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FROM REGIONAL AUSTRALIA



# Milpirri

**STEVE TJAMPITJINPA PATRICK** dancer  
**TIM NEWTH** dancer



**Steve:** I remember Tim coming here and doing his first performance with a group of young people.

**Tim:** In 1988.

**S:** ...and they're talking in Warlpiri, my language.

**T:** I was part of a youth theatre group. I'd never met a Warlpiri person in my whole entire life. And we were doing a short play in Warlpiri language and we didn't know what we were saying at all. I remember coming to Lajassamu and standing in this park performing it to people who *did* know the language and I remember people laughing a lot and I know we must have done a terrible job.

**S:** Yes, they're laughing but they're saying it's a nice way to understand each other and get communication going.

**T:** I remember an older woman said, 'We'll dance for you tomorrow if you stay another night,' and we did. So straight away, there was some connection. We had some sense of being a part of it here. And that was the beginning. Steve and I became friends. And now we have been working together for 20 years in many different forms. We've seen a lot of who each other is and what each other does.

**S:** I always wanted to find out more about kardiya, you know. Do you know the word kardiya? It means 'white person.' I wanted to find out more. I was always thinking things were unbalanced and you know, maybe the two

cultures just need to understand each other better.

**T:** Steve approached me with the Milpirri dance idea. It's a one night performance involving the whole community. The word *milpirri* means a particular thundercloud that is formed by two different lots of air, the hot air and the cold air, and when they come together there's some friction and some tension. But from that, the rain falls and when the rain falls upon the ground there's nourishment and new growth. Steve's idea is about two cultures coming together. Milpirri is about understanding that. And being strong about each other's culture and, if necessary, fighting things out but from that, to grow together.

**S:** I learned from my own culture and from talking to kardiya friends and what I've learned is that I can see some things in common with this other culture. And I knew Tracks from long time. I knew it's all right for you to ask them for help. So now from there to here... first Milpirri 2005, second 2007. So it's surprising, hey?

**T:** Very early on Steve and I made sort of an agreement that it was okay for me to ask him any question about his culture. It didn't matter how stupid that question might feel like and vice versa. He could ask me anything about my culture and I would try and answer that question truthfully as well.

**S:** I remember one of our leaders saying how we're finished as Warlpiri people. There were frustrations from both sides of me. I would wake up to it and go to sleep with it, you know. But I know the way to bring ourselves back to who we are is through memory. That's been helping us.

I started with the school. I thought school is the learning place, that's where I should attack this unbalanced thing, you know? But later on, we found out that Milpirri's good for all the community. That it's another place to make them understand these things. A fun way. With a dance and being colourful and all that.

**T:** Through Milpirri Steve has found a way to explain Warlpiri culture in ways that both Warlpiri people and white people can engage with. It's totally bringing back a whole new life to the community. Everybody has a part in Milpirri and you know, I'd never worked in a community context before where a whole community has completely engaged in a concept. We have six intensive weeks when we're here creating it but obviously before that there's 12 months or more of planning for Steve and the older people, of sorting the right songs and the right dances, everyone together.

**S:** The kids are learning. They're finding it more easy to know about themselves, especially those youngfellas, through this. They can see the similarities between us. And they can talk about their culture. That's the sort of thing that draws them together and gives them the confidence to explore more. And it will be a bit scary for some of us, the experiences. But now we're feeling that we can jump on a plane and just go and see an AFL game or something and come back. We understand that it can be easy.

**T:** We all bring very different things to the creation of the performance. In the future I hope to understand better how Steve and the older men and women make their choices of dance and so on. But in the same way, I'm hoping they'll understand better why I say, 'We've got to have a dress rehearsal!'

We were just talking yesterday about how long we have worked together. When we first met, people would say about us, 'Oh there's those youngfellas...' Now we're the oldfellas, making around with bits of grey in our hair. I'm Steve's brother now, people know that.

**S:** Call that jumpitjipa.

**T:** Yeah we've both jumpitjipa.

**S:** That Old jumpitjipa now!

**T:** Not so old!



ABOVE  
Majestic Festival on the edge of the Tamar  
PHOTO: ROBERT CANTON



RIGHT  
Yankari (Slow Dance) - Jerry Jongala and  
Ashley Zangitanga Mbarim  
PHOTO: PETER HALL