



THE GARMA FESTIVAL

ALL PHOTOS: Peter Eve

Near an escarpment of stringy bark trees, with the blue-green Gulf of Carpentaria glittering in the distance, Djalu Gurruwiwi is sitting cross-legged at the end of a sand-covered ceremonial ground, kitted out in mirrored shades and wielding his didgeridoo. Hours earlier the bearded Aboriginal elder had grabbed an axe and a few disciples to fell dead eucalyptus branches hollowed by termites, before testing them with short, swift parps. 'Treat old people with respect,' insists the festival programme. 'They hold the knowledge and power.' Mindful of protocol, a German man with dreadlocks and a peroxide-blond Japanese guy carry the logs back for treatment in time for the next day's didge – or rather, *yidaki* – masterclass. But as dusk falls and the *bunggul* (traditional dance) ceremony gets underway, the *yidaki* assumes its traditional role. A call to people to come together in unity, its age-old sound is also a vital component in the retelling of the oral history of the Yolngu people.

Jane Cornwell ventures to Australia's Northern Territory for an indigenous festival experience

The Yolngu are the hosts of the Garma Festival of Traditional Culture. It's held at Gulkula in Arnhem Land, an area in Australia's Northern Territory owned and managed by its indigenous inhabitants and is the *yidaki*'s birthplace. Ganbulapula, the spirit man said to have brought the instrument forth, stands sentinel in the middle of the ceremonial ground: a carved, upturned tree branch. Tomorrow, there'll be a forum titled 'The Didjeridu as Cultural Commodity?' (The term 'didgeridoo' is used ironically up here, or not at all.) Tonight, alongside a group of men singing and clapping *bilma* sticks, Djalu's circular breathing provides the rhythmic foundation for the Manikay: song cycles featuring the various ancestral spirit beings of the Yolngu clans. Music and dance are inseparable:

bare-chested, body-painted male dancers in red skirts whirl through the sand, telling stories of birds, stars, rain and first contact with the outside world. Women with white-chalked faces shuffle on, heads down, elbows pumping, twitching sprigs of gum leaves. When things stop abruptly, a great and unsettling 'Whooh!' rises from huddles of Yolngu in the audience.

Now in its fifth year, the five-day Garma Festival is proudly billing itself as 'Australia's premier indigenous cultural event'. For some the claim is underlined by the presence of Yolngu actor David 'Walkabout' Gulpilil, best-selling Aboriginal crooner Jimmy Little, famous painters from communities around the Top End and the irritating boom mics of Australian TV crews. For others it is the spirit of *corroboree*, of being among indigenous people with a deep intellectual strength, on a land that almost shimmers with its own powerful history. At any rate, Garma aims to celebrate the Yolngu cultural inheritance. Established by a group of indigenous Australians including Mandaway Yununpingu, lead singer of



A diverse audience enjoy the action

Yothu Yindi, the festival encourages the practice, preservation and maintenance of traditional dance, song and art.

Nearly 20 clans of the region are here, speaking any of a dozen dialects of a language group known as Yolngu Matha. Yolngu children with painted faces, and chests stamped with white handprints, skip across from the Yolngu-only campsite to play football on the sand. Yolngu women in lurid missionary-influenced skirts and T-shirts queue next to white federal ministers in the shower blocks. Yolngu men smoke roll-ups and lean against trees in the shade. There is much laughter despite the dry, sauna-like heat, the lack of water to dive into and the biting sandflies. Garma isn't your average festival. It's officially dry – so forget about the glass of wine with dinner. And with just over 1,000 participants attending forums and workshops on, say, 'New Media for Indigenous Artists' and 'Indigenous Bands in Community Arts,' it feels more like a convention. Aboriginal clan members outnumber *balanda* (non-indigenous Australians) roughly ten to one. It's a neatly ironic role reversal in a country that has infamously marginalised its indigenous people; for a white population trying to atone, there's a sense that we're privileged to be here at all. An invited posse of white academics, lawyers, arts administrators and politicians debate the rhetorical 'Aboriginal



Yothu Yindi

question' (like traditional music and dance, Aboriginal culture and politics are joined at the hip). A trailblazing, indigenous arts policy is launched by the new Labour-led Northern Territory government on the opening night. There's women's basket-weaving workshops throughout, a collaborative etching project and an open-air print exhibition. An air of optimism prevails.

Garma didn't allow members of the public in until 2001, when it was decided that a restricted number (around 50) might apply. Adventure holiday specialists World Expeditions were chosen as booking agents;

our bush-savvy leaders Greg and Toni worked closely with Aboriginal guide Steve (from the relatively nearby Kakadu National Park), pointing out everything from Yolngu kinship patterns to green tree snakes. Local musicians play in the evenings. Most, if not all, are bands; Yolngu society is a determinedly collective one. In a region where access to equipment is limited (break a guitar string and it's often a 400km drive to buy a new one) and decent radio stations few and far between, the young bands showcased at Garma must nevertheless be judged on their own merits.

In some instances, singing is flat. The Yolngu are rather shy people; there is much foot gazing. A backing vocalist has his back to the audience. The Burula Band from Gapuwiak lose their rhythm and run off, giggling, only to be herded back onstage. But the Black Shadows rock. The Young Guns, erstwhile street kids from a Darwin community, ooze confidence. "Yo! Garma! Aren't I great?" grins one. (That 'yo' is also Yolngu for 'yes' lends proceedings extra cred.) If nothing else, Garma is a great gig to play. For the time being, Yothu Yindi are hanging on to their baton. When they finally perform, under a full moon that illuminates a backdrop of towering gum trees, it's with four body-painted, bilma-clicking dancers in tow and the knowledge that their name – the Yolngu word for 'balance' – has been lent extra resonance by the preceding few days. Djal Gurruwiwi is up there, too, performing a yidaki solo that seems to send stars shooting around the night sky. "May the power of the yidaki heal and guide you," he says. "It's only when you understand my heart and mind," he adds enigmatically, summing up the Garma Festival in one eloquent sentence, "that you can take my hand." |

The sixth annual Garma Festival will be held at Guluka, via Nhulunbuy (Gove) in north-east Arnhem Land (via Darwin), Northern Territory, from August 6-10 2004. For up-to-date information check www.garma.telstra.com. Entry to the five-day festival is booked exclusively with World Expeditions (www.worldexpeditions.com) with the cost including camping equipment, all meals and transport in the Gove Peninsula. Permits are required to enter Aboriginal land. Garma has an arrangement with the Northern Land Council; accepted registration permits you to attend the festival site. Places at Garma are limited and advance applications advised. CDs by Yothu Yindi are available from www.yothuyindi.com or www.skinnyfishmusic.com.au