



**KOORIE**

HERITAGE TRUST INC

GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

## **Uncle Johnny Lovett**

Gunditjmara, Boandik

Interviewed by Steve Dow

August 2020



Uncle Johnny Lovett always has a guitar with him. The 72-year-old Gunditjmara-Boandik singer-

songwriter still lives in Hamilton, in south-eastern Victoria, where he was born. His two main guitars at the moment are a Fender and a Cort.

But the last time Uncle Johnny performed in public was in March with his band at the local country music club, before the novel coronavirus shut down live music venues. However, he usually travels around the circuit as a solo act.

How has he coped being without the camaraderie of other musicians? "These six-string devils, they do a lot for you," he laughs, referring to the Fender and the Cort.

"I've always got one near me. Actually, I've got three in the room here with me. Have you ever seen a lap steel? Remember the old Hank Williams and that [horizontal] steel guitar? It's one of those things."

At home with his partner, Arrernte woman Aunty Joanne Walker, from Central Australia, Uncle Johnny isn't fussed about this social isolation epoch. "I just go to the shop, [but] I don't fraternise in the business area. Just do what I need to do and come home."

Instead of worrying about the COVID-19 pandemic, Uncle Johnny will jump in his four-wheel drive and head bush. He roams about Lake Condah, or Tae Rak, its Gunditjmara name, photographing the landscape on his mobile phone. "I can jump in the car and do 300 kilometres in a day, and I'm still in Country. I'm out there a few days a week."

Having devoted much of his adult life to gaining land title rights for the Gunditjmara people and an ongoing campaign for settlements for Indigenous soldiers such as his father, Herbert, and uncles who served in the world wars, Uncle Johnny is decidedly sunny side-up when asked about his own health.

He says he's in "real good" shape, despite his triple bypass in 2007 and more recent surgery for lung cancer, diagnosed in 2017: "I had it cut out," he coughs, adding with a laugh: "I've got half a lung."



We talk about *Maralinga*, the song he wrote in 1972 as an indictment of British atomic testing in outback Australia in the 1950s. The Australian public had been ignorant of the testing for many years because those who were in the know were forbidden, under the Official Secrets Act, to speak out. But even now, I tell Uncle Johnny, the story would have been news to some viewers when the six-part ABC-TV drama about the Maralinga project, *Operation Buffalo*, went to air.

I mention I once interviewed the late Yankuntjatjara elder Yami Lester for a Red Cross magazine; the British exploding of nuclear bombs at Emu Junction in 1953 sent Lester completely blind by the time he turned 14. Yet the softly spoken Lester, then nearly 70, struck me as incredibly magnanimous despite the colonialists stealing his sight.

“I can understand that, because he lived with [the blindness] for such a long time,” says Uncle Johnny. “The anger ceased a little bit, I suppose.”

It turns out Lester was pivotal in pointing Lovett in the right direction to gain permission from local Indigenous people to describe Country around *Maralinga*. Uncle Johnny had written the song before he had ever been to the area.

“I went out to Walatina Station to meet him,” says Uncle Johnny. “He and I formed a really close relationship before he died. My greatest fear is I would give the song to the wrong mob, so I had to make sure that I was doing the right thing.”

Uncle Johnny’s song was translated from English to Pitjantjatjara for the people who call Maralinga home, and the performer and other Indigenous people performed the song on the steps of the South Australian Parliament in Adelaide.

Even today, the area in question is highly radioactive. “Joanne and I drove up to the gates of Maralinga. The gates were locked, of course. We then drove into Oak Valley [home to the largest Aboriginal community on the Maralinga Tjarutja lands]. I hadn’t been there prior to that, and the song that I wrote, you would have thought I had been there. I was surprised how close to the landscape the song came.”

In 2018, Uncle Johnny was inducted into the Victorian Aboriginal Honour Roll. What did becoming a member of the hall of fame mean? “I’m lucky because there’s three of my family in there – my father, my sister and me. It meant a lot to me, actually.”

Uncle Johnny’s affidavit got his people’s native title claim over the line, and he is still campaigning for recognition and compensation for Indigenous



soldiers; just before our conversation, Uncle Johnny had left a message on the answering machine of the Governor of Victoria because his efforts to contact Aboriginal Victoria, the state ministry, were being stymied.

Did his father, Herbert, ever get the chance to say how proud he was of his son? “He was always proud of me, Dad. He died in 1976. He was always pretty proud of us, yeah.”

Does Uncle Johnny have a philosophy of life? If he had to give a young Indigenous fella some advice, what would it be?

“Get as close as you can to the culture,” he says. “I know it’s hard for some people. A lot of things have happened to Aboriginal culture, especially in Victoria. I’m talking now about the loss of language, dance and song.

“There were reasons as to why we never grew up with language. Our grandfathers and grandmothers, they didn’t keep the language because it was seen to be a burden for us to take into the future

“Where I come from, Lake Condah Mission, when they [parents] taught the children language, the rations were taken off them, the kids were locked up in the dormitory and they were not given back to their parents until the parents promised they would not teach their kids song and dance and language. Missions were all about Christianising and civilising.”

Uncle Johnny hasn’t been able to reclaim much of his own language “because so much of it has been distorted. I’m not too sure how you research a language that was never written. My partner, she speaks two languages, and my adopted families of Yami Lester and Oak Valley mob, they have a language that’s pretty much spoken right across [central Australia] ... It was really great to hear.”

Uncle Johnny keeps abreast of fights still to be won. He says the Budj Bim Cultural Landscape in south-west Victoria, which is sacred to the Gunditjmara and was added to the World Heritage register last year, should be locked away from tourism until such time Indigenous people are given self-determination over such sites and a better financial deal.

He sat out the recent Black Lives Matter protest in Melbourne, given his age and underlying health conditions. The shocking toll of 437 black deaths in custody since the 1991 Royal Commission needs a deeper historical context, he says.

“Deaths in custody for Aboriginal people has been happening since 1788,” he says. “It went on with the establishment of missions. Everyone that died on those missions had no choice, no freedom of movement.”



**KOORIE**

HERITAGE TRUST INC

GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

---

*Uncle Johnny Lovett is a respected Guditjmara/Boandik Elder born in Hamilton, Victoria. He is a well-known singer-songwriter and country and western star. Most notably, Uncle Johnny wrote the song Maralinga in response to British nuclear testing in the 1950s and early 1960s at Maralinga, South Australia. He also wrote and recorded Guditjmara People, considered an anthem for the Guditjmara people of south-western Victoria. Uncle Johnny has advocated for native title rights of the Guditjmara people who now legally have a say about developments – called ‘future acts’ – that occur on their native title lands. He has also advocated for recognition and compensation for Aboriginal soldiers who served in World War I and World War II, and has fought tirelessly for his father and uncles to be properly recognised and compensated as Aboriginal soldiers who fought in World War I and World War II.*