

Harold

A DOCUMENTARY FOR TELEVISION



Written and Directed by
STEVE THOMAS

for
OPEN CHANNEL PRODUCTIONS
and
FLYING CARPET FILMS

Screening on ABC's 'TRUE STORIES'
Sunday 9th April 1995

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HAROLD Short Synopsis

Harold Blair is a forgotten hero. In 1945, when the number of Aborigines who had broken through in white society could be counted on one hand, he emerged from the repressive Queensland Reserve system to become the last, renowned Australian tenor of the concert hall era. Touted by the media as the first Aborigine to sing opera and held up as a model of assimilation, Harold was politicised in Harlem. He never shied away from the politics of being black....

INTRODUCTION

Many Australians over the age of 40 remember the name *Harold Blair*. "What a *wonderful* singing voice" they say, "And a *very* charismatic man". Then they pause. "*Whatever* happened to him in the end?" they ask. Few young Australians know the name. "An Aboriginal opera singer? Didn't know there was one!" they exclaim.

These are intriguing reactions to the name of a man who is as important in Australian history as Paul Robeson is to American history, who helped shape black-white relations in this country in the mid-twentieth century and whose story is as relevant today as it was in the 1950s. That story is now told in the documentary film '*Harold*' to be screened in ABC TV's 'True Stories' series on Sunday 9th April.

'*Harold*' is filmmaker Steve Thomas' portrait of Harold Blair, which follows his multi-award winning documentary 'Black Man's Houses', the controversial story of the search by Tasmanian Aborigines for the graves of their ancestors on Flinders Island and an investigation of contemporary Aboriginal identity in the face of the myth of 'extinction' of the Tasmanian Aborigines. "In '*Harold*' the deep dilemmas faced by Aboriginal communities in surviving the eras of segregation and then assimilation are focussed in one man" says Steve, "And Harold Blair paid the price of taking those pressures on for his people. It's a story full of highs and lows and like life it's tinged with disappointments. But it's not a victim story and it has much to say today about the perennial issues of art (and sport) and politics".

'*Harold*' takes us on a sweeping journey from Cherbourg, in the heart of Joh's country in Queensland where Harold was born on the Reserve in 1924; to the rarefied atmosphere of the Melba Conservatorium in Melbourne, where he met the woman who was to share in a controversial marriage; then to New York and Harlem, where Harold became politicised in 1950. In 1951 the ABC controversially pushed Harold's singing career in Australia and then dropped him but Harold's life continued in Melbourne, where he became a prominent community member.

But this is *not* a conventional bio-pic. "It looks like one at the start" says director Steve Thomas, "And that's how it began for me too. But the film progresses in a way which parallels my own dawning recognition as I made it. A recognition that Harold was simply a man beset by the questions of life, whose career became subsumed by those questions".

In Harold's public life his ideas as an activist and the projects they spawned were often controversial among black and white alike. While his private life, right up until his premature death in 1976, was very much a search for identity. In its moving final section '*Harold*' becomes a film about the unresolved nature of these issues; and in particular the unresolved nature of family relationships.

'*Harold*' features a wealth of archival film material unearthed during its making, a soundtrack permeated with recordings of Harold singing both classical and popular songs, and interviews with his surviving family and close friends. In celebration of the film the ABC is releasing a CD of Harold's music, including tracks never publicly released, which should establish Harold at last as 'the *fourth* tenor'.

HAROLD Synopsis

In 1945, when the number of Aborigines who had broken through in white society could be counted on one hand, Harold Blair emerged from the repressive Queensland Reserve system to become the last, renowned Australian tenor of the concert hall era.

Touted by the media as the first Aborigine to sing opera and held up as a model of assimilation, Harold never shied away from the politics of being black. He explored the uncharted territory of assimilation unassisted by infrastructure or notions of self-determination. Like Paul Robeson he was proof that blacks lacked choice, not intelligence. And like Robeson, his insistence on talking about rights for his people had consequences on his career.

An unlikely alliance between a communist trade union leader and the famous soprano Marjorie Lawrence set Harold on the road to fame. He made a fantastic voyage from the Mission to the Conservatorium in Melbourne. Here he met Dorothy Eden who, ignoring the paranoia of the day towards inter-racial marriage, became his wife. Shortly afterwards Harold travelled alone to New York to continue his studies. Here he was politicised and lived as part of the 'counter-culture', discovering the pleasure of being himself - free of labels like 'abo'.

Harold returned home to star in the ABC *Jubilee Concert Tours* of 1951. Hailed by the public (many of whom were moved to tears by his singing) but savaged by some critics, it became clear that Harold was being pushed too far too soon by the ABC. His singing career faltered, never to recover once he began to speak stridently for the Aboriginal cause.

Undeterred, over the next twenty years Harold toured Europe with Moral Re-Armament, sold boomerangs, raised a family, ran a petrol station, acted on stage and sang popular songs on TV. He lived in a Melbourne suburb with his wife and two children and in 1960 started a huge project (innovative then but sometimes criticised today) providing educational holidays in Melbourne for Aboriginal kids. In the era when black children were being removed from their parents he was presented as the 'assimilated Aborigine', an example to which others could aspire.

But despite the media's portrayal of Harold, he never stopped being black. His children, Warren and Nerida, both now in their thirties, understand the pressures their father was under. As the children of a famous mixed marriage they know what it is like to be criticised from all sides - for being *too* black or *not* black enough.

In the 1970s Harold's conciliatory approach was swept aside by a new generation of Aborigines for whom Land Rights was the catch cry. Now a schoolteacher and feeling increasingly isolated, his personal life began to crumble. Fighting to keep up appearances, Harold smiled bravely on screen in 1976 as a subject of TV's *This Is Your Life*. Two weeks later he was dead.

Today Harold is a forgotten hero. But the world he *imagined* is closer to hand - a world where people can be whatever they want to be, irrespective of colour.

HAROLD Background

There's a scarcity of films about urban Aboriginal resistance in the early to mid-twentieth century or about the people who frequented that landscape.

Albert Namitjira is one of the few individuals to have received some attention while films like *'Lousy Little Sixpence'* have touched on the wider story. In general however, the television viewing public might be forgiven for thinking that the modern Aboriginal movement began in 1970 with the Freedom Ride and the Tent Embassy. This could not be further from the truth.

There are many stories yet to be told and many unsung heroes to be given recognition on the screen. *'Harold'* is one such story of one such hero.

When Harold Blair got his 'dog licence' (an exemption from the Queensland Aboriginal Act which allowed him to travel and work freely if he gave up Aboriginal ways) and found himself on a fairytale journey to the Melba Conservatorium, there was no Aboriginal flag, no pan-Aboriginal identity, no supporting infrastructure, no Aboriginal funding and few organisations for Aborigines. As Prof. Bruce Miller states in the documentary about this era of apartheid in Australia: "The only people interested in Aborigines were missionaries, anthropologists and communists". One might add: "and some middle-class do-gooders".

But not all Aborigines were out in the bush or on missions and reserves. In Melbourne for instance, there was a thriving Aboriginal community centred around Pastor Doug Nicholl's church in Fitzroy. Dances, concerts and fund-raisers were held regularly as a means of providing both social and personal support for urban Kooris.

Important local Aboriginal figures included Pastor Nicholls and Bill Onus, the former famous from his footballing days and the latter renowned for his boomerang throwing. Both were tireless workers for their people and won the respect of the white community. Harold became part of this support network, sang regularly at Pastor Doug's *Pleasant Sunday Afternoons* and for some years ran a successful Aboriginal choir.

On the national scene important figures like David Unaipon, William Cooper and Bill Ferguson had each made contributions of their own to the Aboriginal movement. It was against this background and with the inspiration of such forebears that Harold Blair set out on his journey.

Having experienced the deadening hand of segregation, assimilation was the next strategy to explore (notions of self-determination would come later). As author Eric Willmot says: "Harold believed that you could be part of another man's world without losing your own identity". This was untested territory - based on the notion of taking things from another culture and adapting them for one's own use. As artist Lin Onus states: "Harold was not wholly concerned with black and white - he saw himself as an *Australian* creative person".

Harold's contribution to Aboriginal development emerged from his personal experience of the benefits of education and he encouraged his people to seek access to European knowledge. Because the notion of uplift through education was overtaken by the civil rights movement in the 1970s makes Harold *no less* a pioneer in his own day (nor do accusations that his thinking was assimilationist), for it is the new generation of highly educated Aborigines, many of them lawyers, who are *now* setting the pace in the contemporary debate about Mabo etc. Harold is one who can take credit for that.

Today, Harold is a forgotten hero. Although remembered for his voice and charisma, his contribution to Australian history remains unrecognised. Dorothy, his widow, has fought to keep his name alive and it was when she approached Open Channel in 1992 that the idea of a documentary film took root, strengthened by fascinating archival film of Harold which lay at the bottom of her trunk full of memorabilia.

The search for archival film footage and audio recordings of Harold's singing continued throughout the filmmaking process. Even during the final stages of editing, material was still coming in and being incorporated into the documentary.

Although strangely *no* concert footage was unearthed, the end result is a film rich in archival images and sound of Harold from the 1940s to the 1970s. These are supplemented by quotes from journalists and critics of the day and integrated with interviews and contemporary footage, centred around Harold's surviving family and others who were close to him, particularly Aboriginal Australians such as author and educator Dr Eric Willmot and artist Lin Onus.

Of course, '**Harold**' is only *one* filmmaker's view of Harold Blair, a portrait filtered by my own, contemporary concerns, two of which are uppermost - *art and politics* and *the family*.

It was obvious to me that Harold's New York experience was central to the political direction of his life. 'The *first* of his race to study abroad' and 'the *first* Aborigine to appear on any American concert stage'. What a formative, political experience this must have been. We were therefore fortunate to have the participation of Paul Robeson Jnr in the film, who reflects on various approaches to the thorny issue of art (you can also read *sport*) and politics in a way which is so relevant today.

It also seemed clear to me (particularly in the *Year of the Family*) that Harold's was not the story of one man but of a family. The consequences for children or spouse having a famous parent or partner are great. But in this case the consequences seem to match a more universal experience - that of the often unresolved nature of our relationships with parents and sometimes spouses.

This then is the story of '**Harold**'. It is not an 'Aboriginal story' or a 'victim' story. Rather it is the story of a human being in all his humanness. A man and a drama of his time.

Steve Thomas, Director (Dec. 1994)

STEVE THOMAS Writer/Director

Steve Thomas grew up in England and graduated from Durham University with a Science Degree in 1971. He spent the next four years as a youth worker before taking up a science teaching post in Jamaica. In 1977 Steve returned to England to work for the Commission for Racial Equality as an investigative officer.

Steve moved to Melbourne in 1981 and initially combined teaching with documentary research. He trained in video production at Open Channel, a community facility which encourages the production of socially important programs. By 1985 he was working as an independent producer.

He has produced, written and/or directed many programs for clients concerned with social issues. An example is **MOVING OUT** (1991), a video made for Community Services Victoria about the rights of intellectually disabled people to live in the community rather than institutions.

In working with Open Channel, Steve developed approaches to collaborative filmmaking with communities. One significant success in this area was **THE SEAGRASS STORY** (1991), a 50-minute documentary about the environmental issues faced in Hastings, an industrial town standing on a globally important wetlands area in Victoria. Local conservationists had embarked on a project using large-scale, outdoor theatre to raise awareness and promote action. The program documents the project over three years ('89 to '91) and has been screened on TV in Austria and Canada.

With the multi-award winning **BLACK MAN'S HOUSES** (1992), Steve continued his collaborative approach to documentary making. This one-hour film enters the area of black-white relations and was developed over two years with the Flinders Island Aboriginal Association. Funded by the Australian Film Commission, it was screened on ABC TV in 1993 and has travelled to film festivals worldwide. In addition to winning several documentary awards **'BLACK MAN'S HOUSES'** gained Steve the Rouben Mammoulia Award at the Sydney Film Festival in 1993.

Steve Thomas has now completed **HAROLD** (1994), a documentary film for ABC TV's *'True Stories'* series. **HAROLD** was made in collaboration with the Blair family and Aboriginal communities in Queensland.

JOHN MOORE Co-Producer

John's career as a producer started at the Pram Factory theatre in 1978 where he was involved in the production of a large number of shows including **BANQUET OF VIPERS** and **KATE KELLY'S ROADSHOW**.

When the Pram Factory folded in 1980 John worked with Jean Pierre Mignon to establish the Anthill theatre in South Melbourne, where he produced the first three shows, **ARTAUD & CRUELTY**, **FINELINE** and **EXILES**.

After leaving Anthill in early 1981 John worked as a freelance production manager and lighting designer on a number of plays including **THE WHITE HOTEL**, **SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER**, **CALLING FOR HELP** and **HERSTORY**.

In 1982 he began to produce and direct short independent and sponsored film and video programs including **SCREAMERS**, **SOUND THE ALARM**, **RADHAZ** and **MEGA HURTZ**.

In late 1987 John joined Open Channel where he has continued to develop his skills as a producer on a range of sponsored and documentary programs. During nearly seven years at Open Channel John has produced more than thirty programs for a diverse range of community organisations and government departments, as well as seven documentaries for television. These include **BAREFOOT STUDENT ARMY**, **BLACK MAN'S HOUSES** and **GUNS AND ROSES**.

MARION CROOKE - Co-Producer

- Worked with CBS News in London and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (UN) in Italy and Africa.
- Qualified drama and media studies teacher (Melbourne State College) and Graduate Diploma in Organisation Behaviour (Swinburne Institute)
- Responsible for publicity and promotion of Open Channel Co-operative and development of workshop program.
- Responsible for promotional campaigns throughout Australia for the Victorian Tourism Commission
- Executive Director of Learning Network, the service which pioneered the provision of educational and information programs on ABC and SBS Television.
- Film and television experience over 10 years as producer and producer/director (working primarily in documentary and education).
- Director of Footscray Community Arts Centre.

HAROLD Credits

Produced by:	Flying Carpet Films Pty Ltd & Open Channel Productions
Producers:	Marion Crooke & John Moore
Writer/Director:	Steve Thomas
Editor:	Uri Mizrahi
Composer:	David Chesworth
DOP:	Philip Bull
Sound Recordist:	John Wilkinson
Production Manager:	Cristina Pozzan
Script Editor:	Annette Blonksi

A closer look at our singing ambassador

IN the 1950s the tenor Harold Blair was promoted as the very model of modern Aboriginality. He was a singer in the John McCormack mould who sang arias and hymns on the ABC concert circuit and later performed in America.

News clippings from the time describe him as Our Singing Ambassador, and he was photographed cheerfully yodelling in the bath or sharing a cuppa with his wife Dorothy. The magazine 'Dawn' in 1952 enthused: "Twenty years ago a barefooted little Aboriginal boy ran laughing and playing on the Murgon Aboriginal Reserve in Queensland. A happy, carefree youngster, he never dreamed that one day he would stand on the concert platforms of the world."

Harold Blair died in 1976 aged 51, but Melbourne writer/director Steve Thomas is now producing a television documentary about him in collaboration with Blair's family and with financing from the ABC, the Film Finance Corporation and Open Channel. 'Harold' will probably screen on Channel 2 early next year in the 'True Stories' series.

Thomas, who is now unearthing clippings and archival film footage, says the sunny 1950s media memories of Blair were a "media construction" of a "successful" Aborigine.

"He was held up as the model; this was how other Aboriginals could be if they tried hard enough. In a sense he was the token assimilated Aborigine," he says.

"That was an era when if Aboriginal culture was to be accepted, it had to be Europeanised for public consumption. He recorded two albums — one was a series of European sacred songs and another of Aboriginal songs put to European arrangements. If Harold Blair were alive today he probably would be like Kev Carmody, singing his own songs — he would not be singing European opera."

Despite Thomas's comments, his documentary will not be a consciously angry judgment of the past. Rather, with the help of Blair's widow, Thomas wants to show Blair as a complex char-

Tenor Harold Blair was, in his own way, a pioneer of black power. He is the subject of a new film, writes **Raymond Gill**.



Harold Blair helped bring Aboriginal issues to white society.

acter who was a pioneer in fighting for Aboriginal rights and who played a vital role in bringing Aboriginal issues to a white society.

"It's the story of an amazing journey where no Aboriginal man had been before. He left the reservation and really explored and experimented with the notion of coming over to white society — but he never gave up on his own culture."

Steve Thomas says Blair was happy-go-lucky, but in 1951, when he returned from touring America, he became increasingly politicised.

Blair's ideas of Aboriginal advancement would be regarded as outrageously assimilationist today.

"His big thing was education. He said that if Aboriginal people were given the same education as white people then they could take their place in white society," Thomas says.

Blair initiated a program where Aboriginal children were sent from reservations for holidays with white families so that both races could learn from each other. Thousands of Aboriginal children participated in the scheme in the 1950s and 1960s, but one result was that white families adopted some of these children.

While some saw his program as heroic, Steve Thomas says other Aborigines were less enthusiastic.

"In order to achieve what he did, he had to move away from his own people and he landed in a void. I think some Aboriginal people felt he left them behind, but he fanned the black power movement. It's a myth that the modern Aboriginal movement started in 1972 with the tent embassy. People like Harold were laying the ground work right through the 1930s to 1950s."

While Blair's actions might seem ill-conceived today, Mr Thomas says he was "a man of his times" and there are connections between this film and his 1992 award-winning documentary, "Black Man's Houses".

That film told the story of the Wybalenna settlement on Flinders Island. In efforts to "civilise" Tasmanian Aborigines, the English "conciliator" George Augustus Robinson tried to root out Aboriginal culture and establish a European peasant culture. Many died, and now some describe that settlement as a concentration camp where genocide was committed.

Steve Thomas says it's easy to look for villains and heroes when making a film, but history is never that simple.

"George Augustus Robinson was a man of his time, as was Harold Blair. Both of them were criticised from both sides — from their own people and the other side."

Steve Thomas and 'Harold' co-producer Marion Crooke are seeking any film footage of Harold Blair and can be contacted at Open Channel on 419 5111.

Singer's rise and fall reflected tenor of times



**PHILLIP
ADAMS**

WHEN I was growing up in Melbourne, Aborigines were something you heard about at school. Until I was in my teens, I'd only ever seen a few black faces.

There was an old Aborigine, inevitably called Jacky, who dragged kids into taking pony rides at the Balwyn sanctuary. There were a couple of Aborigines playing the gumleaf on Princes Bridge, glimpsed from a passing tram. More to be pitied than blamed, Aborigines couldn't have been more remote from our experience.

In school, we learned they were dying out and were given the impression that the cause of death was that they belonged to an ancient and incomprehensible past. A bit like dinosaurs.

This was a time when Australians could name, at best, three or four Aborigines. Some, having seen *Jedda*, knew about Robert Tudawali. Others approved of the paintings of Albert Namatjira, the good works of Pastor Doug Nicholls, or the tenor Harold Blair.

Among the mass of suburban whites that was about as far as it went. Or needed to go. Approval was meted out to those Abos who had achieved some sort of success in white culture or society. In white terms, not theirs. They were deemed to have stepped out of the darkness into the light, out of savagery into civilisation. Thus they could be approved of, even honoured.

Each was to pay a heavy price for his attempts to negotiate with white Australia, to confront prejudice and to interpret the world of its people. When, one by one, Tudawali, Namatjira, Nicholls and Blair were deemed to have failed, it proved that, finally, no matter how much help you gave

fought the good fight. In the Australian context, he was as brave, as heroic.

A mission kid, Blair learned singing by sneaking off to hear Nelson Eddie serenade Jeanette Macdonald. After a debut appearance on radio's *Amateur Hour*, he was adopted by a Melbourne family who, progressive for their time, taught him to speak English like an actor in British rep and encouraged him to seek training in the US.

Blair became a household name, married a middle-class white girl in Melbourne, before heading off to America. In New York, he saw Harlem and what for others was a festering slum was to him a revelation about what black people could do, could be. He would return to Australia less inclined to be the happy-go-lucky blackfella.

The ABC frog-marched Blair around the country in a series of concerts that soon had his voice in tatters, provoking increasingly cruel and more patronising reviews. Essentially, an Aboriginal tenor was a novelty, if not a freak, and the career opportunities would remain severely limited. Thus began a long slide with Blair working at a garage, getting minor parts in early Crawford shows or desperately seeking employment as a school teacher.

Blair's brand of political activism wasn't the sort that got Robeson stoned by Ku Klux Klanners at mass rallies but was immensely courageous in its context. Thus he would march up and down outside Parliament House, proudly carrying a political placard. Or he'd try to organise money so Aboriginal kids from missions and reserves could see the cities, getting a glimpse of the possibilities that were denied them.

While he suffered the same sort of uppy-

nigger attacks as Robeson, the aggression wasn't as poisonous, as demeaning, as the way people patronised him. To hear the sort of things well-meaning idiots said about Blair is to cringe with embarrassment. It must have been far harder to bear than abuse.

Towards the end of Blair's life, black politics was taking off. Having been reduced to playing Uncle Tom in a low-budget stage production, he was increasingly treated as Uncle Tom by the new guard. Once a hero, now increasingly humiliated, Blair found it hard to soldier on. Towards the end of his life the living symbol of assimilation was supporting a very different set of policies.

The most bizarre moment in this admirable documentary involves a young Mike Willesee rushing into a lecture room and announcing "Harold Blair, this is your life". Blair had recently left his wife and children, who were almost numb with grief. But for the sake of Harold, and the program, they bravely appeared as a united, happy family.

The documentary records this macabre reunion, where it is Mrs Blair and the kids who are the heroes. Two weeks later, Blair died of a heart attack. His kids, his widow, each of them are truly impressive, remember him with deep love. His daughter still fights the good fight, deeply involved in the Aboriginal politics of the 90s.

You may find Harold hard to watch. Not only will you share his humiliations, but you'll be humiliated by the sanctimonious, pompous behaviour of most of the whites involved in his story.

While the doco is a good piece of work, admirably reticent, I couldn't help seeing it as a treatment for a feature film that somebody simply has to make.

True Stories, ABC at 8.30pm Sunday.