

Casey Atkinson (right) and Matthew Beattie are known in the hip hop world as Alter Egoz.



## Helping young Indigenous find their voice

*Casey Atkinson is one of many young Indigenous people in Victoria to have benefited from an innovative multimedia and story-telling programme supported by Mercy Works Inc. Casey spoke to Stephanie Thomas.*

Indigenous hip-hop artist, Casey Atkinson, launched his first album this year with fellow artist Matthew Beattie. Casey is thrilled about this milestone, but interestingly, he gives greater attention to the journey that led to the album launch.

For Casey, 25, music is central to his life. "If I didn't have music, I wouldn't be the person I am," he declares. "Music is an expression of my self." Music has also been an important means of "being able to tell people how I feel and say what's on my chest and do it in a way that's constructive".

Casey started playing the guitar when he was 12. "It was probably the best thing that Mum and Dad bought me, beside a pair of footy boots." He worked hard at guitar and by the end of school he had taught himself bass and drums.

Casey grew up with an eclectic mix of music, including rock, pop, country and hip-hop, but Indigenous music was central.

Indigenous musicians inspired and helped him to realise that "we could take it to that step one day too".

Casey was born in Melbourne and grew up in Shepparton. He is proud of his Indigenous heritage; his family and community mean a lot to him. "My people are Bangerang clan from Cumeragunja around the Murray River," he says. "My Mum and Dad have played a massive part in my general morals and goals". He describes them as "my biggest inspiration".

After finishing Year 12, Casey moved to Melbourne where he connected with his cousin Gary Saunders who was working at Fraynetwork Multimedia, a ministry of the Sisters of Mercy. Casey applied for a traineeship at Fraynetwork and started in 2003.

"I gained valuable skills in graphic design, web development and multimedia." He says one of his biggest supporters is Fraynetwork's Director, Sister of Mercy, Adele

Howard. "I have a lot of respect for her. She was someone who had faith in me from day one."

After completing his traineeship in 2005, Casey became involved in the Indigital Centre, a project established by Fraynetwork and supported by Mercy Works Inc. The Centre uses multimedia and the arts to give Indigenous young people a voice in the community and skill development opportunities.

Casey ran music workshops and cultural awareness activities with young people from all walks of life. These sessions helped participants to understand the value of different cultures, but perhaps more importantly, gave them an opportunity to talk about a range of issues such as suicide, isolation and disadvantage.

He says one issue that kept recurring was family and the need for support from immediate and extended family. "Closeness of family is something we hold proudly in our culture," Casey explains. "We try to promote

respect for elders, respect for other cultures, respect for people in general."

Casey believes the experience at Indigital helped him to grow "as a musician, as an artist, a sound technician, and as a mentor". It also allowed him to explore hip-hop music, form the duo Alter Egoz with Matthew Beattie, and ultimately produce their debut album "Split Personalities".

The album came out under the Payback Records label, established by Indigenous AFL player, Nathan Lovett-Murray, and Casey himself. This Aboriginal-owned label was set up to give young Indigenous people a voice and a start in the music world.

Casey hopes his music inspires young people to deal in a positive way with the many issues they face in life. He is thrilled with the launch of "Split Personalities", but at the same time, filled with gratitude for those who have supported and encouraged him. ■