



MURUNDAK – THE BLACK ARMBAND Native Tongue

Murundak is an extraordinary musical event that celebrates music as an instrument of identity, resistance and resilience, and a call to freedom. Winner of the 2006 Best Australian Contemporary Music Concert Award, it brings together The Black Arm Band, a 32-piece ensemble featuring a lineup of exceptional musicians performing works from the inspirational songbook of contemporary Indigenous life. Murundak – The Black Armband is at The Fremantle Arts Centre on Saturday, February 23. JOSIE MITCHELL reports

The Indigenous artists playing in The Black Arm Band are among the most respected names in Australian music and include Archie Roach, Ruby Hunter, Bart Willoughby, Stephen Pigram, Peter Rotumah, Kutcha Edwards, Mark Atkins, Lou Bennett, Joe Geia, Emma Donovan, Dan Sultan, Ursula Yovich, Rachael Maza-Long, Shellie Morris and David Arden – who will be joined by non-Indigenous musicians such as Shane Howard... artists that have added their own unique voices to Indigenous musical history.

The soundtrack to Australian Indigenous life is alive with songs that express joy, hope, struggle and compassion. There are songs everyone will recognise – Yothu Yindi's *Treaty*, Shane Howard's *Solid Rock*, and Neil Murray's *My Island Home*; some that are lesser known – Joe Geia's *Yil Lull*, Bart Willoughby's *We Have Survived* and Tiddas' *Koorie Woman*; and others that were specially commissioned for Murundak – Peter Rotumah's *Remembrance* and Kutcha Edwards' *Is This What We Deserve?*

Against a backdrop of lyrical and provocative film images, *Murundak* unfolds as a symbolic and tangible step towards mutual recognition between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. First performed in 2006 as the closing event for the *Melbourne International Arts Festival*, *Murundak* was conceived by producer Steven Richardson and spent two years in development.

Tiddas' Lou Bennett has been involved with *Murundak* since the beginning and is the backing vocals coach for the performance ensemble, so he knows the nature of the event as well as anyone.

"Steven Richardson wanted to create a spectacular event that could portray the talent and skill of Aboriginal musicians and the

historical recordings they have made to detail Indigenous history in Australia," Bennett says. "*Murundak* presents both established and emerging artists and others that have been around for a long time but aren't really known outside the Indigenous community. Peter Rotumah is a good example of that – a fantastic musician who has been a great mentor to me since the early days of Tiddas – in fact he came to our first ever gig. Then you have the likes of Joey Geia who has been instrumental in the development of contemporary Indigenous music, but is virtually unknown in the mainstream. Some of these artists have no profile at all in Western Australia, but that makes it especially exciting for us to be travelling there to perform," he adds, excitedly.

Murundak uses a combination of songs, narration and images to tell the story, Bennett goes on to explain. "Some of the images used are incredibly moving – like Gough Whitlam pouring sand into the hand of Vincent Lingiari when the land was handed back to the Gurindji people in 1975, or thousands of people marching together before the 1967 referendum. The reinforcement of the words through the images really seems to resonate with the audience and gives them a deeper understanding of where our songs come from and the messages behind them."

Calling the ensemble 'The Black Arm Band' is a ironic way of reclaiming a term that has come become associated with a 'blame and shame' view of history.

"When footballers wear a black arm band, everyone knows it's because they're grieving for someone who has passed away – so calling ourselves 'The Black Arm Band' symbolises a tribute to and respect for the individuals that have passed before us... it's all about letting go of that old view that ours is a dying race," Bennett reveals.

"That's what 'murundak' means – 'alive' in the Woivurrung language – our culture is alive right now, not something that finished 200 years ago. We are not a stagnant culture as some people presume – we are a continually developing culture. The idea that a real Aboriginal person is a black man standing on one leg in a desert with a spear in his hand is wrong – *Murundak* is about breaking down those misconceptions, allowing them to stay in the past and moving forward into the future.

"Aboriginal people who live in urban areas are told we're not real Aboriginals because we don't eat witchetty grubs or live traditionally. I may live in a house in the city and drive a car and wear normal clothes and speak little of my language, but I am still connected to my land, my family, my totems and kinship laws, and that grows and develops on a daily basis. Using the name 'The Black Arm Band' is also a way of saying we can let go of the past,



we can forgive, but we can never forget. We are so lucky to live in Australia in so many ways, but we have to acknowledge that our own countrymen are living in third world conditions, with third world diseases and a life span that's nearly 20 years shorter than a white man's. There have to be processes we can utilise to bring Aboriginal people to the level of the rest of the community," he says.

With the long-awaited apology to Indigenous Australia fresh in our ears, and a re-engagement with Aboriginal Australia gathering momentum, the Perth concert will be performed in a more optimistic political climate than the original two years ago.

Bennett reflects, "The apology was a great day for all Australians - black and white together saying 'we've acknowledged this now - so come on! Let's move forward together as a stronger nation'. Moving forward has a lot to do with education - and not just education of Aboriginal people, but of white people too, so they can have some understanding of the continuing struggles of Indigenous people.

"Attitudes need to change, not through anger or protest, but through compassion and humanitarian action.

Hopefully *Murundak* can have some influence in that way."

