



INTERVIEW WITH DEAF ARTS NETWORK'S ROSS ONLEY-ZERKEL

*Transcript of 3CR Community Radio's recent interview with Ross Onley-Zerkel from the Deaf Arts Network, speaking about the **So You Think Deaf Can Dance** workshops currently running in Melbourne.*

RACHEL: To many people dancing is all about the music. But what if you can't hear the music? Can you still dance? Ross Onley Zerkel, is the Deaf Arts co-ordinator of the Deaf Arts Network, part of Arts Access Victoria. The Deaf Arts Network is currently running a series of dance workshops for Deaf people, focussing on hiphop. I spoke to Ross last week to find out how it all works. Ross was speaking to me through his Auslan interpreter.

ROSS: Well firstly can I just say that I'm a man! I'm speaking through a female Auslan interpreter so my name is Ross- not Rozz- which happens all the time in phone interviews, people call me Rozz. I just thought I'd clarify that first.

RACHEL: So the Deaf Can Dance program: It's been running since the start of August. What is it and how did it all come about?

ROSS: So specifically with Deaf Can Dance, in 2007 there was a lot of Deaf people taking an interest in hip-hop dancing; they saw it at nightclubs on TV.... You know, we wondered can Deaf people dance, and how relevant is music to that. Medina Sumovic and Anna Seymour, both of them decided to set up a hip hop class, with Demi Sorono- she was in the top four of So You Think You Can Dance Australia- to teach us through the medium of workshop. I was so keen to be involved in that. We had workshops say about six months, and we were asked to do a community performance for the Victorian Council of Deaf People, for their state conference, at the conference dinner. Well we performed there and what was really funny was the choreographer asked us what was our favourite colour. The four of us said, ah red yellow blue, purple. So we were on stage, many deaf people in the audience didn't know that we were Deaf and we thought that they thought that VCOG had actually brought in a professional hip-hop group but when we were on the stage and started to sign, everyone was just gobsmacked, and some of them laughed at us, because we were dressed in the same colours as the Wiggles! That was incredibly successful, there were so many deaf people out there in the community that really wanted to get involved in dance. Arts Access Victoria supported the idea of looking

for funding from the City of Melbourne and from Vic Health, to actually support us running our workshops, in conjunction with the Deaf Arts Network who were promoting it and co-ordinating the dance classes. They were held at VCA- very kind heartedly allowed us to use their venues for those workshops and we did that for about six months.

RACHEL: I wanted to ask you specifically about the... you mentioned it all started with hip-hop. Why is hip-hop so well suited to Deaf dancers, can you sort of explain the attraction with hip-hop?

ROSS: I've actually got another story for you...Sitting in my car, I always have CDs on and its always hip-hop music. Same as many people in their cars you know drive and listen to music. But the reason I'm different is I have the volume cranked up full, the bass on full, with my windows down. Whenever I stop at traffic lights, you know, grooving as I am, people are always staring at me. Anyway I don't care, I love music but I need to have it loud. Of course those people don't realise that I'm Deaf. Some of them will sort of like you know say to me, you'll hurt your ears you know -you'll burst your ear drums. But hey I'm already Deaf! But I like it that loud cos i need to feel the bass. And that's how I pick out moves.

RACHEL: So it's about the vibrations?

ROSS: Yes it's all about the vibrations. When I go dancing at nightclubs I saw people doing hip-hop I was able actually to make a connection between that and the music. And that s why we thought you know Deaf people can dance to hip hop music. Demi- when Demi was teaching us – Demi can actually sign because she has a profoundly Deaf sister...and she showed us how to count beats you know 1234... 1234 . We followed her counting the beats at the same time as feeling the vibrations. So we thought hip-hop is really perfect. The music beats are clear. Other music can be a little bit heavy and can be quite difficult to pick up the beats sometimes. And we live the hip-hop moves as well. Crumping, break dancing, all of the elements of hip-hop.

RACHEL: So I can imagine hip hop is just a pretty cool kind of dance to learn, are the courses that you run popular, have you had a lot of good feedback?

ROSS: Yes good.... We really, really need a venue that has a good wooden floor and sub woofers in their sound system. And yeah it's always loud. I'm always worried about the ballet classes next door at VCA, with our loud music interrupting their ballet classes! We usually, um, we start with a huge number of people and over time attendance drops off and you can see the core group that are really, really committed. The feedback that we've had has been great. Some people were unable to fully commit because of other commitments that they had, time constraints, but no

one said 'I can't dance'. So I mean that was really good.

RACHEL: I was wondering actually, you mentioned that nobody who comes to your classes thinks they can't dance. I can imagine some hearing people saying I didn't think Deaf people could dance. But do you ever get Deaf people who are reluctant to come along, saying 'I can't dance'? They sort of have a perception that they wouldn't be able to join in because of not being able to hear the music?

ROSS: Yeah, that's one of many reasons. But specifically Deaf people who have grown up Deaf... they see hearing people involved in singing, understanding music on the TV the radio nightclubs, and they see it as a hearing thing and they feel that they're not included in that, not part of that culture. Maybe they do like to dance but they you know sort of seem to make it up. What I've learnt is that many of my hearing friends who sign and they will tell me that hearing people cant follow music either, well some of them...

RACHEL: I'm one of them

ROSS: ...And they can't dance and they make up their own moves. And so I was able to make a connection with that. I can actually make a connection with the beat. And it was being told that that actually gave me a lot more confidence. So now I'm more than happy to make dance moves up- and they get more creative the more I drink! But it helped me realise by learning hip-hop and going to classes and seeing how it worked, it really helps having a teacher who can sign, because they can explain the moves better, as regards the music, and they can show us again and again and I realised its just a linking of movements, it doesn't have to relate to music at all. So that's how I learnt. OK, if I copy... do the same moves again and again. ..you can develop that into a routine. And when you practise the routine many times and get used to it - you can actually develop and include many different hip-hop skills. So far we've had about 6 different hip-hop teachers. All of them ended up explaining it in exactly the same way. They teach you individual skills and then mix it up. We've done popping, locking, break dancing, pop rock and we've always been able to follow the beat and its helped me realise its like developing fluency, you develop all the individual skills and mix them together. And ultimately actually it doesn't matter about the music and that's what I've learnt through this process myself. And you know that's what I've been advising Deaf people, in terms of how it works. So Deaf people CAN dance.

RACHEL: Ive actually seen footage of Deaf performers in China's Special Art Troupe who performed at the Beijing Paralympics . And that was a big stage for people to be exposed to Deaf artists. Do you think there is enough awareness of the contribution that Deaf people can make to the arts?

ROSS: That's a really interesting question. I'm sure there is awareness out there, but not enough true understanding, training and access for Deaf people to be included in

the arts. That's why I'm here working in Deaf Arts Access Victoria. At the moment so far I know I'm the only Deaf artist working this way in Australia, certainly in relation to Arts Access Victoria. Setting up various projects for Deaf people, to enable them to be included in arts practise. Some Deaf artists are integrated in to the mainstream...for one example, you know, we actually performed at the Melbourne Fringe Festival in 2008 and that was a really, really successful performance. The audience was a mixture of both Deaf and hearing people. So I'm sure that's one way of spreading awareness, via our audiences. Many of them are hearing, from arts organisations, from funding bodies, from the hip hop community. So I'm sure through word of mouth and just though talking about our project awareness is being spread out there.

RACHEL: It sounds like great stuff. We're running out of time, so just to finish up- the Deaf Can Dance program runs until the end of September, is that right?

ROSS: At the moment the workshops do yes. We've just finished 2 hip-hop workshops at the Dance Factory, and prior to that we had couples dancing, salsa and the tango.

RACHEL: So there's quite a range.

ROSS: Yes and coming up we have funk and swing and contemporary dance workshops as well. After that we are bringing the group down to five dancers to work with the choreographer for a performance at the 4th World Congress on Mental Health and Deafness in October.

RACHEL: Well best of luck with that. If people want to get involved with Deaf Can Dance or find out more about the work you do at the Deaf Arts Network, what's the best way for them to get in touch?

Ross: They can email Deaf Arts Network at deafartsnetwork@artsaccess.com.au

Arts Access Victoria's Deaf Can Dance program is funded by Vodafone, ANZ trustees and Beyond Blue.

