

Yothu Yindi's lead singer Mandawuy Yunupingu, performing at the Darwin Festival circa 2003



Top to bottom: a young Mandawuy pictured in 1993; one of the first pictures of Gurrumul performing in 1989; original member Stuart Kellaway

→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

# YOTHU YINDI

Jane Cornwell examines Australia's foremost Aboriginal group's impressive back catalogue

When Aboriginal rockers Yothu Yindi burst onto the Australian music scene in the 1980s – the decade that marked 200 years of white settlement – their very presence grabbed the country by the scruff of its neck and made it think twice about celebrating. Here was an act unlike anything white Australia had seen or heard before: a line-up of indigenous and *balanda* (non-Aboriginal) musicians on guitars and keyboards, *bilma* (clapsticks) and *yidaki* (didgeridoo), playing a mix of ancient song cycles and modern rock accompanied by body painted dancers and couched in the spirit of cross-cultural understanding.

Yothu Yindi (which means 'mother and child' in Yolngu) were a timely reminder of the strength and beauty of Aboriginal culture and more specifically of the Yolngu people of north-east Arnhem Land, 600km east of the Northern Territory capital of Darwin. They were also a living indictment of the mistreatment meted out to Australia's original inhabitants, the people who had been resident in that wide brown land for some 40,000 years. Aboriginal people had been subjected to racism and ignorance on the part of settlers from the get-go, their minority status reinforced by a succession of white governments who stole their land, implemented contemptible policies and reneged on a plethora of promises.

"The struggle was to find ways of explaining our laws and beliefs to white Australia in an attempt to retain all that is

important and sacred in Yolngu life and in our land," lead singer Mandawuy Yunupingu, one of the country's most influential Aboriginal leaders, has said. "That struggle is what you hear in Yothu Yindi's songs. In our songs we have found a way to help people hear us today."

Having commanded attention with their 1988 debut *Homeland Movement*, their performances at bicentennial protest concerts in Sydney and as the support act for legendary leftfield Aussie rockers Midnight Oil, Yothu Yindi delivered a sucker punch in 1991 with the hit song, 'Treaty': '*This land was never given up/This land was never bought and sold/The planting of the Union Jack never changed our law at all*' they sang in English and Yolngu Matha, their beats deftly remixed by dance producers Filthy Lucre. '*Now two rivers run their course/Separated for so long/I'm dreaming of a brighter day/When the waters will be one.*'

Co-written by members of Yothu Yindi, Midnight Oil's Peter Garrett and esteemed *balanda* singer-songwriter Paul Kelly, 'Treaty' was a plea for reconciliation that topped the charts and bagged them everything from Song of the Year at the ARIAS (Australian Recording Industry Awards) to a Human

Rights Commissioners Award for songwriting. The album from which it was taken, *Tribal Voice*, spent 22 weeks in the national charts; its blend of Yolngu and English lyrics and clapsticks/didgeridoo/pop rhythm section helping to break the band across the world. Having founded their very own Yothu Yindi Foundation to support and further Yolngu cultural life, Yothu Yindi became a force to be reckoned with – both in their own world and in the white man's.

Boasting a core of original members including Jodie Cockatoo Creed, Stuart

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**“That struggle is what you hear in Yothu Yindi's songs. In our songs we have found a way to help people hear us today”**

Kellaway, Mandawuy's older brother Galarrwuy and burgeoning international megastar Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu – who left the collective in 1992 and joined the Saltwater Band a few years later, Yothu Yindi have continually refreshed their sound by granting each of their line-up (most of them drawn from two of the 16 clan groups in their region, the Gumatj and the Rirratjingu), a turn in the spotlight. Increased in rhythmic variety and less anthemic songs (they have never surpassed 'Treaty') have allowed the likes of Papua New Guinean members Baruka Tau-Matagu and Ben Hakalitz, on *kundu* drums and woodwind, to shine.

In 1999 the Yothu Yindi Foundation launched the annual Garma Festival – which has since become Australia's most significant cultural exchange event – in Gulkula in their homelands, part of the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve. The band enjoy an almost mythical status in the Top End, where

their appearances at Garma prompt a joyous response from clan groups and invited balanda alike. Despite the ad hoc nature of their national performances, the fact that they haven't released an album since 2000's *Garma* and the fact that some recent ugly internal wranglings have meant that Mandawuy and Yothu Yindi are no longer involved in the Garma Festival or in the Yothu Yindi Foundation, goodwill for the band remains strong throughout Australia.

Mandawuy's recent battle with alcoholism and kidney disease was documented in the ABC's *Australian Story* in October last year. "Having a commercially successful band with a big hit was one thing," said Paul Kelly, "but it was really the way he conducted himself through all that and afterwards, and always made it clear that the band was about a whole lot of other things besides just trying to get to the top of the charts."

Just when Yothu Yindi will make music again is subject to Mandawuy's health (he is currently waiting for a transplant), though management are cautiously optimistic. In the meantime, a best of album/DVD titled *The Healing Stone* is in the works, its one new (eponymous) song written by Mandawuy and longtime collaborator/producer, Andrew Farris of iconic rock outfit INXS.

"We operate in two aspects of reality," Mandawuy once said. "One is restricted (sacred) and the other is unrestricted (public). That's why I find it easy to come into the white man's world and operate, then go back into my world without fear of losing it. I'm using white man's skills and Yolngu skills and putting them together for a new beginning."

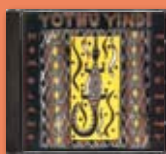
Much has changed for Aboriginal Australians since the 80s, some of it thanks to Yothu Yindi. In many ways, however, their work has only just begun. ●

**INTERACTIVE** Listen to excerpts from these albums: [www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/70](http://www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/70)

**PODCAST** Hear an excerpt from 'Treaty' on the podcast

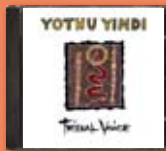
# BEST...

## ...ALBUMS



**Homeland Movement**  
(Mushroom Records, 1989)

Released in Australia's controversial bicentennial year, this raw but innovative debut had white Australia doing a collective double take.



**Tribal Voice** (Mushroom, 1991)

The hard-hitting album that secured their place in the annals of Australian rock history and generated international recording and tours. Contains the band's first hit single, 'Treaty,' which was chosen as one of *Songlines'* 50 Great Moments in World Music (#50).



**Freedom** (Mushroom Records, 1994)

Featuring the hits 'World Turning,' 'Timeless Land' and 'Dots on the Shells' and co-writers David Bridie (Not Drowning, Waving) and Neil Finn (Crowded House), this third album marks a maturing of the band's funky drone-and-beats sound.



**Birrkuta** (Wild Honey)  
(Mushroom Records, 1996)

The band's fourth album is flecked with Melanesian influences, courtesy of some Papua New Guinea members. It features Galarrwuy Yunupingu's rendition of 'Cora,' a song he sung as a young man for ethnomusicologist Alice Moyle's *Songs from the Northern Territory* in the early 60s.

## ...COMPILATIONS



**One Blood** (Mushroom Records, 2002)

Fabulous 19 track anthology that features new recordings of hits including 'Treaty,' 'World Turning' and 'Our Land' and guest contributors such as Neil Finn and Paul Kelly.

## ...AVOIDED



**Garma** (Yothu Yindi Music, 2000)

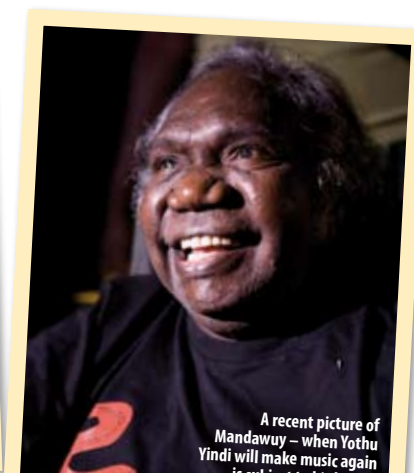
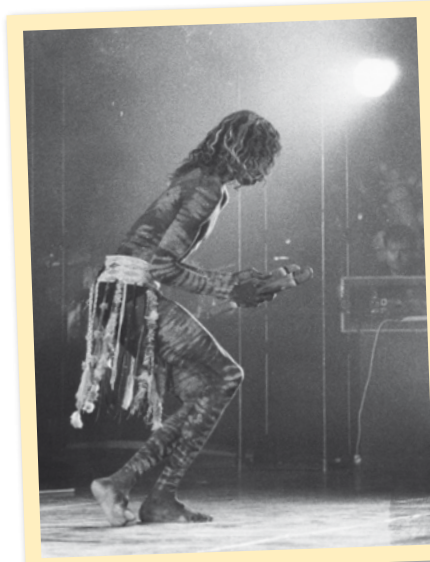
Produced by Andrew Farris of INXS, their most recent effort boasts the catchy Sydney-Olympics-minded dance tune 'Calling Every Nation' and a few too many rawk riffs. Not a bad album by any means, but certainly not one of their best.

## IF YOU LIKE YOTHU YINDI, THEN TRY... THE BLACK ARM BAND



**Hidden Republic** ([www.blackarmband.com.au](http://www.blackarmband.com.au))

Live 2008 recording of the Aboriginal super band; a sprawling collective of black and white performers whose anthems about land, kinship and reconciliation have taken the likes of the Sydney Festival and WOMAD UK by storm. A sort of Aboriginal Motown revue, the BAB features the esteemed likes of didge player Mark Atkins (pictured), golden-voiced Shellie Morris, legendary singer-songwriter Archie Roach and recently departed chanteuse Ruby Hunter.



A recent picture of Mandawuy – when Yothu Yindi will make music again is subject to his health