

Musical journey to Aboriginal heart

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Murundak is a new soundtrack for our indigenous past, writes **Joyce Morgan**.

Who would have thought conservative historian Geoffrey Blainey would inadvertently provide the name for a music group? Calling yourselves the Black Arm Band is wryly subversive, given its members are mostly indigenous singers, songwriters and performers.

It's one way of reclaiming a phrase that has become associated with a "blame and shame" view of history. The band will present an alternative soundtrack to Australia's history when they perform at the Sydney Festival, musician Shane Howard says.

"Aboriginal Australia has a great history of resistance and a great history of humour," says Howard, the group's co-music director. The band will present an alternative soundtrack of Australia's history when they perform as part of the Sydney Festival.

Drawing on songs from decades of struggle for indigenous rights, the 28-piece ensemble brings together some of the country's leading black musicians and performers, among them Archie Roach, Ruby Hunter, Bart Willoughby, Ursula Yovich and Joe Geia.

"There's an incredible voice of resistance that is lyrical, musical, sorrowful, joyful and compelling,"

Howard says. His voice has long been intertwined with Aboriginal Australia. As the frontman with Goanna he penned the 1982 anthem *Solid Rock*, the first song to put indigenous experience on the Australian charts before Yothu Yindi's *Treaty* or Midnight Oil's *Beds Are Burning*.

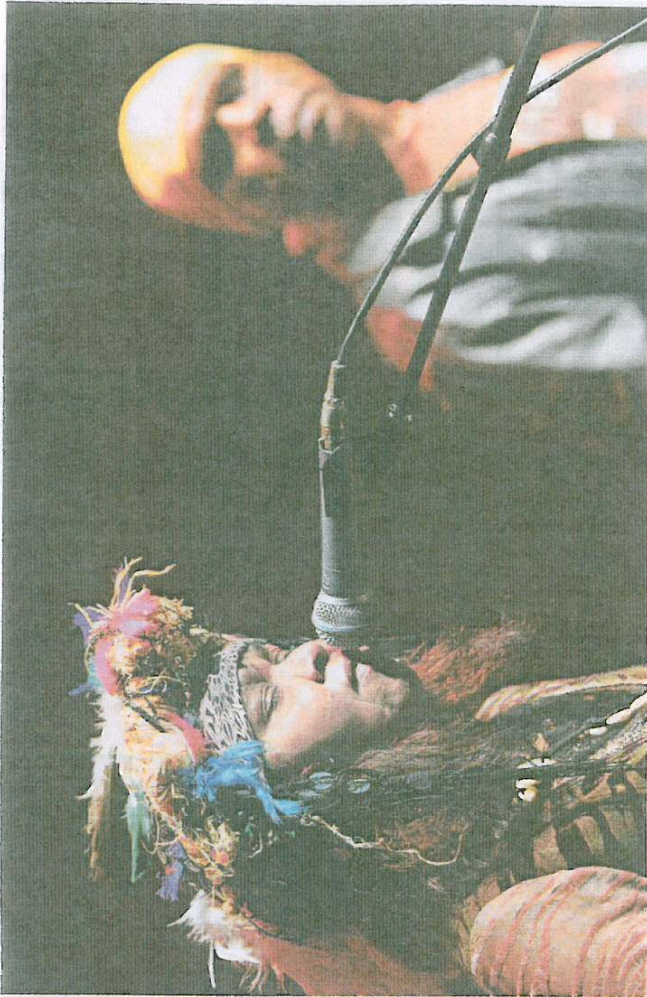
When the band first performed the concert *Murundak* - meaning alive - more than a year ago at the Melbourne Festival, it was a way to give voice to issues that had been silenced or sidelined for a decade.

"Aboriginal people in that period lost their voice to a large extent. There was a feeling through that last 10 or 11 years that a lot we'd fought for was about to be swept away. It was dispiriting stuff," Howard says. "We did the Melbourne show in a climate of incredible hostility, at least at a political level."

With an apology to indigenous Australians on the political radar and a re-engagement with Aboriginal Australia gathering momentum, it is in a more optimistic climate that the Sydney concert will be performed. While Howard is wary of politicians, he has faith in ordinary Australians.

**Faith ... musician
Shane Howard.**

Photo: Angela Milne



Silent no longer ... Ruby Hunter and Archie Roach join other leading indigenous performers in *Murundak*.

"we're a generation away from being able to do that," he says. "I said: 'Why not put the great songs of the last 30 years together?'"

And there's been plenty of them. He also realised that some of the first generation of musicians were dying. It is a realisation underscored by the loss earlier this year of the Warumpi Band's frontman G.R. Burarrwanga, who performed in the Melbourne concerts.

The concert is not a covers gig. The songs have been arranged for the large ensemble and will be presented against a backdrop of evocative images, with Rachael Maza-Long as narrator.

Howard grew up in rural Victoria near a number of missions where contact with indigenous people was a fact of life. He was struck by the discon-

nection between the stories he heard of a proud past and the often dysfunctional reality around him.

"So you ask some big questions," he says. "That led me to Uluru in 1980. I found there a cosmology and a deep spirituality that really lit a fire in my head."

Some of that fire went into *Solid Rock*, which was a turning point not just in Australian music, but in Howard's own life.

"That song threw me head-first into Aboriginal Australia and I've never quite made it out, and nor would I want to," he says.

In the aftermath of its success, Howard went through a troubled period during which his marriage ended and he drifted from the spotlight and ended up living in a caravan in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

"I had incredible commercial suc-

Americans and all that. We were going to be bigger than Men At Work," he says.

"I came out of that era certainly disenchanted with the Western world. I saw it as greedy, avaricious, soulless - it cared little for history or truth."

Yet Howard's friendships with indigenous Australians sustained the musician and helped him find a new direction which has led him full circle, returning to live "in a shack by a swamp" near Port Fairy, not far from where he grew up.

"It's been a continuous journey into the mystical heart of Aboriginal Australia," he says. "It has enriched my life."

The Black Arm Band performs *Murundak* at the Sydney Opera House on January 22 and 23.