

Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu review

STM Entertainment editor Jay Hanna
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UNDER a sky peppered with stars we sat and watched the all ords flashing on the building above us.

And as we felt the wind whip off the river and watched the trees swaying we could see the Perth Wheel slowing spinning. Unlike many cities, Perth is not all concrete and steel, but it was the man made elements that seemed to stand out as we sat in silence listening to the intensely pure and wondrous sound of Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu.

With his magical, mystical Yolgnu words Gurrumul whisked us away to another place and another time. It may as well have been another world. Singing of his ancestors, his people, his land and its animals Gurrumul's sense of belonging to and understanding of his country is something that we cannot even begin to understand, even though we share the same home.

For our benefit, English translations appeared on a screen behind Gurrumul. Some chose to watch, some chose to close their eyes and listen as he opened the evening with the enchanting "Wiyathul" and "Djarrimirri" from his ARIA Award winning album "Gurrumul".

Those who watched learned that animals such as the orange footed scrub fowl, the saltwater crocodile, the cat and the mythical rainbow serpent all have particular ancestral relevance to Gurrumul. His songs tell of his emotional connection to these animals, his ancestors and his land. His songs are deeply personal and deeply spiritual. They are songs that reverberate deep within Gurrumul's being. So much so that being in his presence and listening to singing these words is both an honour and privilege.

The emotive effect it had was quite astounding. The glorious "Bapa" visibly moved some to tears. "Gurrumul History (I Was Born Blind)" was equally breath-taking. The screen behind really should have had a warning to the audience: "don't forget to exhale".

Gurrumul's reluctance to talk is well documented. In concert he prefers to stay silent between songs. His double bass player, producer and friend Michael Hohnen has the job of vocalising what Gurrumul will not or can not.

"Hello, over here," Hohnen said drawing our eyes away from the commanding presence of Gurrumul. "I get to speak because Gurrumul doesn't want to, but maybe if you say hello to Gurrumul he might say hello."

Our calls of "hello" were met with a small "hello" and a shy smile. Somehow, that seemed more than enough.

The eager crowd lapped up the small morsels of insight that Hohnen offered into the character of Gurrumul. When the "pussycat song" "Marwurrumburr" was restyled as a reggae tune Hohnen explained reggae was one of Gurrumul's favourite styles of music.

Later Hohnen told us how to show our appreciation in Yolgnu. The words were well replicated by some, but luckily for this writer Hohnen added: "If you can't remember that just say 'yo'." "Yo", "Yo", "Yo" came the immediate response.

From that point on the audience were delighted when prior to a guitar solo Gurrumul would call out "Yo Francis!" to guitarist Francis Diatschenko or "Yo Erkki" to Erkki Veltheim on violin and viola.

In a moment of frivolity Hohnen, Diatschenko and Veltheim turned their instruments upside down to replicate Gurrumul's way of playing -- as a left handed guitarist he plays a right handed guitar upside down, but with the strings left as they are. Together the quartet played "Wipeout" in this way. The result, particularly the guitar solo from Diatschenko, was hilariously shambolic.

For the rest of the night they never once stumbled with Gurrumul's voice lighting the way strong and true. The rest of the set included two songs from Saltwater Band and more songs from the album including - "Wukun" about the way people divide and come back together like storm clouds and "Marrandil" about the Arnhem Land coast.

After an hour that passed far too quickly, we were on our feet clapping. As Hohnen walked over to Gurrumul to help lead him from the stage Gurrumul stared into the audience and a flicker of a smile played on his face and he waved his hand for us to sit.

For once, we weren't listening.

Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu
Beck's Music Box
Tuesday, March 3.