

Words: Mitch Brook
Photos: Courtesy of SoundSchool

sound School

INDIA



**THREE YOUNG AUSSIES
BRING HOPE TO NEEDY
CHILDREN IN INDIA
THROUGH THE SOUND
OF MUSIC**

Imagine, if you can, a world without music. A world where the harsh clatter of life and the grating sounds of the city are the only sounds one can hear, where it's simply impossible to sit and enjoy the crescendos of a symphony or the pounding rhythms of the rock gods.

Outside of Australia, in less lucky places where millions exist in poverty, life without music is not an uncommon thing. In India, despite stellar economic growth, at least 25 per cent of people live in poverty and many children have never heard the

strum of a guitar, let alone played one. Recently, three young Sydneysiders were able to make a difference to this score by acquiring musical instruments for more than 150 Indian street children through their new charity, SoundSchool. Their objective is not to eradicate poverty; rather, they aim to bring a bit of music and some modicum of happiness into the lives of homeless children.

"We just want them to have a smile on their faces and to have one of the most important things that anyone can have in their life – just because of the emotional relevance music has for

all of us," says Jay Hemsworth, one of SoundSchool's founders.

BEER AND PIZZA

SoundSchool began making waves in 2009 when one of Jay's friends, Oli Mistry, returned to Australia after a trip to India and started telling his mates what he had seen.

"I saw firsthand some of the poverty there," Oli recalls. "I was playing my guitar out in the street and all of these children came up to me just to listen to the music. Their enjoyment of something that I take for granted was a real eye-opener."

"There was this one kid in particular who made a lasting impression. He was called Hari and he had a busted-up old guitar with missing strings, but somehow he'd managed to learn to play Oasis' 'Wonderwall'! He was enthusiastic and the kids all loved him playing – he was clearly passionate about music."

After hearing the same story and seeing the photographs a dozen times, Oli recalls, "Jay said to me, 'Look, there's got to be something we can do. I've wanted to do something for ages; you're talking about doing something. So let's sit down and

come up with a way to make a difference.' So we got on the blower to another mate, Jarrod Paul, and told him to come over for beers and pizza."

Then they started brainstorming, and SoundSchool was born.

Over the next few days, the trio hammered out a plan that would see them promote concerts in Sydney to raise money to buy musical instruments, teaching aids and tuition for street children in India.

SoundSchool staged its first fundraising gig in August 2010. Held at the Beach Road Hotel in the suburb of Bondi, it was hosted by Jane Gazzo, a presenter for payTV station Channel [V], and featured live performances by The Delta Riggs, Midnight Youth and Bigphallica.

"We started off with an ambitious goal of raising about \$5,000 or \$6,000 and ended up raising almost \$19,000 that night," Oli recalls. It was a sellout success."

The next move was to figure out what to do with all the money. Which led them back to Oli's photos and the experiences he had in India.

THE INDIAN EXPRESS

The Salaam Baalak Trust is an independent charity with branches in Delhi and Mumbai that runs a dozen-odd children's shelters across the subcontinent. Oli had come across them during his visit there and, after looking into their operations, the guys felt it was an organisation they could trust to help them make the most out of the money they'd raised from their sell-out gigs.

A few weeks later, Oli and Jay headed off to India at their own expense to set up the first SoundSchool in one of the Salaam Baalak-run shelters.

"The shelter we set it up in was a boys' home with about 150 kids," Jay says. "We bought instruments, we met with teachers and hired them to teach the kids. We also set up a room to store the instruments and held an impromptu concert with a couple of local bands to get the ball rolling."

"It didn't take long for the idea to catch on. Within a few minutes, the room was jam-packed with kids

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Oli was especially stoked when he caught up with Hari – the boy with the busted guitar who'd made such an impression upon him during his earlier visit to India.

"Hari's face lit up like a Christmas tree when he got his hands on one of the new guitars," Jay recalls. "He even joined in with the bands at the launch concert, strumming the chords he'd learned for 'Wonderwall'."

"It was awesome to see him up in front of the other kids, playing and having a go," says Oli. "He's clearly going to be a rock star!"



ONWARDS AND UPWARDS

Now back in Sydney, Oli and Jay are in regular contact with the folks at Salaam Baalak. Their simple gift of music has made a huge difference in the lives of the boys living in the shelter, and has inspired the guys to take their plan to the next level: setting up a second SoundSchool in a Salaam Baalak girls' shelter. Having spent only about a third of the funds they've raised so far at the first shelter, they have plenty left over for SoundSchool 2.0.

"We're also going to start up a SoundSchool in Australia, possibly in the Northern Territory," explains Jay.

"Maybe in a remote town or Indigenous community – any place where kids don't have access to instruments and tuition," adds Oli. "We've now started to look for local organisations we can work with in those regions."

Whatever they do next, the innovative guys are thinking big; there's talk of expanding into South-East Asia and even Africa.

"We definitely want the fundraising gig to be an annual event because we were amazed about how successful it was last time, and how far the money can go," says Oli.

"Seeing the kids actually play music, strumming guitars and having fun on the day ... that was everything," Jay recalls.

Keep an eye on www.soundschool.com.au for the SoundSchool India photo exhibition by Julian May, as well as new events and updates. Sponsored by Channel [V], FOXTEL, the Gibson Foundation, Fairfax Digital and www.fasterlouder.com.au. *



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founders Oli and Jay
Left: With Hari
Above: Taking it to
the streets in India