



UKARIA

MARK ATKINS, ERKKI VELTHEIM AND TOS MAHONEY

MUNGANGGA GARLAGULA
(Wajarri: Sitting by the fire at night)

Mungangga Garlagula is commissioned and produced by [Tura](#), supported by Ulrike Klein AO and the Australia Council for the Arts. There will be a showing entitled *Nightfalls* at [UKARIA Cultural Centre](#) in October 2022 as part of [Finding Our Voice](#).

Interview Transcription by Ben Nicholls
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Ben Nicholls: You were last here [at UKARIA] in March 2021, and it's winter up here now, so I wanted to know how the changing landscapes and seasons effect your work?

Mark Atkins: I'm happy. And I love this place, you know. It's a place to come and write, create, the creative juices flowing, it's a great space to work in.

Erkki Veltheim: I think in March we just had the doors open more, and we spent a lot more time outside. Mark still goes out there, you know, he's made of tougher stuff than me.

I think that you know, obviously it's windier and colder than last time, but I mean last time there was that crazy infestation of the Portuguese millipedes. Have you seen that?

Ben: No, I haven't seen them.

Erkki: So apparently late-summer's kind of the time when they come out, and the whole outside wall when we turned up was black. Like literally, there were thousands and thousands, and they were dropping in from the air con units... so that was a seasonal thing, and fortunately we don't have that this time.

Ben: Well at least you've got the place to yourselves this time, that sounds like an advantage, not sharing it with the with the wildlife.

Erkki: It's good to be at one with nature.

Ben: That's true.

Tos Mahoney: In terms of the weather, and Tura's role in this matchmaking. Mark and Erkki met through our touring program in the Kimberley in which there was a lot of time spent in some very hot places, and yet this incubation here this time, has been a much cooler world, one spent inside which reflects both the process and the outcomes.

Ben: With these different residencies, how has the project changed and morphed, not just with the seasons, but how has the project itself been developing?

Erkki: Well, I guess it's actually changed a lot since its inception, but that's mostly to do with COVID. So originally the idea was to present it as a much larger ensemble work. And also, it was supposed to happen in 2020. Obviously, with anything that sort of incubates for a longer time there's contingencies that happen.

So, for instance, it ended up being impossible to get the ensemble that we wanted together in a reasonable time period because everyone's work had been completely decimated, and then, now that work is back, everyone is super busy. So that's one thing that we had to work the whole project around. So, our solution to that was to completely downsize and downscale the live component – we've recorded each member of the ensemble and we've made this virtual ensemble that's going to be a kind of soundscape that's played through the speakers at the performance.

It's turned into a more intimate one man show, I mean I'll be there as well but it's more focused on Mark, which is something that came out of necessity, but as we've been thinking about and talking about it, it actually may be a really great way to present it. I mean of course it's the greatest thing for us as musicians to play with other musicians, but now we've kind of reimagined the other musicians more as disembodied or ethereal characters.

The stories are all about sitting around a fire telling stories about spirits and supernatural beings... So, in a way the ensemble's taken on the role of these background characters because obviously they won't be on stage to be watched and heard live. So, it's kind of been a chance to reimagine the project. Which is interesting itself, like it is actually going to be quite a different thing in a way as a result. Not better or worse, it's just a different project.

Ben: You're both very highly regarded in your own right but also as collaborators, and this fusing of electronics with the words, the stories, and the didgeridoo and acoustic elements, this collaboration seems really special. What do you think it is about this that's been so fruitful and productive?

Mark: Yeah, well for me it's allowed me to move forward in a sense of not just being a soloist, but being able to create and tell these stories in such a way where it's much more acceptable to an audience here, if you like, because the whole thing has to be able to bring an audience in and for them to share an experience, to have an experience and you know, with the expertise that we all have and the technology, I suppose, and the lighting it's going to enable us to do that. So, for me I'm trying to recreate that so I can bring them into a space, so I'm sitting there by the fire and I'm telling stories, you know. And you know each story is different, and I've never seen it done that way, you know, and I think that's the sort of thing I'd love to see myself.

It's different than what we've done even outside of this work, and with these fellas before. It's a bit of an inside journey, and part of my life, my stories and how I see things and bringing them closer to what we're trying to project, you know. And it's leaving enough room, I think, for the imagination. It's like reading a book, you know, you read the book, then you go and see the movie. It's not the same. But when you read the book, then you've got your imagination, your room to think and everybody's got a different interpretation about something.

So, that's how I'd like to put it across, it's just something that is different, but could also bring them into the space where they can have an experience and you know, looking around, thinking '... I won't walk home under the shadows tonight!'

Ben: Yeah, I like that there's something about a story which is haunting. You want people to be a little haunted after the experience. I'm interested in how you've recorded the musicians, and how they've become these presences. There's this train of thought, going all the way back to the start of recording technology, that recording removes the aura of art, you know Walter Benjamin's idea. So, I'm really interested that you're using electronics in a way that creates an aura, right? You're creating this spirit, this presence, with technology.

Erkki: Part of that is also that Mark's stories are, a lot of them you could categorise as ghost stories... these kinds of spooky night-time stories, but with Mark there's always a serious and double meaning to them, which I guess is where Mark is reminding people through those stories: hang on, there's been beings and spirits here for millennia, and in a way you should be a bit aware, like you know, being spooked is one way of being aware.

You look in nature, you know the basic kind of existential state of nature used to be aware and alert, and that's what it is about. Like being in the dark and having this idea that there are these spirits here and you know you'd better look after them, or you'd better look after your environment, or they're going to get you. It's through these stories you channel into this idea that you've got to be aware that there's all this stuff. There's not just the trees and the animals that you see but there's a lot of memory and a lot of spirits actually in the daily environment.

In terms of your question about collaboration, I think that for me the great thing about collaboration, especially with people like Mark and all of the people in the ensemble who are part of this, is that you have certain ideas as a musician and as a human being, and then it's easy to get into a kind of tunnel vision with those and you sort of find the things that work, and then you sit down with someone like Mark and it's almost like all these new channels and canals open up and you can actually find completely new ways of working. I think that's the really exciting thing with collaborating, it feels to me like a natural way to make music.

Backtracking to the aura and the Benjamin thing – the way that we went about recording the ensemble members was meant not in the sense of reproduction, but kind of in a sense of capturing some kind of essence of their playing. The instructions were 'just do it once', for instance, because they are all great improvisers. Sure, there were some notated things that needed to be more or less right, but we really tried to keep to this theme of spontaneity.

The way that they'll be used in the live context is that some of them will be set, but some of them also will be used in a way that responds to Mark, they'll be triggered in some ways, or processed in other ways, kind of treated so that hopefully we keep the feeling of spontaneity rather than the idea of decreasing the original aura of the work through multiple reproductions and alienation from that source. So that's been the ethos of the way that we recorded and worked with those musicians.

Because of COVID again, and people that live in different states, everyone is being recorded in their own place, by themselves, and for some of the pieces the idea is that it's improvised as a group... how do you communicate that through individual recordings? We listened to some of those yesterday, and some of them sound like they were playing in the same space at the same time – that was pretty eerie in itself. And obviously they are people who know each other, and we've decided to collaborate with them because there is some *sympatico* between each player, but it's still pretty amazing to go back and listen and think, actually I couldn't tell that this wasn't recorded in the same space together. If we can communicate that, then that's a really great result as well because it becomes about artifice masquerading as authenticity in a way, which is a part of what the stories are too.

Tos: On the collaboration point... in the standard commissioning process you commission a composer with a specific brief, and then there's an outcome that's delivered in a pretty fast time. We certainly view commissioning much more as facilitating relationships between artists, and in this case that started with Tura's Kimberley touring programmes. So, the sort of relationship, friendship, compositional/performer relationship started even before this process, and that was in the Kimberley and out in remote communities with traditional dancers and songmen, whilst this performance and relationship was growing and then joining with UKARIA for this phase, but even in the original timeframe, it was still giving a space to allow the unknown to happen. We've ended up with even more space due to the enforced delays, but that's the upside actually, because so much has come out that nobody could have thought of before, even in terms of story and writing.

Mark: That's like we were saying the other day about this whole process – and I've been writing other stuff and I'm thinking, oh maybe... then I sit down and connect with the music, and I sensed I have to go back to there, that's it there.

Erkki: I would also say on that, that it's about allowing the unknown to happen.

Ben: It's kind of beautiful, this process reminds me a lot of meeting around the campfire. You're all here, the unknown spaces are out there, which is what you're exploring in one way, but I want to come back to the light of the campfire. You know, that's where we come to hear stories, to learn about what else is out there. There's something necessary about it. There's something necessary about story, there's something necessary about people coming together.

Mark: Well, I mean if you think about it, you know that's where it all started... Any story, every story you can think about, it's been built off, or it's coming off the back of telling by fire. And all the stories that I've grown up with as a kid, with Uncles and Aunties just telling stories around the fire, you know, tall ones too, sure... but you always had that warmth of that fire, you know, and you could be leaning in, listening, and watching, through the smoke and the sparks, then the flickering flames, the face. And they're always there in your mind, and then you sort of lean back a bit and you look back into the shadows. It was just that place, you know, and that's what I'm looking at trying to create.

My original idea was just to have a fire burning – not on stage, you know, technology – but the fire when it starts, there. You know people come into a cold place and then the stories start and the fire flickers. As it goes, it gets warmer and then you could bring in lighting... that's what I'm looking at.

Ben: You were talking about the difference between reading a book and watching a movie, how you read a book and you've got space for your own imagination. There's something about a fire which prompts imagination, you look into the fire, and you see different things. In the show, you've hinted at ways that you've thought about presenting that, but how do you not deliver too much, how do you leave space for the audience?

Mark: Well, I suppose it's about pacing... the way that it's delivered, just the telling of everything, and I think it's the music too. I mean try watching a horror movie or something like that, or anything, without the sound effects, you know, I mean the music and sound behind it. So that's what we're trying to touch on as well. The wind, the rain, the crickets, all of those sounds that you expect at that time of year in the bush. Which again, the different sounds in the bush will tell you what time of the year it is, and time of day. People will have room to interpret it, that's the beauty about it.

Erkki: We've also got substantial, purely musical works in the performance as well, so it kind of alternates, or flows from stories into just instrumental music, and Mark is of course one of the great didge virtuosos. We've also tried to come up with very different musical numbers... all these little pieces that use the didge in different ways because Mark's actually invented so many specific techniques on the instrument that are signature sounds, so this is kind of trying to make sure that Mark's got the full breadth of room to explore a lot of these different kinds of techniques on different didges. Different didges respond differently, so that's been really exciting just to try to find new contexts for the didge as an instrument with this kind of ensemble.

And these natural sounds. Mark had this idea that the show starts in a swamp that Mark used to camp out at back in the Albany region. And Mark had this great idea of trying to find, and creating a soundscape, of all the different frogs and insects and birds that have become extinct since Mark's youth. In a way, this is going back to the Benjamin idea. The idea that you lose the aura of the original through recording, but in a way for these extinct species that's the only aura we've got left. So, Mark has these incredible ideas about how to actually weave quiet important messages into an aesthetic product in this way. And then to find gentle ways to tell the audience that everything you hear is gone, which is a spooky idea itself.

Mark: You've got probably 70–80% of the swamps in the last 50–60 years gone. And probably about 80% of animals, insects and any creature that would live or crawl in those swamps – gone. Which then goes on and affects other things as well. So, we're going to find all those animals, or the sounds of them, and put them back into the story... then later we'll say, that piece you just heard there, probably 70–80% of them are all gone.

Ben: You were talking about how from the sounds you can know the season, or the sounds can tell you the time of day. Once the audience knows that those animals and their sounds are extinct, there's a certain sort of time travel, you know, but have we travelled backwards or is it an imagined future where we didn't have this environmental loss, a space that could have been?

Mark: Yeah, it's all of that. It's for everybody to have a think about different things. You know that's not all the show, but I mean it's just these little things, you know it might just be a song, a campfire song or something, you know.

Tos: I just want to ask you Mark about the story around the fire, every time I hear you talk about it, it's so valued by you in your family group, but that was a time when Indigenous culture, as you grew up, wasn't acknowledged or respected by the non-indigenous world as much as it is now, and we've got a long way to go, but was it the sense that that "round the fire" was a cultural haven – was it a way of keeping culture alive?

Mark: Yeah, it was keeping the whole thing alive. Family is a safe thing, you know it's like I said about the swamp. You get away sitting in the park for a while, but somewhere along the line they just throw you in the can for the night or just run you off or something, give you a good hiding, but a swamp, it's a safe place, a fire, someone's backyard, we could all cook a feed, it was just that place, and that's where I grew up, in that area, in that time, I suppose. You know when I think about it all my stories have something about a bloody fire, you know! But that's where it comes from, I can't get away from it.

Erkki: But it's interesting too, Ben, that you talk about time travel because the song that's most likely going to finish the show is called Time Machine. And it's all about Mark going back in time and seeing his grandparents around the fire. So, I think there is maybe, through the show, there is a sense of what's lost, right?

Mark: Yeah, it's what's lost, it's storytelling, the fire. You could walk into anybody's place and there'd be a fire going. Now you know, I mean, I got up here and the first thing I wanted to do was get a fire going. And they're like, oh maybe not. But a little bin down there in the cul-de-sac. Get a fire going. It's obviously easier just to come in here and turn on the air conditioner, sit at the table, done. Anyway, but I mean it's just those little things you know that.

Erkki: It is really interesting that thing about fire, like how, in some ways if you are out bush or in the natural elements, in any manner, that's the first thing you do in order to stay warm and stay safe, right? So, in some ways it is something that we have done as humans since we thought of ourselves as humans, right? I would imagine... It feels like it is more than just making a fire, it's some kind of ritual of gathering, it's some kind of ritual of feeling safe and warm, and I guess the converse of that is that behind your back there's that sense of vulnerability. So, it's marking a safe space in a kind of vulnerable space around you, so I think there's good reasons why you talk about fires.

Mark: Well 80% of your tools are made in the fire, and your cooking, keeping warm, keeping wild animals away, keeping anything else away, and for signalling, lots of things – the beginning of everything goes back to fire in a way. So, bring back the fire into the building? No, it's bringing people around again to tell stories. But it's not all about the stories, it's coming into that space, and hearing those yarns, and for a lot of people they've never even heard them before, because so many of them are gone. So those are the little things you can mention on the way, so they think about all these things the next time they're sitting by a fire, if they're lucky enough. It's not just to keep warm.

Tos: Ben, when you asked the question about the risk of overdoing it, I'm thinking we should talk about the next phase with Ruth and Nik.

Erkki: For the next development period, we've got a dramaturg and a lighting designer coming in. Ruth Little is the dramaturg and Niklas Pajanti is the lighting designer – they're both amazing artists in their own right, of course. The show is not purely music, and it's not purely story, it's a much larger experience for the audience, so we need those outside eyes in terms of how to keep the flow of the show going and that's where the dramaturg comes in. And obviously the lighting is going to be very important because we don't have a set, so to speak, so the lighting becomes the way to control the space and really make people feel these different parts of the show in a real way.

Tos: And it was always conceived as a black box, a theatre show, for the city, rather than a concert that could happen anywhere. And to celebrate Mark's full pallet of artistic skills, especially his world-renowned didge playing, but also that he's not as well-known as he should be for his writing and his poetry and spoken word. So, we want as much of Australia to experience that, if not the world.

Erkki: And definitely, from the beginning we talked about it being, in a way, a theatre show. So, Mark calls it Music Theatre and it's, you know, it's not Broadway or West End, it's something quite different. Except in that experience of actually feeling like you're transported into a different world rather than just watching. Not that there's anything wrong with more 'standard' concerts, but this show really demands a different kind of experience.



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