

# Gurrumul

**Gurrumul Yunupingu** lead vocals & guitars  
**Michael Hohnen** acoustic bass  
**Francis Diatschenko** acoustic guitars  
**Matthew Cunliffe** piano  
**Mikey Randon** drums

**Dewayne Everettsmith** vocals and guitar

Never mind the fact that Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu is blind, or that his totem is the saltwater crocodile, or that he plays a normal right-handed guitar upside down. The most extraordinary thing about this Aboriginal megastar is his voice. Lifting, tender, tinged with sadness and sweetness and hope, it is about to hold you spellbound.

"It is the voice of a higher being," said Sting, who's performed with him. And indeed, most who hear it are dazzled by its celestial power, by its ability to draw tears, prompt reverie and swell hearts fit to burst. It is the voice of the earth's oldest living culture, where things like kinship and country and history and community are all. It is the voice of Gurrumul, an unassuming Yolngu man from Elcho Island in Australia's remote Top End – and a singer-songwriter who just happens to be a global phenomenon.

Way before mainstream Australia pounced on Gurrumul's self-titled 2008 debut, way before it showered him with awards and critical praise ('The most important voice this country has ever recorded' proclaimed the Sydney Morning Herald), Gurrumul was singing for the people of his Yolngu clan, performing native-language songs that have been passed down for as long as anyone can remember. The Yolngu of northeast Arnhem Land know that songs about clouds forming and separating are to do with kinship patterns; that references to wind,

rocks and stars pertain to ancestors and relatives. For the rest of us, there's the voice.

"People just love his sound," says Michael Hohnen, Gurrumul's producer and bass-player, mentor and wapu (Yolngu brother) and the co-director of his Darwin-based independent record company Skinnyfish. "We find we get the same reaction whether we're in Australia or Europe. He just has this ability to leave people feeling deeply moved."

Recorded in New York and Byron Bay, Gurrumul's new album *Rakala* maintains the campfire-like intimacy of its multi-award-winning, double platinum-selling predecessor. But this time around the spotlight is on his skills as a multi-instrumentalist as well as a singer and (upside-down) guitar player; Gurrumul also plays piano and percussion with sensitivity and flair. His songs still move from reggae to folk and gospel and beyond. Their melodies are still uncomplicated and compelling. But there's a new depth and confidence in the stately, deliberate mood; a new presence and spaciousness in this remarkable musical journey.

The boy who grew up on Elcho riding bikes and playing marbles, who listened out for the changing tides and the flight of the white cockatoo, has come a long way. There's been much to navigate: his seven-year stint with Aboriginal rock/pop collective Yothu Yindi and his (ongoing) membership of the reggae-loving Saltwater Band (check out their excellent new album, *Malk*). The approval of his extended family and community, who must be consulted each time he leaves Elcho Island to tour. His relationship with Hohnen - whose arm Gurrumul now takes instinctively - which has been building for over a decade.

"For so much of Aboriginal Australia it's people coming and going all the time," says Hohnen, who acts as Gurrumul's mouthpiece (the artist doesn't see the point in talking about himself). "School principals, medics, people who run the communities, all that white infrastructure is very transient. But [record label] Skinnyfish have been around a while. We can't imagine not doing this."

It's a new story, this one. Who would have thought it? An indigenous Australian performer who has made a huge impact on millions of people around the world with a set of ancient songs sung in local language, all without speaking directly to the media or indeed, addressing his audiences when onstage. Not that he needs to, of course: as you are about to experience, Gurrumul's music speaks volumes.

But first up a bright new talent on the musical landscape, indigenous or otherwise: Dewayne Everettsmith. A Tasmanian singer and guitar player with roots in the Aboriginal community of Cape Barren Island in Bass Strait – a place with its own unique folk music – the charismatic Everettsmith has entranced audiences across Australia and beyond. There have been duets with Paul Kelly and support slots for John Farnham and Archie Roach; though untutored in stagecraft Everettsmith has a knack for working a crowd and making listeners feel as if he's singing just for them.

There will be one interval in tonight's concert. Smoking is not permitted anywhere on the Barbican premises. No cameras, tape recorders or any other recording equipment may be taken into the hall.



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The evocative single 'Milaythina' from his debut album *Introducing Dewayne Everettsmith* is the first commercial recording of a Tasmanian Aboriginal language song. "It's about recognising Tasmania as Aboriginal land," says Everettsmith of the southern Australian state and island. "And not taking it for granted. This is a land to be cherished."

Both Gurrumul and Everettsmith offer glimpses into the traditional indigenous Australian world, a world free of stereotypes and filled with stories. Ready? Sit back and prepare to be captivated.

Programme note © Jane Cornwell

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