

Eulogy for Kumantjayi Burarrwanga.

Read aloud by Neil Murray at Galiwinku, NT Friday 22nd June 2007.

I have been privileged to have made and performed music with Kumantjayi Burarrwanga for more than 20 years.

In 1980 I took a job at Papunya and I began playing music with Sammy and Gordon Butcher and other young men. Later that year Kumantjayi arrived to live in Papunya after marrying Suzina McDonald.

One afternoon I was attempting to play some Yidaki when Kumantjayi came walking up the road and saw me and came up onto my veranda.

I was struck by his confidence and enthusiasm as he sang in language to my stumbling yidaki. After encouraging me, he noticed my guitar lying inside on my swag.

“Ah you got a guitar there” he said.

“yeah” I said

“I’m a singer man” he said, “when are you playing band?”

“this afternoon” I said.

So he came to our rehearsal and we tried some cover songs and I could see straight away he had it in him. He wasn’t shy and didn’t want to play an instrument, he just wanted to sing.

You need three things to be a good band; good songs, good musicians and a good singer/front man.

With Kumantjayi as our lead singer the Warumpi Band was complete. We went on to become a formidable live act. He was a gifted showman and performer. There’s no one else like him. He could entertain a crowd with a single gesture or ignite them with flat out barnstorming rock and roll.

Through his voice and commanding stage presence the Warumpi Band delivered an important message to Australia. A message of equality, brother hood, reconciliation and respect for indigenous people. He made the nation sit up and take notice. He made them hear what he sang. Made them realise that the true stories of Aboriginal people mattered and that it was vital the nation hear them.

It seems the nation is still catching up for just this week the Warumpi Band’s first single “Jailanguru Pakarnu” has been selected by the National Film and Sound Archive as one of ten iconic recordings for its “Sounds of Australia”- National registry for 2007. Kumantjayi sang “Jailanguru Pakarnu” at every Warumpi Band gig.

He was a proud and passionate man. He gave his heart to the audience every time. He never wanted to stop performing. He lived for his fans and his music.

Earlier he did have a personal battle with alcohol but eventually he beat the grog and spoke out tirelessly about the dangers of alcohol to young people in schools and to his concert audiences.

May he continue to inspire others to be all they can be. To be bold and confident in whatever they choose to do.

I'd like to pay particular tribute to his father, Matjuwi. For it is through him and his family and the strong Yolngu culture that is maintained here at Galiwinku, that Kumantjayi's singing and performing power has come.

I also want to pay tribute to his backing band in his solo career- Birdwave. Robbie, Stu, Brendan and Anda along with his family have been his primary carers in the last few months of his life. This was a difficult task but they did it with utter devotion and I take my hat off to them.

The Warumpi Band in full flight with Kumantjayi out front is the only band I ever wanted to be in. There was a powerful energy that happened when we played together. Sadly that can happen no more.

But Kumantjayi's legacy is strong, as are my memories of him. I remember how mesmerised I was watching him doing a Baru dance with his countrymen at Barunga Festival- and also when he won the spear throwing!

I remember how deeply touched I was by the instant compassion he showed me when I told him I'd lost my father.

I remember the last time I saw him, here, less than 2 months ago. Despite the gravity of his illness his spirit was strong and resolute. And when I reminded him of all the good work we'd done and how we'd had the best fun doing it; a brilliant smile like the sun rising spread across his face. His music and performances thrilled many people in this land and we will miss him dearly.

Anyway my brother, I'll carry you in my heart, until we meet again in that one true place.

Limurru wangayin ngura. (We are all one blood.)