

Yabun festival: We have survived

By Penny Jones through Jawun

On 26 January 2013, Sydney will once again host Australia's biggest one-day Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural event. The 11th Yabun festival offers a stellar line-up of performers, the inaugural Gadigal Art Embassy, a Speak Out Tent and a Culture Tent for big conversations, and activities for the whole family.

Headline musicians include multiple award winners, Western Arrernte country music artist Warren H Williams, and Pitjantjatjara singer-songwriter Frank Yamma, along with soulstress Ursula Yovich and hip hop queen Dizzy Doolan and her deadly dancers. The legendary Archie Roach will perform songs from his latest album, 'Into The Bloodstream', backed by an all-star choir. Brisvegas-based rock band Mop & the Dropouts will delight Sydneysiders with their edgy classics. Hosting the main stage will be irreverent female impersonator Constantina Bush and *Redfern Now* star Alec Doomadgee.

Yabun hostess, Constantina Bush, who comes from a small cattle station outside of Katherine, is thrilled to be performing at Yabun. 'I'm very excited to be introduced to all the Sydney mob – and I can't wait to rock it up on the Yabun stage. I've got a few songs that Sydneysiders wouldn't have heard, and some stories about my life, growing up in the bush and then going to the big smoke, looking for fame and love.

Country music great Warren H Williams is also looking forward to performing at Yabun 2013. Williams describes Yabun, held each year on 26 January, as a day of celebration which arose out of mourning. 'As an Aboriginal musician from Central Australia, I've always heard about Yabun. People talk about this date as Survival Day. It's like a wake. A lot of friends go to the wake, and you can be happy and think of better things to come. Often, sad things get people together. Yabun is one of them – but it is a celebration as well of all that First Nations people in Australia have achieved and what we will continue to achieve.'

The festival's Production Coordinator (Events), Sonny Dallas-Law, from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media and arts organization Gadigal Information Service, is thrilled to be creating his first Yabun. His signature is the brand new Gadigal Art Embassy, which will present some of Australia's best Aboriginal artists, including Brook Andrew and Adam Hill, as well as community artists from Sydney and further afield. The dynamic Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative will present an exhibition, and the Art Embassy will also include arts and crafts workshops and stalls. For people looking to buy authentic Aboriginal art, this is the place to go.

In a rare quiet moment between phone calls with artists from across Australia, Sonny Dallas-Law reflects, 'I'm really passionate about bringing more of the arts

into the festival. I'm excited about the Art Embassy, and showcasing the community's talents and bringing the art to a wider audience as well. It was only starting off small, and now it's become massive.'

Yabun is known for hosting big conversations between diverse people. Yabun 2013 will open with the annual Kevin Cook Lecture, named for the famous freedom fighter. This lecture features prominent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander thinkers, and aims to reinvigorate debate about issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia.

The 11th Yabun will also retain the popular Speak Out Tent, where people come together to discuss current issues, ranging from education and employment to Constitutional reform and the Intervention. Young people will get the last word in the Speak Out Tent, talking about the issues affecting them.

Another Yabun tradition is the Culture Tent, hosting discussions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, including literature. Yabun 2013's Culture Tent will consider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander film, television, dance, sports, books and more, and attract prominent speakers including Anita Heiss, author of *Am I Black Enough For You?*

Unlike many Australia Day events, Yabun is alcohol and drug-free, and offers activities for all ages. As Sonny Dallas-Law points out, 'we don't need alcohol and drugs in our community to have a celebration of our culture.' Yabun does, however, offer market stalls with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delicacies, as well as food from around the world.

Children have their own area at Yabun with painting, storytelling, sports and the much-loved children's karaoke, Bop Till You Drop. Elders have a tent to themselves, with volunteers serving them tea, coffee and sandwiches, and the Aboriginal Medical Service offering check-ups.

As for young people, they have the Young, Black and Deadly stage, which showcases up-and-coming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander performers from across New South Wales. Wandjina Smith is 11 and lives in Redfern. She has been selected to sing on the Young, Black and Deadly stage, and will perform in front of her extended family, including her mum and her aunts from as far away as Wollongong. She says, 'I'm excited about performing in front of a lot of kids, and showing off my talent, but I'm very nervous.'

Lily Shearer is General Manager of Gadigal Information Service, which runs Yabun every year. She explains, 'it's important that our non-Aboriginal brothers and sisters share this day with us, to break down those barriers and build those bridges to a better Australia, because we can't move forward if we don't acknowledge the past. And this is a great opportunity to do that - to share and engage, ask questions.'

The 2013 Yabun is particularly important, as it marks the 75th Anniversary of the National Aborigines Progressive Association, which organized the first Day of

Mourning on 26 January 1938, to protest the lack of human rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Association also campaigned for the abolition of the NSW Aborigines Protection Board (later known as the Aborigines Welfare Board), which was responsible for the removal of thousands of Aboriginal children from their families – with devastating consequences.

For Lily Shearer, an essential way of continuing the work of the Progressive Association is through sharing culture and telling stories. There will be lots of stories at Yabun, from the kids experiencing their first moments of fame on the Young, Black and Deadly stage, to the elders meeting old friends over a cuppa in their own tent.

Constantina Bush hopes that her Yabun will be a story of love. ‘I want to check out all the single black boys and see what the liquorice is like in Sydney.’

‘We need to be telling those stories,’ stresses Lily Shearer. ‘We need to be sharing with the world our rich and diverse cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this country, because we are the first peoples. We are the oldest living culture in the world. And it’s just a great day.’

Yabun will be held on Saturday 26 January 2013 at Victoria Park, Broadway, Sydney, from 10am to 7pm. Entry is free.

For those unable to attend in person, Yabun will be broadcast around Australia on the National Indigenous Radio Service and Digital Radio KR00, and streamed via the Gadigal website, www.gadigal.org.au.