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GNOKAN DANNA MURRA KOR-KI

Uncle Kutcha Edwards

Mutti Mutti

Interviewed by Andrew Stephens

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Negotiating the restrictions and difficulties of Victoria's second pandemic lockdown is a call for Uncle Kutcha Edwards' innate approach to life: candour, persistence, a warm sense of humour, and an ability to see the bigger picture with clarity.

While this talented, popular man faces the realities of this situation, and deeply misses the direct contact he is so used to having with audiences, he is rolling with the punches. This is a man who has faced tough situations before, and his focus is admirable: taking care of others while minding his own wellbeing and responsibilities as well.

Uncle Kutcha, a Mutti Mutti man who was NAIDOC's 2001 Indigenous Person of the Year, says he knows from his long experience as a singer, songwriter, performer and presenter that he has a good handle on reading audiences. "I can judge an audience and deliver what, in a sense, is needed to deliver directly," he says. "You can stare down an audience. It's like a sheep dog corralling sheep. I don't want to pump up my own tyres, but I've learnt the craft over the years."

It has therefore been a challenge to do this through a live stream situation, performing to a phone or computer where there is no audience present in the room. "Practically, you are looking at yourself performing and it's not the same. I understand the process but I'd prefer it otherwise." In the past, if he were talking about his life experience to 500 students at, for example, a big private school, he would focus on "reading the crowd" and educating them to "not read a book by its cover", providing an opportunity for direct interaction afterwards.

"You are packing up and putting stuff away and a few kids will come up and say 'We didn't know, Kutcha' and I say what you need to do is go and have the conversation with your parents. And the kids become the teachers at home. They become the knowledgeable ones, they've had the conversation with the Aboriginal person. The dynamic shifts in the home I have never been to, and that is the trick, but it doesn't come across as that." That sort of personal interaction is far less likely in a live stream situation.

Uncle Kutcha says that while he has been "chucked from pillar to post" as a result of being part of the Stolen Generations, "my journey in reality isn't



about me". "It is about what the powers that be did and continue to do to Aboriginal people. It is the simple fact that my mother and father did nothing wrong. How do we pay for their suffering and the denial of their rights to their children as parents? When I talk about my personal experience it pales into insignificance compared to the pain that my mother and father carried."

While his parents have gone to the Dreaming, he says, it doesn't mean their pain has gone. "Their spirits: when I go to sleep at night I am sure they watch over me and I hope I wake up in the morning so I can continue to advocate for the pain and suffering of not only them but me and my family. They guide me in my decision-making and will continue to guide me until I am sitting beside them in that place."

Uncle Kutcha says a lot of his material, in relation to Aboriginal existence and the Stolen Generations, might be heavy, but he well remembers the words of Uncle Jimmy Little who once said to him: "Kutcha, it's sometimes easier to slap people across the face with a feather rather than a baseball bat. Then they don't know you're doing it."

"Uncle Jimmy used to use those sorts of analogies and I understand," Uncle Kutcha says. "He had this beautiful way of delivering the sermon, so to speak."

At the start of the first lockdown, Uncle Kutcha had a live stream program running on his Facebook page called *Kutcha in Konversation*. "People would tune in and I would go live and 'konversate' about community and memories, and sing a few songs. Sometimes I'd go for twenty minutes, sometimes I'd go for an hour depending on how many people were scrolling through the page." Then work got in the way – he has been fortunate enough to have it keep coming in over the lockdown periods and it has included work around Reconciliation Week and Sorry Day.

At the same time, he has also been recording his fifth solo album at a studio in regional Victoria – exciting but also challenging. Yet amid all the difficulties of the present situation, Uncle Kutcha seems to rise above it and see a silver lining.

"The reality is that individualisation is coming to the fore globally as we speak," he says. "Everybody has that responsibility now, not just governments. It gets back to the individual to decide whether they wear a mask or self-isolate or go into town even though they haven't got results back from the pathologist," he says. "It is coming back to the individual decision-making. Everybody is worried about self but if you are worried



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about the holistic aspect of it all ... I wouldn't want to pass on COVID to any of my family members."

Uncle Kutcha has been through one patch of self-isolation already: in July, arriving for a pre-recording with other artists at Hamer Hall, the walk from the car to the entrance left him flushed and with a runny nose. A few days later he felt under the weather and got tested (negative).

"But you think to yourself, jeez, what would happen if I was positive? The people I interact with ... it's scary stuff but it is about humanity, not the economics."

Uncle Kutcha is a Mutti Mutti man, born on the banks of the Murrumbidgee River at Balranald, New South Wales. In 2001, he was named Indigenous Person of the Year at the NAIDOC Awards and won a Deadly for Male Artist of the Year. Through his music, stories and songs – of twists and turns, ups and downs but always of family and culture – Uncle Kutcha shares his personal journey and that of his people, engendering a connection and belonging with all people. In addition to performing with various bands, he has released four solo albums. He also wrote, co-produced and performed with his family, in the tradition of oral history, the theatre-based show, Songlines of a Mutti Mutti Man, a unique and personal insight into the stories and songs of the Stolen Generations. For Uncle Kutcha, music is a debriefing of one's life; it is like therapy for him and his family and people.