



PROFILE

Mandawuy Yunupingu

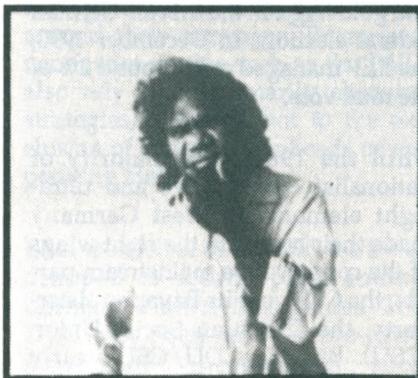
When the dance music remix of Yothu Yindi's *Treaty* finally burst into the Australian Top 20 last year, the sound of consciences being salved was almost audible. For years there had been veiled accusations of racism aimed at the Australian music industry, particularly commercial radio, concerning the lack of recognition and opportunity given to Aboriginal musicians.

Suddenly those accusations seemed to have less substance; a round of communal back-slapping ensued and the band's commercial success was followed by a plethora of awards for the single, its accompanying video clip and the album from which it was taken, *Tribal Voice*.

For Yothu Yindi's leader and spokesperson, Mandawuy Yunupingu, this recognition is just reward for years of hard work and determination. Essentially optimistic, you get the impression he always felt commercial success was just around the next corner, despite the lack of precedents. Yet Mandawuy's outlook hasn't always been so positive. "In my time I've been without hope," he says. "I was angry, I got into fights. I've turned to drinking, I've been locked up...But I've changed now because I know my family is really strong and powerful. Instead of being angry and turning away, I'd rather

challenge and find a positive solution."

The family Mandawuy refers to is indeed strong, both spiritually and politically. In 1963, in one of the earliest expressions of the Aboriginal land rights movement, Mandawuy's father presented the Yirrkala Petition—an attempt to control bauxite mining in Arnhem Land—before the House of Representatives. And his brother Galarrwuy, who also provides vocals on a track on *Tribal Voice*, is chair of the Northern lands Council. For his part, Mandawuy decided the future of his people lay in education. He became the first Aboriginal university graduate from his region (the area around Gove, in east Arnhem Land) and is now the principal of the Yirrkala school, where he's pioneering a curriculum that emphasises both Yolngu (Aboriginal) and Bandala (European) learning.



This marriage of cultures is typical of the approach taken by Mandawuy and his Gumatj clan. Mandawuy is neither militant nor separatist; rather, he's a realist who believes that retaining Aboriginality does not mean rejecting the best of what other cultures have to offer. This is reflected not only in Mandawuy's approach to education and politics but also to music and technology.

"These days we're doing more compromising in terms of cultural situations, and you've got to do it because you're dealing with the commercial aspects of the music industry. As long as our values, beliefs and principles remain intact—and I reckon we've

got the strength to do that—then I think that's the way to go. We may have made some compromises but we've retained the essence, our Yolngu integrity is not being threatened. In fact we're enriching our culture."

The success of *Treaty*, which deals with the Australian government's failure to draw up the treaty between black and white Australia promised by Bob Hawke in 1988, has seen trendy nightclubbers the world over dancing to a song that's not only political but combines the traditional music of a 60,000-year-old culture with state-of-the-art technology and is sung largely in an Aboriginal language. While the song's message clearly goes over the head of many dancers, Mandawuy's pleased if just a few get the point. And as seriously as he takes his responsibilities (he's currently taking two years' leave without pay to concentrate on musical activities), he also takes an almost capricious delight in being such an unlikely pop star. Sure, he wants to educate, but equally he also wants to entertain.

While other musicians might already be putting down the deposit on the country house in Bowral and the fleet of vintage cars, Mandawuy has other plans. At present he's putting together a proposal to have a cultural centre, complete with recording studio, built in his community—the idea being that it will act as a forum for interaction with other indigenous peoples from around the world. He sees Yothu Yindi's growing profile (and his own) as the perfect opportunity to agitate and build bridges, to be both the fly in the ointment and the oil on stormy waters.

"This may be the best platform we've had yet for getting our message across and telling people overseas about the plight of Aborigines in Australia—and also our strengths," says Mandawuy. "Now, you can talk all you want, but I reckon nothing communicates like music."

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