



Ron Murray

Wamba Wamba

Interviewed by Andrew Stephens

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When Uncle Ron Murray plays his beautifully painted didgeridoo, its deep, warm sound fills his stone-walled studio, and the mezzanine above, with a rich feeling. Around the studio there are many books, artefacts and paraphernalia relating to his heritage, and there is an air of welcome. Uncle Ron is a Wamba Wamba man, has many different modes of expression, and has had many careers, but at the centre of it all is a strong thread: reaching out to others.

Uncle Ron and his family have lived on a beautiful bush property, on Jaara Country in central Victoria, for almost two decades but his work in schools and juvenile justice as an education and curriculum consultant, together with performing, has involved much travelling. He thrives on connecting with people and describes himself as “affectionate, a real hugger”. So, when COVID-19 began to hit, even before lockdown, and his world of contact with others began to shut down, the effects were drastic. Things have been tough, but there has been brightness too.

Uncle Ron does not have a simple description for himself: he is a storyteller, musician, trainer and mentor. Much of his storytelling, which incorporates playing the didgeridoo alongside his wife, Sarah James, a violinist and singer, takes place in schools he regularly visits. Some of his regular rounds of visits involve annual overseas travel to India and Singapore, even though he prefers not to be away from his family. “But when you get a good job overseas and it’s paying well, you do it,” he says. These two gigs were the first to go with lockdown, putting a big hole in his budget. Then the schools cut the cords as they went into distance-learning. Uncle Ron was grateful that his one day a week job with the Malmsbury campus of the Melbourne Youth Justice Centre continued, work he has been doing for about 30 years.

“That’s my passion, working with young men who’ve gone off the rails,” he says. When the pandemic hit, the centre, like all institutions, had to quickly install measures for screening visitors and workers. “I am 60, coming up, so I was vulnerable,” Uncle Ron says. “So, I had to make a choice. I thought I better stop going in until it settles. I have only just started going back on Fridays. I have made an agreement that I will only be working outside.” At the centre, he runs a Koori healing program and he hopes a didgeridoo-



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making program will also resume after a two-year hiatus. As part of this mentoring, he is also planning to teach the boys how to use kangaroo and possum skins to make rugs. “It’s going to really kick off,” he says. “We have really good staff in there.” Because a lot of the inmates have been struggling during lockdown, Uncle Ron has resumed his smoking ceremonies with them. “It keeps their heads clear.”

While these programs are intended to be run solely for the Aboriginal inmates, he welcomes others who are interested. “I have always been one for inclusion so I say to the boys if you have a non-Aboriginal mate in here and you want to bring them, they can come in. Because they want to be there, they are not going to muck up.”

While continuing this work, he has also been lucky enough to qualify for government support, thanks to hours going through paperwork. Otherwise, he has tried to focus on positive aspects of lockdown: a nephew who is a butcher has been keeping them stocked with meat, and he is grateful that he and his family have been able to remain isolated on their 50-acre block, with magnificent views and lots of space to roam around.

Yet this isolation has not been easy and Uncle Ron found his energy fluctuated. Some days he worked enthusiastically in the garden vegetable plot with his 10-year-old son. At other times he just wanted to cook bacon and eggs and sit in front of Netflix all day rather than go into the shed to knock out some work. “I have an order for six didgeridoos and I still haven’t finished them. I haven’t had that motivation.” While he has loved spending more time with his family, he has spoken to other artists who have also had these spells of no-activity days. “They’ve felt like that too. We have a laugh about it, but that’s been the energy in the air for everybody.”

Uncle Ron grew up in Balranald, near Swan Hill, and he is full of respect for his parents, Elders and wider family community. Yet some of the experiences in that community, where Aboriginals were viewed in a negative and stereotyped way by white people, made him want to forge new pathways for understanding and education. This eventually led to his commitment to training in schools, and corporate and other environments, through all of which a strong sense of humour has stood him in good stead. “One thing you can’t take away from a people or a culture is their humour. When I used to do cultural training for Melbourne Fire Brigade, I had this gruff bloke ask why do you have so much humour? I realised I do tell a lot of jokes.” He also realised that humour makes people more receptive to learning more serious things.

Uncle Ron’s outlook is getting positive again, and he thinks he will have to reinvent himself in some ways. However, he is used to this and looking



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back over his interesting and diverse career, acknowledges it took a long time to develop. “I did STOP and GO signs, I’ve worked in a mine in WA. I’ve done some shit jobs, like a lot of Aboriginal people. I even used to go rabbit trapping and pig hunting in the bush for work.”

He is looking forward to more contact with people, beyond the imaginative and creative ways he managed during quarantine. From time to time, Ron and Sarah would meet with another Aboriginal man and his partner, on opposite sides of a river. “We lit a fire and we did some singing and violin and we did a smoking. It was about four weeks in. I felt amazing when I came back that night after cleansing in the smoke. Then I made sure we did it every week.”

Uncle Ron Murray is a Wamba Wamba man who grew up surrounded by Aboriginal sacred country and sacred sites near Balranald, NSW (Muthi Muthi Country). He is an international didgeridoo soloist, having performed in Australia, New York, Jordan, Canada and New Zealand. Passionate about keeping Aboriginal stories, art and culture alive, Ron regularly gives lectures on Indigenous issues concerning employment, history, the environment, justice, cultural heritage, arts practice, and the positive contributions of Indigenous people to Australian society. Ron also teaches didgeridoo and boomerang making to Indigenous youth in Victoria’s youth justice centres, with a focus on cultural healing.