: Someone who really taught me that was uncle Kevin... down at Roxby we're at the front of the uranium mine, and he lit a fire on the road and he said, you know, right now this is the sacrifice burning on this road and no trucks are coming through today. There will be no trucks leaving the mine, carrying uranium, um, destroying our land. That's it. And it was

interesting because it was just a fire, like a humble fire in the middle of the road, but it held such power because, you know, he, they, he said these laws on our laws, these, these rules, these things, they're not, they're not ours. And this, you know, as far as it's gonna stay here and it's gonna burn and you're not coming through. And we set up sound systems on either side, I think it was arms, not bombshad a bus sound system in it.

And we had the laboratory sound system in a van and we had a freestyle battle with two rappers on the bus from America. And they were either ends of the road, um, having, uh, having a rap battle, like in a sound clash from each sound system. And the fire got bigger and bigger and bigger. And I think by the end of it all night, the fire burnt and the music continued and we ended up burning a big, massive pothole in the middle of the road for at least 24 hours, no trucks went through and it was like, well, actually, hell yeah, we can do this. And yeah, I kind of want everyone to experience that, to feel that because it's an amazing feeling and, you know, you know, yeah. It can be done in a place that is a place of destruction and can become a place of creativity.

Carly: Izzy, I do want to ask you a bit more about the change hip hop theater project, which took place last year in the Collingwood underground car park. So how did that project come about? And yeah. Can you tell us a little bit more about who was involved and why you chose the Collingwood underground car park to have that project?

Izzy: So, um, the change began in 2017, uh, when I first moved to Collingwood Housing Estate after squatting in Bendigo street. And I discovered after meeting, uh, some of the crew from the Collingwood Neighbourhood House, they would have that we could access the underground car park as a venue and because of its expansiveness and, um, you know, it was an endless possibilities. And I guess through my networks and also people that I met on the estate.

I saw the potential for, you know, a theatre projects that could really encompass like so many people's stories and so many kind of aspects of, um, you know, you know, the struggle project and the struggles that people have faced, but through, you know, community theater and music. Um, so yeah, it was the ideal venue to host such an event. Um, the first one we actually did in the factory in Richmond in 2017, and then with an ever evolving beast, uh, with what the fabulous superstars like race rage and Poro, uh, elf transporter, um, grim SIM, um, yes. So, um, combining all those really talented artists with a whole lot of, um, people like often kids from the estate, they'd never done anything before. Um, and other people that had that theater experience and a lot that didn't, we all pulled together. Um, yeah, the fabulous and epic, epic show that every show, every show is different.

Every time it evolved every time it had new aspects, um, I never actually really knew how it would come together or what it would look like until the day we did it. So, you know, we went from covering kind of refugee issues and like first nation sovereignty to looking at climate change in the latest one that happened in 2019 was rough and tight, so tight in the whole climate change issue with, um, a lot of the refugee stuff, as well as first nations

struggles and including the Djap Wurrung tree. And so it kind of evolved with the times, as well as looking at historical things like the Aboriginal tent embassy with uncle Robbie and, you know, going to like, eh, but then also, yeah, like Djap Wurrung and on different issues that people brought to the table as it evolved and you know, it always amazed me how **out of the chaos people could achieve, you know, incredible, incredible things**. And it was exciting. You never knew what would happen, but yeah, people amazed me with their dedication and skill and, um, and use of the space. And yeah, I really hope, you know, we can do these things in the future, you know, COVID has made it hard, but, um, I'm sure people are just, you know, laying low and, and when we can, it's going to be different. It's going to be evolved. It's going to be something else, something new and that's exciting too.

Carly: And Poro, did you want to share, um, some of your memories from being a part of the change hip hop theater project?

Porobibi: Yeah, sure. the amazing thing about is that each of us already a faith in our story. Um, I'm sharing my West Papuan story and then, uh, Sophia from Palestine, uncle Rob, and meenie, and that's the most beautiful thing about the creative and being an artist - that connectedness. yeah, it's, it's really inspiring for me to just come into space and then everybody feel this, uh, solidarity feeling. And, um, how can I say brotherhood feeling, the same feelings to express themselves. We had so much freedom because we find that freedom within ourselves, within the group that we're working together, knowing that, oh, Hey, we will be all here affected by, uh, such a colonial system, such a brutal colonial system that...and then again within the system, it's very hard to us to have a freedom of gathering and only that, that space allowing us to be that human to be trusting to each other.

So that's the memory that I still carry and all of us within that group, uh, still one family, you know, inside or outside, because we already know we are connected with our stories. So we, we bring it, bring it outside. That means we can use it as a tool for mobilization. So that's why it's not only doing the theater, but also outside doing, we do direct actions. We, um, we, we, we still connect and support each other back. So every time, uh, for example, I do events in underground carpark, I'll bring the same crew to, um, who protests for refugee, for example, in, mantra or park hotel, or either on border cross, across with the same crew, with easy with the race rage...and some bunkers. And it's true truth, allowing, uh, that creative, uh, autonomous space. We can have that connection. We can have, uh, strengthened mobilizations, and, um, that's why, uh, uh, the region forward is to be able to, um, help each other for their work and then for their vision to help their community. And, yeah, so that's the memory that, you know, it's still attached to all of a different performer from United struggle project and, uh, with uncle Gab, every different figure within, uh, the group, uh, we keep asking each other's story too. Like I met, uh, uncle Gab and...to race rage. Uncle Gab was there with their, during the struggling forces, the same direct actions, with people with creativity and he was, and so the story continues. So, uh, this is part of life where we keep storytelling all the time in this story for generation to generation.

Carly: And I want to ask as well, um, how maybe you've both experienced times when the city of Melbourne or creative Victoria or not-for-profit institutions have attempted to engage with you. And I guess, um, do you both want to maybe reflect on the ways that sometimes these tools for mobilization these political performances can become institutionalized?

Porobibi: To answer that, to answer that question, to see the bigger picture on how actually, uh, the system, uh, really want to limit us in a way of movement and our initiative and our bigger goal with holding a creative space and knowing that the system, um, want to institutionalize, meaning, um, they really want to hold our voice down and, uh, which are fun, fun, and really, really devastating and really cool because, um, for me, um, how can you shut the voice down of a creative person? Um, if it's you ending up someone creative operations and it can cause stress. And it's just for one example, and we applied that t, a creative group as a, as a whole, then there'll be more stress, there'll be more stressed to community knowing that the arts and creativity is the only identity someone can help.

And you cannot do that to, you cannot do that to, to us as a group. So to institutionalize creative space I find it really wrong because it's it's a big question to, to the, to the organizer of that space either to, to make it accessible or not, because what they failing is, uh, they're failing to different community, some spaces say it's for community. Uh, when we entered a space, there's this, uh, breach of bureaucracy that we need to face with. And again, um, with some of us, English is not our first language, and most of the space that now commercial run by, rich privileged people. it's hard. It's hard when the institutional the space meaning the true freedom of creativity will be shut. And, uh, that's violating the visions of being a creative being. It sells well for folks, for us, all of a great organizer. That's what I'm thinking. If people want to institutionalize the creative space...

Izzy: I guess for me, my experience is in the past applying for grants, if I was like, you should get a grant for that, you're doing all this work. And of course, when I applied for grants, I never got any because what I was doing was too radical. And, um, I didn't tick the boxes, you know, with, um, you know VicArts and, and all of those kind of more governments or bodies that have all this money that's supposed to be for the arts. But like, unless you fit into a stereotype or, you know, someone that's on the board or whatever, it's actually quite hard to access any of, any of that stuff.

And so for me, I always felt like you just gotta do it for the love. He got to do it anyway, you gotta do it despite the fact that they're not going to give you any money for it, despite the fact that he doesn't fit the boxes or tick the boxes to obtain any of that money that is supposedly for the arts. Yeah. You know, you can't let that stuff stop you or send your way. And I think often artists do get stifled because they think, okay, I should, I could get a grant for that. And maybe if I changed my work or my work to fit that particular box, then maybe I will. You know, and I think in that way, um, it can be quite repressive for artists to go down that path. But then more recently I have learned to navigate those systems.

And there's certainly ways you can, um, extract cash in those systems and still use it the way you want to for the good of the planet. Um, but it certainly takes some navigating and takes knowing some people. And, and that's definitely not what everyone has access to. And so it's a bit of an unfair kind of ballpark. Um, and, and whether you want to buy into that system or, or work independently, you know, people have to often make those choices, um, and that can often compromise their creativity. And often once you do have a grant and you do have to fulfill all the things you said you're doing is actually way more stressful. Keep the money. I don't want to stress, especially if you're dealing with a large group of people, like 60, 70 people that are involved in a project, and then how do you distribute that? And it's a bit daunting and can actually be a pain in the ass, but, um, you know, I can't complain.

Carly: And yeah, are there any final thoughts, Poro from you or Izzy that you wanted to let people know about anything that's coming up? Um, any updates in regards to any of the campaigns or projects that you've talked about today?

Porobibi: Yeah. Uh, for me a message to this so-called community organisation or social work or community development organization, um, is that, um, you, we truly know that this organization have bureaucracy and infrastructure, but again please evaluate the policy and the principal and working community to, instead of using this young creative people of color to be their faces, but to be honest with the principles and the values so that there is no feeling of this tokenism for this next generation because, um, tokenism is a, it's a hard feeling, uh, for us because, um, again, all over, come into the space with a vision of amplifying our story, to all of these different creativity, um, activities and movement. And if, if later on they say that, oh yeah, this space is for community. Then you allowing us to come into a space which, uh, a nurturing, um, vision and transparency, and that will be a better, uh, advice for me so they can help them navigating to work with our young generation, uh, people of color in the creative industry.

And we in, in West Papua, uh, current the current COVID situation is pretty deadly and really dangerous for community with not enough health facilities and some of us who are active, we're still being held in, in prisons and not having access to legal aid or medical care. I want to shout out for everyone there, they can support, um, one of our leaders, **Victor Yeimo** that is still in jail and.... So if they can share on their social media solidarity photos or of holding a black card with written 'free, Victor Yemo', V I C T O R Y E I M O. And that will be great. And also if people do more work, they can contact the Indonesian consulate around in Australia, in Melbourne check in you know, Australia, the abiding, the rule of human rights principles, and as a member of UN. So it's a reminder that, Hey, we are your neighbor and please look after our West Papuan friends, um, you know they can be treated humanely.

Carly:- And, um, on that note, thank you so much Poro and Izzy for joining me today for this disorganizing project, that three 3CR has been doing a series of interviews with people about the local history of Fitzroy and Collingwood and gentrification. And today we really spoke about the use of public space and art and politics and organizing.

Izzy: Thank you for having us.

Porobibi: Thank you for having us Carly.