

A True Fella

Neil Murray, who has Scottish ancestry, started his musical career when he was living in the Australian outback. There, Larry Schwartz explains, he learned the importance of having a 'connection to country'.

It says something about Neil Murray's regard for the ways of Indigenous Australians that he declines to name a former bandmate, and close friend, who died in 2007.

"I avoid saying his name," Murray explains after mentioning a tribute he attended to George Rrurrambu, lead singer of the Warumpi Band. "You can write it," he says.

The Warumpi Band was a Central Australian group co-founded by Murray, the only non-Indigenous member, in 1980. Three decades have passed since the quietly spoken musician and writer left home in western Victoria on "a kind of a quest for belonging, to go and learn from people who have lived here the longest".

Murray helped set up the rock group while working as a teacher, supply-truck driver and outstation worker in the remote Aboriginal communities of Papunya and Kintore, northwest of Alice Springs. They toured Australia extensively, including on the 1986 'Blackfella/Whitefella Tour' with Midnight Oil.

"The Warumpis were legend, a formidable unit," wrote Midnight Oil's guitarist Jim Moginie, who produced Murray's recently released 10th solo album, *Witness*. Moginie's first encounter with the band was in the Northern Territory community of Docker River (also known as Kaltukatjara) on a clear winter night. "The Central Desert was their turf."

When the Warumpi's lone whitefella came back home to Victoria's Western District in the late 1980s, it was at the suggestion of Aboriginal friends, including Warumpi guitarist Sammy Butcher, who told him: "That's your country – you should sit down there." Murray continues: "They'd ask me, 'Where you from?' I'd say, 'From Victoria'. They'd say, 'Ah, that's your country – you should go back there'."

With this encouragement, Murray went on to investigate the notions of country and attachment to place. Now 54, he grew up on a property near Lake Bolac, where his family farmed sheep and crops until the mid-1970s. It was here that his father and grandfather showed him grindstones and axe heads they had found. "That was the first idea I had that people had lived there before. Of course it set in motion the trail of wondering what happened to these people."

His paternal great-great-grandfather came to Australia from the north of Scotland in 1848. He was among the many driven out by unscrupulous landlords in the notorious Highland Clearances of that period. Murray's music and writing are not his only endeavours informed by the challenge of finding a sense of place. He won an award in 2005 for instigating the overland Healing Walk along the water-courses in the region, and inspiring the annual Lake Bolac Eel Festival.

“Neil Murray is a white man who grew up in Victoria’s Western District, but which he also identifies as Tjapwurrung Country,” historian Peter Read wrote of him in his book, *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership* (2000). Read cites a section in Murray’s autobiographical novel, *Sing for me Countryman* (1993), in which the singer-songwriter recounts accompanying an elder of the local Indigenous group, the Pintupi, to an ancestral creation site in the Northern Territory. The old man points to the lines of ochre and blood on the cave wall. It occurs to Murray that he has “not a stone or a claypan or a bush that I could attest to being me...” Of Murray’s search for identity, Read writes: “Some may admire, but we cannot easily emulate his hard-won sense of belonging.”

Murray, who launched his solo career in 1990, says: “I have released several solo albums, but more than that I returned to being a native man [in] the region where I was born and raised. To a large extent that quest has been successful, although one is continually confronted with the enormous loss of traditional knowledge that has been obliterated from the landscape. All that profound poetry and wisdom is gone forever. I sometimes think that if traditional Indigenous language, lore and culture were still intact in western Victoria, I would never have been a songwriter. Neither would Archie Roach or Shane Howard as well, probably. There would have been no need. We would have had it all given to us and carried it.”

Howard has said that Murray’s work speaks to him in a way few artists can, about “the loss and longing, the need for those of us, as migrant Australians, to understand this Aboriginal country and create a new way of belonging here”.

Murray wrote his most famous song, *My Island Home*, in 1985 for George Rurrumbu. He was inspired by a visit to Rurrumbu’s home on Elcho Island, off the coast of Arnhem Land. *My Island Home* was performed by Christine Anu at the Sydney Olympics in 2000.

Murray co-wrote tracks several tracks with Rurrumbu, including the classic ‘Blackfella/Whitefella’, which appeared on the Warumpis’ debut album, *Big Name, No Blankets* (1986). It included the lyrics: *it doesn’t matter what your colour / as long as you a true fella*.

Murray returns to the Central Desert each year and remains in contact with Sammy Butcher and others from the band, which continued to perform occasionally until 2006.

Murray went up north last September for a memorial service and tribute performance for Rurrumbu. “It was a very emotional event, but very fulfilling,” he recalls. “It felt like it was closure. It was also like handing the torch on to these younger blokes who are playing.”

Larry Schwartz has made several appearances in The Big Issue. His last story, ‘Crouching Tiger, Hypnotic Dragon’, was in Ed#352. For more on Neil Murray visit www.neilmurray.com.au. Witness is out now.