

Gurrumul: an evocative and unique musical contribution

By Tony Cornwell
7 August 2009

The most remarkable feature of *Gurrumul*, the recent first album by Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, is the blind Australian indigenous singer's extraordinary voice. Variousy described by music writers as "angelic" and "sublime", Gurrumul's sound—like all the best tenor voices—combines robustness and fragility along with an emotion-laden timbre that conveys passion and a deep sadness.

Gurrumul's deeply moving songs are in his mother languages—Galpu, Djambarrpuynu and Gumatj—and are concerned with traditional Aboriginal themes such as love of country ("Wiyathul", "Galiku"), spiritual connection with the land ("Djarimirri", "Marrandil"), the death of his father ("Bapa"), and the importance of continuity and acknowledgment of tribal ancestors.

(To watch Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu perform "Wiyathul" live see YouTube)

Most modern Aboriginal songs focus on dispossession and loss, but as his musical collaborator, friend and translator Michael Hohnen has explained: "Gurrumul is not an activist or a social commentator; he just says it's his role to tell these stories about his culture."

Thirty-eight year old Gurrumul was born on Elcho Island, off the north coast of Australia and about 560 kilometres from Darwin, and into a family steeped in a love of music—traditional and more modern forms. He cites as favourite singers Elvis Presley and Neil Diamond, and groups such as The Eagles and Dire Straits.

Because Gurrumul was born blind—of which he sings in "Gurrumul History", one of the songs on the album—he was denied a lot of the normal boyhood activities. As Hohnen points out: "He was stuck with the family more than a normal rebellious kid: stuck going to the church and learning all the gospel songs,

stuck playing a toy piano his mother gave him, and being given a guitar and being told, 'Play this'." And because there were no left-handed guitars available in the area he learnt to play a normally strung right-handed guitar upside down.

Gurrumul was also exposed to an enormous amount of traditional Aboriginal music and learnt hundreds of songs from tribal elders. This latter point is significant because of the pivotal role that music plays in Aboriginal culture and its ancient heritage. While Aboriginal society never attained literacy, music is a vital means of teaching what must be known about the environment and culture.

Aboriginal music, as Catherine J. Ellis explains in *Aboriginal Music—Education for Living* (University of Queensland Press, 1985), is a guide to life. Every task, every object, every social relationship has a song.

From a very young age Aborigines are encouraged to dance and sing about every day tasks; at puberty, karma songs—about totemic plants and animals of his/her clan and the history and mythology of the group—are learned. This meant that everybody in the tribe sang for at least part of everyday. Either solo, to remind themselves how to pound nardoo seeds, for example, or together, to remember the taboo on a foodstuff. All have specific melodic formulas and modes that distinguish them from other group's songs.

In brief, the song or chant acts as a mnemonic and with regular repetition of brief and rhythmic words—along with communal memory—ensures the accurate passage of information. With this type of singing it is possible to see back into the human past, to a time when dance, poetry and song were everyday essentials to survival.

The kangaroo dance is one of many complex examples. Young men are taught to imitate the

movements of a kangaroo, the dance accompanied by a song that tells of the origins of the kangaroo and the various totem contingencies that accompany this: who can hunt the kangaroo, who can eat it, etc.

On the surface this might appear to be a celebration of the relationship between man and nature but in fact, the tradition is drawn from the strict economic reality of everyday traditional Aboriginal life. In order to become a good hunter or even to be taken hunting, young Aboriginal men must be able to fully understand the behaviour of their quarry and this is tested in their depiction of the kangaroo's habits through the medium of dance.

Another element of Gurrumul's varied musical education was his good fortune to be a member of the Yolngu people of east Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, who have produced some of Australia's most successful indigenous rock bands. This includes Yothu Yindi—founded by one of Yuninpingu's relatives, Mandawuy Yuninpingu—and the Warumpi Band, which had George Burarrwanga as the lead singer. The latter recorded "Jailanguro Pakarnu", the first Aboriginal language crossover hit.

Yothu Yindi—which translates to "child and mother" and is a kinship term referring to the connection of the people to the land—was a breakthrough Aboriginal band, first formed in 1986 and immensely popular in Australia during this time.

Gurrumul, in fact, joined Yothu Yindi and from the age of 18 to 25 toured the world. He found, however, that his blindness made the constant travel exhausting and he returned to Elcho Island where he formed The Saltwater Band, playing mostly reggae-based songs in local languages.

Gurrumul eventually met Michael Hohnen, a classically trained bassist, who went on to become his producer. It was Hohnen who suggested the "less is more" approach that characterises the production of the *Gurrumul* CD. The sparse backing of Gurrumul's guitar, with occasional bass from Hohnen, ensures that Gurrumul's voice is free to dominate the album. The result is a beautifully played and engineered album and rewarding for all those prepared to listen.

Live however, Gurrumul's band is expanded with violin and classical guitar, and has Hohnen playing both plucked and bowed bass. The effect is startling. You can hear all the influences in Gurrumul's life: bits

of ancient court dances, old hymns, reggae; all sorts of things mixing together quite happily with a voice that seems as natural as the earth and the sky.

The musicianship—at least on the night that I saw Gurrumul's performance at the Sydney Opera House—was tasteful. Not a note or inflexion was played or sung that didn't need to be, allowing the audience to really savour the tonal shapes and pulses. And the way that the band joined in the general applause at the end of some songs showed that they were having a good time too. Gurrumul's live performance is not to be missed.

If one has a complaint about either the CD or the concert it is a certain "sameness". There's never any real liveliness or lightness, rather it's all a bit sombre. Partly this due to the nature of Aboriginal music—story-telling songs are forced to take a measured pace after all. Gurrumul's musical palette is also somewhat limited by never having had formal music training, and playing the guitar upside down restricts the chords and keys available.

But these are mainly quibbles, the important thing is Gurrumul's wonderful voice and the chance to share in and acquire a taste for his unique and extraordinary combination of traditional Aboriginal culture, modern and gospel church music and other musical influences. While the languages and traditions underpinning Gurrumul's compositions are remote from the lives and sensibilities of the majority of his listeners, his songs, like all good music, transcend cultural barriers.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>