

Harry Bardwell Backs To The Blast Reminiscences on making the film

In 1977 I moved from Perth to Adelaide after getting a basic understanding of filmmaking by producing and directing some short films through PIFT (FTI), working as a trainee at ABC Perth and going to night school at WAIT (now Curtin University).

At that time I thought Don Dunstan's South Australia with the SAFC was the happening place for film in Australia. I created my own production company "Composite Films" and began making corporate documentaries for the SAFC with the likes of Ron Saunders, Justin Milne, Andrew Prowse, Gus Howard and Geoff Simpson. I also worked at the SA Media Resource Centre where Glenys Rowe made me the Equipment Officer. My job was to raise money from the AFC to buy filmmaking equipment, rent it out, service it and run workshops on how to use it. Soon we were making films using portapaks, umatics, a second hand 16mm BL camera and an ancient cast iron flatbed editor bought with assistance from the AFC's Murray Brown – God bless him! Besides Glenys, my MRC mates included Frank Maloney, Kim Lewis, Ned Lander, Graeme Isaacs, Cathy Robinson, Aggy Read, Ian De Gruchy, and Michael "Zippy" Zerman. We were the dudes of East Rundle St. We thought of ourselves as pretty hot filmmakers but really we were just emerging practitioners in a small town.

Unlike many of my counterparts who were interested in making alternative auteur media or trying to make a feature, I had since the beginning of my media career been primarily interested in making TV documentaries. I had loved Chequerboard on ABC, and BBC series like The Ascent Of Man. At that time there were only four channels in Australia, no SBS or cable TV and the ABC did not commission outside work. The holy grail was to make something worthwhile that "Got on TV".

The late seventies, the final years of the cold war, was also a time of violent dispute in the Western world. The fashion was punk. The drug was cocaine and in many places cities were rioting. To young filmmakers there seemed an urgency to get this on screen.

One key area centred on nuclear energy and weapons, with activists such as Sister Rosalie Bertell and Dr Helen Caldicott making regular headlines. The Australian governments wavered between opposition and opportunity. This included the SA Labor Party. Once Don Dunstan stepped down it was split between pro uranium mining advocates led by Mike Rann (now the Australian High Commissioner in London) and anti nukers led by then Attorney General Peter Duncan. Rann got the numbers and began pushing on with the Olympic Dam project – one of the largest known uranium, gold and nickel ore bodies in the world. I think he still holds the view that selling uranium will save South Australia and the Olympic Dam mine is his legacy.

In 1979 I received a tip off to check out the lead tailings pond on the edge of Port Pirie, BHP's lead and silver smelting port north of Adelaide. It was making news with

kids having high blood lead levels, and Friends of the Earth thought it could make a good community health film. A little more research showed that it was both a lead and uranium yellow cake tailings pond open for kids to play and ride their bikes in. The next question.... where had this uranium come from and why was it mined? I was soon on the road to Radium Hill, Australia's oldest uranium mine situated in the desert near Broken Hill. It had opened in the 1920's and remained productive though to the 1950's. Ore from here had been refined first in Hunters Hill in Sydney, then during and after WWII in Port Pirie and Thebarton in Adelaide, when drums of uranium yellowcake were supplied to the British Government for nuclear weapons research being done at the University of Birmingham. Both places had high background radiation as a result.

It was Michael "Zippy" Zerman, the only person I knew at the time who read both the AFR and the Australian's business pages, who alerted me to stories running about "Maralinga". Like most Australians at that time I had never heard of the place. But when we looked it up we knew we had a story.

Maralinga in the desert north of Port Augusta had been the secret trial site for British nuclear tests in the later 1950's and 60's. The whole thing had been out of sight and out of mind. A cover-up that was coming to light. It took me years to realise Zippy's seminal role in making this film.

At the time all AFC documentary funding came from the Creative Development Fund and the project manager Murray Brown (God Bless Him) gave me enough development funding to drive to Sydney and Canberra to fully research the story. I found the Nuclear Veterans Association headed by Avon Hudson who put me in touch with all the characters I could need, and with Rob Rowbotham, a former radiation safety officer at Lucas Heights. Between them I obtained a wealth of knowledge, stories, archive stills, home movies and leads.

I started interviewing the veterans. Many were ill. They told me eye-opening stories of working with out safety gear in the desert, having to go into radioactive hotspots, flying through plumes after the bombs had exploded.

Cinesound had newsreels of men turning their backs to the atomic blasts, and in Canberra I found footage of Jeremy Long rounding up nomadic Aborigines to make way for the tests. Then I met Sir Ernest Titterton, an ANU Professor and ardent nuclear advocate. He was, I thought, my balance to the 'workers' and a perfect character for the film.

Titterton, as a young researcher had helped detonate the first nuclear weapons in New Mexico and Bikini Atoll during WW2. In 1950 he had moved to ANU to found Australia's first Dept of Nuclear Physics. He had then become Britain's "our man in Australia" managing the nuclear program as, amongst other things heading the Australian Atomic Weapons Test Safety Committee. By the time I met him Titterton was almost retired. In his mind, I thought, he and his ilk had been both intellectual and scientific heroes, potentially saving all humankind with their nuclear

experiments. He had a lot to lose. As information had begun to come out on the ramifications from various tests held in Australia he retained an adamantly defensive position. No one, he stated repeatedly, had been hurt by any test. He agreed to be in the film on the understanding that he would make a statement to that affect. He was tough, hard and unilateral – a man cast of hardened steel like his bombs.

By 1980, I was close to being ready to make the film.

I knew I had enough story to create a film that led us from mining to processing to weapons. I had some shocking stories. But also I had a film that showed that, even with the best intentions, or ideology, things could very easily go wrong with radioactivity. I suppose my outcome was really, if you want to mine uranium be bloody careful because it is more powerful and enduring than you are.

Stylistically I remember thinking that documentary, while great, often tended to be very slow and boring. In my view in-house TV producers had a lot of time to fill and stretched ideas to fill slots rather than using up too many new thoughts. Film Australia films on the other hand, I thought, were beautifully crafted but editorially blunt. They were primarily made for select audiences not mass media and it showed. For new TV we needed something harder and more adventurous. Something sharper, that hooked you and hit you with a new story every one or two minutes, and using the cumulative impact to make the larger, fairly intangible point.

I put a team together. My Adelaide mates, my old Perth mates and Dasha Ross as associate producer and sound recordist. The blessed Murray Brown arranged for me to apply to the AFC. On the interview panel was Murray, along with Esbon Storm and Gilly Coote, neither of whom I had met before. I had estimated the budget would be \$48,000. We had a 15 minute interview and they agreed at the end that I would be a successful grant recipient. I had the money.

The clamour of nuclear dissent was increasing. The newly created current affairs show Sixty Minutes did a one hour special on the nuclear veterans and also introduced the world to Yami Lester, an Aboriginal man whose community lived near the site of one of the first tests. Yami claimed to have been blinded by smoky mist from the test. I tried for weeks to get him into my film, but his media minder declined. Instead I needed to find my own Indigenous stories. Mindful of the footage I had seen at the NFSA, I tracked down the Yalata mob.

These people had been forcibly moved from their traditional Maralinga homeland to a barren stretch of the Nullarbor Plain to make way for the tests. Our first filming trip was to drive out to Yalata with the crew as well as some 8mm home movie I had blown up to 16mm. The film showed Aboriginal people being moved, aerials of the area and tests going off.

We arrived at the community unannounced. It was my first visit to a remote Indigenous community. What we were to learn was the community manager had walked out and the community was in the midst of a pay back process.

However, naively, we introduced ourselves and asked if anyone would like to see the film we had. A group of elders assembled at the community hall. In the centre on the only plastic chair sat Jack Davis, the traditional owner of the Maralinga test site. We screened the film onto a sheet on the wall.

Everyone began talking. But when we got to the test footage there was complete silence. When the bomb detonated Jack began to shake uncontrollably. The film finished and everyone silently went outside without looking at us. I think some one said we should hang around.

For two days we hung around playing frisbee, driving each night to a roadhouse about 40k away. The crew was getting edgy. I got in the crew car and went out to the bush where the old guys had gone. A young bloke carrying a car spring met me on the road. Tapping the spring in his other hand as he spoke to me, he said - Just wait mate...be patient, don't push it. - I got the message.

Next day the elders emerged and arranged for the entire community, particularly the kids to watch the film and then they discussed it with them. Jack agreed to an interview. But in the end he said very little, allowing his hands to do the talking. Lallie Lennon was also interviewed from the women's side giving important information about how several people had wandered unknowingly into the contaminated ground. It must have been impossible to actually control something like this in the desert in the 1950's.

The next part of the shoot entailed getting into the Maralinga test site itself. Unbeknown to us the Federal Government had been feuding with their British counterparts for years to get the site properly cleaned up. Despite the agitation and antinuclear campaigns going on they agreed to give us access. However the caveat was we had to fly two of their representatives up there as well, with their alpha Geiger counter, at our expense. Of course I agreed.

Rob Robotham and the crew had the eerie experience of going to ground zero. Despite the cost, we ended up being pleased to have the experts on board with their alpha counter. As were the three guards who were housed in the old barracks at the site.

Much later I had the realisation that I should have burnt the Dunlop Volleys I had worn to ground zero. Such is the invisible threat!

After completing this part of the filming I received an unexpected request. Don Dunstan, now an ex-politician, asked if he could view the Yalata footage in at the MRC. I got out the Bell and Howell. Don showed up. I remember noting that his trademark safari suit was split at the seams. I also remember being a little embarrassed when the screen fell off the wall half way through the screening. Don seemed unfazed. He said little other than that was very important footage. Later I

learnt that he was at a turning point in negotiating the first native title land claim for the Pitjantjatjara to return to their traditional lands.

We finished filming and went into post. Andrew Prowse cutting on the cast iron flat bed. Everyone began getting edgy. It was announced that antinuclear activists were now identified as ASIO's number one most subversive citizens. Was it paranoia or had my phone started clicking mysteriously. Notes disappeared from my car, had I left them somewhere?

My new girlfriend Chris Pip told me that she had heard from a friend that talk was there was a guy making a film about Maralinga who was going to "get it". When I heard this I contacted Robin Millhouse, the one and only Democrat in the SA parliament. He came round to the house. We went into a quiet room and discussed the problem. He promised to do everything to look after me. I moved to Sydney to finish the film. We finished it at the old Paddington studios with Ian Allen and Jo Horsburgh, where they had made Skippy and were now making Bryan Ferry clips. He seemed like a nice bloke if a little aloof. Heady times.

We felt this was a truly Australian story. It required a good Aussie voice. We went with Martin Vaughan as narrator.

By the time we had finished the film, nuclear vets were in the news. It was a hot story. I got Philip White, a wine reviewer to be my publicist. We had a publicity screening in a cinema in Rundle Mall. The Advertiser editorial team headed by Ian Henschke came along. It was great to see on the big screen and get their response.

The Advertiser press helped me enormously. Now 'to get on TV'. I contacted Channel Seven in Adelaide. The network was still smarting over the 60 Minutes special from a year before. The Adelaide Manager got a sale for national network syndication. He was chuffed. They offered to pay me \$35,000 for one run. I nearly knocked them back, because I thought they should pay \$48,000. Glenys told me I was crazy. How right she was.

Screening the film on the Seven Network triggered a media storm that seemed to me to last for weeks. More and more evidence of nuclear mishaps and sickness was exposed as journalists tried to outdo each other with the story. I felt totally vindicated. But I must admit I also loved it and so did the AFC.

The film was nominated for an AFI and I was given an export incentive grant to take the film to the UK, Europe and the US. I had never been to an awards night in Sydney, let alone travel overseas. How cool was all this! Chris and I fronted up. The sole documentary award was the first one given. Chris Noonan won with Stepping Out. I felt a little deflated but I didn't really care because the next day I was off to London. I had no money but I did have a 16 mm print and the umatic master under my arm.

The export development grant paid for travel – which was much more expensive

than today. It did not pay for accommodation or any per diems. This seems harsh today, but it also gave me the freedom to travel at will, no handout meant no acquittals were required.

I arrived in London in November. It seemed bitterly cold. Maggie Thatcher had recently come to power. Unrest about how she had treated the coal miners was ongoing. For the first time I saw a pack of 4 cigarettes. There was no food. I had never been so cold or hungry in my life.

I had an introduction to meet Tony Kirkhope, independent distributor with Soho's Other Cinema and king of London's alternative cinema circuit. Tony passed on taking the film for his cinema. It was too parochial he thought, too TV and not helped by Martin's broad Aussie narration (a lesson). But he offered to get it into the BFI collection. He also agreed to let me stay in his place in Deptford, South London. Brixton, the next suburb down the street had already erupted with the first of many riots.

Tony was a warrior. He was at war with the council who wanted to tear down his council house to make way for a residential tower block. He wanted a new better house in return. It was a standoff. The street outside had been torn up to his door. It was boarded up and had no heating. He slept with a machete next to his bed. On the first night a couple of his friends gave me a gallon can of Fosters as a welcome to England present. London's Burning made complete sense.

At that time the AFC had an office in ritzy Regent St close to Piccadilly Circus. For a WA farm boy it was all extraordinary.

The office was run by Ray Atkinson who seemed old and very worldly to me. Ray had lined up a Eurail pass and a travel schedule for me to visit TV channels around Europe and then attend the Lausanne Film Festival followed by MIFED in Milan.

My first stop was Belgium public broadcaster BRT. I had my trusty umatic with me. Three buyers, one for each language came in and sat down. We rolled tape and they all immediately fell asleep. I sat there silently for the whole show. As the final credits rolled and silence ensued they woke up, looked at each other sheepishly - and agreed they should buy the film. I had my first international sale!

After stops in Holland and Sweden, where I was told that they had recently bought one Australian documentary, Dick Dennison's All Quiet On The Western Front, and would like to take this one as well thank you if you can arrange Swedish subtitling, I caught the train straight to Lausanne, where a group of young Aussies were being featured and hosted by none other than David Stratton. David was as gracious to us as ever.

We were housed in this medieval castle with six-inch thick studded doors and huge black keys. And I remember the food, the first good European food I had tasted. After England it was fantastic.

My film screened to about 20 people who gave it a courteous but strangely disengaged response. Australia was not America and was it really such a major problem comparatively? I made no sales and won no prizes. As with so many festivals, the attendees had a great time but the audience seemed untouched. So, on to Milan.

Italy in 1981 was under siege from the Red Brigade. It was the first time I had a metal detector run over me in order to enter an event. Now even MIPCOM has it.

The Australian team at MIFED included Hilary Linstead and Ross Mathews, Tom Zubricki and his new girlfriend Julia Overton, and Carmelo Musca. I was a little overwhelmed by what seemed like a huge market. But I came good when I made a sale to RAI TV.

Then it was a train and ferry ride back to London, where Ray told me there was a chance we might be able to sell the film to Channel Four, which had not yet begun transmission. Channel Four would be a public broadcaster based on a radical new idea, to run its programs on commissioned independent content. That sounded good to me.

Before I'd left Australia I had arranged to stay with Tim Burns in New York. Tim was, and still is, a filmmaker/artist/performer who has spent much of his career making and performing his film *Against The Grain*. Tim gave me specific instructions on what to do when I arrived in downtown Manhattan – just call out from the street and we will come down and let you in. This was years before the mobile phone was invented.

I arrived at JFK about 5.30am and caught a cab to the address: East 11th between A and B. The driver asked me three or four times to repeat the address for him before saying it could not possibly be right. White people don't live there he said. I assured him it was the only address I knew in NYC. So he made a deal. He took my money in advance and stashed it. He would, he said, pull up at the address and pop the trunk from inside the cab. I had to get out and he would lock the doors. I jumped out, grabbed my bag and slammed the trunk as he snaked the cab off down the street, heading out of there asap.

About every fifty metres up and down the street small groups of Puerto Ricans wearing battle fatigues were standing round 44 gallon drums keeping warm and keeping an eye on me. Tim's 'place' was a standard Manhattan 4 story walk-up apartment except all the ground floor windows and the front door were sheathed in plate steel, making them bullet proof. Tim had found the cheapest rental in Manhattan, in Alphabet City, at that time the coke dealing capital of America. Today it's a little gentler, with the Murdochs living nearby.

I started yelling TIM and after what was really only a couple of minutes down he came from the 2nd floor. Later all the flat mates regaled me with stories of shootouts

and other trouble they had encountered in the 'hood, but nothing like that happened while I was there.

AFC filmmakers in New York at that time had access to an office in the Rockefeller Centre next to the Australian visa office. While I was there Bryan Brown was starring in A Town Like Alice on PBS and a line of wannabe immigrants filled the floor each day. Australia was a hot location, which helped my cause.

At this time US TV was limited to three networks and PBS. Cable TV was in its infancy but there was a large network of independent distributors. More than Australia or even Europe, Americans seemed to like getting into groups and discussing issues. However more than the others they were also very parochial. To work for a group discussion, media had to relate specifically to their circumstances (another lesson learnt).

I had my heart set on getting Backs onto the new WGBH documentary show Frontline and I had several talks with its exec producer David Fanning. Eventually he passed saying he liked Backs a lot but it was not relevant enough for his audience. But that interest opened the door to a possible screening with WNET in New York – which would happen as part of Peter Watkins compiled nuclear issues film program Resan several years later.

I had several screenings and discussion sessions in America. One was with Peter Hamilton who was working for ABC America at the time. ABC passed without blinking.

In Washington DC I screened the film in Ralph Nader's office to the group making Atomic Café and placed the film with Bullfrog Films for non theatrical distribution. (I think we made about three rentals and the deal has long since finished).

When I complained that I seemed to be getting close in America but never getting over the line, Tim reminded me- But mate, you are in the Big Apple.

I knew I had much to learn about selling overseas.

Back in Australia.

I was spending the next year back in Adelaide when I heard from Ray that the brand new Channel Four had bought Backs. I think it was either the first or second Australian documentary they acquired.

At about the same time I got a job with Andy Lloyd James, Head of ABC's TV Features to be part of a team starting a new ABC TV Science Unit. We moved to Sydney to start a new life.

Andy was keen I do a second installment of Backs that would include more details of the politics surrounding the issue. Using my newly acquired authority as an ABC producer I phoned cold war warrior Bob Santamaria, who was polite but not

forthcoming. I phoned some Federal contacts seeking more military archive film. I was starting to make some traction when I heard back from the producers working for Channel Four. They were cutting my film to half an hour to be part of a week long current affairs series called Broadside examining Britain's nuclear role in the cold war.

When it came out in early 1984, the Broadside week caused a storm in Britain ending up with the Government calling for a House of Lords Inquiry. In Australia Bob Hawke's new government thought there should be a Senate Inquiry on the British tests to go with it.

I was attending the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Conference in Canberra when I got a call from the British Embassy – would I be free to have lunch at the Lakeside Hotel. Sure.

I was met by a pucker Englishman who explained he was part of the embassy staff. He said he was sort of like a journalist except he did not file for a media outlet and he wanted to ask me a few questions about this film I was thinking of making. Hmm. Over a three-course lunch followed by port he quizzed me about my motives for making Backs To The Blast and why I hated the British. Of course I said I had no such hard feelings but could he please explain the difference between MI5 and MI6. Lunch concluded abruptly at that point and I went back to the AAAS conference. That afternoon Barry Jones, the newly minted Minister for Science in the Hawke government came to the conference. A group of scientists with Norman Swan and myself approached him about the possibility of upgrading the inquiry to a Royal Commission. Barry concurred and later took the idea to cabinet.

In 1984 a Royal Commission into British nuclear activities in Australia headed by 'Diamond' Jim McClelland was announced.

The Royal Commission found extensive evidence of gross negligence, cases of soldiers and airmen being used as human guinea pigs, cover ups, poor management of Indigenous people and extensive contamination remaining at the sites.

I have been told Backs to the Blast was screened twice to the commissioners during the inquiry.

As a result the British Government agreed to fund two cleanups of the test site, in particular identifying and collecting plutonium fragments left from the tests at Maralinga. Overall, I understand the cleanups cost the Brits in excess of 100 million dollars.

The Maralinga people had their land returned to them in 1985 and were later compensated \$13.5 million dollars for their mistreatment. Subsequently there have been several attempts by nuclear veterans to hold a class action for compensation for their treatment but they have not been successful. Many have already died.

I decided not to make another Maralinga film, although I later made a film about the missile sites at Woomera, the site next door, where the British tried to trial a missile capable of carrying an atomic warhead across Europe.

Looking back I see how fortunate I was to be able to make Backs To The Blast reasonably unencumbered by the bureaucracy that surrounds production today, and to be lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. I learnt an enormous amount from it and ended up working in documentary, factual and current affairs production at the highest levels for many years at the ABC. Much of that time, I was responsible for increasing the amount of independent production appearing on the public broadcaster.

Backs To The Blast is available in many libraries. It has been screened many times to groups and workshops, but its biggest impact was in its timely release on mass media. Thirty years ago there was less TV, and independent films like this were a relative rarity on prime time programming. When they “got on the box”, their innovative “independent” style sometimes had great impact. Today with many more avenues and platforms the impact of almost all electronic media seems more muted. Maybe making viral You Tubes is the current social media equivalent of what we were trying to do.

While Maralinga and the other weapons test programs were largely ignored by the conservative mainstream press during the 50’s and 60’s, it was the freer independent voice, when given access to mainstream platforms that could generate a significant amount of noise on the issue, making a taboo subject acceptable to public investigation.

An independent filmmaker/media producer can sometimes make a real difference.

In a parallel debate, which I believe the news storm Sixty Minutes, Backs to the Blast, the Advertiser and their ilk helped engender, the official three mines uranium mining policy was adopted by Australia in 1984 and is still more or less retained through to today.

The best summary of that is in the boxed wiki below:

The three mine policy was officially introduced in 1984 after the federal elections that year had confirmed Bob Hawke of the Labor Party as Prime Minister of Australia. The policy restricted uranium mining in Australia to three existing mines Ranger, Nabarlek and Olympic Dam.

The policy was abandoned in 1996 after John Howard's Coalition took power. Their new policy was to develop the country's uranium mining industry and uranium exports.

The Australian Labor Party changed back its policy in the 1990s to a "no new mines" policy to allow uranium mines already approved by the Coalition government to go ahead. With the opening of a fourth uranium mine in Australia in 2001 the Beverley uranium mine and the approval of a fifth mine the Honeymoon uranium mine, Labor's stand had essentially become a "five-mine policy" as Nabarlek had since been closed.

The Labor Party however continued its opposition to increased uranium mining until 2006 when under the leadership of Kim Beazley discussions to abandon the three mine policy were initiated. The party eventually abandoned the policy in 2007 at a national conference under the new leadership of Kevin Rudd but faced heavy internal criticism for it.

Individual states continued their ban on uranium mining however with Western Australia lifting its six-year-old ban in 2008 after state elections which saw the Labor Party replaced in government by the Liberal Party. Queensland continues to impose a ban on uranium mining but trade unions have advocated the end of the ban in the hope of uranium mining creating more jobs.