



ENJOY THE SILENCE

GEOFFREY GURRUMUL YUNUPINGU IS A MAN OF FEW WORDS. HE'S MUCH MORE COMFORTABLE SPEAKING IN HIS TRADITIONAL LANGUAGE OF YOLNGU THAN IN ENGLISH, AND NOT SOMEONE WHO RELISHES MEDIA ATTENTION. SO KIM FISHER TALKS WITH HIS SPOKESPERSON, MICHAEL HOHEN.

Geoffrey Yunupingu might be shy of media attention, but he's being continuously thrust into the spotlight after winning AIR Awards, Northern Territory Australian Of The Year and Limelight Awards. However wary he is of the media, Gurrumul made his voice heard to Australia at large at the 2008 ARIA Awards, where he won Best Independent Album and performed his song *Bapa*. Gurrumul's dear friend Michael Hohen speaks on his behalf, a situation that Hohen says is not ideal, but works for them. "I felt uncomfortable at first, but we've tried to drag him through so many interviews that have been total disasters that it's kind of this or nothing," he says. "His English is so limited that you would get monosyllabic answers from him, if anything."

Hohen says there have been occasions when some members of the media haven't respected Gurrumul's wishes to be reserved, even after claiming to be understanding and work around it. "There's been some quite embarrassing television stuff, where they would either try to circumvent my advice before the interview, and try to attack him or go for him, and it's made it worse. There was a classic example of one television program, where we spent the week before talking on the phone about the best ways to bring out something in him," Hohen explains. "I had all these ideas because I know him very well, and essentially I thought they were listening and no worries, but then we turned up and there was this whole ambush. As we were walking in the door, before we were even introduced to anyone, people were asking him questions and bringing him closer to the camera."

When the ARIA's were on the horizon, Hohen tried to appeal to Gurrumul to let the viewers hear him speak. "My ideal would be for him to speak, like at the ARIA's, before we went on stage. 'You know, people really, really do want to hear you talk. Anything that you want to say, even if it's in full language, this is a really good opportunity to do it.' And he did," he says proudly. "Me trying to slowly work at him being more comfortable with

the media is part of, if you like, some sort of informal mission that I've got. But when those other things happen, it pushes it back a few steps. He's very, very comfortable being silent."

Gurrumul and Hohen have a very close relationship that Hohen says a lot of people just don't understand. He says that people have to remember that Gurrumul has been blind from birth and English is not his first language a combination that leads to him being understandably intimidated and uncomfortable. But Hohen says as long as people are accepting, it's all fine, but concedes that it's not the same as speaking directly to Gurrumul. "I know it's a weird issue, and I'm not Gurrumul so there's lots of things missing."

Hohen wants to make it clear that he and Gurrumul are not at all against the media as such, just a handful. "There are a lot of journalists that are really good thinkers, so it can be quite inspiring. And Chrissy Carr, our publicist, she had tended to avoid a lot of the sensational type press. I've talked to a lot of intelligent people who have listened to the record and do know something about Gurrumul," he says, adding that it's important to remember that dealing with the media is only one small part of Gurrumul's life. "He's very comfortable on stage though and that's where he's mainly in the spotlight."

Hohen isn't kidding about Gurrumul being in the spotlight, he's even performed for the Queen and the Pope. However, one of these so-called honours massively outweighed the other. "The Queen was a pretty big thing, she's the figure head on the coin and she's been on that coin for a long time. People in north-east Arnhem Land and across the Northern Territory, they love the Queen, love her," he says. "With the Queen comes a lot of things, like ceremony, religion, continuity, it's something that they know that's been around for a long time. The ceremony we did with the Queen was when she came out for the Commonwealth Games and



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the services was held in a church in Sydney. He was like six metres away, singing for her there. It was just like a nice ceremony that's something he was really proud of. He didn't know who the Pope was, so that wasn't so much a big thing."

With such a close friendship that he acts as Gurrumul's spokesperson, one must wonder how Hohen and he met. "I was working for the university up here, running the music industry courses, and I went up to his island and did some stuff up there. After a couple of days of doing that, some of his friends brought him in to meet me and he hung around at the end of the day and played me this beautiful song," he says. "I maintained a friendship with him and over the years worked on Saltwater Band's records with him and that's probably the way that friendship developed. It came to a point when the second album came out, he'd done a bit of solo stuff, and one day I just suggested that we do some of those songs live. He's a bit reserved and doesn't jump into anything, but I got my double bass out and he loved that acoustic sound, so we just got up and played. It all started from there,

and then I said to him, 'what you're doing is so pure, let's make an album that's like that.'

Hohen says Gurrumul has had a training of sorts in being in the public eye from his time in Yothu Yindi, but back then he could easily fade into the background, while still flexing his musical muscle. "I don't think he ever really was seen as the main thing in Yothu Yindi, because he wasn't, but he did play a lot of stuff in the band; guitar, keyboards, drums, backing vocals," he says with the pride of a close friend and admiration of a fellow musician. "He was there through seven years of lots of fame and touring and recording, but never as a front person. I s'pose as people get older, they get a chance to do something of their own."

WHO: Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu

WHAT: *Gurrumul* (Skinnyfish Music)

WHEN & WHERE: Perth Festival – Tuesday 3 & Wednesday 4 March, Beck's Music Box, Perth

