



murundak: songs of freedom

**Music film feature article
by Megan Spencer (c) 2011**

First published on the [MusicNT website](#), February 2011.

Natasha Gadd is one half of the talented filmmaking team behind murundak - songs of freedom, the brand new documentary about Indigenous music group, The Black Arm Band.

Natasha and partner Rhys Graham co-directed and co-shot the film, the former also in editing and producing roles. The project took four years to make across several states – the Northern Territory included – plus two continents: Australia and Europe.

The Black Arm Band is an Indigenous music group which grew out of the tail end of the Howard era, a period in which Indigenous politics were forced to redefine against the backdrop of the Federal “intervention”.

Songs of 'resistance', 'hope', 'anger' and 'freedom' came from this 'gathering' of diverse Aboriginal singers and performers born over several generations and each at different points in their respective careers.

Featured in the film is a ‘who’s who’ of Australian Indigenous music: Dan Sultan, Archie Roach, the late Auntie Ruby Hunter, Kutcha Edwards, Joe Geia, Bart Willoughby, Lou Bennett, Steven Pigram, Emma Donovan and Ursula Yovich, just to name a few.

Included also is NT singing royalty, Shellie Morris, front and centre with a powerful Territory story of her own to tell, and a singing voice to match.

Subtitled “a journey into the heart of Aboriginal protest music”, in other filmmakers' hands *murundak - songs of freedom* could have easily been a botched exercise. (Think 'worthy' ABC-TV doc with earnest voiceover, over-explaining every scene and cut way-fast 'lest the audience reach for the remote'.)



Emma Donovan in a scene from 'murundak'. Pic: Daybreak Films

Thankfully, it's not.

Instead *murundak* takes its time, languidly gliding between backstage tour footage, live performances, interviews and quietly-observed scenes of landscape and performers going back to country, to contemplate where they have come from and what they are moving towards. (There's one such beautiful scene featuring Shellie Morris and her sister in the tropical glades just outside of Darwin.)

What *murundak* does do is strike a delicate balance between 'concert film' and 'cultural documentary'.

Which is not surprising given the calibre of this doco-duo's debut film, [*Words From The City*](#) (2007), another poetic and delicately-woven music film about the emergence of Australian hip hop as a cultural and musical force to be reckoned with. (And how young Indigenous Australians have gravitated towards hip hop as a form of contemporary protest music.)

Like *murundak*, *Words* also delves fearlessly into Australia's urban Indigenous culture, and the importance of song in keeping it loud, proud and alive.

murundak – "meaning 'alive' in Woirurrung language" – is a deft film with music at its heart. Individual stories entwine themselves around performances much like a melody embraces beat in a beautiful, transcendent song. The musicality of *murundak* – *songs of freedom* makes it powerful, and defines it: you feel as if *you are right there* at every gig, smack bang in the heart of the crowd drinking in the voices and stories, be they sung or spoken.

The film will premiere at St. Kilda Festival on February 11, with screenings at WOMADelaide and Adelaide International Film Festival before its SBS-TV screening mid-2011. (Theatrical dates for the NT are also in the pipeline.)

Natasha Gadd kindly spent some time with Megan Spencer from MusicNT, to walk her through making *murundak*, a labour of love from start to end.

MusicNT: When did you first hear about The Black Arm Band? And what was your first impression?

Natasha Gadd: In 2006, we were invited to create a series of archival sequences that would play during the live performances of The Black Arm Band's first show called 'murundak'. These sequences were intended to provide a context to the songs by showing in a lyrical, visual way, key moments in the struggle for Aboriginal rights in Australia.

Right, filmmaker Natasha Gadd.



MuNT: What made you and Rhys want to tell this story - turn it into a documentary?

NG: During the first rehearsal of the show, we realised that this was a unique and extraordinary gathering of the pioneers of Aboriginal protest singers from all corners of the country.

Hearing artists like Archie Roach, the late Ruby Hunter, the late G.R Burrurawanga, Joe Geia, and Bart Willoughby singing the anthems of Aboriginal Australia, we realised that this was a unique expression of the ongoing fight for justice and freedom.

Given the political climate at the time – Howard was in his 10th year of leadership – there was a great sense of urgency to get these songs out there and to demand change and call for action.

By creating a music documentary of 'murundak' we could tell the story of the struggle through the songs that have sustained and galvanized blackfellas for decades but which very few whitefellas know about.

We thought this would be a great opportunity to explore not only the history of the struggle but also the personal struggles and sacrifices of the artists. As many of the artists were elders in the community, there was an even greater sense of urgency to record this gathering. Since we began the film, three of the original members of the Black Arm Band have passed away. We hope that this documentary serves, in some small way, as a legacy to the music and courage of those early pioneers.

MuNT: How long did it take from start to finish?

NG: The film took four years to complete. What surprised us in the early stages was how difficult it was to get the project funded given that this gathering featured such a great lineup of artists and songs. I guess not really surprising given the political climate at the time.

When the idea for The Black Arm Band was first conceived in 2004, it was the height of the Howard era, the 'history wars' were raging and there was much debate in the political landscape about the "black arm band view of history" – a term coined by historian Geoffrey Blainey and later adopted by Howard - which sought to undermine the history of oppression

and injustice experience by the Aboriginal people of Australia. Hence the tongue in cheek name 'The Black Arm Band'.

MuNT: Did you spend a lot of time researching it?

NG: We researched the project from a number of angles; from the historical struggles that the songs refer to, the personal stories of the artists and the history of Aboriginal protest music.

We received some early development funding from Film Victoria and Screen Australia which gave us the opportunity to spend time with a number of the key artists including people like Stephen Pigram in Broome and Shellie Morris in Darwin who were far removed from our experience. Shellie took us out on country with her sister Mandy Muir and her family (traditional owners in Kakadu) and we spent time hanging about and filming with her during music workshops at Daly River and community performances in places like Gunbulanya.

It was a great way to get to know the artists and what inspires them and motivates them to write and sing.



In the edit suite: Shellie Morris and sister Mandy Muir in a scene from 'murundak'. Photo: Daybreak Films

MuNT: How would you describe making the project?

NG: One of the things we love about making docos is the ability to view the world through other people's eyes. Most of the time was spent filming the artists at every stage of the tour - rehearsing, travelling, hanging out as well as performing - to capture their experience of the tour.

Making character docos like *murundak* means that you need to get close to people to be able to represent their stories honestly and respectfully. Sometimes this can be difficult as the closer to the characters you become, the harder it is to remain objective.

But to be able to gain the trust of the artists required us to be as open with them as we were hoping they would be with us. It can be challenging and emotionally draining but it is a pretty wild experience to be able to immerse ourselves in the lives of the characters that we film with.

MuNT: What was the reaction of the participants when you first floated the idea of making the film - and did your relationships with them change over time?

NG: The Black Arm Band is a large ensemble which is made up of not only Indigenous singer/songwriters but also non-Indigenous instrumentalists. There is also a large and dedicated team behind the scenes including the producers at the City of Melbourne and the stage crew. So there were a lot of people we needed to be on board before we could seek the support of the broadcaster and film agencies.

It was a long development period of meeting, talking and filming with the artists to earn the trust required to tell this story. It was definitely difficult and at times, I'm sure, people wondered whether the film would ever be made!

We filmed the first half of the footage whilst still in development with a limited crew and limited resources. Even when we had financed the film, we were still operating with a small crew documenting the tour, recording interviews and filming and recording the live performances.

Our relationships with everyone changed over time, particularly with the artists as friendships developed and all our lives were shared. It was a slow process but in the end one that definitely benefited the film as what emerged was much more intimate and involved than if we'd shot it in 6 months.



Ursula Yovich in 'murundak'. Photo: Daybreak Films

MuNT: Did your idea of the project - its shape - change as you were making it? As in, what idea did you have that the film might be when you started out, and what did it end up?

NG: A lot changed in the course of making the film, not just for The Black Arm Band but for the national political landscape as well.

The story definitely changed shape over the course of the shoot. The initial idea for the film focused on the pioneers of Aboriginal protest music and the songs that told of the struggles

for equality and justice for Aboriginal Australia.

After the first couple of shows, younger performers were coming to the fore within the band - like Dan Sultan, Ursula Yovich and Shellie Morris - to sing songs about contemporary Aboriginal life. Whilst a lot of the earlier songs were hard hitting political anthems like 'We Have Survived' and 'Took the Children Away', these younger performers were singing songs of love and hope.

At the same time, Australia itself was changing. As we filmed the tour - from Australian capital cities, to London and then the Northern Territory and Western Australia - Howard was voted out, Rudd voted in and an apology was delivered to the Stolen Generations. All these elements seemed to impact on not only the artists and the songs but also the different audiences along the tour, both black and white.

MuNT: Do you view *murundak* as a music documentary?

NG: We view *murundak - songs of freedom* as part-music documentary, part-character doco. There are obviously live music performances in the film but they are often interwoven with the story of the songs and the journey of the tour.

MuNT: What did you learn making the film?

NG: We learnt so much through making this film.

Obviously we learnt a lot about the historical and political history of the struggle but what we really learnt about was this huge repertoire of music that has galvanised blackfellas across the country for decades. There are a few songs that have obviously been big on the mainstream circuit like 'Treaty', 'From Little Things Big Things Grow' and 'Solid Rock', but the anthems that came before it had an even bigger impact on blackfellas across the country.

Everywhere we went, north or south, urban or remote, songs like 'We Have Survived' and 'Yil Lull' are played, danced and sung over and over again. As Bart Willoughby said, "these are the peoples' anthems".



On stage in 'murundak'. Photo: Daybreak Films

MuNT: How much time did you shoot and/or spend in the NT? What were your impressions - especially about the music?

NG: We spent a couple of weeks in the early development stage of the film in and around Darwin, Arnhem Land and Kakadu filming with Shellie Morris.

The second night we were in Darwin she said she wanted to surprise us and asked us to meet her at the Botanical Gardens. It was the Darwin Festival and we arrived at dusk just as the

lanterns were lighting up the trees and Gurrumul - prior to releasing his landmark album - was walking onto the stage. It was totally amazing and even more so that the audience were singing along in Yolngu matha.

The next day we went to the Gunbalanya Club for a performance by Wildflower Band and Shellie, which is totally etched in our memories. The creativity and the prolific nature of music making in Northern Territory is really unique. There's a sound shaped by geography but also just by a joyful creativity that keeps music constantly flowing in communities around the region.

MuNT: What did you learn about the NT - and the artists in BAB from the Territory - when you filmed there?

NG: While it's obviously hard to totally understand the language songs, there is a definite NT sound and an emotion that is still communicated by the songs. Shellie has that same sound but given many of her songs are in English, it obviously makes it easier to understand! But the focus on family and country runs throughout all these songs and a lot of the music we heard in the Top End.

MuNT: Specially Shellie Morris - who features in Murundak.. Can you tell us any stories about meeting her, your thoughts about her talent etc?

NG: The first time we heard Shellie singing Swept Away we couldn't believe what a strong and soulful voice she had. Whether she is singing to an audience of 2000 at the Opera House or two people around a campfire, she captivates everyone, everytime. And offstage, she is just as generous and welcoming as on which is why so many people warm to her and fall in love with her and her music.

MuNT: You're premiering at St Kilda Film Festival - and then WOMADelaide - are you finding the film is being welcomed by film festivals, or arts festivals?

NG: The film has been welcomed by both arts festivals and film festivals which is great. We have done a really big push with the arts festivals largely because many of the large arts festivals across the country have been involved with the live Black Arm Band show's or have featured many of The Black Arm Band artists over the years. So it made sense to approach festivals that have a strong affinity with the artists and the band.

Like the concerts, we hope the film plays to diverse audiences across the country and overseas. It has a place in both traditional cinema venues as well as open air at arts festivals or community screenings. Everyone is part of the story.

MuNT: What are your plans for the film after the festivals?

NG: We are planning a national tour of the film in April then in May SBS will screen the film. After that Madman will release the film on DVD. We're also hoping the film will find an international audience.

There will definitely be screenings in the NT during the national tour. We'll keep you posted on special events and screening details in the meantime!

Many thanks to Natasha Gadd for this generous interview - MS

