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Academic life Don Grusin's CU-Boulder class inspires social change with music (VIDEO)

Students in music class create videos that highlight social issues
By Melanie Asmar, asmar@coloradodaily.com
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IF YOU GO

What: Tjupurru performs his didjeritronica music

When: 7 p.m. Friday

Where: The Secret Garden, 4715 North Broadway, Boulder

More info: \$10 suggested donation. Bring your own chair or blanket.

RSVP: 218-282-0102

The man with the didjeribone had the floor.

"We've got to get the message out that indigenous people are human," said Tjupurru, an aboriginal Australian who visited a University of Colorado class Wednesday.

Minutes later, Tjupurru put the didjeribone -- part didgeridoo, part trombone -- to his lips and blew. The music that came out was also a sum of parts: part indigenous, part electronica, part heavy metal, part nature sounds.

Tjupurru was invited to CU by Don Grusin, a Grammy-winning jazz pianist and CU alumnus who, for the second semester, is teaching a class called "World Music Video as Catalyst for Social Change." The goal of the class is to have students create short videos that highlight local or international social issues -- using music relevant to those issues.

Tjupurru is a perfect example of how music and social issues can intersect, Grusin said. The 44-year-old former roadie and descendant of the Djabera Djabera tribe began playing the didjeribone soon after it

was invented in the 1980s.

He now takes his one-man show into schools and juvenile facilities all over Australia, New Zealand and other countries. Armed with techno gadgets such as loop machines and effects pedals, he uses modern sounds to introduce students to the traditional didgeridoo.

For some students in Australia, where Tjupurru said racial tension exists between indigenous people and those descended from European settlers, he's the first aboriginal person they've met.

"Tjupurru is a social activist-type guy," Grusin said before the class, which was held in the university's Alliance for Technology, Learning and Society center's Black Box Theatre, a high-tech, two-story performance space in the building's basement. "For the students, getting this kind of information from the horse's mouth is important."

Junior Matas Vilgalys, a studio art major, said he signed

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Tjupurru, an Australia didgeridoo player, was a guest speaker at the University of Colorado for Don Grusin's class World Music Video Project as a Catalyst for Social Change. (CLIFF GRASSMICK)

up for the fledgling course because he's interested in both videography and social change. The combination, he said, "is hard to resist."

Senior Tom Gershwin is a teaching assistant this semester. He was in Grusin's first class last year and produced a video about a Brazilian fair-trade organization called Fairloom that sells bobbin-lace clothing made by the women of Terra Prometida, Brazil.

Gershwin, a music major, and a group of his classmates strung together footage of Terra Prometida to make a promotional video for Fairloom.

Other students in the class made videos about topics ranging from the gentrification of the traditionally African-American neighborhood of Five Points in Denver to the efforts of Mongolian immigrants in Colorado to

preserve their culture, including the music of the horse-head fiddle.

"A class like this didn't feel like a class at all," Gershwin said. Instead of just taking notes and sweating through a final, Gershwin said he felt like he accomplished something concrete. In addition to making the video, his group held a fundraiser for Fairloom that netted a couple thousand dollars.

"It was all inspired by Don," Gershwin said, referring to Grusin. "He has an attitude that anything can happen."

Indeed, Grusin has big hopes for his class. He'd like for his students to eventually visit the places they make videos about, on what he called "bridge-building missions."

Videos from last year's class can be viewed on Grusin's Web site, dongrusin.com/cuatlas, as well as on YouTube. There are still about six slots available in Grusin's class this semester.

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