

Secret sounds of Canberra

There's nothing quite like a bit of spontaneity to liven up what can sometimes be just another day in Canberra.

Throw in a dash of mystery and you're sure to see Canberra come to life in ways never imagined — that's the thinking behind local Canberra band, the Cashews', recent "Summer of Guerilla Gigs" — a series of totally acoustic performances in unlikely places around town.

The spontaneity and the mystery emanates from the gigs' locations — they aren't disclosed until one hour before the performance.

"A week or so before a Guerilla gig

They perform in front of some of Canberra's most beautiful backdrops. **Petah Rhynhart** reports on an underground musical experience where concert goers only learn of the venue by email or text-message an hour before the gig.

the band sends out an email to its known fan-base, giving them the time and date of the gig," band member Pete Lyon says.

"We just leave out one of the more important pieces of information — the location. We ask people interested in knowing the location to send a return email with their preferred method of location notification in the subject line."

Here's where the power of

information technology and mass text messaging meets Canberra's underground music scene.

Before heading off to set up for the gig, Lyon sends an email or text message to those who indicated a desire to be told the secret location.

It's a crazy and quirky concept which, prior to the first Guerilla gig at the end of last year, definitely could not guarantee a sizeable audience, if any.

But the crowds have turned up with the hour's notice.

The first gig in December on top of Mt Ainslie at sunset drew a crowd of 40 people, excluding the tourists and couples who didn't anticipate the company.

The January gig at the Carillion saw a crowd of more than 100 gather for a very uplifting evening performance.

Last Monday night's gig on the foreshore of Lake Burley Griffin, down from the High Court, drew a crowd of 70.

Many have walked away from all three Guerilla gigs pleasantly surprised, and with a new-found respect and appreciation of Canberra and its hidden talents and landscape.

"I love the philosophy of what they're doing," self-confessed Cashews groupie Graham Anderson, of Fadden, who went to Monday night's gig with his son Nash, says.

"The Cashews' music is awesome, their songs are meaningful and I support the concept of the guerilla gigs vehemently."

Adrian Young, of Griffith, and his wife Audrey, stopped to watch the gig while on their regular night-time walk around the lake.

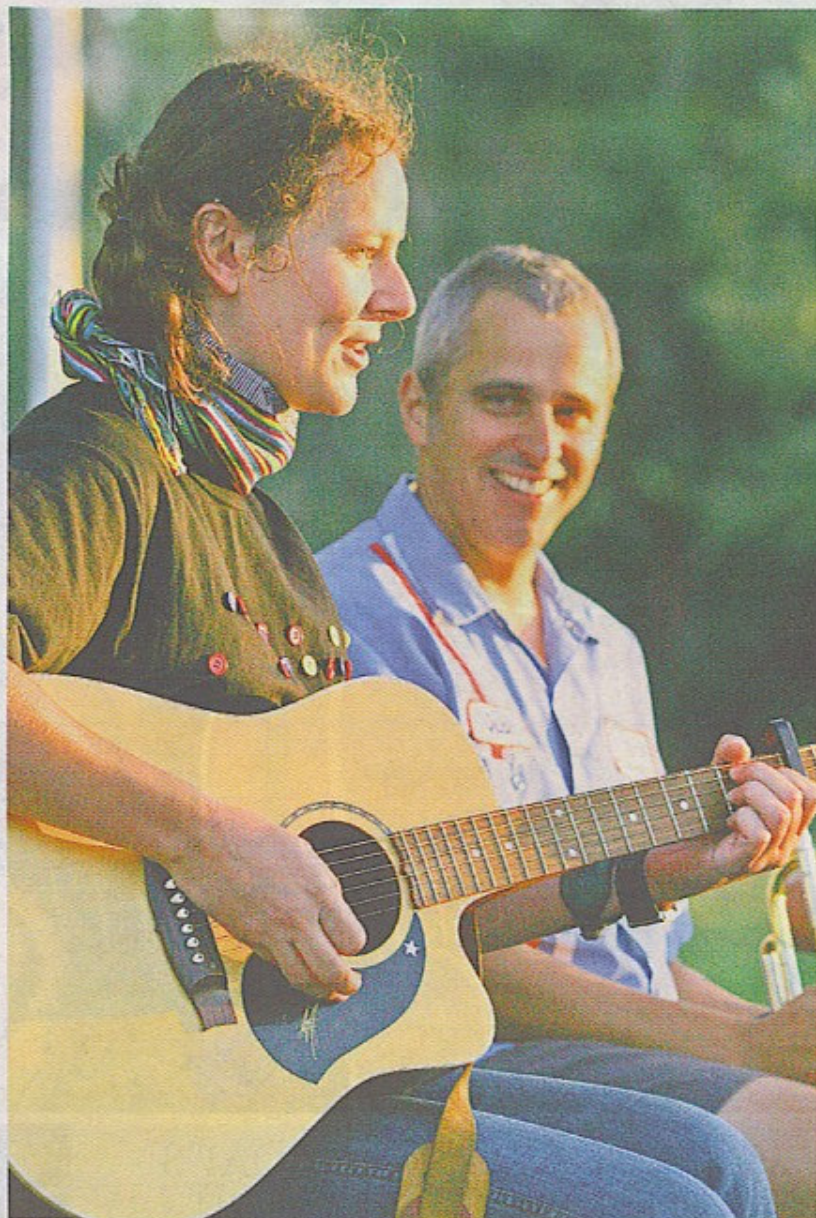
"We were intrigued about what was going on," Adrian says. "So we decided to stay and delay our walk. Their music was great acoustically — you can't get better than that."

Michelle Evans, of Curtin, and Georgi Pepper, of Yarralumla, also went along to Monday night's gig after seeing the Cashews' gig at the Carillion.

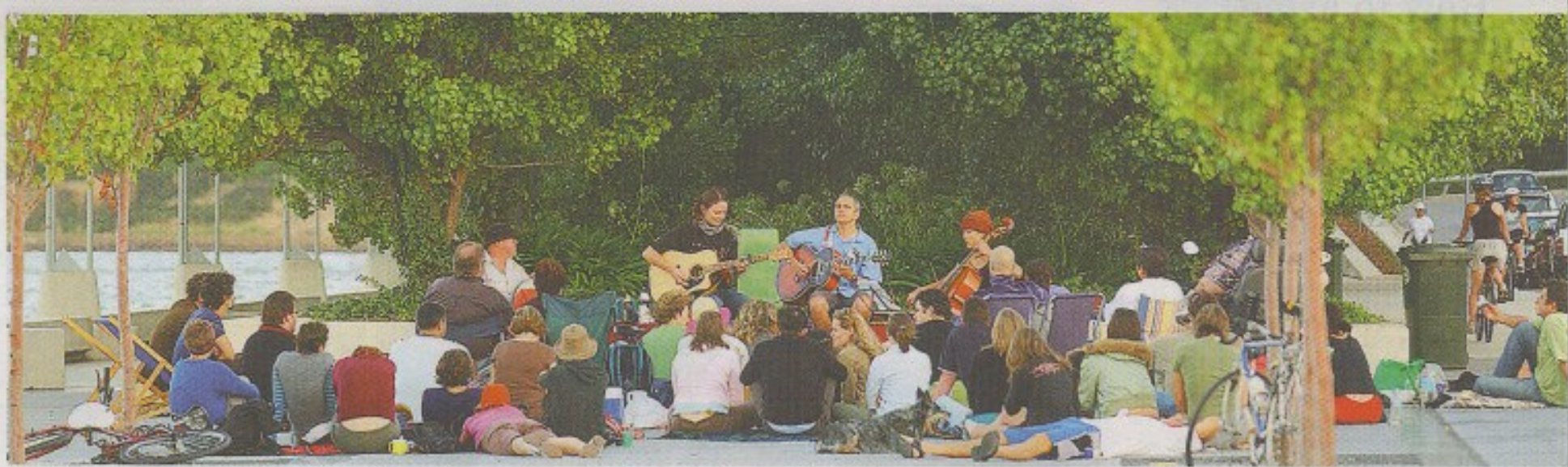
"We love the atmosphere, especially the outdoor setting and the fact it's not in a smoky bar," Georgi says.

Michelle likes how the Cashews interact with the audience.

"Their music is about local things like Sullivan's Creek and the Tuggeranong Parkway, it's Canberra music."



Cashews band members, Alison Procter and Pete Lyon, strum away for the crowd at their Guerilla gig last week, lakeside near the High Court.



The Cashews performing with Randall Blair at the surprise venue last week. The crowd only gets notified of the venue an hour before the performance.

Photos: Andrew Sheargold

Band member Alison Procter says the gigs bring people to a place in Canberra they might not have been before or seen in that way.

"We really love Canberra and it's nice to create this sense," Procter says.

"Especially if they haven't experienced being in an audience like that. They're precious moments in unexpected places."

Lyon agrees and emphasises how their Guerilla gigs help bring the community together.

"Yes they're listening to us, but they're also lost in the landscape around them. They rediscover how great Canberra really is."

"Another thing about doing these gigs is when we do them in reasonably public places random people walk past and wonder 'what is this?'"

"And I'd like to work on that more, about how we can ensure the passer-by understands they're welcome to come — in fact we would love them to come — and join in. It's part of the underground life that exists in Canberra — if you look hard enough, it's here."

The Cashews rarely ask the audience for money to perform, however they often request a silver coin donation at the gigs to cover the costs associated with text messaging the location notifications.

"We don't do it for money," Procter says. "We really like challenging

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Cashews band member, Pete Lyon

ourselves as performers and reminding us of what a performance is about.

"I feel quite compromised when we ask other musicians to come and play with us at the Guerilla gigs, because it's like 'hey do you want to come and play? There's potentially no audience, there's definitely no PA, and there's definitely no money.' And the response is 'it sounds like heaps of fun', she says.

Lyon says there is that other side which involves the professionalism of musicians and not wanting that to be taken for granted.

"Because we play for free we don't want people to think we undervalue or undermine other musicians."

For many who know the Cashews and have seen them perform live know that the Guerilla gigs aren't solely out of character for the band.

The Cashews have performed to intimate audiences in a series of backyard gigs around Canberra over the past two years. The motivation behind the Cashews taking on these alternative venues stems from the band's desire to get their music out there — because to the Cashews, it's all

about the music. It's not about fame or becoming the next Australian Idol.

"Like a lot of the stuff we do, the backyard and Guerilla gigs was part of making gigs happen — or making good gigs happen rather than waiting and hoping somehow, somewhere, someone might give us a good gig to play at," Lyon says.

"What do you need, what are the elements of a good gig? It's an audience, it's a stage, and a performance — and we can do that!"

Both Lyon and Procter are real about their goals for the band and make the Cashews fit into their life, not the other way around.

All the members of the Cashews, including Emily Rice on the cello and Jon Jones on percussion, have full-time work, study and family commitments outside the band.

So finding time when they can get together to organise gigs means creating little bits of space in their lives for the music and letting it happen.

"It's about compromise," Lyon says. "Alison has mentioned recently the idea of a little rest for the Cashews for a while." Procter interrupts and begins

workshopping with Lyon the idea of a strategic plan for the band — which she had recently emailed to him in four succinct dot points.

"The first one was finish the summer gigs," she says. "The second one was rest in autumn and write some songs. The third one was try out new songs and maybe do some residencies in winter. And the fourth one was recording and getting ready for another gig stint."

Lyon jokes, "I read that more like the annual operational plan, than the strategic plan."

Procter has performed in other bands and as a solo artist, and has some understanding of the national music industry, and admits this insight made her so aware that she wants to keep it local.

"I do music not to become famous," she says. "I do music because it's when I feel whole. I think I've reached my aspirations right now with the Cashews and if we continue to make music that is authentic and connect with people in an authentic way, that's fantastic."

And that's exactly what the Cashews achieved with their "Summer of Guerilla Gigs" — making life in Canberra, and making Canberra come to life.

To head along to future Cashews' gigs, email lame@incanberra.com.au or visit www.thecashews.com