

# The songman of Arnhem Land...

## ... meets the 'Big Two' poets

From  
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in Darwin



Wandjuk, Ginsberg and Voznesensky . . . with poetry as a common language.

THREE poets sat on a remote beach in Arnhem Land.

It was raining heavily, so they were huddling in a small, corrugated iron hut belonging to one of them.

One poet toyed with aboriginal song-sticks and sang a short aboriginal song about a willy-willy — a song of the Pitjantjatjara group of central Australia. He was Allen Ginsberg, American.

One of them listened, occasionally clapped his hands in time with the music, and looked thoughtful. He was Andrei Voznesensky, Russian.

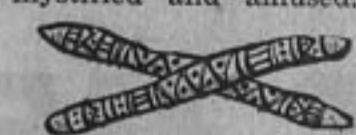
The third experimented with a pair of small Tibetan cymbals and laughed a lot. He was the owner of the hut, Wandjuk Marika, a member of the Pitjantjatjara group.

There has probably never been a meeting like it.

Allen Ginsberg, one of the first of the "beat generation" poets in the U.S. was doing his thing.

Andrei Voznesensky, the foremost modern Russian poet — better according to many, though less popular, than Yevtushenko — was interested.

Wandjuk Marika, one of the great aboriginal songmen, didgeridoo players and artists, was mystified and amused.



Mr Ginsberg had been itching for such a meeting — grasping for an opportunity to hear aboriginal music in its original setting — since he arrived in Australia on March 7.

Having known Mr Voznesensky for seven years — and his poetry — Mr Ginsberg wanted him to hear the music too. To Arnhem Land they went.

I could say I tagged along, but that would be misleading. I led them, acting, as Mr Ginsberg put it, as their native guide.

Soon after we arrived at Nhulunbuy, the Nabaco mining town on Gove Peninsula 400 miles east of Darwin, we headed south, in the bush dusk, to Yirrkala Mission.

We called on the mission superintendent, the Reverend Keith Hendry, who thought Wandjuk might be in his camp on the beach.

Down to the beach we went, as the quiet dark closed around us — but Wandjuk was not there.

A dozen children, most of them Wandjuk's, led us back to the settlement proper, where Wandjuk was taking part in a funeral ceremony.

And then the white poets, from the other sides of the world, realised how lucky they

were. They had stumbled on to the real thing, the full-scale funeral rites of one of the Yirrkala tribes.

Had a 20-year-old aboriginal girl not died that day, the poets would have heard little but talk.

We met Wandjuk, and got permission from the village council president, Mr Roy Marika, who was leading the ceremony, to stay and listen.

Mr Ginsberg brought out his Pitjantjatjara song-sticks and showed them to Wandjuk. Wandjuk was impressed.

"These are good sticks," he said. "There must be a song in them."

Mr Ginsberg was impressed. The idea caught and held, and he repeated it often. There must be a song in them.

I felt a little embarrassed, worried that we were intruding on other people's grief.

"No," Wandjuk said. "Our funerals are as public as yours."

So we stayed. Mr Ginsberg tapped his sticks and tried to hum along with the songmen and the throbbing didgeridoo. Mr Voznesensky sat quietly, clapping now and then and listening in wonder at the songmen's precise ensemble work.

Next morning we returned, in the rain, and sat with Wandjuk in his hut on the Yirrkala beach. His voice was almost gone. He had been singing all night and had had only two hours' sleep.



It was Mr Ginsberg's turn to perform. He brought out his Tibetan cymbals, sang Hare Krishna and a Zen chant. He then brought excited laughter to Wandjuk's hut as he sang the Pitjantjatjara song about the willy-willy, tapping away with Pitjantjatjara song-sticks.

This white American then had to explain this black Australian song to this black Australian. A thousand miles separate Yirrkala and the Pitjantjatjara area, and the languages are totally different.

We returned to the scene of the burial ceremony, but did not stay long. Wandjuk was dropping with fatigue. That afternoon we returned again. The cere-

mony was building to its climax after almost two days.

We found two ceremonies going. A baby had also died, and relatives and clansmen were holding a totally different rite 30 yards away.

The dead girl had been of the Dua moiety and the baby of the Yiritja moiety. These are divisions within a tribe for ritual purposes.

The Yiritja women were walling, swaying, throwing themselves on the ground and beating themselves with sticks, stones, tin cups and their fists. The baby's mother had inflicted "sorry cuts" on herself and was hysterical.

Dua people, in contrast, seemed orderly, organised, in control of

themselves. But this was the end of the Dua ceremony and the beginning of the Yiritja one.

We watched and listened as the Dua women did the dance of the bees, buzzing like bees, and the dance of the seagulls, waving their arms like seagulls' wings.

The didgeridoo throbbed on, the song-sticks tapped their complicated rhythms in unison. Wandjuk, responding to questions, supplied a running commentary for the two white poets. They were fascinated.

Later, Mr Ginsberg expounded his proposition that aboriginal songmen should be paid highly to teach their art.

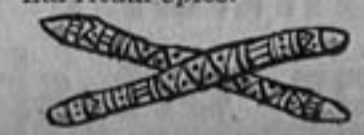
"The body of pre-Western historic legend is all articulated in ritual design, dance and vocal stanzas," he said.

"The economy that cultivated that high sophistication of epic art is the natural economy of a balanced nature where man is not an egotist and has his rightful place in earth's

household with other sentient beings, trees, and animals.

"Human egotism is now destroying that balance, and from an American point of view perhaps, destroying the life of the planet.

"As an educational corrective to excesses of exploitative capitalist consumption civilisation, we need to preserve the integrated nature-wisdom of aboriginal ritual epics.



"For that reason it would 'pay' a so-called sophisticated civilised community to subsidise the recording, transmission and dissemination of aboriginal songmen's knowledge.

"That means millions of dollars, like maniacal hallucinatory war jet planes.

"Money and power should go to songmen not white bureaucracy supervising them and living off them."

Mr Ginsberg said a professor of literature, who studied for 10

years, got \$10,000-\$15,000 a year and his educational institution was subsidised by the state.

It should be equally reasonable that an aboriginal "old-man-who-knows-many-songs," who studied for 40 years to master the pre-historic memory of his tribe, should receive comparable subsidy.

The teaching of aboriginal legends should be as much a part of formal education, for both white and black, as the teaching of English and mathematics.

"The government policy has been cultural assimilation — Bible study instead of legends," he said.

"To correct this cultural genocide, studies of aboriginal epics should be an integral part of education," he said.

Mr Voznesensky said simply: "It is beautiful music."

I returned to Darwin. The famous white poets left for Cairns and the rest of the world. Wandjuk Marika went back to his beach.