



THE COOLBAROO CLUB

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THE COOLBAROO CLUB

SYNOPSIS

For 14 years, from 1946 to 1960, in the city of Perth, Western Australia, the Coolbaroo Club was a meeting place and a community focus for the local Aboriginal community. The Club was the only Aboriginal-run dance club in a city which practiced unofficial apartheid, submitting its Aboriginal population to unremitting police harassment, identity cards, fraternisation bans, curfews, and bureaucratic obstruction. During its lifetime, the Club attracted Black musicians and celebrities from all over Australia and occasionally from overseas - among them Nat "King" Cole, Harold Blair and the Harlem Globetrotters.

Although best-remembered for the hugely popular Coolbaroo dances attended by hundreds of Aborigines and their white supporters, the Coolbaroo League, founded by Club members, also ran a newspaper and became an effective political organisation, speaking out on issues of the day affecting Aboriginal people.

Through the story of the Club and its members, the film lifts the lid on postwar race relations in Australia. With minor variations, their experiences were common to Aboriginal people throughout Australia in the 1940s and 1950s. The exceptional achievement of the Coolbaroo League in finding an affirmative response to white oppression can be seen today as an important step forward in the development of Aboriginal self-determination. The film is a powerful record of this achievement.

THE COOLBAROO CLUB was produced in collaboration with Aboriginal co-author and co-producer, Steve Kinnane. As a writer and researcher, and member of the Perth Aboriginal community, Steve Kinnane developed the film through stories from friends and relatives who were participants in the League during the 1940s and 1950s.

The director and cinematographer is Roger Scholes, best known for his feature film, shot in the Tasmanian wilderness, **THE TALE OF RUBY ROSE**. He has also directed several award-winning documentaries including **THE VALLEY** and **HOME OF THE BRAVE**.

THE COOLBAROO CLUB

CREDITS

Director	ROGER SCHOLES
Producer	PENNY ROBINS
Co-producers	STEVE KINNANE LAUREN MARSH
Written by	STEVE KINNANE LAUREN MARSH ROGER SCHOLES
Director of Photography	ROGER SCHOLES
Editor	TONY STEVENS
Music composed & written by	LUCKY OCEANS
Performed by	LOIS OLNEY

Developed and produced with the assistance of the Australian Film Commission

Produced with the assistance of Film Victoria, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Financed by the Australian Film Finance Corporation Limited.



RATING: G

RUNNING TIME: 55 MINS

16MM

COLOUR

THE COOLBAROO CLUB

CREW BIOGRAPHIES

ROGER SCHOLES - director

Roger Scholes was born and educated in Tasmania, Australia. He graduated from Swinburne Film School (now the VCA) in Melbourne in 1971 and worked as a camera operator in Australia. He spent much of the 1970s living and working in Europe and the United States. His sculpture and applied art work has been exhibited in Britain, Holland, Switzerland and Australia.

In 1981 he returned to film, writing and directing *THE SEALER* (ABC TV). Since then he has been writing and directing documentary and drama films for television and theatrical release in Australia, many of which have won international recognition including First Prize at the 1993 United States International Film and Video Festival, Chicago, and the Grand Prix at the 1992 Australian Mobie Awards for *HOME OF THE BRAVE*.

He is best known for his feature film, *THE TALE OF RUBY ROSE* which was invited into Main Competition at the 1987 Venice Film Festival where it won four critical prizes including the Francesco Pasinetti Prize for Best Actress and received very favourable reviews. The film has had a worldwide distribution.

He is presently involved in a number of feature film and documentary co-production projects with US and British participation.

PENNY ROBINS - producer

Penny Robins is an independent film and television producer with her own production company, Annamax Media. Since entering the industry in 1981 as a researcher, Penny has gone on to produce a range of documentary and drama projects.

As Head of Film Victoria's Documentary Division during the period 1991-1994, Penny was responsible for managing Film Victoria's investment in independent projects and the executive production of government films. In 1994 she produced the television hour documentary *SUGAR SLAVES* for Film Australia which screened on ABC TV in September 1995 and was invited to the Margaret Mead Film Festival, USA. *SUGAR SLAVES* was also a Finalist in the 1996 ATOM Awards and won a Certificate of Merit at the San Francisco Film Festival, 1996. In 1995 Penny was a Consultant Producer in development on Film Australia's *FEDERATION SERIES*, a three part series for television, also book, CD ROM and other spinoff materials.

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STEVE KINNANE - co-producer/co-writer

STEVE KINNANE comes from the Mirriwoong of the East Kimberley, but was born and raised in Perth, Western Australia. He works in Heritage and Aboriginal History. He collaborated with Alice Nannup and Lauren Marsh on the publication **WHEN THE PELICAN LAUGHED**, and has worked on a number of community heritage and oral history projects. He co-wrote, co-produced and was Assistant Director on **THE COOLBAROO CLUB**, his first film project.

LAUREN MARSH - co-producer/co-writer

LAUREN MARSH is a writer from Western Australia. She collaborated with Alice Nannup and Steve Kinnane on the publication **WHEN THE PELICAN LAUGHED**. She co-wrote and co-produced **THE COOLBAROO CLUB** film.

LOIS OLNEY - music

Born in Roebourne, Western Australia, LOIS OLNEY was adopted by Justice and Jennifer Olney at the age of eight months. She grew up in Cottesloe, Perth, where she received a Catholic Education. As a teenager Lois studied classical music. In the nineteen eighties Lois sang with the SWAN CITY JAZZMEN and John Hewsensland's band, JUST FRIENDS. Since then she has performed mainly in a duo doing Billie Holliday songs and other jazz standards.

THE COOLBAROO CLUB

COOLBAROO LEAGUE CHRONOLOGY

researched and written by Steve Kinnane and Lauren Marsh

- 1940** Commissioner of Native Affairs, A.O. Neville retires. Mr Neville has been in power since 1915 as the Chief Protector of Aborigines and has been instrumental in drafting legislation that gives the State unprecedented powers over the lives of Aboriginal people in Western Australia.

At the time of Neville's retirement there are approximately three thousand Aboriginal people living in the Southern part of WA. Living conditions are very poor, employment scarce, many children have been removed from their families to institutions, and Aboriginal people have been increasingly segregated from the wider community. In addition, Aboriginal people are required to carry passes to be in the city limits after six o'clock at night, are not entitled to vote, do not hold any citizenship rights, and are excluded from the census. Imprisonment rates are very high, with the majority of offences being alcohol possession, and related alcohol offences.

Despite these conditions, Aboriginal people have a strong family based community network and continue to survive as a separate identifiable community.

- 1941** Many Noongar men join the armed services and are sent overseas to fight in World War Two.
- 1942** The Pilbara Aboriginal Pastoral Strike is in the making with Don McLeod canvassing for support. Don approaches Helena Clarke at this time but Helena is not interested as it does not appear to be under Aboriginal control.
- 1942-1944** There is much political activity in WA due to the war and Aboriginal people such as Mary Morden, Tom Bropho, and Daisey Bindi are involved in communist groups in Perth. It is at this time that Helena Clarke is attending Communist Party meetings in Perth to see what they can offer Aboriginal people, as the mainstream parties offer nothing.

Geoff Harcus returns from New Guinea and he and Tom Bropho become involved in the Native Welfare League.

- 1944** The Citizenship Act is passed whereby Aboriginal people can apply for conditional Citizenship Rights. These are known within the community as 'Dog Tags' or 'The Dog Act'. The Citizenship Rights has to be applied for, and are subject to the applicant 'proving' they meet a large list of requirements (mainly based on living standards and who they associate with). The Citizenship Rights are regarded by white authorities as a privilege and are tenuous in status - they can be withdrawn if it is deemed a recipient was not conforming with the specifications.

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1945 With the end of the War Noongar Servicemen are returning with the expectation of being treated as equals but finding that this was not the case. Many are being arrested under alcohol and cohabitation laws as they are drinking with whites they had served with in the war.

1946 The Pilbara Aboriginal Pastoral Strike begins in the North.

1946 The first Coolbaroo Meeting takes place. Helena Clarke, George Poland and Jack Poland (all Nor' Westers) meet with white people, Geoff Harcus and the McEntyre Sisters (both members of the Modern Womens Club).

At this meeting Helena Clarke states that she believes only Aboriginal people should be members of the Coolbaroo League. This is a fundamental difference to how organisations based around Aboriginal issues had been structured. Usually such groups were controlled by all white membership.

"Coolbaroo" is a Yammatji word for Magpie and in Helena's view represents Aboriginal people of mixed descent.

The first Coolbaroo dance is held at the Modern Women's Club in the centre of Perth. The dance is a flop as it is in the middle of the prohibited area of Perth and only a small proportion of the community attend.

The Coolbaroo League relocate dances to East Perth, outside the prohibited area, and the Mackintosh sisters withdraw from the League. Elders Bill Bodney and Tom Bropho join organisation.

The dances thrive in East Perth and a Coolbaroo Youth Club is set up which is very successful. The League begins to speak out in the wider community against conditional citizenship and segregation. There is even talk of setting up a housing development, called a utopia, on the outskirts of Perth.

1947- The dances are very successful but it is still very much a Nor' Wester push, coming mainly
1948 from Helena and members of her family.

Helena is overworked and has a breakdown. Helena returns to Port Hedland and eventually Darwin where she remains.

Just after Helena leaves there is a terrible fight at a dance and a huge brawl breaks out. the fight spills onto the railway track and stops a train. The fight gives the police the excuse to close the dances down.

1948 After a succession of different commissioners since A.O. Neville left in 1940, a man named Stanley Guise Middleton takes over as Commissioner. For the rest of the history of the League, Middleton is the Commissioner of Native Affairs.

Middleton's approach is assimilation. He is sympathetic to the League as he sees it as beneficial to the process of assimilation. However what he fails to understand is that Aboriginal people have a very different reading of assimilation. To Aboriginal people, assimilation will give them rights equal with the wider community, but they will still remain a separate cultural community.

- 1948-** After the fight that closed the dances down, members of the Coolbaroo League continue
1951 to meet. Many of the Nor' Westers who have been involved in the League have returned to the North.
- 1952** The New Coolbaroo League is formed. This League is significantly different to the first as it is now set up by Noongars from Perth to respond to the specific needs of Noongars in Perth. Geoff Harcus is still involved. Weekly dances begin again in East Perth and are even more popular than before.

Under the New Coolbaroo League the term Coolbaroo represents black and white working together, rather than representing Aboriginal people of mixed descent.

The League writes a section called 'Coolbaroo News', in the newspaper published by Progress of WA.

- 1953** The League begins publishing its own newspaper, The Westralian Aborigine. At this time the League begins lobbying the government on human rights issues and particularly citizenship which it wants to be automatic and unconditional.

The Westralian Aborigine runs until 1957.

- 1954** A new Native Welfare Act is passed. This does not go as far as the League wants but there are some improvements. The Prohibited area is lifted, although the police still hold powers to detain Aboriginal people.
- 1954-** The League has spread to Noongars in country towns, and the paper is widely read. The
1956 League begins to attract National and International performers to the club as well as providing an outlet for local Aboriginal performers.
- 1957** Bill Bodney retires as President due to poor health George Harwood (a Nor' Wester) is elected as president.
- 1958** Manfred Corunna takes over as president of the League. By this time the League is beginning to wind down. Manfred, like George before him, is an employee of the Native Welfare Department and while the organisation is running better it seems not to be as widely supported.
- 1959** Ron Kickett, who has been the heart of the League and one of the last original members, dies of a heart attack on New Years Eve.
- 1960** There are a number of organisations starting up like the Advancement Council and the New Era Federation that focus on Aboriginal issues. All of these groups are white controlled and initiated and have greater resources than the Coolbaroo League. Gradually members of the Coolbaroo League become involved in these organisations and the League ends.
- 1960-** There are a number of trial periods where Aboriginal people in the south are given certain
1967 rights such as voting. It is not until the 1967 National Referendum that all Aboriginal people are given the right to vote and automatic citizenship.

THE COOLBAROO CLUB

"a lushly textured glimpse of an Australia - both lively and harsh - which most of us didn't know existed." Ruth Hessey, Sydney Morning Herald 19 July

Ronin Films are proud to present the Melbourne release of the highly acclaimed Australian documentary, **The Coolbaroo Club**. Following its Melbourne International Film Festival screening at the Forum Cinema on Tuesday 6th August, **The Coolbaroo Club** will screen at the George Cinema in St Kilda, from the 22nd to 28th August, 6pm sessions only.

The Coolbaroo Club lifts the lid on postwar race relations in Australia. It is the story of a dance club that became a political force. Perth in the late 40s - a suburban community hall turns into a unique Aboriginal meeting place, the Coolbaroo Club. In a city with an unofficial apartheid policy, the club was an anomaly - a classy dance hall visited by black celebrities from all over Australia and even overseas, such as Nat King Cole, Harold Blair and the Harlem Globe Trotters. Certainly in the Aboriginal experience, it was unique. Considering the racial culture of Perth at the time (the city submitted its Aboriginal residents to a campaign of obstruction and harassment involving identity cards, curfews, and even a designated black zone) the Coolbaroo Club was extraordinary. And it wasn't just a dancehall - the activist wing of the club, the Coolbaroo League ran a newspaper and became an effective political organisation, speaking out on issues of the day affecting Aboriginal people.

Roger Scholes' evocative eye-opening documentary is at least 50% dramatisation, and the all singin' all dancin' club where Aboriginal singers and musicians belt out bluesy jazz standards is brought back to life in dreamlike colour.

It couldn't have been like this you ask? But it was. Drawing on the research of Aboriginal co-writer/co-producer Steve Kinnane, and the close collaboration of the Perth Aboriginal community who share their memories, oral histories, and photo albums with the filmmakers, the Coolbaroo Club is elevated from the level of myth and captured on the record, for ever.

The Melbourne season of The Coolbaroo Club is strictly limited. We urge you not to miss this extraordinary film!

For more information regarding this Media Release please call

MIRANDA BROWN PUBLICITY

3rd Floor, 31 Victoria Street, Fitzroy 3065, Victoria. Telephone: (03) 9419 0931 Facsimile: (03) 9417 4475

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Across the great divide

THE COOLBAROO CLUB From 1946 to 1960 the Coolbaroo Club in Perth was a meeting place and a focus for the West Australian Aboriginal community. The club was the only Aboriginal-run dance club in a city which practised official apartheid, submitting its black population to unremitting police harassment, identity cards, fraternisation bans, curfews and bureaucratic obstructions. More shaming than a hundred news stories, this alternately chirpy and sad, dignified and scathing documentary by Roger Scholes (*The Tale of Ruby Rose*) and Steve Kinnane does more than just recall a less tolerant time and place. In its modest way it lifts the lid on a post-war race relations in Australia. (Robert Drewe) (Valhalla)

Who would have thought Perth played host to a particularly cool nightclub, way ahead of its time, in the 1950s?

Importing the latest jazz directly from America, and attracting visitors of the stature of Nat King Cole and the Harlem Globetrotters, the Coolbaroo Club successfully flouted the discriminatory laws which forced Aboriginal people to ride in separate train carriages and at the back of buses. A place where whites and blacks could fraternise, a dance hall, and a focus for political activity, the club flourished from 1946 to 1960.

"There was a lot of stuff we didn't put in the film because it is still very confronting for whites in Perth," says the director-cinematographer of *The Coolbaroo Club*, Roger Scholes (best known for the ethereal feature *The Tale of Ruby Rose*, shot in the Tasmanian wilderness 10 years ago). "Perth was an apartheid town till 1954." Not until 1967 did Aborigines gain automatic citizenship and the right to vote.

But the documentary, beautifully shot by Scholes and instigated by co-author and co-producer Steve Kinnane (many of whose relatives

played a leading role in the club), is no whinge about the past. It's more a celebration of people who refused to stop having fun just because the authorities made it difficult.

Scholes says the film was fashioned to capture "the people and the way they told their stories" rather than stir up bad feeling. "The guiding principle was to uncover the meaning of the club to the community - the stories of goodness and hope which have taken on an almost mythical dimension."

Because media coverage of Aboriginal affairs was virtually banned in that period, however, Scholes and Kinnane stuck "an archival black hole" which forced them to re-enact footage of the period in a variety of styles.

Interspersed with interviews with marvellous characters such as Helena Clarke (a ravishing beauty in the '50s) and Kinnane's grandmother and famed card player, Mum Smith, *The Coolbaroo Club* delivers a lushly textured glimpse of an Australia - both lively and harsh - which most of us didn't know existed.

■ RUTH HESSEY

The Coolbaroo Club is showing at the Valhalla Cinema, Glebe.

THE COOLBAROO CLUB

Documentary revisits racist shame

THE COOLBAROO CLUB

Directed by Roger Scholes
Screenplay by Steve Kinnane,
Lauren Marsh and Roger Scholes
Rated G
Valhalla

MORE shaming than a hundred news stories, this chirpy, dignified and scathing documentary by Roger Scholes (*The Tale of Ruby Rose*) does more than just recall a less tolerant time and place. In a modest way, it lifts the lid on postwar race relations in this country.

From 1946 to 1960, the Coolbaroo Club was a dance hall, a meeting place and a focus for the West Australian Aboriginal (Noongar) community. The club, a timber and asbestos hall in East Perth, just outside the prohibited area (after 6 pm) of the city of Perth, was the only Aboriginal-run organisation in a city which practised a sort of apartheid, submitting its black population to unremitting police harassment, identity cards, fraternisation bans, curfews and bureaucratic obstruction. During its existence, the club ("coolbaroo" is the Yammatji word for magpie) attracted black musicians and celebrities from all over Australia and sometimes from overseas, among them Nat King Cole and the Harlem Globetrotters.

But mostly its members just

ballroom-danced in their Friday night best, and drank tea and ate cakes (possession of alcohol, of course, was a jailing offence) with their friends and relations. And outside, the police hid in trees to spy on them, to try to catch someone drinking, or someone who had been granted citizenship (i.e., white) rights dancing, or even talking, with a family member who hadn't.

Occasionally, belief is suspended in the re-enacted scenes. (An outdoor fight wild enough to stop train services and close down the club is rather skated over; there is no trace of cigarette smoke in the dance hall; and everyone behaves like po-faced elders at a church dance. Fight? Shout? Who, us?) But old footage and some wonderful interviews with feisty former club members, especially several still remarkably articulate old women, tie this short (55 minutes) film to reality and the here-and-now. This is a shaming documentary (especially for someone who grew up in Western Australia) but an educative and surprisingly forgiving one. It's a credit to the Australian Film Commission, Film Victoria and the ABC that they backed it – and no real surprise that the WA Government did not. A copy should be obtained by every school in the country.

□ ROBERT DREWE