

Aboriginal singer Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu dies, aged 46

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Iconic Aboriginal singer-songwriter Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, whose haunting tenor voice and striking synthesis of indigenous song-cycles, Christian hymns and folk music won him wide international acclaim, died late last month at the Royal Darwin Hospital in Australia's Northern Territory.

A press release from Skinnyfish Music, Gurrumul's record label, described the 46-year-old as "one of the most important figures in Australian music history." Numerous tributes have been made by musicians and others across the country and internationally.

Gurrumul was a self-taught instrumentalist, playing guitar, piano, drums, and didgeridoo. His gentle lament-like songs were mainly performed in Gumatj, Galpu or Djambarrpuynu—languages of the Yolngu people of north-eastern Arnhem Land—with references to sacred bush animals, the sea and the seasons, tribal ancestors, funeral songs, love for his parents and reverence for the land.

The most unforgettable aspect of his music—its essence—was the sensuality and emotional power of his voice, which had an otherworldly character that seemed to speak across the ages. It is difficult to adequately describe the complex and heart-rending qualities of Gurrumul's voice but his rendition of "Wiyathul" with the Erkki String Quartet at the Enmore Theatre in Sydney in 2008 is an important example of its alluring character. The extraordinary song was inspired by the cries of native bush fowls.

Gurrumul was born and raised in Galiwin'ku, a small community of about 2,200 people on remote Elcho Island, which is about 560 kilometres, or a two-hour flight, northeast of Darwin, the Northern Territory capital. The first of six children, Gurrumul began his professional musical career in his late teens as a member of the popular Yothu Yindi rock band. The group was founded in 1985 and headed by his uncle and lead singer, Mandawuy Yunupingu.

Tired of touring and its associated pressures, Gurrumul left Yothu Yindi, formed the Saltwater Band in 1996 but eventually decided to go solo, releasing his first album in 2008. The CD simply titled *Gurrumul* quickly achieved

triple platinum sales status in Australia and sold half a million copies worldwide. He followed this with two other successful studio albums—*Rrakala* (2011) and *The Gospel Album* (2015)—and two concert recordings—*Live in Darwin, Australia* (2010) and *Gurrumul: His Life and Music with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra* (2013).

Gurrumul became the highest selling Aboriginal musician in Australian history and sang in Britain, Europe and the US, including a sold-out concert at New York's Carnegie Hall. His albums were praised by music critics and singer-songwriters alike, including Sting, Elton John, Paul Kelly and others who performed with him. Famed US jazz composer and arranger Quincy Jones said that the Aboriginal singer-songwriter had "one of the most unusual and emotional and musical voices that I've heard."

Gurrumul rarely said anything during his concerts and gave no interviews. Rejecting the life-style and accoutrements usually associated with successful recording artists, he continued living on Elcho Island. Earnings from his music sales went to his parents—Daisy Gurruwiwi and Terry Yunupingu—and their extended family, his daughter Jasmine and her mother, and were also used to establish a charitable foundation for indigenous youth.

As his spokesman and double-bass accompanist Michael Hohnen explained to journalists in 2013, Gurrumul "hates the media. He hates the exposure and the attention. He doesn't want to be photographed or talk to anyone. He just wants to play music."

Hohnen, a classically trained bass player and co-founder of Skinnyfish Music, was among the first to recognise the unique qualities of Gurrumul's voice. He was instrumental in persuading the singer to embark on a solo career and with the appropriate musical setting.

"I knew if we could capture that spirit across a whole record, there would be something really special," Hohnen told the *Guardian* in April 2016. "We just tried to make that record, which had that mood, to try to seep into people's consciences and hearts and minds without actually having the listener have any responsibility to listen and work out

what someone's saying.”

While Gurrumul's premature death came as a shock to many of his fans around the world, the 46-year-old had waged a protracted struggle with kidney and liver disease for many years. He was blind from birth and contracted Hepatitis B at the age of three.

Gurrumul's death at such an early age is another tragic confirmation of the huge social gap—in health as well as employment, education, housing and other basic indices—between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Aborigines, for example, are 10 times more likely to contract kidney disease than Australia's non-indigenous population, while in remote communities the figure is between 30 and 50 times the national average. Gurrumul's uncle, Mandawuy Yunupingu, died from kidney disease in June 2013, aged 56.

The exact details of Gurrumul's death are not clear, but according to press reports he had indicated that he did not want to continue with his difficult and debilitating dialysis treatment. There is no cure for kidney failure. The only treatment is several hours of dialysis three times per week, or a kidney transplant. Remote indigenous patients are often traumatised or sink into depression as a result of the illness and the distances they must travel away from their families to receive treatment.

Gurrumul's health worsened at the end of 2015 after a long-delayed US tour. On Easter Sunday in 2016, he suffered internal bleeding and was taken to Royal Darwin Hospital by Skinnyfish Music managing director Mark Grose and Yunupingu's private nurse.

Instead of undergoing minor surgery to rectify the problem, which was associated with liver disease, Gurrumul was left overnight in the Rapid Assessment Unit, where he continued vomiting blood. Eight hours later he was admitted into intensive care.

Grose publicly protested the hospital delays. Yunupingu's doctor Paul Lawton told a press conference that the singer was a victim of incompetence or racial profiling. “We know it happens right around Australia ... We need to have that discussion about how we can improve care for indigenous Australians so they receive the same level of care as non-indigenous Australians,” Lawton said.

Asked to comment, Northern Territory Health Minister John Elferink arrogantly dismissed the accusation, rejected calls for an investigation and then provocatively accused Skinnyfish Music of staging a publicity stunt to promote a new album by the singer.

In 2012, Gurrumul was refused service by a taxi driver after a concert performance in Melbourne, and in 2015, his musician brother and uncle were refused three pre-booked taxis in Darwin.

Among those offering tributes to Gurrumul was Midnight Oil lead singer and former Australian education minister Peter Garrett, as well as current Labor Party opposition leader Bill Shorten. Both men were ministers in the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments from December 2007 to September 2013.

Like every other federal Labor MP, both men supported the Liberal-National coalition government's Northern Territory “intervention” in mid-2007—a reactionary social assault launched under the bogus pretext of “protecting” Aboriginal children from sexual abuse. The intervention tore up the democratic rights of Aborigines in the territory, “quarantined” social welfare and pensions, seized indigenous land and imposed repressive controls on indigenous communities.

When Labor was elected, Garrett and Shorten became government ministers, and were actively involved in extending these measures, ensuring that unemployment, poverty and lack of basic health and education services remain endemic among ordinary Aborigines. The breakup of indigenous communities continued and the regressive attacks on social welfare recipients used in the Northern Territory were expanded to selected non-indigenous communities across Australia (see: “The Aboriginal “intervention” in Australia: Four years on”).

Last Friday Shorten and Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull attended the annual four-day Garma Festival in the Northern Territory and held hands with local residents in honour of Gurrumul. Both men feigned concern about the social plight of the majority of Aborigines and voiced platitudes about Gurrumul's music and “indigenous disadvantage.” These ritualistic proclamations are thoroughly disingenuous.

While Gurrumul never made a public comment or any overt references in his songs to the decades of social neglect and repression of Australia's indigenous population, his songs and compelling voice gave forceful and poignant expression not just to the decades of suffering but a powerful longing for a better life.

Many examples of Gurrumul's remarkable work are available on YouTube. The best of these include “Bapa,” which is dedicated to his father, “Wukun,” about storm clouds rising over Elcho Island, and “History (I Was Born Blind),” one of his few English-language songs.



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