

# MANAGING MUSICAL SUCCESS IN A SMALL ISLAND ENVIRONMENT

## Vanessa Quai and the Vanuatu music scene

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### Introduction

Vanuatu, formerly known as the New Hebrides (during the period of its Anglo-French colonial condominium) comprises a group of 83 islands in the South West Pacific, north east of New Caledonia and north west of Fiji. Vanuatu is home to a rich Melanesian culture where more than 100 different languages are spoken (in addition to the national pidgin language bislama). There is a French and British influence from the colonial days, and a strong Christian heritage. The majority (94%) of Vanuatu's population is indigenous Melanesian (ni-Vanuatu). The remainder comprise Europeans, reflecting the colonial heritage; Vietnamese, from the days of indentured labourers; Chinese; and other Pacific Islanders. Of the current population (circa 205,000) over 40% is under 15. Many ni-Vanuatu are engaged in subsistence activities and the cash economy is little developed outside of the capital city of Port Vila (on Efate island).

This paper examines the career of young ni-Vanuatu singer Vanessa Quai. In particular, it outlines the management strategies that have brought her success in national, regional and international popular music markets from a base in Vanuatu. We identify that her family's efficient exploitation of international cultural/commercial networks has been a key plank of her career to date, and one that merits attention as a strategy for other small island nation performers trying to achieve commercial success beyond their domestic markets.

### Local Industry

During the 1970s, in the years immediately preceding independence, local commercial music recording was initiated by Vanuata Productions, which recorded local artists on cassette. This business was purchased by Jean Marc Wong in 1989 and developed into the nation's major recording operation, a position it has held through to the present, releasing over 100 albums. For the majority of its time in operation, Vanuata Productions has been heavily dependent upon its owner-manager, with Wong producing, engineering, mixing, mastering and—for low volume releases—duplicating copies (although larger runs have been handled through Australian and New Zealand manufacturers). Currently Wong has a production routine that records a string band album in 5–6 working days and a pop band (usually requiring more editing and overdubs) in 20–25 working days. The label's peak sales successes, in terms of numbers and profitability, were a series of albums recorded by Vatdoro, Vanuatu's first band to combine reggae and stringband elements in an amplified format. These provided the label with its largest ever production runs, of 5000 copies per album. Since the mid 1990s the average volume of sales per album release has declined considerably, due the number of competing releases on other labels, a downturn in the economy and an increase in CD copying.

In both its local and international forms, music industry success (measured in terms of

profitability) is dependent on successful access to and exploitation of markets of sufficient scale to generate the income necessary to cover production and various artist development and facilitation costs. So few artists and managers achieve viable long-term careers that it is often said of the music industry that ‘failure is the norm’. Given that is the case in mainstream Western industries (such as the United Kingdom and USA) with their massive markets, concentrated populations and economies of scale, the issues facing performers from smaller national contexts such as Vanuatu are considerable. It is therefore all the more surprising that over the last decade ni-Vanuatu singer Vanessa Quai has achieved a degree of success in international markets from a base in Vanuatu without being processed and promoted through the Western music industry as a ‘world music’ product. Instead, shrewd and efficient deployment of a diverse set of commercial strategies has developed her profile and profitability in different regions.

As befits a performer working in an international cultural environment, Vanessa Quai’s musical reference points are diverse. Her vocal style has been influenced by singers such as Whitney Houston, Celine Dion and Mariah Carey and, in terms of instrumentation, her recordings conform to Vanuatu and broader Pacific reggae styles that ultimately derive from influential 1970s’ reggae bands such as Bob Marley and the Wailers. Her latest album *Transformation* (2007) also includes elements of hip-hop and features popular Solomon Island hip-hop artist Straky.

Due to the far-reaching nature of western cultural imperialism, Vanessa and her father/manager Nigel Quai have had access to the cultural capital of mass popular music. Discussing creativity in general, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) notes that the place where one lives is important for the following reasons: firstly, one must be in a position to access the domain in which one plans to work because information is not distributed evenly in space but is clumped in different geographical nodes (1996: 128); and secondly, because novel stimulation is not evenly distributed. However, although this may be the case for other domains or cultural symbol systems, Vanessa has had easy access to the cultural capital that is signified by the work of artists such as Carey and Houston. The global operation of popular music is unique in this way. While other domains are not distributed evenly in space and are clumped in different geographical nodes, access to the domain of mass Western popular music is less variably spread; and Vanessa and Nigel Quai’s musical creativity has been dependent on this accessibility (see Hayward (ed), 2007).

Geographical location has traditionally been important for the music business. The conventional wisdom is that the closer an artist and artist manager are to the head offices of major labels, agencies and press publications that set the taste for mainstream music across the world, the easier it is for such a new artist to be heard and appreciated on a massive scale. However, in the contemporary digital era the music business is becoming much more fragmented. Influential Australian artist manager and song publisher Keith Welsh noted in relation to the new online web-based version of the business that is emerging:

*It’s so good that managers and bands can now actually manage so much more of it themselves. . . . It’s exactly the same problem though because the artists and managers then think ‘Oh my God there are so many more outlets, there are no mainstream outlets now.’ The research and education that managers have to give themselves now is far greater than at any other time (interview with Guy Morrow, 2006).*

Increasingly the successful development of an artist’s career relies on their management finding alternative pathways to those that have traditionally been provided by major recording companies. In this industrial context, Vanessa’s isolated geographical location can actually be manipulated as a competitive advantage because it is ‘exotic’ from a Western perspective. Any point of difference can become advantageous in a more fragmented business that is fueled by creative contributions to the domain; especially when musicians all over the world

have access to the relevant cultural capital to be able to make a contribution. In terms of her latest album *Transformation* (2007), for instance, Vanessa and her family are in an advantageous position because they own the master recording. They would not own this asset themselves if they had signed to a major recording label.

However, because economic capital is not evenly spread throughout the population in Vanuatu, access to this cultural capital/or domain is dependent on class position or on membership of a smaller community through which the cultural capital can be disseminated. Vanessa's parents are prominent members of a Christian musical community in Vanuatu. Vanessa began showing interest in singing at the age of 3, remembering songs and melodies and by the time she was 6 it became apparent that she had excellent pitch and musical feel. Proud of his daughter, Nigel encouraged her to appear in church events. She practiced singing on a karaoke mini-PA system at home, developing her techniques and exploring her range. At this time she took a particular liking to Houston and Carey—two technically gifted performers and ambitious models for a young girl. The qualities Vanessa admired in the two singers were their pitch control, wide range, power, attack and pronounced vibrato.

Vanessa's first recording was *To Aitape With Love* (1998), an album that featured her and the Good News Proclaimers, a gospel band led by her father. The lead song from this album, *Beautiful Aitape*, was performed by Vanessa and the Good News Proclaimers during a fund raising event following the Aitape tsunami tragedy in the Sandaun Province, Papua New Guinea in July 1998 and was an immediate success in Vanuatu. It also came to the attention of the Papua New Guinean consul in Vanuatu, Eileen Nganga and her husband Meto Nganga, who eventually arranged its recording along with the other gospel tracks that formed the album. The album was recorded at Vanuata Studios and final production work was undertaken in Port Moresby. Pacific Gold distributed the album in PNG with Kamiko Ltd handling it in Vanuatu and with a percentage of the proceeds going to the disaster relief fund. These developments came as a surprise to the Quais, particularly the profile it gave Vanessa in PNG (at the age of 9). At this point a momentum entered Vanessa's career that Nigel and Christiane Quai managed to control and channel through what (to them) seemed simple family decision making but which, in retrospect, can be seen as the beginning of a set of shrewd and decisive artist management strategies.

The Quai family has been able to convert their cultural capital into economic capital through the continual accumulation of social capital at an international level. Due to declining sales figures, the once powerful international networks that major labels possessed are diminishing and it is increasingly important that artists and artist managers find alternative ways to network internationally no matter where they are located geographically. The success of the Quai family has involved accumulating social capital all over the world through tapping into both Christian networks and those provided by international song competitions.

In January 1999 Vanessa entered the South Pacific International Song Contest held on Australia's Gold Coast. She achieved 3<sup>rd</sup> Prize. As a result she was invited to enter the 2<sup>nd</sup> Children's International Nile Song Festival (CINSF), held in July 1999. Her entry was sent to Cairo and she was subsequently selected as one of the final 20 contestants, representing the South Pacific region (including Australian and New Zealand). She went on to win first prize and received a cheque for US \$6,000. Following this success Vanessa recorded an album with Mangrove Studios in New Caledonia (one of the most popular studios in Melanesia) entitled *Beautiful Pacific Islands* (2000). The deal Mangrove offered involved publishing the 10 songs on the album, with them owning the master and paying royalties to the artist and with the songs being registered with SACEM (the French international copyright body). The album was licensed to labels in other countries to distribute, such as Chin H Meen in Papua New Guinea, Kingmusic in New Zealand and Vanuata Production in Vanuatu. The success of this arrangement resulted in a continuing arrangement with Mangrove and annual visits to New Caledonia to perform.

Shortly after these recording sessions, another song competition opportunity arose when Cornel Fugaru, the founder and Director of the Golden Star International Music Festival in Romania, wrote and encouraged Vanessa to enter a song into the 2002 Golden Star International Children's Song Contest in Bucharest. Vanessa's entry was accepted and the family flew to Romania, with Vanessa eventually winning 2<sup>nd</sup> prize, for which she received US \$3,000. In the same year she recorded her second album with Mangrove, entitled *The Untouched Paradise* (2001). This album exceeded expectations, selling 3,000 CDs in its first week of release in New Caledonia and Vanuatu. A hit song from this album, entitled *Freedom*, boosted her profile and created a demand for her throughout Melanesia. As a result, Vanessa became fully professional, developing an annual schedule of performing around Vanuatu and New Caledonia, working on her vocal technique, dance moves and general stage appearance and generally making the transition from being a child performer to an adolescent one.



Vanessa Quai onstage in Brasov (Romania), 2005

In September 2002 Vanessa was selected by the Francophonie Games committee in Canada to participate in cultural events coinciding with the 4<sup>th</sup> Games in Ottawa and attended with the Good News Proclaimers as her backing band. After her return she completed her third album, *Pasifika* (2003) at Mangrove Studios and her profile began to draw the attention of bigger concert organisers. In December 2003, she played major shows in Papua New Guinea and this opened the largest market for her music to date. Her visit to PNG also resulted in her making a joint album with a PNG hip hop band named Soul Harmony for the major PNG label Chin H Meen Supersound. The album, entitled *Promise*, was released in mid-2004 and rapidly went to the top of the PNG music charts, with over 6,000 copies being sold in the month after it was released.

Another significant overseas invitation occurred when Vanessa was invited to enter the 2004 Golden Star Childrens' event again, this time in the teenage category, with Vanessa eventually winning first prize. Being an event backed and heavily promoted by Romanian TV,

this win secured substantial publicity for her and she was invited to perform at diplomatic events. Shortly after returning home—and reflecting her emerging profile in the Eastern Europe Nations—she received a third invitation to enter a Romanian song contest. The major difference for this event was that it was not a sponsored children’s competition but rather a high profile adult event, held in Brasov in September 2005. The contest was organised by Romanian TV1 and had previously featured headline appearances by the likes of Diana Ross, Kylie Minogue and James Brown. Pitched into competition with an international group of more mature artists, the Quais principally saw the contest as an opportunity for Vanessa to gain more experience in an adult context. Travel costs were supported by the Vanuatu National Council of Women (VNCW), the Vanuatu government (through the Ministry of Youth) and Air Vanuatu, with the TRA-Sandal company sponsoring her performance costume. This array of sponsors reflects the manner in which the Quai family managed to transcend a purely commercial space and secure a broader support and investment network for a national performer—a market advantage not so easily accessed for mainstream Western artists at similar career stages. This collective investment paid off when Vanessa won the competition and the resulting momentum provided her with the biggest boost to her career to date. Arriving back in Vanuatu she found that her victory had been front page news and that the story had circulated around Pacific media outlets. A cheering crowd awaited her at the airport (further boosting media coverage) and launching her profile as a young adult artist capable of performing in an international arena.

The Quais’ strategy at this point attempted to consolidate and expand Vanessa’s presence in Pacific pop markets (and to extend these to Hawai’i and New Zealand); to try and gain an entry point into the Australian market (the largest regional music consumer base); and to maintain her gospel profile. This strategy was implemented in 2006. The first target was approached through a collaboration with PNG ‘ragamuffin’ toaster Straky, with whom Vanessa had worked on the album *Promise* (2004). The result of this partnership was the aforementioned album *Transformation*. Retaining ownership of the masters, the Quais licensed the album to Mangrove for New Caledonia, Tahiti and New Zealand distribution, while Chin H Meen distributed in her biggest music market, PNG (with the Quais receiving advance payment from the distributors to cover the production costs).

While Vanessa is at the top of the local music industry, in terms of professionalism and earnings, it is still hard to make a living in Vanuatu from music alone. Vanessa’s career has thrived to date due to her talent and hard work and successful managerial strategies. These might best be described in terms of diversification and flexibility—a disinclination to follow one musical style to the exclusion of others matched by a series of commercial partnerships explored on a case-by-case basis. As Nigel summarises it, “we look and see what directions work for her and treat these as stepping stones to bigger things” (interview with Philip Hayward, 2007).

On July 13<sup>th</sup> 2007, Vanessa turned 19. She has been offered management deals for countries that include the USA and Australia and has just finished recording an album with the Cairns/Australia-based Papua New Guinean band the Tribes of Jubal that promises to open a new thread of performing. If the Quais can sustain her present career momentum and continue to access a diverse ‘portfolio’ of markets she is likely to become a figure of major significance in the Pacific music scene, offering a model for other performers (and, as importantly, managers) to emulate. Vanessa Quai’s music and career development establishes that location in what is, by global standards, a remote, thinly populated, scattered island archipelago, is not necessarily an impenetrable obstacle to achieving transregional and transnational musical success provided that the musical product is viable and the managerial strategy is accomplished and flexible.

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