Jazz just one string to Jessica’s bow

She may have grown up on a farm in what she calls “the beautiful red gum country” of Mingbool, just outside Mt Gambier in South Australia’s southeast, but Flinders drama graduate Jessica Beck wanted to be a performer from an early age.

“My grandfather bought me a microphone when I was a little girl and I just loved hearing my voice amplified,” Jessica told Encounter.

“We had this old hay-carting trailer, as well, a big wooden old trailer, and I used to get up on that and pretend that it was a stage and sing out into the paddock,” she said.

An older sister fuelled the precocious youngster’s enthusiasm for music.

“She’d watch Rage and Video Hits,” Jessica said.

“From about the age of five I was putting my tape recorder up to the television, recording it and taking it to school, showing off to the kids all the latest music.”

With the encouragement of her music and drama teachers and a visit to Flinders in Year 12 with the Experience Uni program for indigenous students from rural areas, Jessica enrolled in a Bachelor of Creative Arts (Acting) course.

Now, with an Honours degree under her belt, Jessica is putting her many varied talents to work from her base in Sydney.

“When I graduated, I spent about a year going from play to play,” she said.

“I did shows at the Adelaide Fringe, with Bakehouse Theatre and with [theatre group] The Rabble which took me to Melbourne and Sydney.”

But it is Jessica’s distinctive voice, showcased with her own jazz quartet, which is drawing attention from many quarters. It is a little curious, given she hadn’t sung a note of jazz until she came to Flinders.

“Music seems to be taking off for me,” Jessica said.

“At Flinders, I had a fantastic teacher, Professor Michael Morley, who taught us a music theatre topic. It involved taking part in two cabaret shows.

“One of them featured the music of Rogers and Hart. It introduced me to jazz songs I’d never heard of and may never have heard of if wasn’t for Michael Morley.

“That was my first taste of jazz music.”

Jessica’s partner, double bass player Curtis Argent asked her to audition for a new band.

“I sang those few songs that I knew and the band said, ‘Yep, that’s exactly the stuff we want to do, so if you could just learn another 40 songs, you’re in!’”

The band became the Jess Beck Quartet and, a year later, the group is heard regularly in venues around Sydney.

Jessica’s rising profile led to her nomination in the Most Promising New Talent in Music category in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Music, Sport, Entertainment and Community Awards, otherwise known as the Deadlys.

“It was really exciting to be nominated for a Deadly and to attend the ceremony in September. I didn’t win but it was a great honour to be there,” she said.

Jessica, a descendant of the Indigenous Arrernte people, said she was driven to get to know more about her culture.

“My grandmother was a member of the Stolen Generation, and my mother was removed from her mother, too. I didn’t get to grow up with my culture but I’m searching for that now,” she said.

“I’m getting to know a lot of people in the arts who have Indigenous heritage. And I have a documentary in the works. It’ll be about my grandmother’s story and also reconnecting her with my mother.

“They have met a few times but only for a couple of hours at a time. I think the last time was eight years ago, I guess I’m also trying to help that process through the documentary.”

“It’ll be a bit of a ‘Where did I come from?’ story.”

In the meantime, Jessica is writing original songs with members of her band, working as project coordinator for the Message Sticks Indigenous Film Festival, doing voice-overs and preparing for coming performances.

“I’ve been invited to perform a 40-minute set of original material on the big stage at the Spirit Festival in Rymill Park in Adelaide in February,” she said.

“I get so much enjoyment from all the different things I do that it doesn’t bother me that they’re not necessarily all related to my degree. Your degree helps you in lots of situations. It gave me confidence as a person — and it gives you all these skills you don’t realise at the time.”

Vincent Ciccarello