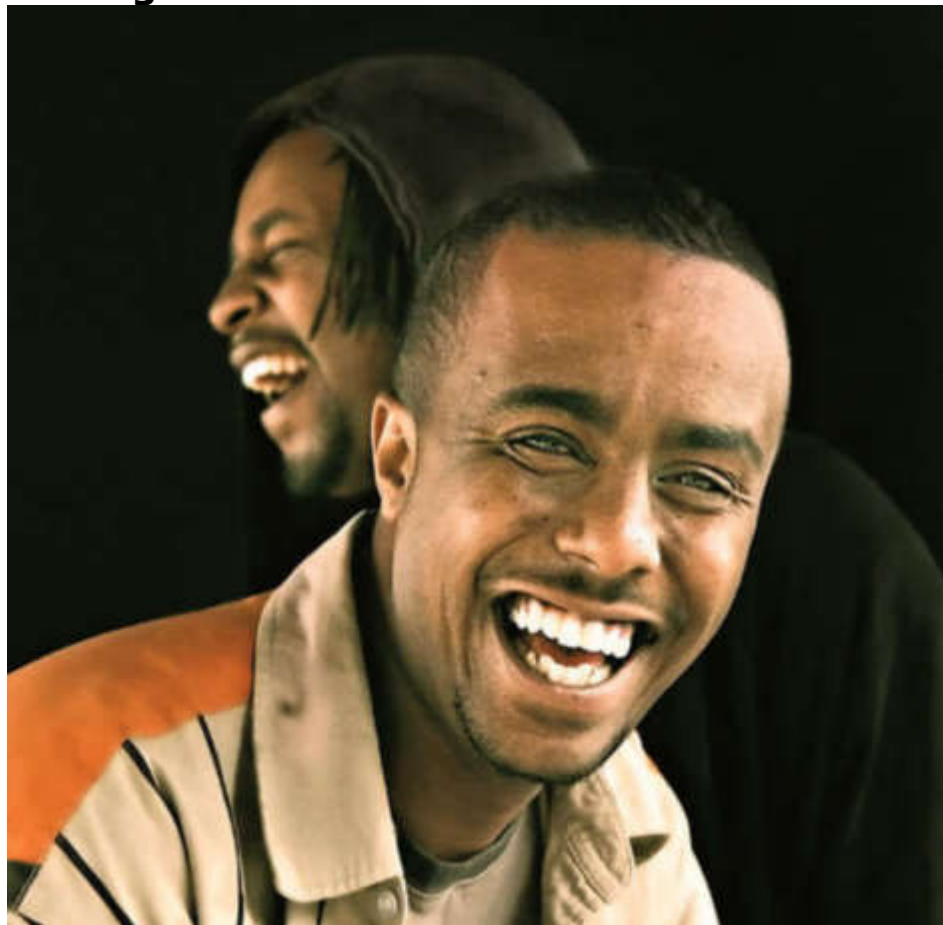


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## Making the audible visible



Khaled Abdulwahab of African band Diafrix.

Photo: *Simon Schluter*

Mary O'Brien

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KHALED Abdulwahab is fired up. He has just left a meeting at the Arts Centre where he argued passionately for giving African musicians a chance to stage a concert this year. Music is integral to Abdulwahab's life and he believes it will open doors for him and Melbourne's growing African community.

"Hip-hop and music have set me free," says Abdulwahab, founder of the five-piece hip-hop crew Diafrix. "There's stuff that we were growing up with that we want to talk about, like to do with politics, like to do with a voice that is not represented."

This is a man with a message, who wants to encourage fellow Africans and disillusioned young people to find their voices. He was 18 when he arrived in Australia in 2001, leaving his family and three siblings in troubled Eritrea.

He enrolled in a hip-hop workshop in Footscray, hit it off with other students and formed a band. Diafrix is one of the nine groups coached by Multicultural Arts Victoria's Visible project, which helps migrants and refugees to develop their art forms.

Six years later, Abdulwahab has achieved much. He won an Australia Council young leaders' award last year, gives workshops for disadvantaged youth in schools and has a scholarship to study community cultural development at the Victorian College of the Arts. He also runs one of the coolest

hip-hop bands in Melbourne.

Young people can be tempted to turn to drugs and crime, he says. Mainstream hip-hop is often negative but Diafrix's lyrics are encouraging: "Music is the best way to talk to young people". He was surprised to win the young leaders' award but admits it makes spreading his message easier. "It's good for me, it's good for my band and it's good for my work," he says.

Having spent his initial years here within the African community, Abdulwahab, who lives in Fitzroy, worries that Africans are becoming isolated in suburbs such as Footscray and Dandenong. He wants them to be proud of their heritage and to stand up for themselves. "Speak up and make it better, don't put your head down and walk by and say 'I wasn't good enough'," he says. "Life is not fair. We need to stop feeling sorry for ourselves and start trying to make a change. Isolation is very bad. You need to be friends with other cultures."

The Visible project targets emerging refugee communities from the Horn of Africa. This group represents 63 per cent of people in Australia's humanitarian program, making them one of the largest and fastest-growing refugee communities. Over the past five years an average of 3500 Africans settled each year in Victoria, according to the Department of Immigration.

Visible, which has given Diafrix a kick-start in Melbourne's music scene, started in 2005 with five groups from the Horn of Africa. Visible co-ordinator with Multicultural Arts Victoria Anita Larkin says the project gives African artists a mainstream platform to encourage them to produce cross-cultural music.

"They come from very rich cultural backgrounds," Larkin says. "We want to help them settle in and find their identity. The cross-cultural interaction will add to the vibrancy of our arts scene."

Larkin says one goal is to reverse negative perceptions about community groups, such as the drink-driving problem among Sudanese in Dandenong. "We want to give them the opportunity to show positive aspects," she says. "Settlement issues will pass but stereotypes can stick."

Nine groups in Visible performed at the Emerge Festival last June and the Arts Centre's Mix It Up program in September. This year the project will extend to Shepparton's growing Congolese community and it will also include indigenous and Polynesian groups.

One of the most successful parts of the project is the teaming of groups with professional musicians who act as mentors. Nicky Bomba, from the dance and reggae band Bomba, has been a mentor for the past two years and helped the Visible groups make their first CD. "I'm conveying my expertise but I'm also learning," he says. "It's as much a lesson for me, soaking up other people's cultures, and this is invaluable."

Bomba hopes Melbourne will become the world music capital of Australia. He says the ideas, melodies, instruments and rhythms from different countries offer much to local musicians. "There's a lot of established talent out there and we need to nurture people coming up," he says. Bomba would like to see governments committing to funding on a five-year plan instead of yearly.

Keeping alive cultural traditions to be passed on to young children is one of the most valuable aspects of the Visible project, says Poly Kiyaga, a community worker with Adult Multicultural Education Services, a provider of settlement services to immigrants.

"Music is very, very important. Music in the community back home was happening continuously. It was not something we found time for - it was happening every evening. This is what we did before

we went to bed. Here things are happening so fast that we are missing out a lot. So we are thankful to the Visible project, whereby we are getting organised and getting back to what we used to do before."

He says the cross-cultural interaction is invaluable and the shows give the performers confidence while offering a glimpse of the musical traditions of the African communities.

After spending six years in Melbourne, Abdulwahab feels he's part African and part Australian but he misses his family and homeland. "Every day you wake up and your skin reminds you of where you're from. I believe we are accepted in Australia and I'm very grateful that Australia has become my second home."

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