

## Gija Music of the Kimberley

Where did the songs come from? And where are they going? Song woman *Peggy Patrick* knows nearly all the songs of the Kimberley, and linguist *Frances Kofod* is battling to keep them alive. Story and images by *Jackey Coyle*.

“We used to watch all the different *joonba* [a type of *corroboree*] they brought to our place from the west,” *Peggy Patrick* says. “They used to teach us to dance, sing and paint, and we watched them. When I grew up a bit, I thought, I should do that too. Then all the different songs stuck in my head. I sing them now. I dance and sing. The song is lodged in my brain. Any song that comes from another place I can remember it straight away.”

*Patrick* is a *Miriwoong/Gija* woman of *Naangari* skin in her 70s who is a singer, performer, painter and law woman. To get to her home in *Crocodile Hole* in the Kimberley, you need to drive from *Kununurra* – right up on the *WA/NT* border – west towards *Halls Creek*.

*Patrick's* family lost many members as a result of European occupation. Recently she published a reply statement in *Robert Manne's* book *Whitewash*, following an attack by *Keith Windschuttle* on the veracity of her account of the horrific *Mistake Creek* massacre.

The attack hinged on *Windschuttle's* misunderstanding of her *Kriol* words, her use of ‘*mum mum*’ for ‘*grandmother*’. “I don’t talk that high English but everybody who talk to me face to face understand properly what I bin tell ‘em,” she said.

*Frances Kofod* has studied *East Kimberley* languages since 1971, using her skills in projects ranging from native title claims to documenting the stories behind paintings. (We use her interpretations of *Patrick's* words in this story.)

It was in one interview with painters *Paddy Bedford* and the late *Timmy Timms* that the massacre *joonba* of *Bedford Downs* came to light – *Fire Fire Burning Bright* was born after the community decided to ‘wake up’ the *joonba*. Although it had been performed many times on the stations throughout the *East Kimberley*, it was kept hidden from outsiders – the workers were scared they would be killed themselves if white people saw the *joonba* or realised what it was about.

*Fire Fire*, set at the time of *World War I*, is about a poisoning and the fire built to burn the bodies. It was to punish a group who, driven from their hunting grounds, killed a bullock and ate it. After it was revived the traditional *joonba* was first performed at *Bow River* in the Kimberley, then at the *Telstra Art Award* in *Darwin*. It then became part of *Fire, Fire* which was shown at the *Perth Festival*, and opened the *Melbourne International Festival of the Arts* at the *State Theatre* last year.

There’s a very different ethos of performance; the narrative is not linear as everyone usually knows the story. In *Melbourne*, everyone was having such a great time at one stage dancing and singing that it just kept on going on and on and on.

“Well, I think that people do like dancing,” *Kofod* laughs, “and the thing is about the leg or verses of the song is that you can repeat them as long as you feel like it and as long as people feel like dancing, and as that old man used to say, you ‘sugar the song’. The voices get better and the dances get better and they keep going and it could have gone on all night. Well, with a few breaks, you know.”

Director *Andrish Saint-Clare* saw the *joonba* in *Darwin* and approached the group about working with them. *Patrick* recalled: “I said, ‘You come down six weeks out the bush, we learn you, you look at the thing, what is good for you and you can put ‘em in the white way’.”

The 'white way' used narrative and traditional song combined with dance, historic footage, tableaux and masks in a set incorporating red dirt and trees.

Tony Oliver, who designed the sets, plays a key role in enabling the Warlpawun vision, a concept devised communally to integrate cultural, social and economic development for the Gija and other related Kimberley groups. The Jirrawun Aboriginal Art Corporation and the Neminuwarlin Performance Group are first steps.

Patrick is chair, creative director and performer in Neminuwarlin, which consists of about 30 singers and dancers. She is also a painter; her representations of the ancient boab tree that still stands guard over Mistake Creek shown in the exhibition *Blood on the Spinifex* tell her tragic story in the elegant, spare style of the Jirrawun group.

Referring to the quote that begins this story, Kofod comments: "Patrick and her brother, who passed away, are amazingly talented. She is a star performer. And she's right, she absolutely knows nearly every song in the Kimberley. But because of copyright protocols, you can't stage every song in the Kimberley if you're not the owner of the song."

And when she talks about 'they', who would they be? "Anybody that comes. With traditional ceremonial exchange, visitors would come and sing their song and then whoever they were visiting would sing the song from their place. And when I say song, I'm referring to song cycle with dance. So they'd perform what you might describe as their personal corroboree, their own song and dance. And that's how people used to amuse themselves. It was television, basically. And people like Peggy are addicted to song; and her brother even more so, he was a wonderful Lirrga singer as well as a Joonba singer. His loss, for both the song styles, is really very sad.

"I was very happy to be involved in this because I've been worrying about the East Kimberley songs for a very long time. I've been recording language, writing and analysing Miriwoong and Gija and the next language north, Gajirrabeng."

Those languages are endangered now; they, with song, are bound up with culture and identity. If you don't revive the songs, what would happen when these old people die? Would they pass it down to anyone else?

"No, there's many songs that are dying. The songmen are dying in the park. Lots of songs have already died. The song men are sometimes men – songmen and songwomen, I should say – may be not necessarily the one who finds or gleans the song. People used to say to me, 'Oh, the clever man found the song'.

"But when I did lots more interviews during the development of *Fire Fire*, it turned out that the spirits who in this particular instance were of the dead who were burned and poisoned at Bedford who then travelled up the mountain nearby. They created the song when they looked back at their burning bodies. And then they travelled through the country, singing the song, and the clever man found the song. It is a metaphor for composition, but it's expressed as though the song is meant to be found, because it's already been created by the spirits. Most of the songs in the East Kimberley are found in that way.

"Like the 'Gurirr-gurirr' that was dreamed by Rover Thomas [famous East Kimberley painter]. It was given to him by the aunt of Tiger Moore who was also in the show She was killed – well, they say the snake crossed the road in the wet season and the car ran off the road and then she came back and gave the song that told the story of her travels after her death. She saw all kinds of parts of the East Kimberley including these really amazing hills near Kununurra. And she went to Darwin and saw Cyclone Tracy and then she made the song and Rover found it."

"I thought it was a wonderful opportunity to be involved in *Fire Fire* to at least give one song a chance."

Nearly every song has some kind of spiritual and ceremonial meaning: “Even public songs – like the Joonba is a public style that everybody, men and women, can look at together. But it’s still a serious business and has the right way to do it according to custom.”

*Fire, Fire* used a particular performance style. Joonba which was incorporated as part of “*Fire, Fire* used only the singers and clapsticks,” Kofod explains, “whereas that other style, the Gooloomboong style – that uses the didgeridoo – some of the singers that came to the Melbourne Festival are able to sing that style as well. That style is associated with young men times, but the public part of it. When the ceremonies for young men are on, there’s part of that we can’t talk about or know about, but before young men away, there is always the public part, where women and mothers and relations are there. And the songs of two different styles called Lirrgka and Wangga have usually two song men and a didgeridoo – it’s the proper way for Lirrgka and Wangga. And they have a different type of dancing and a different type of painting on the body from the joonba. And joonba has to be led by a man – the man starts the verse, you know [sings]. And after he’s just done that initial bit, then the women join in. So women and men sing Joonba together. Lirrgka and Wangga are only sung by men, but women dance as well as men.”

It was a radical departure to perform the Joonba in spite of Timmy Timms’ death shortly before. “He wanted it to go ahead and normally, when somebody dies who is as loved and important as he was, the song would not be performed for a number of years out of respect, like after the other famous artist from the East Kimberley passed away, they didn’t perform the ‘Gurirr-gurirr’ for quite a long time. And then in the end they decided to perform it in his memory.

“But because we had already lots of commitments to performing after the Telstra Art Award in 2000, when everybody came to Darwin and staged the traditional version of the Joonba, many applications were made to develop the performance and people decided that yes, in spite of the tradition of covering things over, it would be a better memory for him to go ahead with it. And the first day that we actually staged it at Bow River and people did the dance, Peggy did this loud crying for her brother and called out about this thing and everybody thought about him and remembered and loved him.”

That particular Joonba was revived basically because of one interview. “Timmy said, ‘Oh there’s a song for that story’. He and Paddy Bedford started to remember the songs, what we might term ‘verses’. Verses is not quite the right term, they are slightly longer; the Kriol term is ‘leg’ – the leg of the song. So they started with the first introductory part, and when we started doing rehearsals, I realised that the first verse they sang was actually like the chorus. When you start that one, it’s when people are getting ready, like changing the set. So they reminded one another of various verses of the song [cycle], or various acts of the play or scenes of the opera when they were there.

“And then it took quite a long time, because it hadn’t been staged or sung for a long time, they were saying, ‘Oh yes, and then there’s this other bit’. When we all came back to Bow River, they picked up another very old lady called Dottie Watbi, to confirm with her some of the verses they may have missed and also to discuss the correct order for the verses, which ended up as you saw them in *Fire, Fire, Burning Bright*.

Kofod laughs, recalling the Darwin performance in 2000: “The Bow River people came and camped in my Darwin house that year. It was very full... 35 Bow River people, plus myself, plus Tony, plus a friend from Sydney – there was no spare floor space.”

In a letter she wrote about *Fire Fire*, Patrick tells how her people “want everyone to look at the show, to enjoy the song and dance and to learn what happened to our people in the past.

"Before, Aboriginal people were frightened of white people. Now we hope we can all be friends together."

That was a 'hard' (sad) story. "We bin bring out hard story what bin happen to blackfella," Patrick says. "We talk about bad story so black and white can be friend when we look at true thing together."

Kofod says: "There are some wonderful songs that are not hard stories that I feel very sad for, which are passing away or going. Rusty Peters has a wonderful song that I would really like to see incorporated in some kind of stage performance, about a yoonggoony (a kind of hairy man like a yeti) and a leaning tree. I can't talk about Rusty's song without his permission, but it's a beautiful song about the sunrise and the diver jack and the yoonggoony and the tree that has been bent low by the wind. I'd like to see all the songs of the East Kimberley performed in some way.

"And I think that we need a small local theatre that will do such a thing."

Neminuwarlin has recorded a CD, comprising the *Fire Fire* music as well as a different song cycle called the Wanalirri. "The May before we did the rehearsal period, we did a trip to Bedford Downs. And the night before we went out to the massacre site we camped in a little gorge. Everybody didn't want to sing the joonba about the massacre because we hadn't been out there yet to sing and speak to the spirits of the dead and perform a smoke ceremony.

"This mob are addicted to song, and Peggy and Phyllis [Thomas] started to sing the Wanalirri – Phyllis is one of the owners of this song cycle. I don't know if you've heard of the stairway to the moon in Broome; as the moon rises there's a phenomenon where you see lines of reflection of the moon across Roebuck Bay.

"As Peggy and Phyllis sang the Wanalirri in the gorge the moon rose between the cliffs and was reflected on the water as the stairway to the moon.

"The Wanalirri is such a consolatory song. Peggy gave the tape to Peter Adsett, who had painted *Two Laws and One Big Spirit* with Rusty Peters.

"Peter went to New York and he saw September 11 happen with his kids. Peter told Peggy later that the only thing that consoled them was listening to Peggy and Phyllis singing the Wanalirri on that is on the CD."

There's an instant affinity with country music because of its storytelling narrative structure and because every one of the older generation worked as stockmen and women. At Waringarri, the local radio station, the record library is one-third country.

Kofod laughs. "One day Jeff Chunana was in the language centre at Kununurra and there was some rap music on the radio and then they put on Slim Dusty and he said, 'Oh isn't it good they've turned off that gardiya music and put on our music!' That gardiya music was the black American rap and our music was Slim Dusty music!"

And gardiya means? "Means white person, in this context white people's music. The music that comes from a long way away, doesn't belong to us, that's what he meant."

Email [jackey@rhythms.com.au](mailto:jackey@rhythms.com.au) for sales of the Neminuwarlin CD

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