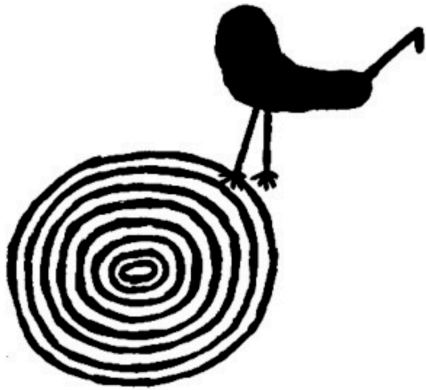


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Crossing the Divide

Liza Power, 31st of July 2010



THE first time Paul Grabowsky visited the remote Arnhem Land township of Ngukurr, he thought he had travelled to a different country. People spoke a different language, Kriol, a lyrical melding of pidgin English and multiple indigenous tongues. The landscape was painted from a palette of greens, reds and blues that was as foreign as the scents he breathed. The music he heard — particularly for a man who has savoured almost every rhythm and melody from around the globe — was tantalisingly unfamiliar.

But Grabowsky hadn't needed a passport to make the journey. His trip coincided with the end of the wet season in 2004, so after leaving Darwin around dawn, travelling south to Katherine and Mataranka and then east along the Roper Highway to Roper Bar, he found the river too high to cross. The final leg of the trip was taken by barge, and he reached Ngukurr as if it were an island. Which, for several months a year, when the Roper and Wilton rivers swell with rain and rush for the Gulf of Carpentaria, is precisely what it is.

Grabowsky's guide to Ngukurr was one of his former VCA students, Stephen Teakle. The erstwhile jazz aficionado had been based in Darwin for five years; he'd become a teacher himself, working with Charles Darwin University's music outreach program. Teakle, who had always enthralled his teacher with his adventures — from breaking horses in the Kimberley to prawn fishing in Bass Strait — wanted Grabowsky to travel north to supervise his studies.

Once again intrigued by Teakle's endeavours, Grabowsky proposed a deal: he would venture to Darwin if Teakle would take him to a remote community to meet traditional songmen.

Six months later, Grabowsky arrived in Ngukurr, a town that has since become a kind of

second home: a spill of houses nailed from corrugated iron, an old, stone mission church, swimming pool, medical centre, school, a local store, several community buildings, an arts centre. A place where time follows its own metre, the horizon is indescribably large, and the bark of stray dogs mingles with children's laughter from sun-up to sundown. At its heart sits a meticulously tended sports field, home of the beloved Bulldogs football team.

In his first days, Teakle introduced Grabowsky to town elder Kevin Rogers and Benjamin Wilfred, the latter being the grandson of the celebrated indigenous painter Djambu "Sambo" Burra Burra, a custodian of traditional law for the Wagilak people. Wilfred, who has since given Grabowsky a skin name and adopted him into his clan, remembers meeting "a crazy white man. He just come one day and want to learn about our music. So I start to teach him stories of our culture."

Ngukurr is home to eight indigenous groups; the tribes fled to the refuge of the town's Anglican mission after being driven from their lands in the early 1900s. Their country had been sold to the Eastern and African Cold Storage Company, whose plan was to set up cattle stations and ship their produce from the Gulf around the world. The missionaries provided food and shelter when, unable to hunt, the indigenous population was facing starvation, or worse — white land owners had open licence to shoot "trespassers". But the food had a hefty pricetag: indigenous languages were banned, as was the practice of traditional ceremony. And yet, as Grabowsky soon found, a dedicated group of songmen has preserved them.

Before long, Grabowsky was invited to hear Benjamin and Roy Wilfred sing. He didn't understand the lyrics (they told tales of spear hunting, dili bags, the wind), but he was mesmerised all the same. He explained to the performers that he was a kind of songman himself; he played them his CDs — "some New York recordings, to give them an idea of the shape, energy and feel of the music I make" — and asked if he could return with his orchestra. The bemused songmen said yes.

In July 2005, Grabowsky and Teakle returned to Ngukurr, bringing with them the late Ruby Hunter, Archie Roach and 10 members of Grabowsky's Australian Art Orchestra. The journey wasn't easy. Phil Rex remembers strapping his double bass to the roof of a 4WD and praying the rough, pothole-ridden roads wouldn't bruise the instrument. Saxophonist Tony Hicks, who had imagined Ngukurr as a "green, tropical paradise", instead found himself marooned in a hot brown dust bowl. It was the middle of the dry season. Sleeping in tents, with no respite from the unrelenting heat, percussionist Nico Schauble struggled. "It was really hard. Not only did they have a very different concept of time management, but you also had to deal with the fact that you just never got clean."

Ngukurr is a place of few luxuries. The town has one local store: no cafes, hotel, restaurants, cinema, or bar (alcohol is prohibited). The closest cold beer sits 200 kilometres of unsealed roads away, at Mataranka. Fresh fruit and vegetables are hard to come by, and expensive: a small tray of mushrooms at the store will set you back \$6, four sticks of wilted celery \$5. Locals with cars, freezers and funds take monthly supply trips

to Katherine. The indigenous population supplement their diets by hunting; the Roper River is famed for its fishing, namely barramundi.

The orchestra's first trip lasted five days and was comprised largely of conversations and playing sessions, culminating in a town concert on the final night. The initial musical exchanges weren't easy. The Wagilak, for whom the double bass, saxophone, violin and drums were peculiar-looking tools, took time to grow accustomed to the sounds they made. The orchestra, whose initial plan was to mimic the melodies of the didgeridoo, found imitating the songmen's unpredictable meanderings fruitless.

Rex remembers being intrigued by the mechanics of how the manikay (song cycles) worked. "At first I tried to understand it from a Western mathematical point of view, but that pretty quickly fell on its backside. We soon realised that to get anywhere near understanding [the music], we had to understand the way they see the world. The two were completely interconnected."

Saxophonist Tony Kicks says small windows on Wagilak life slowly opened. "I remember this one moment when we were sitting outside the women's centre. It was me and five of the local men, and no one was speaking, but everyone was completely comfortable. It was strange, because when you sit with friends and family at home there has to be conversation all the time. It changed my perception of how you can be with people; just sitting there, all tuned into what's happening but not needing to talk about it."

Rex began thinking about time, namely because he suddenly seemed to have a lot of it on his hands. "When [the Wagilak] play, they don't adhere to strict tempos like other types of music do. That led me to thinking that their concept of time was fundamentally different. We tend to chop time up and subdivide it into minutes, hours, weeks and months; we do the same with music." The Wagilak don't. "So I just started to let things happen."

Slowly, both parties found a meeting place. Rather than being frustrated by the elastic nature of the manikay, which vary in structure and pitch depending on a performer's mood, or didgeridoo (each instrument has a unique pitch), the orchestra began delighting in it, experimenting with new colours and textures of sound.

Hicks likens this process to learning a new language. "None of my prior experience fitted with it, and to begin with everything sounded so incredibly dissonant. If you're a rhythm section player, you work at holding down a groove, but being a melodic player, everything I do is like a lead statement. To form those statements I had to develop new techniques and approaches for exploring micro-tonality, and as my own practice developed and my ears became more attuned to the music, it stopped sounding out of tune. It was as if a whole new world opened up."

The project, called Crossing Roper Bar, has since toured the Northern Territory, played at Melbourne's Birrarung Marr, the National Gallery of Victoria, the Recital Centre, Apollo Bay Music Festival and the Sydney Opera House. When the group travelled to Gulkula to

play at the 2006 Garma Festival, their songs were met with looks of astonishment; the Yolgnu songmen from neighbouring regions had long believed such songs had been lost. This month, the first Crossing Roper Bar album will be released. An overseas tour is planned for 2011.

Having followed the project for a couple of years, it's in April that I hear of the orchestra's plans to return to Ngukurr the following month. Their nine-day trip has several goals: to develop new material, to take members of the project's principal sponsors, Total E&P, to see the orchestra at work, and to have ANU ethnomusicologist Dr Aaron Corn record and translate the manikay. Grabowsky has enlisted four orchestra members to make the trip, with a performance at Darwin Entertainment Centre before the drive to Ngukurr. The Young Wagilak Group — Benjamin, David, Wesley and Desmond Wilfred — will travel to Darwin to perform, their visit coinciding with the opening of Colour Country: Art from Roper River, at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. They'll then return home with the orchestra and crew in tow. I sign up as crew. May marks the beginning of the Northern Territory's dry season, but after leaving Darwin in the early morning and making our way to Roper Bar about dusk, we find the Wilton River too high to cross. So, as Grabowsky has done previously, we take the barge upriver, reaching Ngukurr by nightfall.

Our accommodation is at the mission church's rectory, where Anna Johnson, who runs the school's tuckshop, has cooked us dinner — a generous gesture given she's already fed 260 students two meals that day, often the only food her charges eat. The local store, the town's only source of food, has been closed for several days due to persistent break-ins; without Anna, we'd go hungry. Dawn reveals Ngukurr's handful of streets, which wouldn't take a long time to wander if there weren't so many curious children and locals to say hello to. The days, we're told, are still unseasonably hot and wet; the locals, who have been held captive by the high river levels, complain of cabin fever and freak storms. By noon, it's too hot to do anything but sit in the shade.

Late afternoon, the charismatic Wesley, amused by our heat-induced stupor, announces he's heading out bush to find yidaki (didgeridoo) trees. Hicks is keen to craft his own, so we circle town looking for an axe, stopping off at various houses as we go, then head out of town. Wesley sets off into the bush, leading us up and down a ridge in the search of hollow tree trunks. Then, returning to town, we stop off by the local swimming pool, where we're greeted by a flock of schoolchildren. We dive-bomb, splash and horse about for hours. Then we set about translating the pool rules, which are written in Kriol: nomo pushumbat enibodi (no pushing anybody about), nobodi lau dringgim enijing wen u bogibogi (nobody's allowed to drink anything when you go swimming).

At dusk, Crossing Roper Bar perform for the locals, who sit on the grass by the school under a canopy of stars and watch curiously as the Wagilak join Grabowsky on a stage. "Them white men playing our music," one woman tells me with a smile. "It sound good," says another.

The following morning, the first of three workshops begin. They're held outside, in the

slim belt of shade — slimmer as the sun rises — offered by the eaves of the rectory building. Schauble, on drums, sits underneath a profusely flowering frangipani tree, which sheds occasional blooms when the wind blows. Guitarist Stephen Magnusson props on an amplifier in shorts and thongs, while Hicks perches on the edge of a deck chair cradling his saxophone. Rex, whose double bass has once again survived the rough road trip, plucks away from the landing by the rectory's flywire door. Below him, Grabowsky plinks at his keyboard. Of the Wagilak, David is on yidaki while Benjamin, Desmond and Wesley sing and play clapsticks.

Their music, which unfurls like a meandering dreamscape, is, however, only half of the show. Whispers and laughter spill from a constant procession of children wandering to and from school. A rubbish truck trundles past, dogs snuffle and collapse under nearby gum trees. Cousins, aunties, uncles and sisters and brothers arrive, listen for a spell, then vanish in the direction of the local store.

The next day, I wander down to the Ngukurr Art Centre and buy a necklace threaded from desert seeds. Later that afternoon, a young woman makes her way to the rectory; she's the artist, she wants to say hello and see how the necklace looks. The following day, needing to make a phone call (there's no mobile reception), I buy a phone card and take a tour of the town's public phone boxes. The first registers the card, but won't dial out; the second has a coin jammed in the card slot; the third will dial out, but only accepts gold coins. It costs \$15 to ring Melbourne for roughly four minutes over six disconnected calls. Benjamin approaches me that night and asks me if I enjoyed my "walkabout". "My brother, he saw you down that road, and my aunty, she saw you walking by the school. Uncle see you down that way. It's good," he says with a smile.

If it's tempting to credit Ngukurr's isolation with the preservation of Wagilak culture, it's just as easy to credit an "out of sight, out of mind" mentality for the conditions in which many of its inhabitants live. It's not uncommon for four families to live in a three-bedroom house.

Government housing inspectors come and go, one local tells me; the faces change but the problems remain. By and large, Ngukurr is a healthy, functioning community, but providing local youth with role models and career paths is the next step. It's one Grabowsky is eager to be part of. The next phase of the Crossing Roper Bar project, beyond expanding the group's repertoire and encouraging women to participate in performances, lies in establishing a town cultural centre. While preliminary discussions with Grimshaw Architects are under way, Grabowsky's plan is for the centre to be designed in consultation with and constructed by Ngukurr residents. Equipped with recording facilities, multiple performance spaces and a library, it should act as both a gathering place and a repository for knowledge.

For Schauble, who has travelled to Ngukurr on a handful of occasions over the last five years, the reasons for returning are both selfish and selfless. "I still look for the same thing in any project I'm part of — a sense of connection, fulfilment, when the music takes you to places of inner thought and you discover new things. This gets harder to do after

you've been playing for 30 years. But I try not to explain [this process] too much, because if you want to know you'll listen [to the music]." While he's reassured by a sense of Ngukurr's community moving ahead, he remains irked by what he sees as simple problems with simple solutions. "You do see the general level of healthcare here and think, how can that be a problem? If we were in Melbourne, that would be fixed in a week, no cost, all covered. Why is Australia not able to fix that?"

Rex hopes Crossing Roper Bar's model of collaboration will draw people into a deeper understanding of indigenous culture. "Somehow I'd like the project to reach out to people in the city, bring them into a different way of seeing the world."

On the last night of our stay, the group perform another concert for the townsfolk. The crowd is enormous, and I spend the better part of the night playing games with a gaggle of beautiful children. The stage is circled by dancing Wagilak women, whose fluid movements and rhythmic steps come from another time.

On the morning of our departure I visit the home of Wagilak leader Benjamin Wilfred. Sitting under a gum tree, he explains at first in Kriol and then in English why Crossing Roper Bar is so important to him. He wants his children, who are busy crawling onto his lap as he speaks, to know the stories of their ancestors. "I loved my grandfather, he told me all of these stories, these songs. I learned everything from him. But he died in 2005, so I have to do the recordings, the CD, so in case I ever get crook like him, my kids will keep the stories going. And everyone around here, they're proud of my CD, they keep asking me about when the people come back here for another concert. So I have to thank Paul and the orchestra, because they helped me to do this."