

BIG NAME NO BLANKET



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A **STUDY GUIDE** BY ROGER STITSON

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SYNOPSIS

Big Name No Blanket (Steven McGregor, 2013) tells the extraordinary story of George Rurrumbu, the lead singer of the pioneering Warumpi Band of the 1980s. George features as the charismatic frontman who combined rock'n'roll, reggae, pop and traditional culture to spread the message about Indigenous contemporary issues, awakening the Australian consciousness of a third world in its own backyard.

With George joining founding members Neil Murray and the Butcher Brothers, the Warumpi Band became the most successful Indigenous rock'n'roll band that Australia had ever seen. Dubbed the black Mick Jagger for his energetic performances and hailed a legend for being the first Aboriginal frontman to sing rock'n'roll music in Aboriginal languages, George caught the Australian nation by surprise.

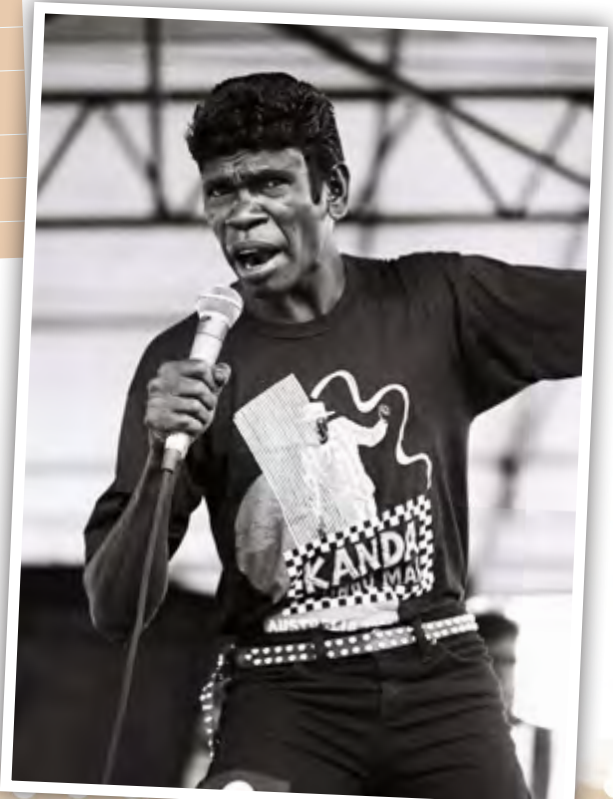
Curriculum links

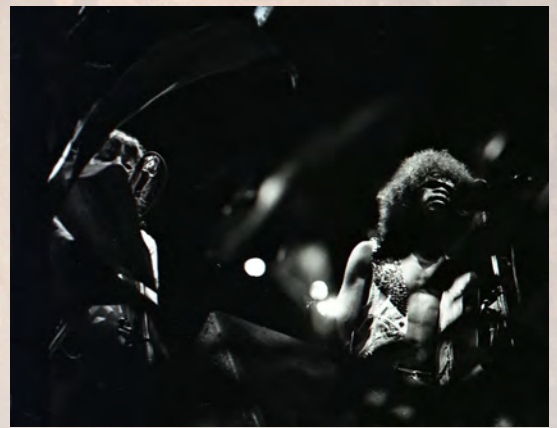
This study guide is mainly aimed at mid to senior secondary school levels, with relevance to English, Media and Film Studies, SOSE/HSIE, History, Indigenous Studies, Music, Cultural Studies, Psychology and Religious Studies.

By the late 1980s, after national and international touring, George became the rock'n'roll star that he always aspired to be; however, alongside success, George struggled with alcoholism and fame. With support from his wife, Suzina McDonald, George drew on the influences of the Christian faith to give up alcohol, which coincided with the break up of the Warumpi Band. At the Stomping Ground Festival 2000 held in Broome, he formally announced 'that it's time for a change'.

His solo career, spanning seven years, enabled him to return to practising his Gumatj traditions inherited from his forefathers of Bawaka, his traditional homeland, in north-east Arnhem Land. George found the freedom to perform his traditional stories on stage and continue his role as a singer, teacher, hunter, dancer and performer. Maintaining a strong identity with the song 'My Island Home', written by Neil Murray about George's life, George later translated the English version into the Gumatj language.

Towards the end of his life, George became an Australian ambassador for reconciliation and continued to spread the message about contemporary indigenous issues through performance. Born at Elcho Island on 13 June 1956, George Rurrumbu died of lung and bone cancer on 10 June 2007, at fifty-one years of age.





BACKGROUND HISTORY AND LOCATIONS

George Rurrumbu, lead singer of the Warumpi band, was born and raised on Elcho Island, off the north-eastern coast of the Northern Territory, then moved to Papunya in central Northern Territory, west of Alice Springs. Here, the Warumpi band was formed when he met Sammy and Gordon Butcher, and Neil Murray. The story of George and the Warumpi band forms the core of the documentary film *Big Name No Blanket*.



Before examining more closely the events and issues arising from a viewing of the film, we should first look at the background setting and Indigenous history of these two locations – Elcho Island and Papunya – because of their relationship to the band's music and purpose, and to George's later career after the band broke up.

- First, draw a to-scale map of the north and north-eastern region of the Northern Territory, showing the locations of Darwin, Elcho Island and Bawaka. Note that Bawaka is a small Indigenous homeland settlement at Point

Bradshaw. (See 'Elcho Island' in website references.)

- To accompany the map, carry out some research then write an account of how, when and why the people of Bawaka (including George Rurrumbu's older family members) were relocated to Elcho Island in 1942. Describe the influence of Christian missionaries on the lives of Indigenous peoples who resettled on the Island. Comment on the effect of relocation, and of missionary work, on Indigenous culture and practices.

Note that the press kit for *Big Name No Blanket* offers some historical detail on the relocation of the Bawaka people to Elcho Island. The press kit accompanies this study guide on the ATOM website. A link to the ATOM site is in the website references section. Also see 'Timeline, 1942', and 'Relocations' in website references. Elsewhere on the internet there seems to be an absence of freely-available and detailed information about the relocation events. Most websites concentrate on Bawaka as it is today, a seemingly idyllic place, with an ancient heritage linking it to contact with Macassan traders.

- Write an account of the community lifestyle and culture of the general populace on Elcho Island. Refer to population numbers, ethnic groupings, main activities, health and education facilities and employment, tourism, etc.
- Draw a scale map of the Northern Territory indicating the relative positions of Alice Springs, Darwin and Papunya. Locate and mark on the





of other filmed stories of rock bands – documentary, fictional and fictionalised – that have similar arcs. We shall return to these concepts later, in the Media Studies section.

map some of the Christian missionary settlements in the area, such as Hermannsburg. (See 'Papunya' in website references.)

- Carry out research to explain when, how and why the Northern Territory settlement of Papunya was established by the government in the 1950s. What was the effect of creating this settlement on the existing Indigenous peoples living in the region? Discuss any parallels you can see between the history of the Indigenous peoples on Elcho Island and in central Northern Territory.
- After having become acquainted with some of the general historical issues surrounding the beginnings of Indigenous missionary settlements in the Northern Territory in the 1940s and 1950s, you may wish to discuss how this might play a role in affecting the content and the impetus of the music created by bands such as the Warumpi Band in later years.

THE WARUMPI BAND – EARLY YEARS

Carry out the following activities on the early years of the Warumpi Band, and its frontman and lead singer George Rurrumbu.

While carrying out these activities, and further activities later in this study guide, students may like to keep in mind the possibility of an overall 'story arc' that seems to be common when recounting the biography and the story of rock bands and their charismatic members: from early beginnings, high hopes, success and fame, to decline or fall, and so on, to apotheosis and on into history and legend. You may want to compile a list of biographies, and

- First, from the documentary and perhaps from other sources you have researched, why was the rock music group originally named the Warumpi Band? Where does the name 'Warumpi' come from, and what does it mean? If you listen carefully to what Selwyn Burns says early in the film, you will hear the answer. You may also find a clue to the meaning of Warumpi in the 'Sammy Butcher' website reference. Note also that if you carry out further research on the internet you may find websites that use a slightly different Aboriginal word, 'Yirampa', to mean the same, in English, that Warumpi means.
- Plan and write a short story both titled and based on the English translated meaning of the word 'Warumpi'. Your story does not have to be about a rock band; you may wish to write it as a myth, about the animal world, and perhaps aim it at a young audience. Include illustrations as you see fit.
- Explain why George had come from Elcho Island to Papunya in 1979. Describe in your own words the immediate impact George had on the other band members, both in terms of personality and as a musician/singer. What





qualities or characteristics do you think he brought to the other three musicians?

- Discuss the following 'alternative history' scenario: if George Rurrumbu had not visited Papunya, what might have been the history of the Warumpi Band, and the possible fate of its other band members – the Butcher Brothers and Neil Murray? From what you have seen during the film, and perhaps researched elsewhere, do you think the other band members were hungry for musical success and fame in the wider world outside of Papunya and the local communities?
- Plan and write a short fiction story about a member of a local 'garage' band. You may consider presenting it as 'one day in the life of ...', or perhaps tell a story from a wider perspective of time, place and narrative viewpoint.
- We are told that George's early musical influences were the American rock'n'rollers Chuck Berry and Little Richard. Find out about these two performers, listen to some of their music and perhaps view some of their performances on video, then comment on how they may have influenced George's own onstage act.
- When the band first began to tour the regional towns and settlements, Sammy says that, 'We slept on the road, and in the morning we would hear semi-trailers, like, big trucks, going past. We played in the cold, we played in the hot summer, we played in dust, we played all around, everywhere'.
- Imagine you are a band member on tour through this environment. You are keeping a diary – either a personal, written diary, or a diary recorded as video or audio. Compose a set of fictional diary entries, perhaps covering a fortnight of travelling and performing, meeting the locals, and living in very close circumstances to your fellow band members. At this stage you also don't have a professional manager to look after the day-to-day business of touring, so it

might all become chaotic at times. Your diary should reflect and capture a range of moods, feelings, thoughts, sights and observations.

- Carry out research on the beginnings of the CAAMA radio station. What does CAAMA stand for? When and where was the radio station first established, and for what purpose? Explain the significance to the general Indigenous populace throughout the region of the release of the Warumpi Band's first record, and its air-play – first on the CAAMA radio station. (See 'CAAMA' in website references.)
- When was the Warumpi Band's first album released? What was the title of the album, and how did the title of the album originate? (See 'Big Name, No Blankets – the first album' in website references.)

THE WARUMPI BAND – SUCCESS AND FAME

Carry out the following activities on the Warumpi Band's growing success and fame, and the relevance of their music to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia.

- In the documentary, Allen Murphy and Rachel Perkins both discuss the importance of the release of the *Big Name, No Blankets* album. What does Allen mean by suggesting that it's 'the first time an Aboriginal person has been able to declare' to the wider Australian public, 'who he is, where he's from ... and to do it in a way that's pulling people in, and not pushing anybody out'? When witnessing George's performances, why did Rachel perceive in the music a much wider context relating to Australian history and racial relations.
- If possible, listen to all eleven tracks of *Big Name, No Blankets*, then plan and write a review of the record in 200–300 words for those that have never heard it, keeping in mind that it was first released in 1985. Are the songs, and the words, relevant today?

- If you look at the iTunes online listing of the tracks from *Big Name, No Blankets*, you will see that the full title of the most well-known track has been deleted. Discuss in class why you think this American-based website has blanked out the lettering. Do you think this is appropriate? Is it overly politically correct? Is it a form of censorship or not? Is the full title of the song offensive? (See '*Big Name, No Blankets* – the first album' in website references.)
- Explain why Neil says that as the career of the band progressed, and its music was increasingly heard by more people Australia-wide, 'We sort-of saw that we were in a position to be able to comment on things, and to make statements about things that other bands couldn't'. Why does he think the Warumpi Band could do this, while other bands could not?
- During the film, rock historian Glenn A Baker, in describing George's public onstage behaviour, suggests in three words the qualities that 'all great rockstars have'. What are these qualities? Do you think they are apt? Are there other words you might add? What makes a 'great rockstar'? Comment on the comparisons of George in performance to Mick Jagger, Roger Daltrey, and others you might consider worthy equivalents.
- At the time the second album, *Go Bush*, was released in 1987, Neil Murray tells us that at certain moments when touring, 'it was like, I am exactly where I want to be. This is the only band I ever wanted to be in ...'. From performance scenes in the film, and from further video viewing elsewhere, imagine that you have decided to write a letter or send an email to an absent friend about a 'perfect' Warumpi Band performance you have just attended. What would you write – and why? What feelings, thoughts, impressions and experiences would you try to convey to your reader?
- You may wish to plan and create a display poster, in colourful pop-art style, depicting either the Warumpi Band in performance, or George as lead singer in typical stage pose.



To help you with ideas, look at a selection of pop art posters and paintings by contemporary Australian artist Martin Sharp – his painting of Jimi Hendrix is worth examining. (For many examples see 'Martin Sharp pop art' in website references.)

TENSIONS WITHIN THE BAND – TOURING, GEORGE'S BEHAVIOUR, RETIREMENT

Carry out the following activities on the pressures the band members eventually began to experience, and the increasingly erratic behaviour of front man George Rrurrambu. You will also find further, interrelated issues, involving tensions and disagreement arising over the ownership of the band's music, in the next section of this study guide.

- One of the inevitable issues that is likely to arise when on tour is the amount of time spent away from home. First, in a general sense that is not directly related to the depiction of the Warumpi band members in the documentary, discuss in class the types of pressures, stresses and responsibilities people usually experience when absent from home for extended periods. Consider such issues as family, marriage and parenthood relationships, and financial responsibilities, from the viewpoint not only of those absent from home, but those who are left behind.
- We are told during the program that as a result of extended touring there was a turnover of personnel in the Warumpi band, due to the differing attitudes among the original members – Sammy and Gordon Butcher, Neil Murray, and George Rrurrambu. Expand on this situation.





Explain the essential differences in attitude between the various band members. What was the reasoning behind each member's emotional state to either continuing to tour, or to wishing to return home.

- From the film, listen to what both George's wife Suzina and George's record producer Richard Micallef say about home responsibilities, then plan and write two different first-person narratives of 150–200 words each. The first will be the feelings and thoughts of someone at home while their spouse is away for weeks at a time, playing in a band, while the second will be the feelings and thoughts of the touring band member.
- In your own words, write an account of George's increasingly erratic behaviour while on tour with the Warumpi Band, and the pressures this placed on the other band members.
- At one point during the film, we see an archival photograph of a notice pasted on the door of a performance venue: 'We apologise for absence of the Warumpi Band. The lead singer has "gone missing".' Explain why you think the notice has been written deliberately using inverted commas wrapped around the words, 'gone missing'. Listen to what band manager David Cooke says about 'blowing a couple of gigs', then discuss both the immediate and long-term ramifications for George and the other band members. Comment on the responsibilities of band members to each other.
- From whatever viewpoint you see fit, plan and write a short fiction story about a rock band under stress by the bad behaviour of one of its members.
- Many years later George points out a major contradiction, amounting to hypocrisy, about his extreme alcohol binges and the content and nature of the songs he was performing onstage. Explain the hypocrisy. How and why did George overcome these problems, and who was a



major force behind his rehabilitation?

- In 2000, the Warumpi Band decided to retire. Comment on the reasons behind the decision. The band's final tour was through the towns and settlements of central Australia, where it all began for the founding members. Imagine you are a journalist writing for either a large daily newspaper or for a specialist rock music magazine or website. Write a review of the band's final public performance. Note that your review does not have to be historically accurate; you may fictionalise and use your imagination to set the scene, the ambience, the crowd, and to evoke the music, the performances and the presence of the band.

THE BUSINESS OF MUSIC – COPYRIGHT AND OWNERSHIP

Carry out the following activities on the issues arising from the question of who owned the Warumpi Band's successful hit song, 'My Island Home'.

- First, describe how 'My Island Home' came to be written. Look at the circumstances, the time and place behind its creation, the people involved, and the subject matter of the song. (For the full lyrics of the original version, see 'My Island Home' in website references. This site also contains a video clip of the Warumpi Band's 1988 rendition of the song.)
- Christine Anu also performed and recorded 'My Island Home' – notably at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games – after changes were made to the original lyrics. In what way are the lyrics of her version different? Why do you think the changes were made? Do you think the changes are acceptable to a general listening audience or not? (See the second of the 'My Island Home' sites, in website references.) You may also wish to research the history of Christine Anu's musical links to Neil Murray, as a singer in his band in the 1990s, which led to her performing the song.
- If anyone writes an original song and it is performed in public – or recorded and then played



THE LATER YEARS

Carry out the following activities on George Rrurrambu's later career as a solo artist, and his legacy.

- During the film, Neil Murray suggests that the Warumpi Band in 2000 'had to finish in order for [George] to do other things, so he found an extra kind of dimension, and I think he grew as a performer'. Explain what Neil means by George finding an 'extra dimension' as a performer. In what ways did George's career move onwards and away from the years of the Warumpi Band, and develop into a deeply expressive and creative solo journey?
- From the film, we are told that George's autobiographical stage show was called *Nerbu*. Find out the significance of this Aboriginal word, and explain its relevance to the content of George's stage performance. What was he imparting, from an autobiographical stance, to his audiences?
- At the time George was performing solo, and had transcribed the English words of 'My Island Home' into his own far-northern Australian Yolngu language, musician Shane Howard observes that, 'George was really entering a time in his life where he was going to be a senior statesman'. What do you think prompted Shane to experience this sense of a revelation about George's life and where it seemed as though it might be heading into the future? Discuss what you think the image of a 'senior statesman' might be, and how George might have fitted into that mould.
- Speaking after George's premature death, Sammy says, in the film, 'He had two ways: his way, culture; whitefella way ... music'. Discuss in class the 'two ways' of George Rrurrambu and how they combined in a spirit of reconciliation. Note, for example, Shane Howard's on-screen comments that George 'really understood the role, I think, that he had to play in society, coming out of a traditional community and going into mainstream Australia'. You may wish to define these terms, 'traditional community' and 'mainstream'.
- Explain why filmmaker Rachel Perkins was so saddened by the response of the Northern Territory government when she suggested they should consider giving George a state funeral.
- The press kit's notes for *Big Name No Blanket* refers to George as 'a flawed hero of Aboriginal music'. Comment on the description of 'flawed hero'. What is meant by a flawed hero, and is the description apt when applied to George?
- Discuss in class the possibilities, then plan and write a short fiction story or short play or film script about a flawed hero/heroine. You may decide whether to draw inspiration directly

on publicly available media outlets – who is said to own the words and music of the song? By law, are there certain steps you should, or must, take to claim and assert your ownership of the song? If so, what are they, and why should you take these steps? (See 'Song ownership' in website references.)

- After looking at the copyright and ownership question in the previous activity, and viewing the interview material with both Neil and George in the documentary, discuss the question of who owns the lyrics and music of 'My Island Home'.
- In terms of the Warumpi Band's success and popularity, particularly with 'My Island Home', Neil states there was a 'fundamental difference' in attitude between he and George: 'I've always felt the song was paramount. He felt the singer is paramount'. Discuss and explain what you think he means.
Further to the above discussion, why was George annoyed and aggrieved when it was Christine Anu who performed 'My Island Home' at the Sydney Olympic Games and not himself? What was Neil's argument about this situation? What did Neil really understand about the reality of why Christine performed it instead of George and the Warumpi Band? What is your view? Should the Warumpi Band – or even George, without the other band members – have been asked to appear on stage, on that night, at the Sydney Olympics?
- Discuss in class the possibilities of plot events, characters, settings and themes, then plan and write a fiction short story about a battle between band members over ownership and royalties of a song that has been a major success for them. For example, you might consider writing the story as a collection of related newspaper reports of a court-case trial over ownership, accusations of cheating, of stealing studio recordings, and refusing to pay back royalties to other band members. Part of the story may also involve the acrimonious breakup of the band just as it reaches popular success.



from the participants, themes and events of the documentary or not. Consider choice of genre, narrative style and point of view, setting (time and place) and character relationships. Part of your initial discussions in class may be to draw up a list of 'flawed' heroes and heroines you have observed in novels, plays, TV dramas and films. For example, is Shakespeare's character, Hamlet, a flawed hero? Is Harry Potter?

MEDIA AND FILM STUDIES

Carry out the following Media and Film Studies activities that arise from a viewing of *Big Name No Blanket*.

- Discuss why the producers considered that *Big Name No Blanket* was a suitable title for the documentary. If you were asked to give the film an alternative title, what would you call it and why? (Note that the film's title is not quite the same as the title of the Warumpi Band's first album release.)
- Earlier in this study guide, in the section titled 'The Warumpi Band – early years', the concept of an overall 'story arc' was raised when applied to the biography and the story of rock bands and their charismatic members – from early beginnings, high hopes, success and fame, to decline or fall, to eventual apotheosis, into history and legend. Discuss in class then write your own analysis as to whether the narrative construction of *Big Name No Blanket* presents this approach to the viewing audience. (What, in fact, is an 'apotheosis'? Note that if you search the internet combining the terms 'rock bands' and 'apotheosis', you will find an abundance – perhaps an overuse – of references. As well, for lists of titles of feature films and documentaries about rock musicians and bands, see 'Films about rock music' in website references.)
- The filmmakers of *Big Name No Blanket* explain in the film's press kit, 'the diverse story of George Rurrumbu's life was best told with music as the backbone. This then allowed an exploding soundtrack to accompany the personal stories told by interviewees, and in the songs we hear the important messages delivered by George and the band'. Discuss what you think the filmmakers mean by their use throughout the documentary of 'an exploding soundtrack'. Drawing from examples in the film, how does this accompanying soundtrack relate to the on-screen visuals in which the various on-camera interviewees express their views and opinions?
- Working in pairs, plan and construct a scripted storyboard for a thirty-second promotional video about *Big Name No Blanket*, designed for television screening. In groups, you may then wish to produce, record and edit your promo. Consider your use of text captions, sound and film clips, and voiceover commentary, to tie it all together into a cohesive, effective advertising message.
- Plan and write a review in 250–300 words of *Big Name No Blanket* for a popular weekly liftout television magazine from a daily newspaper. Take into consideration that you are writing for a general readership of television viewers.



References and further resources

Books

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- Randy Chertkow & Jason Feehan, *The DIY Music Manual: How to Record, Promote and Distribute Your Music Without a Record Deal*, Ebury, London, 2009.
- Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places: Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2004.
- Kevin Markwell, *Once Upon a Time in Papunya*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2010.
- Neil Murray, *Black Fella White Fella: An Inspirational Australian Story*, One Day Hill, Collingwood, Victoria, 2011. (For primary school-aged children; illustrated by students from around Australia.)
- Neil Murray, *My Island Home*, One Day Hill, Camberwell East, Victoria, 2010. (Includes paintings by children from Kintore and Galiwinku communities.)
- Lynette Russell, *Boundary Writing: An Exploration of Race, Culture and Gender Binaries in Contemporary Australia*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2006.
- Jill Stubington; foreword by Raymattja Marika, *Singing the Land: The Power of Performance in Aboriginal Life*, Currency House, Strawberry Hills, NSW, 2007.
- Peter Tschmuck, *Music Business and the Experience Economy: The Australasian Case*, Springer, Dordrecht, 2013. (Includes information on copyright issues.)

Film

- Black Fella White Fella: Midnight Oil & Warumpi Band Tour Documentary*, ABC, 1992.
- End of the Corrugated Road*, (dir. Jason Ramp), ABC, 2002.

From the Bush (dir. Rachel Perkins), SBS, 1992.

For a general list of films about rock music, see more in website references.

Websites

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