

YOTHU YINDI

Biography

Pronounced as "yo-thoo yin-dee", the band's name translates from Yolngu matha to English as "child and mother" and is essentially a kinship term referring to the connection that the Yolngu (Australian Aboriginal) clans of north-east Arnhem Land have between themselves.

Even in their earliest stages, Yothu Yindi were recognised as a unique act. They combined the sounds and instrumentation of western rock 'n' roll with songs and performances that date back tens of thousands of years. They took the ancient song cycles of north-east Arnhem Land - featuring such traditional instruments as the bilma (ironwood clapsticks) and yidaki (didgeridoo or hollow log) - and juxtaposed them with western pop sounds to present a true musical meeting of two diverse cultures. They took traditional Yolngu dance performances - describing the behavior of crocodiles, wallabies, brolga and other fauna of their homelands - and worked them into the context of contemporary performance. The result is a band that's been hailed as "the most powerful blend of indigenous and modern music to emerge from the world music scene".

Coming together in 1986, Yothu Yindi consists of both Yolngu (Aboriginal) and Balanda (non-Aboriginal) musicians and embodies a sharing of cultures. The band promotes the strength of Yolngu culture, presenting non-Aboriginal people throughout the world with an opportunity to appreciate and enjoy aspects of that ancient culture.

The band recorded their first album *Homeland Movement* in Australia's bicentennial year, 1988. Combining contemporary western rock with the traditional song cycles of the Gumatj and Rirratjingu clans of north-east Arnhem Land, *Homeland Movement* was recorded in one day and mixed in another and won the band a contract with Australia's leading independent record company, Mushroom.

In 1988 Yothu Yindi performed at bicentennial protest concerts in Sydney, recorded *Homeland Movement*, performed at the Seoul Cultural Olympics in Korea, headlined the first Festival of Aboriginal Rock Music in Darwin (later appearing in the television documentary *Sing Loud Play Strong*) and embarked on a 32-date tour of the United States and Canada with Australia's most politicised rockers Midnight Oil. Also that year, the band's founding member and lead singer, Mandawuy Yunupingu became the first Aboriginal person from Arnhem Land to gain a tertiary degree when he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Education) from Deakin University.

Early in 1989, *Homeland Movement* was released to critical acclaim. An innovative recording, it has now clocked up sales in excess of 50,000 copies. The band's touring opportunities that year were limited when Mandawuy Yunupingu was appointed principal of the Yirrkala Community School (where he grew up) and set about implementing a radical both-ways curriculum, combining Balanda (European) and Yolngu (Aboriginal) educational processes designed to present students with the best aspects of both cultures. During school holidays, Yothu Yindi performed in Hong Kong and Papua New Guinea and toured Australia's capital cities with Neil Young.

In 1990, with Mandawuy committed to his ground-breaking work at the school, the band used the school holidays to tour New Zealand with Tracy Chapman and to perform at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and the European Folk Festival in Glasgow.

With the 1991 release of their second album, *Tribal Voice*, Yothu Yindi secured their place in the annals of Australian rock history.

Tribal Voice, which dominated the national charts for much of 1991-92, yielded the hit singles *Treaty* and *Djapana*, won the band recognition as the first predominately-Aboriginal act to gain widespread media attention, and generated international recording and touring commitments.

The album featured the band's first hit single, *Treaty*, which crashed into the Australian Top Twenty and spent 22 weeks in the national charts. The first song by a predominately-Aboriginal band to chart in Australia, it was also the first song in an Aboriginal language (Gumatj) to gain extensive airplay and international recognition.

Treaty was a plea for reconciliation sparked by former Australian prime minister Bob Hawke's commitment to negotiate a treaty between the descendants of the Aboriginal people who'd lived in Australia for 40,000 years or more and the non-Aboriginal people who've lived here since 1788. That a song with such a potent political message should dominate the charts for almost six months was in itself extraordinary.

As *Treaty* soared up the Australian charts, the band used the mid-year school break to take up an invitation to perform at the New Music Seminar in New York. Their performance in New York soon led to their securing an international recording contract with US-based Hollywood Records.

Treaty was voted Song of the Year at the APRA (Australian Performing Rights Association) awards for 1991. It picked up the Human Rights Commission's award for songwriting. At the ARIA (Australian Record Industry Association) Awards, *Treaty* was voted Australian Record of the Year and Best Australian Single. The film clip directed and shot by Stephen Michael Johnson of Burrundi Pictures was named Best Australian Video at the Australian Music Awards and took out the same title at the MTV

International Awards in Los Angeles.

The *Tribal Voice* album, voted Best Indigenous Record at the 1992 ARIA awards, has now clocked up multi-platinum Australian sales and has been instrumental in breaking the band throughout the world.

In 1992, with Yothu Yindi fast emerging as one of the hottest acts in Australia, Mandawuy took leave from the Yirrkala School to concentrate on the band. Yothu Yindi spent much of 1992 touring Australia, north America and eastern and western Europe, winning rave reviews wherever they played.

In December 1992, Yothu Yindi represented Australia at the launch of the United Nations International Year of Indigenous Peoples in New York. Upon their return, they released *Ditimurru*, a compilation of their videos. (Ditimurru is a Gumatj clan term meaning "pieces coming together to build a canoe").

On January 26 1993, Mandawuy Yunupingu was named 1992 Australian of the Year in recognition of his commitment to forge greater understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, and because of his burgeoning role as an ambassador for all Australians.

At the 1993 ARIA awards, Yothu Yindi continued to pick up the accolades when their second hit single, *Djapana*, was named Best Indigenous Record, Best Video, and also took out the gong for Best Engineer.

During 1993, Yothu Yindi joined with the National Drug Offensive to launch a campaign aimed at encouraging the sensible use (rather than abuse) of alcohol in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies.

In between touring commitments - which saw the band playing in Australia, Japan and Europe - Yothu Yindi recorded their third album *Freedom*.

Released to critical acclaim in November 1993, *Freedom* featured the singles *World Turning*, *Timeless Land* and *Dots On The Shells* and paved the way for 1994 tours of Australia, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, Germany, France, Belgium, Holland, the UK, the USA, Canada and Japan.

1995 saw the band in studios in Australia and the UK recording their fourth album, *Wild Honey (Birrkuta)*.

Amid tours of Germany, Australia and north America *Wild Honey (Birrkuta)* was released in 1996, garnering airplay with *Superhighway*, a single co-written with Andrew Farriss from INXS.

In 1997 Yothu Yindi performed in South Africa under the auspices of the Fred Hollows Foundation and embarked on two tours of Europe and Brazil.

1998 saw Yothu Yindi recording their fifth album *One Blood* in Dublin and

Bavaria. The band then toured Germany with Peter Maffay on the German rock star's ambitious Encounters tour. With special guests Liam O'Maonlai from Hothouse Flowers and Simple Minds' Jim Kerr, *One Blood* was a polished selection of songs old and new. The album featured dramatic new recordings of the band's earlier Australian hits plus new songs like *One Blood* (co-written with Paul Kelly) and traditional Yolngu songs of the Gumatj clan performed by tribal elder and ceremonial leader Galarrwuy Yunupingu.

In 1999 Yothu Yindi toured Vietnam, New Zealand and Australia (including a show with Darwin Symphony Orchestra) and then embarked on a four week headlining tour of Europe taking in Germany, Austria, Holland and the UK's Glastonbury Festival.

With the dawning of 2000 Yothu Yindi toured Australia and New Zealand with the Big Day Out and completed recording their sixth album *Garma* with producer Andrew Farriss of INXS, a musician with whom the band has been collaborating since 1993. The album was recorded in Sydney and at the Yothu Yindi Foundation's new Yirrnga Music Development Studio in the band's homelands at Gunyangara on the shores of Melville Bay in north-east Arnhem Land.

Yothu Yindi capped off a busy year in 2000 with performances at the closing ceremony of the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney and the opening ceremony for the Paralympic Games. In the weeks prior to those appearances Yothu Yindi celebrated East Timor's freedom with a concert in Dili on the first anniversary of that emerging nation's vote for independence and launched their 6th album *Garma* with an open air concert at Gulkula in their homelands of north-east Arnhem Land, an event that rounded off the Yothu Yindi Foundation's 2nd annual week-long Garma Festival of Traditional Culture.

In September 2001, after workshops and a showcase performance at the 3rd Garma Festival, the band played at the Yeperenye Festival in Alice Springs.

The band kicked off 2002 with shows around Perth and then embarked on a jaunt up the east coast that included the Shoalhaven Thank You Concert at Nowra. With a bill that included Jimmy Barnes, Mental As Anything and Wendy Matthews, the event was organised to show community appreciation to all the volunteer rural fire fighters and State Emergency Services personnel who gave up their holidays during that summer's fire crisis.

In March 2003, Yothu Yindi shared the stage with INXS, Jimmy Barnes and Killing Heidi at the Sydney stop on the Harley-Davidson 100th Anniversary Open Road Tour. Following that fuelled-up show, Yothu Yindi headed off on a nine-date tour of New Zealand and Australia supporting 2003 Grammy award winner Carlos Santana. Also in early 2003 Yothu Yindi spread a message of respecting culture through Northern Territory schools. Singer-guitarist Mandawuy Yunupingu, traditionally trained Yidaki (didjeridoo) players Gapanbulu Yunupingu, Nicky Yunupingu and bass guitarist Stuart Kellaway travelled

across the Territory using songs, storytelling and open discussions to inspire and encourage some of Australia's most vulnerable young people to attend school and stay healthy. The tour started in February in the Top End of Australia and will roll through the Northern Territory until May. The Yothu Yindi NT Schools Tour was sponsored by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy.

Yothu Yindi then performed at the 14th Annual East Coast International Blues & Roots Music Festival at Byron Bay over the Easter Weekend.

Each August, the members of Yothu Yindi are involved in the annual Garma Festival in their homelands at Gulkula, conducting workshops for indigenous musicians from Arnhem Land communities at the Yirrnga Music Development Studio, and presenting a showcase performance at the closing concert. Overseen by Mandawuy Yunupingu and other members of the Yothu Yindi Foundation, Garma has gone from strength to strength in recent years, attracting guests from around the world who wish to experience aspects of Yolngu culture and engage in the forums presented each year. Further information about Garma can be found at <http://www.garma.telstra.com>

ORIGINS OF THE TRIBAL VOICE

The Yolngu members of Yothu Yindi live in the tribal homelands of north-east Arnhem Land 600 kilometres east of the Northern Territory capital of Darwin. Some live in Yirrkala, a coastal community on the Gove Peninsula that was originally established by the Methodist Missionary Society in 1935. Others live in the neighbouring community of Gunyangara on the shores of Melville Bay.

Yirrkala is a community of 800 Yolngu people that serves as a resource centre for a further 800 people who live in small family-orientated out-stations or homelands centres in the region. (It was the move back to out-stations or homelands centres that inspired the title song of Yothu Yindi's debut album, *Homeland Movement*). A move pioneered in north-east Arnhem Land, the homelands movement has seen Aboriginal people returning to their traditional lands and lifestyles that rely less on the trappings of Western society and more on traditional activities such as hunting, fishing and cultural and ceremonial education.

Yolngu band members were drawn from two of the sixteen clan groups in the region, the Gumatj and Rirratjingu.

The people of the region have had sustained contact with Balanda (Europeans) only over the past sixty years or so. Consequently, their traditional cultural, religious, artistic and ceremonial activities are still among the strongest in the country. The band's approach to its career is deeply rooted in traditional decision making processes, so all traditional songs that have been performed or

released have been done so as a result of substantial consultation with clan leaders and traditional law-makers.

As vocalist Mandawuy Yunupingu told *Rolling Stone* : "We operate in two aspects of reality. One is restricted (sacred); 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 to my world without fear of losing it. I'm using white man's skills, Yolngu skills and putting them together for a new beginning."

The processes of consultation generally involve Mandawuy's older brother, Galarrwuy Yunupingu, leader of the Gumatj clan and chair of the Northern Land Council. Galarrwuy, who performs traditional Gumatj songs on some of the band's recordings, was named Australian of the Year in 1978 (sixteen years before Mandawuy took out the same honour) and was awarded a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 1985.

The band's homelands make up part of the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve that was established in 1930. In the 1960s the Australian government granted mining leases to a multi-national consortium to extract bauxite from lands traditionally owned by the Gumatj and Rirratjingu clans. The clans were not consulted about the mine. Consequently, the birth of the Aboriginal land rights movement can be directly traced to the actions of the fathers and grandfathers of Yothu Yindi members. In consultation with their families, the leaders of the Gumatj and Rirratjingu and other clans presented petitions on bark to the federal government during the 1960's calling for recognition of their traditional land tenure. Those petitions, which led to the establishment of the Woodward Royal Commission and ultimately the tabling of the Land Rights Act (NT) 1976, now hang in Parliament House, Canberra.

That Yothu Yindi broke through with the hit single *Treaty* is indeed appropriate, given the political sophistication of their heritage.

Yolngu society has always been based on sharing and reciprocity. In those isolated areas in which Aboriginal culture still survives, those fundamental tenets are as strong as ever.

Through their recorded music and their live performances, the Yolngu members of Yothu Yindi are seeking to share aspects of their culture with the rest of the world.

Their track record would suggest that they're achieving that.