



Gurrumul captivates



CONCERT

Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu
 Beck's Music Box
 Tuesday, March 3
 Review: Ray Purvis

It's impossible to resist the phenomenon that is Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu. In just 12 months, this blind, shy, enigmatic, former Yothu Yindi member has become Australia's first genuine Aboriginal musical superstar. He has captivated people with his gentle songs about his birthplace and ancestral beliefs sung in his Yolngu dialect, few people outside north-east Arnhem Land can understand.

Yunupingu has won a swag of awards, including Deadlys, ARIAs and a nomination for Australian of the Year, without playing the media game of interviews and appearances on talk shows. Sales of his stunning solo album, Gurrumul, have topped 110,000 copies and his portrait has been entered for the Archibald Prize.

He played Carnegie Hall, New York, and he's about to take on England and Europe, with his album getting glowing reviews in the Times newspaper, Mojo and Q magazines.

Anticipation was high on Tuesday night as the unassuming singer was guided on to the stage of Beck's Music Box, surrounded by a city backdrop,

for his first Perth performance.

Wearing a grey shirt he quietly took a seat centre-stage. He was handed an acoustic guitar and hesitatingly began an hour of transcendental music that transported the enraptured audience to a more peaceful, innocent world.

His bridge-building songs are old Yolngu lullabies and story cycles about his childhood, the beauty of the land and sky around the Top End as well as the exotic wildlife such as the orange-footed scrub fowl. These poignant songs have none of the urban social realism and angry political activist messages of the last decade's wave of Aboriginal music. He sings with startling imagery about the beauty of a world he has never seen.

"Gurrumul has asked me to talk for him," said his "brother" and double bass-player Michael Hohnen. The only words the singer muttered all night were "Hello" and "Thank you very much."

The translation of songs such as the sublime Wiyathul, cryptic words like "rainbow" or "clouds" and line drawings appeared and dissolved on the screen behind the musicians. Occasional notes, such as "Gurrumul is a Gumatj man", were all that was needed to explain the cultural depth of the occasion.

Most of the songs, such as Bapa, about his father and collective ancestry, and Marrandil, about the beauty of the sky in an isolated Elcho

Island community, were drawn from the album. The only less familiar material were two tracks taken from albums he recorded with Hohnen in the reggae group Saltwater Band.

A lot has been said about his extraordinary voice and it does rock you back on your heels when you experience it live for the first time. His helium-infused tones are sweet, high, pure and other-worldly; it is a spiritual instrument that resonates inside the soul. As was said at the start of the show, his is "the greatest voice this continent has ever recorded".

Throughout the performance he sat hunched over singing and playing his right-handed guitar upside down with his left hand. The musical presentation was simple, comprising double bass, a second guitar and viola. There was a humorous segment when the musicians turned their instruments upside down to play the 60s surfing hit Wipe Out. All too soon it was lump-in-the-throat time with the moving personal song Gurrumul History (I was Born Blind), sung mainly in English. While a film of his recent activities in the studio and at sound checks played on the screen, he sang about how he learned to read the world of destruction and made the heartfelt plea: "Please hold my hand."

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Phenomenon: Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu performing at the Beck's Music Box. Picture Greg Burke