



Paul Stewart (left) and Gil Santos

PHOTO: PAUL STEWART



A PASSION

For musician and journalist Paul Stewart, whose brother Tony was one of five journalists killed in Balibo in 1975, his first visit to East Timor had an impact which still resonates.

It was the drummer's idea. In 1994, Paul's band the Painters and Dockers were touring Darwin when the drummer suggested they visit East Timor. In the 19 years since his brother had died, Paul hadn't felt the need to go there. And though the band had played a few East Timor benefits, he'd felt no drive to become involved in the campaign for independence. All that changed when he looked into the eyes of the locals. "They were so scared," says Paul.

"Indonesian troops were everywhere. People kept slipping notes into our hands that said, 'Please ring my uncle in Sydney'."

Paul's brother was one of the 'Balibo Five', whose story has rarely been out of the newspapers due to alleged cover-ups by the Indonesian and Australian governments. It was in a Balibo bar that Paul and his band struck up a conversation with some other Australians. "We asked them why they were there. They said, 'We work at the embassy and every year they bring us up here. We just get on the piss, go back and say there's no problems.' Then they said, 'What are you guys doing?' And I said, 'Oh well, my brother was...' and their faces dropped. It was after that we were followed."

Out of nowhere the band was arrested and taken to a police cell. "The police were saying, 'You're spies and communists,'" says Paul. "And we're

going, 'No, no, no – we're entertainers!' An argument started and then this Indonesian cop runs from the back of the room, this is a true story, and he goes, 'Well, if you're entertainers, sing *Cottonfields*'. And we went, 'Sorry?' And he said, 'Sing *Cottonfields*!' We looked at each other and had to start singing, 'When I was a little bitty baby my mama...' And they said 'Oh, OK – you can go'. It was surreal!"

Despite the less than welcoming introduction, Timor and its people have since become so woven into the fabric of Paul's life, he would hardly recognise himself without its influence. His reggae funk band, the Dili All Stars, includes four Timorese close friends. During the past five years they've toured Portugal, organised innumerable benefits and played to 60,000 people at Timor's independence celebrations. Paul's activism has caused his deportation from Bali, which led him to meet and get support from U2's Bono. Though grateful



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FOR EAST

for all help, he saves his highest praise for 'ordinary' Australians.

"If I could take you around and show you how many Australians there are with a passion for East Timor..." he says. "A lot of it is because of the debt people feel we owe them from World War II. There's a woman from Maribyrnong called Pattie who sends up school books every year. The Indonesians either burnt or smashed or took everything – even the toilet-paper holders, the light bulbs, the screws. They left graffiti that said, 'Let them eat rock'."

The need to rebuild lives since the vote for independence in 1999 means the fundraising hasn't stopped. Paul was part of a trust set up by the Victorian Government to restore the house in Balibo where the journalists had been staying before they were killed. It's now a crèche and education centre. In 2003, Paul's mother made her first journey to Timor for the opening.


"That was wild going back there with mum and the family," he says. "Pretty emotional. There's five big pictures of the boys on the wall."

His family's grief and frustration over unresolved questions echoes every time the 'Balibo Five' are mentioned. But being a part of the struggle to help the East Timorese has ultimately left Paul with a stronger belief in the resilience of the human spirit.

"It's a cliché but it's true: you can't bury the truth," he says. "It might be a thousand years – it comes out. Me and Gil [from the Dili All Stars] laugh because at our first demonstration [against the Indonesian occupation of Timor] there were 14 of us. People threw eggs. Then years later, when there were 80,000 people in the Bourke Street Mall, we looked at each other and said, 'Well, there you go. Let's go have a beer!'"

Paul's connection with Timor may not have run so deep were it not for his

family history. But that his brother's death could have led to anything positive may give some small meaning to the family's pain. For Paul Stewart, whose brother was killed doing his job, it has helped forge a life's work of which his brother would be proud.

"I never set out to do this," says Paul. "I never chose it: it chose me. If I go anywhere, even to Denmark, I find myself talking about Timor. I think there are people who see me and run. 'Look out! He's going to want money,' they say. And they're probably right!" 

Story: Kate Johnston

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The Dili All Stars are playing the Apollo Bay Music Festival, Victoria, 21-23 April.

Visit the website to buy CDs, book the band or get involved in fundraising.

Web www.diliallstars.com.au