



Blindfaith
 Indigenous singer of the moment Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu has found international fame with his deeply moving songs, but he remains tight-lipped about his success. By JAY HANNA

SILENCE CAN SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS, but the silence of Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu is no marketing ploy. Blind from birth, he has captured hearts around the world with his moving and deeply personal songs, but he refuses to talk about them.

A former member of Yothu Yindi, Gurrumul released his debut solo album *Gurrumul* last year – and listeners were rendered speechless by its raw emotion.

It touches on life with his family, the plight of his people and his blindness, among other subjects.

A deeply cultural Yolngu man, raised on Arnhem Land's remote Elcho Island, Gurrumul does not feel comfortable talking to strangers about the music that means so much to him.

So his double-bass player, producer and friend Michael Hohnen does his best to articulate what Gurrumul cannot, or will not.

"Gurrumul is like a lot of Yolngu people who are very, very hesitant to come forward with anything when you first meet them," Hohnen says. "They really need to know who they are relating to before they open up, which is why doing interviews is impossible because he would have to start a relationship from scratch every time."

Hohnen says while he understands where Gurrumul is coming from, he can still find it difficult to accept his position at times.

"It is so far out of his comfort zone that it is actually quite frightening for him," he says.

"His English is not shocking and he understands a lot, but he doesn't express himself a lot in

English, unless it is in song. So we have a choice of just saying, 'Look he won't do an interview', or you can hear my perspective which gives a bit of insight.

"I'm sort of used to it now and I talk more about how I see things, rather than how I think he might see them."

Speaking before Gurrumul, 38, was due to perform in New York, Hohnen admitted he was apprehensive about how he would be perceived.

"I think some press will take it the wrong way and say bad luck he's not coming on our TV show or whatever, but Gurrumul just uses this Yolngu term that means 'Oh well'."

Despite Gurrumul's seeming indifference to success, Hohnen says he is quietly proud of his achievements.

"I was with him yesterday and he asked me how many awards he has won. That kind of gave his feelings away," he says.

"He is a very intelligent person, a very cultural person and as a musician he is up there with anyone I have ever come across."

Gurrumul is also proud. As a child he would cycle around Elcho, relying on the calls of friends and family to warn him away from dangers. He doesn't have a guide dog or a walking stick and refuses to wear shades to hide his sightless eyes.

Certain things inspire joy in him, such as playing for the Queen during a visit to Australia.

"The Queen is quite popular with Aboriginal people, which sounds bizarre," Hohnen says. "Up here, anyway, they love royalty. When you think



about it, if you look at our coins and who is on the coins and how powerful money is in our society, it's understandable.

"Gurrumul personally was really upset when Princess Diana died. I think it is partly to do with ceremony and partly to do with history.

"They have a lot of respect for royalty and so it was a really big deal for Gurrumul that he got to sing (for the Queen). She has been trained in the art of conversation, so even though Gurrumul doesn't talk much, she was still able to have a quick conversation with him."

Gurrumul was less impressed when he met former prime minister John Howard. And, when he was asked to sing for the Pope, he did not know who he was.

But he was quite happy to meet Kevin Rudd.

"Gurrumul is sort of friends with Peter Garrett ... and (he) was quick to tell me that Kevin Rudd was the new prime minister when he was and he's not a political person at all," Hohnen says. "He met (Mr Rudd) and sang for him recently and he really enjoyed that."

As for the future, Hohnen says Gurrumul is not one to plan ahead.

"He is more of a reactionary person, so he will react to what is happening rather than think about what can happen," he says. "The Yolngu really don't speculate."

**Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu plays
Beck's Music Box, March 3-4. Sold out.
Gurrumul is out now.**