



VICTORIA UNIVERSITY
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

A Time to Dream

This is the Accepted version of the following publication

Foley, Gary (2013) A Time to Dream. Tracker : be informed, be involved, be inspired. ISSN 1838-8159

The publisher's official version can be found at

Note that access to this version may require subscription.

Downloaded from VU Research Repository <https://vuir.vu.edu.au/25897/>

A Time to Dream

By Gary Foley

13 May 2013

Like many people of my generation I developed an interest in films when I was a boy in the 1950s. Those were the days when Hollywood Westerns dominated the cinema screens of rural Australia, and often those cinemas were segregated. It was also the days when before any film screening began, the then national anthem (“God Save The Queen”) would play and people would actually stand up in the theatre while it was played. (People forget how “British” this country was until the 1970s.) But the one thing you rarely saw on an Australian screen when I was young was Aboriginal people playing realistic or heroic roles. Sometimes the Aboriginal roles were being played by white actors “painted up”. Furthermore, there was zero possibility that one might see a film that had been made by an Aboriginal person, or one which might present an authentically Aboriginal perspective on screen.

In the same way the American cinema denigrated African-Americans and demonised Native-Americans, so the Australian cinema trivialised and was dismissive of the Aboriginal experience in Australian history and life. I suppose in some small way my misspent boyhood haunting the local cinema instilled in me the thought that one day I might like to be in films, but it never developed into a serious desire.

In the subsequent 40 years I have nevertheless made a series of notorious appearances in a number of Australian films, from my legendary encounter with a little old lady in Alessandro Cavadini’s *Ningla-Ana* in 1972, through the lead role Phil Noyce’s *Backroads* in 1976, to cameos in a series of Australian cult films like Haydn Keenan’s *Going Down* and Richard Lowenstein’s *Dogs in Space*. But these days my real interest is in historical Aboriginal films from the 1950s to the 1970s. These films include the first film footage ever shot by an Aboriginal cameraperson and the first films to be directed by an Aboriginal person. My interest in these films has grown out of my university studies in history over the past ten years, as well as my own personal involvement in one of the films.

My current interest began in mid-1996 when one of my students at Melbourne University drew my attention to the fact that legendary Aboriginal activist Bill Onus, who had been one of the founders of the Victorian *Australian Aborigines League* in 1932, had also been an 8mm film enthusiast in the 1950s. This was news to me, and it bothered me that I had not known of this fact prior to my student telling me that she had unearthed this historical tidbit in the course of her research. It bothered me for two reasons. Firstly because I thought that I already knew everything of importance about the history of Bill Onus through my own research, and secondly because I had been a close friend of Bill’s artist son Lin Onus for almost 30 years.

Consequently, I visited Lin’s house in October 1996 and said to him, “Mate, you never told me your father was an 8mm film enthusiast.” Lin replied, “You never asked.” After kicking myself for realising that what Lin said was correct, I then asked expectantly, “Well, if he was a film enthusiast, then where is all the film footage that he would have shot?”

To my horror Lin told me that most of his father's films had been lost in a caravan fire some twenty years earlier. My heart sank as I thought of all of that priceless historical footage going up in smoke. After all, I thought, what amazing material Bill Onus would have been in a position to film in the period from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, given his extensive political connections and activities. Then, just as my disappointment reached its greatest depth, Lin threw me a lifeline when he piped up, "You know, I think there might be a box of a dozen little 8mm films left under the house somewhere."

"What! Let's go down there now and see if we can find them" I almost begged.

As a result Lin and I spent about an hour fossicking among stuff under his house whilst we dodged the occasional red-back spider, but all to no avail. Soon it was time for me to leave Lin's house on the edge of Melbourne and return to my inner-city house, but I extracted a promise from Lin that if I came back next weekend he would help me do a thorough search and try and find the surviving films. I returned home excited at the prospect of unearthing some truly significant and historic film footage and I looked forward to going back to Lin's the following weekend.

Then a few days later I received the distraught phone call from Lin's wife Joanne to inform me that Lin had suddenly died of a heart attack. That tragic event put an end to my quest for the Bill Onus films for at least another year whilst I supported Lin's family through their grieving. It was a terrible blow because Lin was in the process of receiving international recognition and acclaim for his artwork and had seemed to be in the prime of his life.

About 18 months after his death I approached Lin's son Tiriki and reminded him of that last day I had seen his father when we had been looking around under their house. I told Tiriki what we had been looking for and he said he would have a look and see if he could find the box. A week later I was amazed to receive a phone call from Tiriki informing me that he had found it. This was one of those exciting moments that make being a historian worthwhile.

We arranged for the films to be digitized and as I expected, some dramatic historical footage emerged for the first time in 50 years. The films recovered were only a tiny fraction of the films that Bill Onus had shot with his trusty 8mm film camera, and much of the material consisted of family sequences of Lin Onus as a boy growing up, but it also included amazing historical footage. The most significant of that historic footage was a short 5 minute sequence filmed at Bill Onus' famous boomerang factory on the outskirts of Melbourne, seemingly in the 1960s.

This footage showed famous Aboriginal Country and Western performer Harry Williams teaching American singing legend Harry Belafonte how to throw a boomerang. Also seen in the footage, watching on is Pastor Doug Nicholls (later Governor of South Australia) and his daughter Pam. This is a priceless film record of one of the many African-American entertainers sought out Aboriginal people when they visited Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. Others that had made connections with Aboriginal peoples in that era included Paul Robeson, Eartha Kitt and Sammy Davis Jnr. Thus the discovery of this long lost Bill Onus footage was as significant as I thought it would be, as it also represented the first known moving film footage ever shot by an Aboriginal person.

The other important film material that I have managed to salvage in the past few years are the only two surviving prints of the first films ever directed by an Aboriginal person. These

are the films of my friend and mentor the late Bruce McGuinness, and are *Black Fire* 1972 and *Time to Dream* 1974. These are both highly significant historically not just because they are the first films directed by an Aboriginal person, but also because of the legendary activist who made them.

Bruce McGuinness was one of the most influential and important Aboriginal activists of the late 20th century and was my close friend and mentor until he passed away in 2003. When I had first moved from Sydney to Melbourne in 1972, McGuinness was a mature-age student at Monash University. He decided to make a short film to submit as an assignment for his class in Anthropology and in association with his friend Martin Bartfeld scraped together \$500 and set about filming. The result was the film *Black Fire*, which was the first film directed by an Aboriginal person.

Black Fire is a 20minute B&W 16mm film that consists of a series of connected ideas and a take on both the state of Anthropology and Aboriginal Affairs in 1972. In the film the camera turns its gaze onto an examination of the Anthropologist Lorna Lipmann (who was Bruce's Anthropology lecturer), so that the academic becomes the subject and object rather than the Aborigine. McGuinness also playfully injects now historic footage of the Fitzroy Stars Aboriginal community football team into sequences that include a hilarious scene whereby an obviously Aboriginal man (Harry Williams) walks along Bourke Street in Melbourne asking people, "Who discovered Australia?" There is also a satirical take on an Aboriginal debutant quest and a gentle dig at the conservative political approach of Pastor Doug Nicholls. All of this footage is unique material that reveals the state of Aboriginal politics and society in Melbourne at an important historical intersection.

One year later McGuinness raised sufficient funds to embark on another film with Martin Bartfeld producing. This time he set out to document the first ever national Aboriginal Arts conference held at the Australian National University in 1973. This was an important historic event that was convened by the Aboriginal Arts Board which had only months earlier been established by the Whitlam Government. In attendance at the conference were some of the most important Aboriginal artists and performers of that era, including a young David Gulpilil, singer Harold Blair, Poet Kath Walker (Oojeroo Noonuckle), playwright Jack Davis, actor Brian Syron as well as other major Aboriginal identities of that era. Thus the film includes rare footage of people such as Don Brady, Eileen Lester, Ken Colbung, Lindsay Roughsey, Chika Dixon, Steve Mam, Roslyn Watson, Denis Walker and many others. The film is also of minor importance because it featured me as a second cameraman, shooting minor elements of the film on a hand-held 16mm Bailleau camera.

This film was called *Time to Dream*. The historical moments it preserves include Opera singer Harold Blair singing "Old Man River" and David Gulpilil dancing at a time when he was a world-renowned dancer. It also contains a remarkable sequence where a passionate Brian Syron speaks his mind about people he regards as charlatans in Aboriginal arts circles. Syron had only recently returned from America having studied at the renowned Stella Adler's Acting Studio in New York where his fellow classmates included Hollywood actors Robert De Niro and Peter Bogdanovich. Consequently *Time to Dream* is an important filmic examination of the legends of the Aboriginal arts world of 1972, yet despite its historical significance it has had few public screenings since it was made. The same can be said of *Black Fire*. In another remarkable coincidence, Lin Onus was the sound recordist on both of McGuinness' films.

When McGuinness died in 2003, I was able to salvage the only surviving copies of his two films and thanks to the National Film and Sound Archive I managed to have digital copies made so that they will now be preserved forever. I hope to enter into negotiations with NITV in the near future to enable the first public screenings of these two lost and forgotten films so that a new generation of Australians might learn a bit of history at the same time as appreciating the work of our earliest Aboriginal filmmaker.

A final interesting historical note on McGuinness' two films is the fact that Bruce's son Kelli McGuinness was a member of an Aboriginal band in the 1990s called *Black Fire*, of which the lead singer was a young man called Kutcha Edwards. That band's first album was called *Time to Dream*.