

Neil Murray and the Warrumpi Band “singing for their country”

In 1993, Neil Murray wrote a novel called *'Sing for me Countryman'*. This semi-autobiographical story follows a young white man as he heads for the outback, searching for himself and a sense of connection with his country. He feels that the key to his puzzle can be unlocked by the Aboriginal people. Through the formation of a musical group he explores black and white relationships, and finally achieves a remarkable bonding which transcends all racial divides. This novel basically details the beginnings of the Warumpi Band.

"The Warumpi Band grew out of jamming. It was initially for entertainment for the communities, however because I was a songwriter, we started writing from an indigenous viewpoint."

"That's something that's really changed over the last 15 years or so is indigenous musicians writing their own songs and using them as a vehicle to get their point across. I went to Art School and when we finished, a lot of my friends went to Europe, but I needed to go bush. I could have stayed in Melbourne and perhaps achieved commercial success. but I wouldn't have had much to say."

This time in the outback clarified his own sense of place and shaped his outlook on societal and cultural structures.

"If you're an immigrant to this country, you could do well to look at the Aboriginal community. For me, it was a quest for meaning - a lot of Aussie culture is transplanted British stuff. Those frameworks didn't completely enable me to understand living in this land and I felt that living with them would help fill the gap and found their belief Systems made sense. I don't mean live like an Aborigine - you form relationships and they make you feel part of a family."

"Issues like ecological sustainability are basic Aboriginal philosophy. There is so much to be learnt by Western man. We ignore the signs at our peril. I think if we're a clever country, we need to look at ourselves. The most enduring lifestyle is the hunter gatherer lifestyle. i'm never impressed by technology - it is really just another tool. I try to look at human societies on a level playing field. I'm not suggesting that they had a utopian existence they had a lot of tribal fighting etc. but they certainly had control of their lifestyle."

Neil Murray is less interested in racial arguments and more committed to the reconciliation process and how we're going to work things out. As part of some songwriting workshops at the National Youth Reconciliation Forum, a song has been written called *'We'll Build A Nation'*. This Song has been chosen as the theme for this year's National Reconciliation Week from May 27 to June 3.

"I'm promoting true earth-based culture. At the opposite polarity, you have a mass media commercialised culture. In the Folk Festival movement that kind of balance lives, especially at Woodford with the inclusion of the traditional owners, the Murri people. It's probably the most significant festival In Australia."

There is no arguing however that this commercialised culture is pretty useful when it comes to getting a message out to a wide audience. When Powderfinger recorded the Warumpi classic *'Blackfella Whifefella'* as the B-side on their single 'DAF', it must have been very rewarding.

"I met them in Alice Springs when they were playing there. They were playing in a venue that the Warumpi Band could never play in because it is a mainly white venue and I told

Powderfinger this and asked them to do the song that night for us. It made me think that we've had a bit of influence."

Until 1996 the Warumpi Band had virtually been in hiatus for nine years. During this time, Neil kept busy with various projects including the release of three critically acclaimed CD's. Recently he wrote a play which has just finished a three-week-run in Fremantle. The recording of a fourth CD has just been completed and Neil is currently waiting for a record company to release his latest album. An independent release is out of the question because contractual publishing obligations stipulate that the album must be released through a major label. So, what is the new album like?

"The music is similar to other albums, but the album is fairly dark - it's an album for mature listeners. I have certainly been through a dark period and that's reflected in the songs. It's hard to write 'up' songs though there is some rollicking stuff. It has to be truthful and some of those things can be fairly dark conclusions. It's not slit your wrists music."

Once the album has been released Neil hopes to write another book. It is fortunate that the Warumpi Band is not a full-time concern, allowing Neil time to indulge these interests.

"We did the Big Day Out earlier this year and we've done a gig in Alice Springs since then. We've really become a special events band. We're all much older now and we've got families and commitments so we can't go out like we used to do. We released the third album in 1996 **'Too Much Humbug'** but Warumpi Band is really a live band. George is a real showman. They're still pretty much a rock and roll band. I play electric guitar and back George up. It's completely different to what I do solo -I hardly ever play electric guitar now but I enjoy doing it however I'm more into doing what I'm doing with my solo stuff."

Neil Murray will perform with the Warumpi Band at the Brisbane City Council's DAR Festival which starts in Brisbane on May 27. The aim of the festival is to develop greater community awareness of indigenous arts and culture. For Neil It is a great honour to be involved in an event celebrating a culture that is so close to his heart.

"Becoming a republic is all about standing up and declaring ourselves as a nation. To do that you really have to be welcomed into a home (home being Australia). The bad blood can be healed. If you go to a stranger's house and knock on the door and introduce yourself and you handle yourself in an appropriate way, they'll welcome you in. Aboriginal people are very giving and very willing to take you in."