BIOGRAFIA

DJALU GURRUWIWI -
Yidaki player/Yolngu co-ordinator
(AUSTRALIA)

Date of birth: 1940s
Place of Birth: Wessel Islands, NE Arnhem Land
European name: Willie
Other Aboriginal names: Wulumbuyku
Skin name: Wamut
Tribe: Yolngu
Clan: Galpu
Language group: Dhangu
Homeland: Ngaypinya, NE Arnhem Land
Father: Monyu Gurruwiwi
Mother: Djikulu Yunupingu

Djalu Gurruwiwi - Abridged Biography

Djalu Gurruwiwi is a senior member of the Galpu clan and an internationally renowned didgeridoo maker and player. His status as a yidaki (didgeridoo) master craftsman has grown to Herculean proportions over recent years with one leading Australian newspaper proclaiming his as Arnhem Land's latest international cult figure.

Djalu's expertise in the way of the didgeridoo is an extension of the role handed down to him by his now deceased father, Monyu, a noted Yolngu leader in his time. Monyu instilled in his son the importance of culture and gave Djalu the responsibility of looking after the didgeridoo for the Galpu clan. This duty is all the more important when considering the fact that many clan groups throughout Arnhem Land look to the Galpu as one of the primary custodians of the instrument. And linked to the didgeridoo are many aspects of knowledge and cultural practice that are sacred, their hidden secrets religiously guarded by those in authority.

Prior to his international stardom, Djalu's unusual obsession with the didgeridoo saw him spend much of his time over several decades crafting instruments and refining his technique. The pieces he made were sold to the local community arts centre and to non-Indigenous...
workers and visitors in his community who probably did not appreciate
the importance of the man and his work: to them, the didgeridoo was
merely a novelty, a keepsake. Nonetheless, in this way, Djalu was able
to win a small living to feed and to look after the needs of his
immediate and extended family.
In 1986, Djalu's reputation as a expert didgeridoo craftsman was given
a major boost with the establishment of the Yothu Yindi band. The
Aboriginal members of the band commissioned their close relative and
recognised elite craftsman, Djalu, to make instruments for them. These
instruments toured with the band and were also used in studio
recordings that were released under the Mushroom Records label.
As Yothu Yindi began to pique the interest of non-Indigenous audiences
around the world with its blend of contemporary and traditional
grooves, combined with the energetic stage dancing normally
restricted to ceremonial rituals, so too did the didgeridoo awaken the
dormant tribal instinct in all of us. If Generation X was looking for a
hero, they had found it in Djalu - the gentle and quietly-spoken Galpu
man who is fond of bright shirts and mirrored sunglasses.
By the mid-1990s, with the Internet here to stay, Djalu's status as Mr
didgeridoo was cemented. Web forums and chat sites discussed Djalu's
didgeridoos and why they were superior. His instruments were traded
across oceans. Dealers and collectors clamoured to buy his best
pieces. Budding non-Indigenous didgeridoo makers sought out his
knowledge and special skill.
As the idolizing public got to know Djalu, they saw not only a man
possessed with spreading the message of the didgeridoo - and you'll
understand what this message is if you play the didgeridoo and have
met Djalu - but also an incredibly generous and open-hearted human
being. In between hosting the throng of overseas visitors who make
their pilgrimage to his ramshackle house in remote Arnhem Land, Djalu
balances his time between family, community, ceremonial and public
duties. In his Gunyangara' community, Djalu is a highly respected elder
and a Christian leader - having completed studies in theology at
Nungalinya College in 1994 in Darwin.
In 1997, Djalu took part in one of the most important exhibitions of
Aboriginal art, the Painters of the Wagilag Sisters Story 1937-1997.
Staged at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, Djalu opened
the exhibition with yiɗaki playing and helped with the construction of a
sacred sand sculpture in the foyer of the exhibition space.
In 1998, Djalu collaborated with Australian and overseas artists and
printmakers in The Meeting of the Waters project at the Northern
Territory University.
Djalu delivered the first Yiɗaki Masterclass at the inaugural Garma
Festival in 1999, delighting Australian and international guests with his
challenging tuition and infectious personality. He has delivered all
Djalu's first international outing was in 2002 at the Rripangu Yiɗaki
Festival - named in honour of his family run business enterprise - in the
tranquil town of Eisenbach in Germany's Blackforest. He followed this
up with a visit to the USA and Taiwan in 2003 where his mastery of the
yiɗaki and natural charisma etched unforgettable memories in the
minds of those in attendance. In 2004 Djalu and other members of his
family travelled to the UAE for the Dubai Sister Cities Forum, and in
2005 he travelled to Japan for World Expo as well as Yiɗaki Festa.
Also in 2003 was the Northern Territory Export Awards held at the
Crown Plaza in Darwin. Djalu accepted first prize in the Art and
Entertainment category on behalf of north-east Arnhem Land yiɗaki
makers. In 2005 Djalu played for Nelson Mandela in Sydney, Australia,
in a special meeting of 2 great leaders. In 2004 Djalu was featured in the NAIDOC Week special of George Negus Tonight on ABC television. Typically hewn from large termite-hollowed eucalyptus trees, Djalu’s instruments are prized for their highly resonant qualities and shapely aesthetics. His ability to select the right sort of tree to craft into exquisite musical instruments is legendary among his clansmen and testament to his unparalleled skill and vast knowledge.

Overseas tours and performances:

2002 Rripangu Yidaki Festival, Eisenbach, Germany
2003 Joshua Tree Festival, USA
2003 Indigenous Peoples Commission cultural visit, Taipei, Taiwan
2004 Dubai Sister Cities Forum, Dubai, United Arab Emirates
2005 World Expo, Aichi, Japan
2005 Yidaki Festa 2005, Okuhida & Tokyo, Japan

Artistic output:

Specialist Yidaki maker and player
Ochres (earth pigments) on bark
Ochres (earth pigments) on Larrakitj (Memorial Poles)
Material culture items
Recorded music
Subjects and themes
Mandji-dak (body painting design)
Clan miny'tji (designs) of saltwater and freshwater areas
Wititj (Olive Python)
Dhonyin (Javan File Snake)
Bol'ngu (the Thunderman)

Exhibitions:

1990 Spirit in Land, Bark Paintings from Arnhem Land, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
1994 Power of the Land, Masterpieces of Aboriginal Art, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
1994 The Eleventh National Aboriginal Art Awards, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin
1995 Miny'tji Buku Larrnggay, Paintings from the East, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
1995 The Twelfth National Aboriginal Art Awards, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin
1996 The Thirteenth National Aboriginal Art Awards, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin
1997 Native Title, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
1997 The Painters of The Wagilag Sisters Story, 1937-1997, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
1998 The 4th National Indigenous Heritage Art Award, Old Parliament House, Canberra
1998 Hollow Logs from Yirrkala, Annandale Galleries, Sydney
1998 The Meeting of the Waters, an exhibition of prints and works by artists from the Australasian Print Project, 24Hour Art, Darwin
1999-2001 Saltwater Country - Bark Paintings from Yirrkala, Drill Hall Gallery, ANU; John Curtin Gallery, Curtin University; Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney; Museum of Modern Art at Heide, Melbourne; The Araluen Cultural Centre, Alice Springs; Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane
Collections:

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
JW Kluge Collection, Virginia, USA
Numerous private collections

Bibliography:

1990 Jeanne Arnold, Barbara Philip & Djikundurru Burarrwanga, Nambara Art, Nambara Art, Nhulunbuy
1990 Judith Ryan, Spirit in Land, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
1996 John Cawte, Healers of Arnhem Land, University of NSW Press, Sydney
1999 Saltwater - Yirrkala Bark Paintings of Sea Country, Buku Larrngay Mulka Centre & Jennifer Isaacs Publishing, Neutral Bay
Numerous newspaper articles

CDs:

2001 Djalu teaches and plays yidaki (didgeridoo). Traditional music from north-east Arnhem Land, Volume 3. Yothu Yindi Foundation - Contemporary Masters Series
2003 Djalu Plays and Teaches Yidaki, Volume 2 (Songs and Stories from the Galpu Clan). Traditional music from north-east Arnhem Land, Volume 6. Yothu Yindi Foundation - Contemporary Masters Series
2003 Diltjmurru: Djalu Gurruwiwi. ON-Records & Djalu Gurruwiwi

DVDs:

2005 Yidaki Festa 2005 Djalu Gurruwiwi Japan Tour. Dinkum Music

Films

2000 Yidaki. Directed by Michael Butler and produced by Michelle White for Discovery Channel

Thanks to Guan Lee for the Djalu Biography. More info about Djalu on www.ididj.com.au

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