

THE AUSTRALIAN

Aboriginal music brought to the stage by Clinton Walker's Buried Country



Buried Country author Clinton Walker and singer Leah Flanagan. Picture: Renee Nowytarger.

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Writer Clinton Walker has been living with the story of Aboriginal country music for most of his adult life. “There’s that cliché about me not choosing it, it choosing me,” he says. “There is a bit of the cosmic about it. It’s something that has been part of me since the 1980s. I’ve made connections to black Australia that I think I needed more of; that maybe all of white Australia needs. It’s been a natural thing for me so I just keep going on learning more and still finding people and music. That’s what keeps me going.”

Walker is a Sydney-based journalist and broadcaster known for his expertise in rock music, particularly Australian rock music in its formative years during the 1960s and 70s, but in the year 2000 he came up with a definitive history of a musical form that had been largely ignored outside the indigenous population.

His book *Buried Country: The Story of Aboriginal Country Music* also became a documentary and a double album, telling the story of artists such as Jimmy Little, Vic Simms and Roger Knox, and presenting their music as well as that of lesser-known

indigenous performers to a new audience. Now that story is taking on yet another form, as present-day Aboriginal singers including Knox, Warren H Williams and Leah Flanagan join forces for a stage show, under Walker's direction, that brings together some of the best material from a catalogue of songs stretching back more than 70 years.

Buried Country Live in Concert had its debut in Newcastle, NSW, in August; it is part of the music program at this month's Melbourne Festival and will then travel to Dubbo, NSW. Other shows are at the planning stage. For Walker it's another extension of his initial idea, sparked by the re-release of his book last year. He was approached about the idea of bringing the story to the stage by Melbourne producer and journalist Mary Mihelakos. "I had given it some thought before then," he says. "I would sit there and watch documentaries like *Buena Vista Social Club* or *Cannot Buy My Soul* and I'd get that idea. I'm not equipped to do it myself, so when Mary got involved as a producer I knew I could do it as a writer-director."

The show, which has a narrative and video component, features Knox, Williams, Auriel Andrew, LJ Hill, Luke Daniel Peacock and James Henry. All of the artists perform solo as well as in collaboration and are supported by a band of gun players, including musical director Brendan Gallagher, plus Knox's son Buddy Knox on guitar and grandson Teangi Knox on bass.

Flanagan, who has just released a new album, *Saudades*, and who begins a national tour today, has a crucial role in the *Buried Country* stage production. The Darwin-born, Sydney-based singer, who has Irish, Italian and Aboriginal heritage, performs one of the songs central to the show. *Brown Skin Baby (They Took Me Away)*, written by Aboriginal elder, singer and community leader "Uncle Bob" Randall in the 60s, is one of the most powerful songs about the Stolen Generations.

Randall, who died last year, was taken from his family in the Northern Territory in the 40s, when he was seven. It's a song with profound significance for Flanagan, whose grandmother was also among the Stolen Generations.

"That's the story of my family so you can't help but feel that connection and sadness to it," she says. "There are so many things about that song that I'd love to be able to explain, even the way Bob sings it."

The song tells the story of a mother in despair at the loss of her son. "Every time you hear it, it triggers such emotion," Flanagan says. "For me, any time I sing that song I can't help put that emotion into it, because if you don't you're not doing the song enough justice.

"It's about the Stolen Generation, but it's [also] about a mother crying because her baby was taken. I haven't really seen another song that deals with it in that way."

Other highlights in the show include Knox's performance of one of his best-known songs, *Streets of Tamworth*, and Hill's reading of his *The Pretty Bird Tree*, one of the songs featured

on the *Buried Country* album.

Walker hopes that the show, as with the other earlier components of the project, will bring greater recognition to songs that enjoyed little commercial success or exposure on radio when they were recorded.

“This larger audience, that is white audience, is getting introduced to this great material that they didn’t know before,” he says.

“For black Australia it’s more about celebrating this great stuff. I wouldn’t be doing this just on the basis of affirmative action. If the songs and the music weren’t great I wouldn’t have been drawn to it in the first place.”

Aboriginal country music has its roots in church, in the missions around Aboriginal communities and in the touring white country music pioneers such as Slim Dusty, who enjoyed great success playing to indigenous audiences in remote parts of Australia.

“We can remember the first time we saw a rock ’n’ roll band with guitars and stuff,” says Walker.

“So when Slim and those hillbilly bands went out there, they had that impact. In church, same as in the deep south of the US, where blues and country music come from, black and white people were going to different churches singing the same songs, basically; those gospel sort of songs. It all comes from there.”

The landscape of Australian country music has broadened in the past 20 years, with Aboriginal performers such as Troy Cassar-Daley enjoying mainstream success and songwriters such as Dan Sultan and Flanagan drawing from country roots for some of their material. Many more indigenous performers in other genres such as folk and hip hop are enjoying local and overseas success.

The bottom line with *Buried Country*, says Flanagan, is to bring greater awareness of a local brand of music that has been around for generations, but that struggled to be heard.

“At the end of the day,” she says, “Aboriginal stories are the stories that have always existed. I hope this show opens people’s eyes to the fact that Aboriginal music — Aboriginal culture — isn’t a new thing.

“It didn’t just start when someone decided to put the Warumpi Band on the radio. It’s not the music industry deciding what people should listen to. It’s stuff that was always there. Here’s your chance to learn a little bit more about it.”

Buried Country: The Story of Aboriginal Country Music Live in Concert, is at Melbourne Recital Hall on October 12 and 13 as part of Melbourne Festival and at the Artlands Festival in Dubbo, NSW, on October 28.

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