

# Melanesia

bamboo boogie-woogie

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The island chains known as Melanesia include Fiji, New Caledonia, New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Musical diversity is a highlight of the region, from traditional instrumental and vocal music to contemporary rock and reggae. [Steven Feld](#) and [Denis Crowdy](#) untangle this skein of sounds.

# New Guinea

Musically, the best-known part of Melanesia is the island of New Guinea. This is divided in two: **Papua New Guinea** (PNG), the independent, eastern half of the island, and Papua, the western half, often called “West Papua” by indigenous inhabitants seeking independence from Indonesia. Prior to 1962, Papua was a Dutch colony, while PNG, until its independence in 1975, was divided into two Australian trust territories (British and German colonies before World War I). These colonial histories have strongly influenced the music heard today in New Guinea, as has the strong impact of missionaries.

There is considerably more documented and recorded material from the Papua New Guinea side, particularly since independence. This is partly a result of foreign interest in the country’s stunning cultural and geographical diversity – more than eight hundred languages are spoken by just over five million people – but also Indonesia’s hostility to the celebration or promotion of indigenous Melanesian culture in Papua.

There are clear continuities between traditional music from West Papua and PNG – from similarities in dance, song and instrumental characteristics in the highlands to bamboo flutes and wooden and bamboo end-blown trumpets closer to the coast. Contemporary popular music includes string-band music, reggae, gospel and influences from PNG music and Indonesian pop.

## PNG’s Popular Music

Papua New Guinea’s exposure to Western sounds began in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, with the part harmony of church hymns sung in local languages. By the turn of the century, mission songs, colonial songs and gold-rush songs had also made their mark. From the 1920s, 78s of Western popular songs were played around plantations and colonial towns and broadcasting began in the late 1930s. A further foreign influence arrived during the war, when foreign servicemen played and taught songs locally.

Guitars and ukuleles became popular. **String bands** – groups of acoustic guitars and ukuleles playing a hard-strummed and lightly swinging style already in broad Pacific circulation – were first recorded in the early 1950s, and were commonplace ten years later. By the late 1960s, rock’n’roll cover bands like the **Kopikats** were performing at hotels in PNG’s main cities, and string

bands like the **Paramana Strangers** had become well-known.

In the mid-1970s, the boogie-woogie **bamboo band** style spread to PNG from the Solomon Islands, featuring open bamboo tubes played by hitting them with flip-flop sandals. This began among villages around Madang, and spread from a band at the Teachers College there to other colleges and high schools. The **Wagi Brothers**, complete with bamboo tubes and fuzzy rock’n’roll electric guitar (played through transistor radios), are one of the highlights of David Fanshawe’s Pacific compilations.

A local **recording industry** began to develop in PNG after independence. Musical exchanges were promoted by the National Arts School and other national institutions, as well as regional and international festivals. **Sanguma** were the first PNG group to actively mix traditional songs and instruments with rock and jazz-derived styles. In the early 1980s, Sanguma toured the Pacific region, Europe and the US. Around the same time, recording studios became established in Rabaul and Port Moresby, the capital, and radio programmes featuring PNG pop styles, both in *Tok Pisin* (pidgin), the lingua franca, and in *Tok Ples*, (other local languages), spread widely. TV and radio stations, however, tend to play local rock, reggae and string-band music, also the focus of the cassette industry.

George Telek has made international waves through his work with musician and producer David Bridie, first appearing with Bridie’s band Not Drowning, Waving on the album *Tabaran*. Telek hails from the village of Raluana near the town of Rabaul (destroyed by a volcanic eruption in 1994) and his songs reflect everyday village and spiritual life. He tours internationally, so keep up with his schedule at [telek.com](http://telek.com).

## Traditional PNG Music

In 1898, some of the world’s first field-recordings were made along PNG’s south coast. However, music research did not begin seriously until the 1970s, with independence and the establishment of the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies music department and recording series. Traditional PNG music also received a huge boost in 1991 when the Grateful Dead’s drummer Mickey Hart produced anthropologist (and chapter co-author) Steven Feld’s **Voices of the Rainforest**, the first widely available CD of traditional PNG music. It shows a rich traditional musical culture, although its diversity has doubtless been greatly diminished

by colonization, missionaries, and industrial development. Certain types of traditional songs, singing styles, instruments and their performance were targeted for eradication by **missionaries**, who disapproved of the spiritual or erotic power of the music. Length of contact with missionaries – just over a hundred years on the coasts and under sixty in the central highlands – has played a part in how well local or regional indigenous musical traditions have survived, as did the church involved: the Catholics and Lutherans were generally quite tolerant, while the Baptists and Evangelicals were more hostile and restrictive.

**Singsing** is the general Tok Pisin name for village ceremonies which involve feasting, elaborately costumed song and dance, and exchanges of objects and food within and between communities. Singsings often involve entire clans or communities performing together. Songs are often sung with a leader and chorus, in unison or with an overlapping and staggered approach to the same text and melody, producing something like an echo effect. Performers exuberantly decorated in paints and plumes often accompany the singing with regular hand-drum pulses, while bouncing and swaying in dance lines, clustered groups or semicircles.

Some singsings associated with preparing for warfare or secret initiations have been abolished or were banned by colonial government officers or missionaries; others were abandoned by the communities themselves because of social and economic change. In some areas they have disappeared completely, or have been modified or replaced by newer forms, often held only in conjunction with national events like Independence Day, school holidays or Christian festivals. Singsings are the public and celebratory side of PNG culture most likely to be seen by foreign visitors. Large competitive shows with costume and dance contests attract regular audiences, and have been held regularly in Port Moresby and in the Highlands towns of Goroka and Mt. Hagen since the 1950s.

Alongside these powerful displays, the more private, sometimes mystical music based on vocal poetry doesn't easily cross linguistic and cultural boundaries. Many song texts in PNG evoke the power of place, describing the local landscape, flora and fauna. These are often full of metaphors about spirits, and their meanings can be extremely difficult to grasp and translate.

## Fiji

Although the Republic of the Fiji Islands is officially part of Melanesia, and the indigenous Fijians are physically similar to other Melanesians, Fijian culture shares a number of features with the culture of Polynesia: hereditary chiefs, patrilineal descent and a love of elaborate rituals, while music and dance are closely related to the western Polynesian varieties.

**Meke** is the generic term for dance, and the most important types are: *meke wesi* (spear dance for men) *meke i wau* (club dance for men), *meke iri* (fan dance), *vakamalolo* (sitting dance) and *sea-sea* (standing dance for women). The dances are accompanied by a choir singing in parts, as well as **lali ni meke** (slit drums) and **derua** (bamboo stamping tubes). Another popular style is **sere ni cumu** (literally “bumping songs”), which frequently accompanies kava-drinking sessions (the basis for a controversial herbal remedy in the West, the kava plant is used to make an intoxicating liquor of the same name).

One currently prominent traditional performing arts troupe which occasionally tours abroad is **Veivueti Ni Medrau Sucu**. In the 1980s, **Laisa Vularoko** enjoyed popularity with her *vude* pop style, which incorporated meke rhythms, and more recently the popular group **Black Rose** have used traditional songs in modern pop contexts. Giant lali drums were traditionally used to announce a wide variety of important events, and are still used to summon churchgoers. There is a rich vocal tradition of church music as well as styles such as *same* and *polotu*.

With albums difficult to obtain, the best way to hear Fijian music is to go there. Although there has been some political unrest in Fiji recently, this is largely confined to the capital, Suva. Since a series of coups beginning in 1987, the proportion of the population made up of **Indo-Fijians** has fallen below forty percent as a result of ongoing discrimination, although locally produced **bhajan** and **qawwali** music can still be heard.

## The Solomon Islands

Independent from Britain only since 1978, the **Solomon Islands** are sparsely inhabited. About four hundred thousand people, mostly Melanesians, live on almost a thousand islands, most on the principal half dozen.

Musical life in the Solomons reveals a variety of solo and group vocal styles. Large slit-drum

ensembles (like those in PNG on the islands of Manus or Bougainville) are found, but the most distinctive sounds are the solo and group **panpipe ensembles**, particularly those from Guadalcanal and Malaita Islands. The most famous ceremonial groups, from the 'Are'are people in Malaita, feature up to ten performers with instruments of several sizes. These have unique tunings and play a powerful repertoire of polyphonic songs associated with natural sounds like water, insects and birds, as well as work and other human activities.

From the 1920s a kind of **bamboo music** developed, where tubes of different lengths and diameters were struck by coconut husks to create a twangy, bouncing, island-music sounding remarkably like an ensemble of ukulele and bass. The Americans had bases around the capital Honiara, and – just as their abandoned oil drums were tempered into instruments for steel bands in Trinidad – in the Solomon Islands their footwear kick-started the modern bamboo bands: plastic or rubber thong-sandals replaced coconut husks in the 1960s, when the bamboo-band sound spread from the Solomons to PNG, and became a favourite in schools and colleges. There are some contemporary urban bamboo-band albums available on cassette.

Other bands specialise in popular **local-language music** (also well-known in PNG towns), particularly the Polynesian- and Christian-influenced guitar and ukulele string-band sound usually called **Island Music** and local varieties of rock and reggae. Distinctive fusion developments are represented by groups like the **Narasirato 'Are'are Pan Pipers**, who join the indigenous bamboo sounds of the large Malaitian 'Are'are panpipe ensembles to the rubbery basslines of large bamboo tubes whacked by flip-flops. They perform live at cultural centres in the islands, and in recent years have also toured Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the UK. Their cassettes are locally available in Honiara.

## Vanuatu

With around one hundred languages and a population of about two hundred thousand people, Vanuatu music is characterized by cultural diversity. Instruments include bamboo and wooden voice-modifiers, panpipes, coconut-shell ukuleles and unique log drums (some huge) placed vertically in the ground. **Reggae** is very popular and there is a vibrant local recording scene. Stringband groups are very common with their tight swinging

groove and percussive, syncopated ukulele playing. **Fes Napuan** is a large annual music festival in the capital Port Vila, featuring rock, reggae, traditional and stringband groups. As throughout Melanesia, gospel music of various kinds is popular, with cassettes widely available locally. One of Vanuatu's finest musicians is **Vanessa Quai**, who has a growing international profile.

## New Guinea's

Principally found in the Sepik region in the north-west and surrounding islands like Manus, New Britain, New Ireland and Bougainville, the **garamut** is a wooden slit drum, between one and twelve feet long and often elaborately carved. Struck with wooden beaters, the drums can produce different tones, and ensembles make a powerful, thundering sound. Sometimes the garamut is used strictly as a message-signalling device for long-distance communication over both land and sea.

By contrast, the smaller **kundu**, an hourglass-shaped hand drum with a lizard, marsupial or snakeskin head, is generally associated with singsings and found throughout the country. Like garamuts, kundu can be elaborately carved and painted and produce sounds associated with spirit voices; their throbbing pulse can have a deeply moving and hypnotic effect.

Bamboo flutes, or **mambu**, are end- or side-blown and range from one to over three feet long. They are generally found in the Sepik area and parts of the highlands. The most famous variety are played in pairs at male initiation rites, and are kept in the men's cult house, the *haus tambaran*, away from women and uninitiated men. Both the carved designs and the sound patterns of these flutes are symbolically important, making present the voices of ancestral and place spirits. The **Sepik flutes**, said to be the longest in the world, have ethereal, breathy tones rich in harmonics. They are always played in groups with perhaps five or seven players, but never with less than two. Although these are the best-known and most widely recorded bamboo flutes, other types of end-blown flutes and panpipes can be found in the PNG highlands.

Of the less formal instruments, the best known is the **susap** or bamboo Jew's harp. It is particu-

larly associated with young boys and men, and often played for fun, accompanying and mimicking rhythms of insects, birds, water and other environmental sounds.

## DISCOGRAPHY

### Melanesia

PNG music is released mainly on cassette, with production dominated by the **National Broadcasting Commission** and two companies, **Chin H. Meen** and **Pacific Gold**. Since 1990, music videos have also been locally produced and aired on **Mekim Musik** and **Fizz**, programmes broadcast on PNG's EM-TV, while **Chin H. Meen** has produced a series of compilations, PNG Super Sound Videoclips. For videos, cassettes, CDs and other information about PNG music, check [chmsupersound.com/companyProfile.aspx](http://chmsupersound.com/companyProfile.aspx). For a wide selection of Melanesian music, try [mangrove.ws/](http://mangrove.ws/).

## New Guinea

### 📍 **Bosavi: Rainforest Music from Papua New Guinea** Smithsonian Folkways

A fascinating 3-CD collection that explores the musical world of a community in the Southern Highlands province of PNG. Recorded and produced by chapter co-author Steven Feld.

### 📍 **Music from Mountainous West New Guinea, Irian Jaya**

Volkerkunde Museum Collection, Germany  
Important CD compilation with an extremely detailed booklet devoted to the everyday and ritual music of the Eipo, Mek, Yali, Dani and Moni. The best effort to date at a musical survey of the West Papuan Highlands.

### 📍 **Music of Biak, Irian Jaya**

Smithsonian Folkways, US  
Volume 10 in Smithsonian Folkways Music of Indonesia series: older indigenous celebratory songs, now in decline, plus hymns sung by female church choirs, and youthful string band music. Excellent historical notes.

### 📍 **Papua New Guinea: Huli (Highlands)**

Philips, France  
This otherworldly disc recorded by Charles Duvelle in 1974 among the Huli ("wigmen") of the Southern Highlands includes healing, recreational, initiation and other songs, with drumming, chants, pan-pipes, Jew's harp and musical bows.

### 📍 **Papua New Guinea Music Collection**

Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, PNG  
The best introduction to the whole world of musical variety in PNG. Eleven cassettes and a comprehensive booklet illustrate the extraordinary range of styles, instruments, and ensembles found throughout PNG, from turn of the century recordings to the post-independence stringband sound of the 1980s. Available from [ipgns@global.net.pg](mailto:ipgns@global.net.pg).

### ★ **Papua New Guinea Stringbands with Bob Brozman: Songs of the Volcano**

Riverboat, UK  
Five different bands from East New Britain team up with guitarist extraordinaire Bob Brozman. Includes a great DVD documentary.

### 📍 **Riwein: PNG Pop Songs**

Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, PNG ([ipgns@global.net.pg](mailto:ipgns@global.net.pg))

A classic PNG pop roots anthology. Two cassettes and accompanying booklet of lyrics and guitar chords for some of the most popular songs of the 1970s and early 1980s, recorded by bands like Paramana Strangers, Kalibobo Bamboo Band, Sanguma, Black Brothers and Painim Wok. Available from [ipgns@global.net.pg](mailto:ipgns@global.net.pg).

### 📍 **Sacred Flute Music from New Guinea: Madang Vols 1 & 2**

Rounder, US

These reissues of classic LPs are the best recordings available of the PNG secret flutes, whose ceremonial performance evokes the presence of spirits. Although better known in the adjoining Sepik river region, the paired flutes heard here are from the surrounding areas of Madang and nearby Manam Island. On some tracks they are accompanied by garamut slit gongs, kundu skin-drums, rattles and singers. The pulsing cries of the flutes are absolutely mesmerizing.

### 📍 **Voices of the Rainforest**

Rykodisc, US

A day in the life of Bosavi, in the central Papuan plateau. A vivid and atmospheric soundscape where vocal and instrumental sounds of work, leisure and ritual are inspired by and blend with the noises of birds, waters, and insects of the surrounding rainforest.

## Black Paradise

A group from West Papua intent on communicating their vital indigenous culture to an international audience.

### 📍 **Spirit of Mambesak**

Blunt, Australia

Vibrant stringband music from West Papua – a valuable insight into everyday life and the plight of Melanesians at the hands of a murderous Indonesian regime.

## George Telek

A tremendously popular Rabaul-based composer, singer and string player who led PNG's famous rock band Painim Wok, as well as the Moab Stringband. He was the first Papua New Guinean musician to reach a worldwide audience.

### ★ **Tabaran**

WEA, Australia

A breakthrough collaboration with musicians from Rabaul and Melbourne-based rock band Not Drowning, Waving. Combines PNG lyrics, instruments, and string bands with Australian rock songs, some exploring Australia's colonial past in PNG and expressing solidarity with the West Papua freedom movement in Irian Jaya.

### 📍 **Amette**

Blunt, Australia

His most recent album, with a strong stringband focus and flavour.

## Solomon Islands

### ★ **Solomon Islands: 'Are'are Intimate and Ritual Music**

Chant du Monde, France

Polyphonies and polyrhythms of 'Are'are slit-drum percussion ensembles, solo panpipes and amazing ensembles of

bamboo tubes struck against rocks. Beautiful recordings, excellent notes.

🕒 **Solomon Islands: 'Are'are Panpipe Ensembles**

Chant du Monde, France

There are many recordings of Solomon Islands panpipes, but this is the best. A superb double CD featuring ensembles of four, six, eight, and ten panpipes who perform for feast music. The groups are unique in their tuning and compositional style, and astonishing in their virtuosity.

🕒 **Solomon Islands: Fataleka and Baegu Music from Malaita**

Auvidis/Unesco, France

Excellent sampler of panpipe, flute and vocal music. Includes the original recording of the lullaby "Rorogwela" sung by Afunakwa; the sampled version of this melody became the Deep Forest hit "Sweet Lullaby" and later the Jan Garbarek adaptation entitled "Pygmy Lullaby".

## Other Islands

🕒 **Kanak Songs: Feasts and Lullabies**

Chant du Monde, France

Short but interesting sampler of indigenous songs whose musical techniques suggest the complex ways Melanesian and Polynesian influences collided in New Caledonian chant, whistling and other vocal styles.

🕒 **Kaneka. The Kanak Music**

Oceania, France

Compilation of nine New Caledonian artists/groups from 2001, showcasing distinctive local harmonies and rhythms, often with a pop/reggae feel and even some politicized English lyrics.

🕒 **Music of the Fiji Islands**

Arc, UK

Singing accompanied by ukulele, lali, derua, clapsticks and *cobo* (clapping), and some very pleasant acapella pieces from the Rewasese and Nawaka Entertainment Groups. Includes the evergreen folk anthem "Isa Lei".

🕒 **New Caledonia: Kanak Dance and Music**

VDE-Gallo/AIMP, Switzerland

Important and thorough anthology of historical and contemporary Kanak styles, with excellent notes.

🕒 **Vanuatu: Custom Music**

VDE-Gallo/AIMP, Switzerland

Recorded in the 1970s but still the best examples available of the incredible slit-drum ("tam-tam") ensembles; other selections indicate the range of solo and group ceremonial vocal styles.

🕒 **Vanuatu: The Music Tradition of West Futuna**

Auvidis/Unesco, France

Enjoyable guitar and ukulele groups from Southern Vanuatu, plus contemporary hymns from the missionary repertoire.

## Black Rose

One of the most popular groups in Fiji and other parts of Melanesia in recent times.

🕒 **Rosiloa**

Mangrove, New Caledonia

This 2005 compilation of "hits, videos and remixes" includes a DVD showcasing the group's danceable mix of traditional and original tunes with more commercial reggae/dancehall and dance grooves. Lyrics in English and Fijian.

## Tropic Tempo

A great example of local musical innovation from the Banks Islands in Vanuatu.

🕒 **Vois Blong Ol Bumbu**

Available from *mangrove.ws*

Traditional women's songs using both *kastom* (traditional elements) and reggae and rock arrangements and textures. The first local "world music" release, it's an interesting indication of how Vanuatu music might develop.

## PLAYLIST Melanesia

**1 RAUDE Black Rose** from *Rosiloa*  
An uplifting traditional song with an infectious dance groove.

**2 PASKA George Telek** from *Amette*  
Classic East New Britain Tolai stringband style – a song in the Tolai language discussing gossiping.

**3 TOU RA VUI Gilnata Stringband** from *Bob Brozman from Papua New Guinea Stringbands with Bob Brozman: Songs of the Volcano*  
A unique guitar and vocal texture from the beautiful Duke of York Islands.

**4 KOHI Various artists** from *Five Key Bands from PNG*  
A fascinating blend of thick vocals, bamboo and pan pipes.

**5 SONG CEREMONY Various artists** from *Bosavi: Rainforest Music from Papua New Guinea*  
Ceremonial music featuring a unique textural quality coined "lift-up-over-sounding" by Steven Feld.

**6 METAMANI Black Paradise** from *Spirit of Mambesak*  
The stringband sound of Black Paradise at its best, with rich, thick, combined voices over a solid string groove.