

CHAPTER 4

Waking up to the Underground

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1996

*This is your wakeup call today;
I'm a God whose love will never fail.
I will never turn my back on you;
I will never let you down.*

Aaron Mabikafola, *Wake Up Call*
HOMETIME

IN 1996 I REQUIRED A PERSONAL WAKEUP CALL. I needed to know my role as an artist. I still had to establish my purpose as a Christian in this world, for I did not have a clear direction. I had grown up in the Christian education system and I had a Christian family but, by this time, I had fully drifted into the world of secular music. It is not that world music is wrong, good music is important, but I don't think that alone was God's plan for my life.

The problem for me at the time was that with my interest in world music came a worldly approach and a way of living life that was not based on Christian values. I desperately needed to see and get to know more

Christian artists. I needed young Christian role models to help guide and direct my path. In 1996 I would get a wakeup call and hear about the Underground band scene a little bit more.

The year began with some window cleaning. Andrew and I decided we would head out cleaning car windows for some extra cash to develop our equipment. We struck the perfect day for it. It was hot and dusty and business was booming! We made very good money in just a couple of hours. People would always ask us what the money was for. Drivers were actually quite encouraging and pleased to hear that we were raising money for equipment. It all went well, but we never mustered up the courage to do it ever again as we thought it was illegal, so that was the end of our ground breaking fund raising efforts. Andrew and I retired after a promising start. It was back to looking for gigs for the Dented Fences.

Shows were not exactly a plenty for us, so we turned our efforts elsewhere. Cleaning windows was not the last of Andrew's fund raising ideas. Andrew had a good business sense, similar to his father. He could spot a buck to be made and saved here and there, which always came in handy for us as poor musicians starting out.

Andrew was keen to do some busking in town to raise some more funds for equipment. I had to put steel strings on my three-quarter acoustic to make it loud enough but the guitar wasn't designed for this much pressure. We went into town and made a few bucks busking, but not really enough to encourage us to keep pursuing this line of work, although it was still a good life experience to be a busker for a day! My first guitar however suffered for it and it began to bow from the increased pressure caused by the steel strings. With my acoustic guitar out of action, that was the end of busking for me.

Although I totally love street artists, I must admit that busking was not my thing and I had no desire for a part time job. However I was way into original music. I was not a good guitar student, but I came totally alive when I started to write songs. I first got into original song writing in the summer of 1995-96. I had explored things a little bit in Year 12 but now I was writing lots of tunes. I started off mainly writing music with a few basic melodies. I never cared too much about the lyrics to start with. They were not important to me at all; it was all about the music.

I loved original music. I would get totally into writing lots of surf

thrash songs. I was also influenced by mid '90s alternative rock, grunge and punk. I went from a guitarist who never practiced to a person who was often found living on my guitar for a whole afternoon. That summer felt like the longest summer ever after doing Year 12. I was no longer a school student; I was now a student of original music not that I considered this to be work at all. It was play; it was fun to explore.

That summer Andrew and I learnt to write songs together. Lang and I worked out how to write music together very early on in the piece. A couple of times I would come up with a guitar pattern and Andrew would help out with melody lines and lyrics. Our first ever song together was called *Away*. It was a surf song. Our interests were coming out in our music. Working together teaches you to think outside of your own box. Writing songs with Lang was an important step for us; it led to more creative songwriting sessions down the track. Collaborative writing can help you to form and develop songs further than you possibly could do by yourself. It is actually the beauty of being in a band.

When the summer ended I went off to University to study teaching. Band life was put on the back burner a bit. Andrew had decided to take a year off study to further pursue music. The Dented Fences played a few shows that year and we did at a couple of eighteenth birthday parties but things were not progressing enough for the band after Year 12. We were all into music, but we had no idea of what steps to take to achieve our dreams.

Andrew and I had developed a few original songs by this stage for the band, but at the same time we were still playing mainly covers. Frustration at a lack of progress was growing. Andrew had lots of free time and the band was not practicing nearly enough for his liking. His ambitions were not being met by the Fences.

Our bass player Adam Hooper left the band, as he was already involved in another group that was going well. He did not like Andrew's vocals that much, and, to be fair, Andrew was rough to start with. He would later grow into a true performer who could belt out a song but, to start with, Andrew was still working on strengthening his vocals. He was not a natural singer, but rather someone who worked very hard to develop his singing. The Dented Fences was then without a bass player and after some discussion we decided midway through 1996 to call it day.

I had it in the back of my mind that I may be able to start up a new band with my youth group friend Jeremy Owen. Things would not eventuate for sometime though. It was back to being a bedroom guitarist again for a while. Andrew and I remained good friends, but Uni life kept me occupied and we did not get together that much to play music after the Dented Fences ended.

With the Fences finishing off procedures, I decided to have one more go at football in 1996. I went out to play with some church friends in a low grade for a bit of fun. Again I had a big preseason and I got quite fit before tearing a hamstring in Round 2. These events that had weakened my back – first the jumping off the jetty and now a run of hamstring injuries. That was the end of football for me. Football was over for sure! So after bouncing back to football at the end of the Dented Fences, I soon bounced straight back to music again. I started writing more original songs.

While I was writing original music at home, new Underground bands were emerging. Punk music was becoming increasingly popular. More and more kids were getting into original Christian music. The scene was growing; and new international records would have a huge influence on the Christian community. Original Christian punk music had found its way into record stores and this would inspire many bands in the future.

Finding punk music for the first time is a revelation in itself. Finding Christian punk music was a totally new discovery for Australian youths in the mid '90s. It was a wakeup call for many Christians. Christian punk rock music gave young people a way of expressing their faith in this world. It was a way to communicate, culturally speaking. Sam Barnes from Seraphs Coal discovered the US punk band MXPX and after that he was completely into Christian punk rock. He liked the cool music with positive lyrics. Although they had not met as a band yet, both Dan Jones and Andre Dumuid were also getting into MXPX at a similar time as Sam Barnes. Christian punk rock had been discovered in Australia through bands like MXPX!

The boys from Seraphs Coal were becoming punk rockers themselves. Dan Jones thought that punk was not completely genre-specific at this stage which meant you were into quite a variety of sounds and bands. It was actually the Pokinatcha Album that came out in 1994 on Tooth and Nail Records by MXPX that first really got the members from Seraphs Coal fired up and keen to get more into band culture. Dan was way into

it. Christian punk music was the genre that would shape and influence Seraphs Coal and the Underground scene.

A lot of records were actually not that blatant. Seraphs felt like some of the Christian bands were hiding their faith a bit in their lyrics. They were motivated by a lack of direct Christian music. The boys from Seraphs were very fired up over the issue. They had the feeling in the end that there was no music out in record stores that they wanted to hear.

It was this desire to play strong Christian music that drove Seraphs further along the path of starting a punk outfit.

“We wanted to play music that we wanted to hear,” said Dan Jones from Seraphs Coal. For this reason the band decided to strongly wear their faith on their sleeves. No one would ever question what they were on about; it was always so obvious.

Adelaide had quite a strong secular punk and heavy metal scene prior to 1996. The music was pretty heavy in those days. Moshing was intense and a critical part of shows back then. The Adelaide scene had already established a strong down south punk and hardcore movement, although Dan Jones saw that Adelaide venues were not yet fully developed at this stage. I think Dan was referring to the further progress still yet to be made in regards to management and venues. It was all there but at the same time there was a lot of growth to be made. Punk was going from something small to something that everyone loved. Adelaide was always a strong punk and hardcore supporter.

Seraphs Coal met each other through an interesting series of events. Dan Jones first met Sam Barnes on a Christian camp. Together they were playing around on instruments. Dan started to go for it on the drums. This led Sam to hit the distortion pedal and away they went.

“Everyone was looking at us kind of strangely, but we enjoyed it,” said Sam. Dan and Andre were already in a band at the time, but they were looking to start up something a little more serious. Sam bumped into Dan again at a gig for world peace.

“I’ve just got to start a band. Are you keen? Andre Dumuid is keen,” Dan said and by October 1996 Sam was in and the band formed. Seraphs Coal had started. This one band would create massive interest in the Underground community.

Sam still recalls rocking up to practice for the first time. He pulled up

to Andre's house and there was another Renault 12 the same as his.

"What's going on here," he thought.

As he came in for the jam there was Andre play-fighting with an axe in the back yard. This made for a first jam that Sam would not forget. In the first practice the band came up with five new original songs and, a week later, they had drafted together fifteen songs. They had bonded well straight away. The band kept playing some of these early songs from the initial jams for a long time.

Some people instantly make an impression on you. Drummer, Aaron from Embodiment 12:14 recalled the first time he saw Dan Jones in action. It was around 1996/97 and Embodiment 12:14 were about to play another show, but Aaron was running late. He was still in the process of escaping work. Everyone was standing around waiting for the arrival of Aaron. When he finally rocked up Dan Jones jumped on the drums and sang out: "*Az-man's here; Az-man's here; Az-man's here!*"

Aaron recalled that was the first time he saw Dan Jones in action. Aaron called them the Waiting for Az-man band. He remembered that Dan Jones sounded sweet right from the get go!

When Seraphs Coal first started out they dreamed that they would one day be good enough to play with Jemima. Guitarist from Wone, Adrian Woithe, or *Woff* as he is affectionately known to his friends, told me that Jemima was a big influence on him also. Jemima were an early Underground band who played jangle indie rock music. They were well loved and had a strong following in the early days of the Underground scene. Australian indie rock was quite big around 1994-98 and Jemima grew to be popular early in the piece. Woff said that he picked up on the whole excitement and vibe of the Underground in those early years, and Jemima were key players in it.

Hardcore music was always popular with Embodiment 12:14 but it was actually punk music that was big around 1996-97. Embodiment were definitely inspiring new bands but, at the time the younger kids were inspired to start up a punk band. Watching Embodiment 12:14 at the Underground was also my first experience of the scene. The pure intensity of the show surprised me. I was in the mosh in those days and I also came away from the show truly inspired to start a band.

The shows back then in 1996 were high energy and moshing was

huge. At times the complex would be like a Hungry Jacks smoke stack. Steam would be rising out of the crowd and pouring out of the windows. But everyone looked after each other; people were much more careful than the average show. There was a real brotherhood thing going on. It was a very social scene. Lots of friendships came out of that residence. But yeah, moshing was a huge part of the early shows back then. The pure energy of the place was inspiring people to start up bands. I was definitely not the only kid feeling this way.

When the Fences finished, I started making a couple of demo tapes. I did not have a set plan to start out a new band; it was more something that naturally evolved. I kept writing tunes and recording them. I had a chat with Jeremy Owen from Youth Group about what I was doing and he was keen to listen to a demo tape. That discussion was really the beginning of our new band.

God then provided me with a new group. We formed in November 1996. I was way into music at that stage. More so, I was into writing songs on my electric guitar. I used to record and make demo tapes on an old tape recorder. I would add in a tapping pencil to try and create a snare sound. I gave my first demo tape to good friend and drummer Jeremy Owen. He listened to it at school with all his mates piled in his yellow Toyota Corolla. He and his friends must have liked the demo as Jeremy was way keen to start a band with me after that!

The rest of the band soon took shape. I was later talking to Andrew Lang and I mentioned I was starting a new band. Without any hesitation, he was in straight away; I didn't have to ask him. Andrew gave us as a band, a lead guitarist and singer. Jeremy Owen some time later invited a younger school friend Nick Robinson to join the band as our bass player. The line up was somewhat quickly set and solid. The band was fully formed by late November 1996; we were now well under way! I had a new band! It's a great feeling when you are eighteen.

Finding a band name can be a difficult process. The origin of our band name has many stories, but the real truth of it is that it came off an amp Andrew was using at the time. We had our first show coming up and we were nameless. Andrew and I were in his house and we were desperately coming up with names. We liked Lessie off Andrew's amp, basically because it was original. Then it was: "What does Lessie do? *Lessie just does...* Lessie

Does!” and that was the end of it. We were Lessie Does.

The band name didn't have a Christian meaning or anything like that; it was simply an original name. Even after we connected with the Underground music scene I don't think it ever crossed our minds to change our name. We liked it because it was fun and original and it always got people thinking about it and playing with the words. The media always found a line out of it. Lessie Does would remain our band name for the whole journey.

Lessie never set out specifically to join the Underground scene in 1996 like Seraph's Coal and Embodiment 12:14. We were not intentionally a Christian band, although three out of the four of our members were Christians. We had simply come together and formed a band by that November. The rest of our story simply evolved and grew out of relationships with the wider scene.

I had no idea of the early problems that the Underground community were facing, other than to say that my parents did question the value of Christian punk rock. There were some questions about the style of music and lyrics; *was this new music Christian at all?* The wider church body did express some concerns about this relatively new form of Christian music to start with in 1996. The venue experienced some flak from churches. However the church community changed their mind when they saw the fruits of the music.

Jesus does not like religion without fruit either. So you better have some fruit to show, otherwise what are you doing? Christian bands need to be honest with themselves. It's true that we are all guilty of being all show without fruit at times. We need to examine ourselves and find the fruit that God is producing within us.

The Underground had the ability to bring people from all walks of life to God. This brought about a huge paradigm shift in the church. It changed views. Youth leaders experienced firsthand people coming to know and love Christ through the music and the bands. Kids were discovering a lot; really God likes this type of music? This brought a reality that they could connect with God on a creative level as well. It took some time for the wider church to adjust to this new position but they did come on board several years down the track. However 1996 was still a time of questioning for the church in Australia.

The wider Church needed a wakeup call to the needs of the youth. I was really just waking up to the Underground venue myself; I had not fully captured the vision of what God had planned for Lessie Does and the wider band community. The Underground was beginning to be identified by churches as a good place for the youth. The Church had to decide what its response would be to this new form of Christian art.

Some churches were early to get on board while others would take some time. Original punk and hardcore were relatively new things for the body of Christ. In 1996 Australia was waking up to original Christian music – things were starting to get moving. It was all about to happen.

Wake Up Call

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Will you? Won't you?
 Realise before it's too late
 I can't tell you or make the choice
 Only you can make
 Since the day that you were born
 I have called out your name
 Still you want no part in me
 Still you carry your own shame

 When you breathe your last
 And close your dying eyes
 What side of the fence
 Will you be on?

 This is your wakeup call today
 I'm a God whose love will never fail
 I will never turn my back on you
 I will never let you down

ARTIST *Aaron Mabikafola* ■ BAND *Hometime*
 RECORD *Bought with Blood, Album* © 2004