

## *Crossing Roper Bar*

To begin all collaborations ...

### **Aaron Corn**

The Botanic Gardens in Darwin were abuzz on the evening of 17 August 2008. A full house of expectant punters gathered at the Star Shell to witness one of the Darwin Festival's premier events, *Crossing Roper Bar*, an adventurous new collaboration between the Australian Art Orchestra (AAO) and traditional performers from the remote Aboriginal community of Ngukurr on the Roper River in southeast Arnhem Land. Leading them on stage were the AAO's enigmatic pianist and director, Paul Grabowsky, and songman Benjamin Wilfred, grandson of a prolific ceremonial leader, the late Sambo Barabara. Joining them as their special guest was Melbourne's acclaimed Aboriginal songstress, Ruby Hunter. It would be the first of their performances together on a major tour produced by Tura New Music, and taking in Katherine, Timber Creek, Kununurra, Warmun, Wangkatjungka, Broome, Beagle Bay, Djarindjin, One Arm Point, and finally, Perth.

With deep roots in the improvisatory freedom of Jazz, the AAO enjoys a long history of crossing musical and cultural boundaries through its artistic collaborations. Comprising a pantheon of gifted virtuosi including Tony Hicks (reeds, flutes), Stephen Magnusson (guitar), Chris Bekker (bass) and Rajiv Jayaweera (percussion), Grabowsky describes his AAO compatriots as 'musical wayfarers' who constantly seek to push the envelope of musical possibilities with artists from other backgrounds. *Into the Fire* (1996) engaged with the traditional music of southern India, *Passion* (1997) was inspired by the *St Matthew Passion* by JS Bach, while *Sita* (2000) was steeped in the rich musical traditions of Balinese Gamelan and shadow puppetry. Through *Ruby's Story* and *Kura Tungar* (2004), the orchestra also developed a fertile collaboration with Ruby Hunter and Archie Roach.

However, *Crossing Roper Bar* may well be the AAO's greatest challenge yet. How to marry the complexities of Jazz with the equally complex structures of Manikay, an Indigenous musical tradition of exceptional beauty that, sadly, is little heard and even less understood outside its native Arnhem Land?

The journey started in 2004 when Grabowsky visited Ngukurr with Stephen Teakle, a remote area music lecturer with Charles Darwin University. There, he found a community with a vibrant musical life and many gifted blues musicians such as the elder

Kevin Rogers, who since 1969, had been entertaining local audiences as a singer with the Yugul Band. These were fellow musical wayfarers who had adopted the languages of blues and rock to free themselves from the austerity of mission life, once state controls that had long restricted their movements were relaxed in 1964. However, much to everyone's dismay, the music and dance traditions of Ngukurr's resident clans were in far worse shape.

Ngukurr was the earliest causality of the pastoral wars in Arnhem Land. In 1870, Roper Bar was founded at the crossing of the Roper River as a construction depot for the Overland Telegraph Line. Over the following decades, numerous pastoral ventures took root and the entire district became a bloody killing field. Police, prospectors and pastoralists shot 'wild blacks' on sight. Aboriginal inhabitants were decimated, and the survivors were interned on cattle stations. The establishment of the Roper River Mission at Ngukurr in 1908 brought an end to the slaughter, but not to the attrition of local languages and traditions. With its strict regimes of work, school and prayer, and isolation of children in dormitories, the Church Missionary Service pursued an active program of assimilation which discouraged the use of local languages and the open performance of traditional ceremonies.

Eventually, only one resident clan at Ngukurr, the Wägilak Yolngu led by Sambo Barabara, had retained its traditional repertoire of Manikay (songs) and Bunggul (dances) for public ceremonies such as circumcisions and funerals. Barabara sadly passed away in 2005 leaving this fragile traditional legacy to his much younger grandson, Benjamin Wilfred. Yet it was these very songs that caught Grabowsky's attention, and became the beating musical heart of the *Crossing Roper Bar* experiment. They recount the original observations of the sacred ancestors who founded the Wägilak homeland of Nyilapidgi, and innate beauty of all that exists there. It is from this homeland, and the wealth of sacred names bestowed on it by the original ancestors, that Benjamin Wilfred (voice), Roy Wilfred (voice), David Wilfred (didjeridu) and Johnston Hall (didjeridu, dance) have taken the corporate name Wägilak Gujarra Nyilapidgi.

In 2006, I convened the 5th Symposium on Indigenous Music and Dance at the Garma Festival in northeast Arnhem Land, and it was here that the Wilfreds and their AAO counterparts offered audiences an early taste of their work-in-progress. Holding no preconceptions of what to expect, I was amazed at how the AAO was able to improvise around Benjamin and David Wilfred's rendition of the traditional song *Wata* ('Wind') in a way that truly did evoke this natural force. In a way that complemented the innate beauty of the Manikay tradition and its ensemble voice, *bilma* (sticks) and *yidaki* (didjeridu), rather than detracting from it. More than a hundred festival-goers, captivated

by the mesmerising tone poem that undulated through the air, clamoured for views as the performance unfolded under a low-set bough shelter beside the central ceremony ground. This was proof that the *Crossing Roper Bar* collaboration held enormous potential, but left the question of whether this approach could be sustained throughout an entire concert unsolved.

Fast forward to the Darwin Festival Star Shell on a mild Sunday evening in August 2008, with a full house of 600 festival-goers arcing up into the sky. Would our intrepid musicians have found a way of weaving their spell for the concert's duration? And even if they did, would punters get it? As beautiful as Manikay is, it holds a beauty that is unfamiliar to most. Much to their credit, the audience was nonetheless undeterred by this aesthetic gulf. They responded to the virtuosity and vitality of the musicians with enormous enthusiasm, and by final bows, many were applauding on their feet, hungry for more.

Punctuated by Hunter's soulful ballads, *Crossing Roper Bar* succeeds artistically because it observes the very structures that drive musical interest within the Manikay tradition. Manikay are typically performed in epic series of short songs. Each individual song ebbs into being with a gently hummed introduction, builds in intensity with the entry of the accompanying *bilma* and *yidaki*, and flows out of being with a return to unaccompanied voice. This ebb-and-flow creates a natural sense of tension and release just, like breathing in and out or the lapping of the tide. Songs at the beginning of a Manikay series typically start slowly, and intensity builds as faster and faster songs are gradually introduced with greater frequency.

The AAO exploits these overarching structures in its accompaniment of the Wāgilak Manikay to searing dramatic effect. Their beginning is slow and contemplative, and gradually builds into awesome wall of sound. The spaces in between each musician on stage are electric. They are filled with the kind of ensemble and intuition that can only be held among musicians who are masters of aural and improvisatory traditions, who are attuned to listening to others and exploring the musical possibilities of a central idea as it unfolds. It is difficult to comprehend how only nine musicians can create such an effect.

But again, this is the beauty of the Manikay tradition, which weaves individual lines into a unified whole creating one voice made of many that seems to dissolve the shroud of reality itself. Here, there is no complacency to simply accompany the Wāgilak Manikay with a conventional progression of chords, to insist that it conforms to Western ideals of tuning and timing. Nor is there any musical apartheid where the Wāgilak and the AAO take turns to play their respective bits because of some assumed incompatibility. Through

deep listening, they have cracked each other's codes to create a work that gels musically at a deep structural level.

*Crossing Roper Bar* is nothing less than a collaborative and artistic triumph. Seldom do Indigenous holders of a genuine musical tradition, and one that continues to be performed at home in ceremonies, find ways to explore their talents with such dedicated fellow artists, and share the beauty of their songs and dances with new audiences. This alone is an achievement of which tour producer Tura New Music and its principal sponsor, Total E&P Australia, can feel extremely proud. If only musicians who possess other Indigenous traditions in Australia enjoyed similar opportunities.

*Crossing Roper Bar* is a work of rare integrity in Australia that sets an exciting new benchmark for artistic dialogues with traditional Indigenous musicians. And in this one vital regard, it is the collaboration to begin all collaborations.

**Dr Aaron Corn** is a Research Fellow in Ethnomusicology and Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Sydney. He speaks and writes extensively on music, community archives and cultural survival in remote Australia, and convened the 5th Symposium on Indigenous Music and Dance at the Garma Festival. He has been a key collaborator in the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia since its inception <[www.aboriginalartists.com.au/NRP.htm](http://www.aboriginalartists.com.au/NRP.htm)>.