



# The angel from Arnhem Land

Born blind, media-shy Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu communicates with the world through his haunting music, writes Ray Purvis



**G**eoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu is the surprise musical discovery of the year. This blind Aboriginal musician from remote Elcho Island, Arnhem Land, has taken the country by storm with his pure, haunting voice and astonishing repertoire of traditional and new songs about his ancestors, traditions and country.

Three weeks ago, in a rare moment of indigenous musical history, the quiet achiever won two ARIA awards for best world music album and best independent album. The next day his sublime debut solo album called Gurrumul went straight to No. 1 on the mainstream iTunes chart. The release climbed to No. 3 on the ARIA album charts last week and now sits at No. 6.

Now it has been announced that Yunupingu will make his first solo appearance in Perth as part of next year's Perth International Arts Festival. His popularity is growing so fast that by then the sales of his album will have reached 50,000 — an impressive haul. The singer, described by John Butler as having the voice of an angel, sings almost all his songs in his native Yolngu language. He speaks English but chooses not to be interviewed by the media and leaves the talking to Michael Hohnen, his “white

brother”, producer and double bass player. Hohnen is the former bassist with the Melbourne indie band the Killjoys and the co-owner of Yunupingu's label Skinnyfish Music.

“There's either me to talk about the things he does, or no one,” Hohnen says. He explains that Yunupingu's introversion is because of his uneasiness with the media. “He's not a shy person per se. He feels quite intimidated by the media. When forced, you may get a yes or a no out of him. Really, there's two worlds he lives in: his own Yolngu world and whenever he has to, he lives in our world — but that's something he rarely chooses to do.”

Yunupingu, 37, is finding fans all over the world. He performed recently at the World Folk Song Festival in Beijing, where his music flawlessly connected with Chinese audiences. “It has a universal appeal. There's not a specific demographic that's picking up on the music and listening to it — it's quite cross-generational. A lot of parents talk about their little babies and kids loving the album. A radio station here in Melbourne is getting older listeners ringing up who are quite passionate about it.”

Another reason for the record's appeal is that Yunupingu's songs have no political agenda. He's neither an activist or a social

commentator. “People have different roles in North East Arnhem Land,” Hohnen says. “I don't think it's ever been his role within his own group of people to speak about things like that. He very rarely voices his opinion about anything, let alone political things.”

The indigenous people of Elcho Island believe themselves to be the centre of the universe. Their stories and legends are considered so important that they're constantly celebrating their own songs and culture. “Their songs are always about them,” Hohnen laughs. “They've all got this powerful creative force from there and they don't need any other input.”

Yunupingu was born blind and grew up as part of the Gumatj clan on isolated Elcho Island. He was surrounded by a large, supportive family who encouraged him to listen to traditional songs, church music and the radio. His beloved aunts bought him a toy piano and a ukulele and by the age of five he was playing his first songs.

He has never learnt Braille, refuses to use a stick or guide dog and shuns the use of dark glasses to hide his sightless eyes.

His two famous uncles — Mandawuy Yunupingu, the celebrated founder of the internationally successful Yothu



Yindi, and Galarrwuy Yunupingu, a senior tribal leader who has fought for Aboriginal land rights throughout his career — are former Australians of the Year.

Yunupingu left school at the age of 12 and taught himself to play drums, keyboard, guitar (upside down) and didgeridoo. He spent seven years touring the world with Yothu Yindi. Remarkably, he emerged unscathed from the world of pop music and went on to form the Saltwater Band, which has released two albums and has a new CD due early next year.

Demand for live performances and new music from Yunupingu is growing exponentially, so is this very private Aboriginal storyteller's career fast spiralling out of control?

"He's saying 'no' to a lot of things," Hohnen says. "He's getting phone calls and proposals every day. I think he needs to process what's being asked of him. He doesn't want to be on the train that's stopping at all stations.

"If you were in a band in Sydney or Melbourne, you'd be over the moon with what's being offered to

him. But really what he's interested in is going home and soaking up the things that have happened over the last four or five months. At the moment he's not thinking about what he can do to build his career — he's probably thinking the opposite."

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**Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu plays the Beck's Music Box on March 3 and 4 at 8.30pm. Tickets from BOCS and [perthfestival.com.au](http://perthfestival.com.au)**