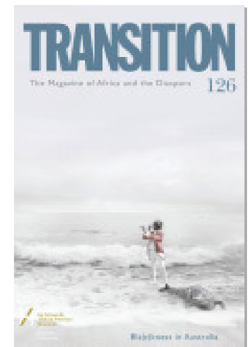
"Reggae Became the Main Transporter of Our Struggle ... and Our Love"



Victoria Grieves

Transition, Issue 126, 2018, pp. 43-57 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press

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“Reggae Became the Main Transporter of Our Struggle . . . and Our Love”

Willie Brim: Cultural Custodian, Bush Doctor and Songman of the Buluwai People of North Queensland

This article is based on two interviews with Willie Brim on 26 April 2017 and November 2017 as well as an interview by Peter McCabe with Willie Brim in 2014 on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_M-rmdY7v0 accessed on 27 November 2017.

Victoria Grieves

This is a story about the life and works of an Aboriginal man of the Buluwai, the Rainforest Bama. The Buluwai, a people of noticeably small stature, live in the tablelands north of Cairns, North Queensland, Australia. This environment, with its rare pockets of Australian rainforest, sets them apart from other Aboriginal Australians.

The man’s name is Willie Brim. Willie, born in 1960, is a cultural elder and leader of the Buluwai people. He likes to say he’s lived three lives. The first of these was a highly regimented “Christian” life, imposed upon him by the Seventh Day Adventist Church. Then came Willie’s life among a cluster of hippie settlements near his home from the 1970s and 1980s. He has now reached a new stage as a traditional owner, a musician responsible for the cultural heritage of his people, the revival of their music and dance. He has combined Buluwai cultural traditions with the reggae guitar he has played since he was a young man. This is the story of Willie and the preservation of Buluwai culture by means of music—specifically reggae. With his band, Mantaka, Willie has delivered an Aboriginal message to the world.

He has now reached a new stage as a traditional owner, a musician responsible for the cultural heritage of his people, the revival of their music and dance.

Willie Brim in front of the house in Mantaka at the age of 18 years. Image courtesy of Willie Brim.

Willie lives on his own country, "out in the scrub" about fifteen kilometres from the town of Kuranda which, in turn, lies thirty kilometres north of Cairns, the main city in North Queensland. Willie lives on his own lands in what is considered a remote Aboriginal community, isolated from the urban centre of Cairns.

"we hardly listen to anything else"

In the 1970s, people known as "hippies" moved from the southern states of Australia to the Kuranda region to live "alternative" lifestyles. Willie was a young man then, growing up among the six Aboriginal families in Mantaka, an area on the Barron River near Kuranda. Among other things, the hippies brought with them the reggae of Peter Tosh and Bob Marley. Tosh and Marley, with their spiritually conscious lyrics, immediately spoke to Willie, who had grown up "in a strong Christian era and Bible talk was the main talk that people spoke." He found that Peter Tosh talked in a way compatible with his

DOI 10.2979/transition.126.1.07 • Transition 126

life experiences, and Willie "fell in love with the lyrics." With reggae, Willie could relax. It was full of ease and joy. In contrast, the church music and solemn hymns of his youth were highly disciplined and even punitive. Besides those Christian sounds, the only genre Willie knew as a youth was country and western, the popular music of the time. He fondly remembers "the sweet voices of those girls" Loretta Lynn and Patsy Cline on the radio.

But with Bob Marley on cassette, everything changed for Willie. In "Get Up, Stand Up" Marley sang, "most people think great God will come from the sky." Willie thought, "he is singing about us and the black people of the world!" Listening to Marley's lyrics closely, Willie understood his message boiled down to two things: love and truth. Many people viewed reggae as radical and anti-white, but Willie understood that the music stood for something else: it was a means by which black people could express their worldview. He was blown away.

For Willie, the Peter Tosh album *Bush Doctor* was a particular revelation. Because of his own dreadlocks, Willie said, "I could see myself sitting there on the album cover!" At the same time, Willie kept a distance from the culture of reggae. The Buluwai have their own spirituality and belief system, so Willie did not subscribe to the practices and beliefs of Rastafarianism.

Still, throughout Willie's career, onlookers have assumed Willie's beliefs mirror those of Marley, Tosh and other Jamaican reggae artists. Willie sees this mistake as part of a larger pattern in which his culture is forever unrecognized. For example, some twelve years ago, when Willie worked as a ranger "helping the brothers and sisters mapping country" in the vast north of Australia, the "top end boys" would call him the Bob Marley of the ranger service because of his dreadlocks. Willie would respond, "No, this is our ancestors, our ancestors all had dreadlocks, come on now, don't be silly!" Old images and photos prove Willie right. "When we wear dreads people try to say we are like Jamaicans or Africans and I say no, dreads come from this land." Willie attributes the confusion to a Christian, or western, type of mentality, whereby every unique feature of Aboriginal culture is assumed to have been imported, while the local, the Aboriginal, is disregarded.

But Willie was not satisfied just to listen; he wanted to learn Tosh, Marley and Jimmy Cliff's style of play. He developed a new sound, one that became known as Mantaka music. To create his own sound and worldview, Willie combined the inspiration of reggae with his cultural knowledge. He wanted to use the band as a means by which to bring the message of his people to the world. In Willie's words, "we have just been going on the love of music and believing that our message has to be spread worldwide."

Willie was eighteen when his band, Mantaka, came together in 1978, and he was its youngest member. That same year, another reggae group, No Fixed Address, also formed in Adelaide, at the other end of the continent. Therefore, 2018 marks forty years of Aboriginal reggae in Australia.

In addition to Willie on rhythm guitar and lead vocals, Mantaka included Irwin Riley (bass and vocals), Ashley Coleman (lead guitar), and Alvin Duffin (drums). All four came from the local area, and they began with jam sessions every day after school. Willie began with a box guitar; percussion was boxes and bottles. The hippies lent them instruments for gigs until the members of Mantaka had the means to buy their own.

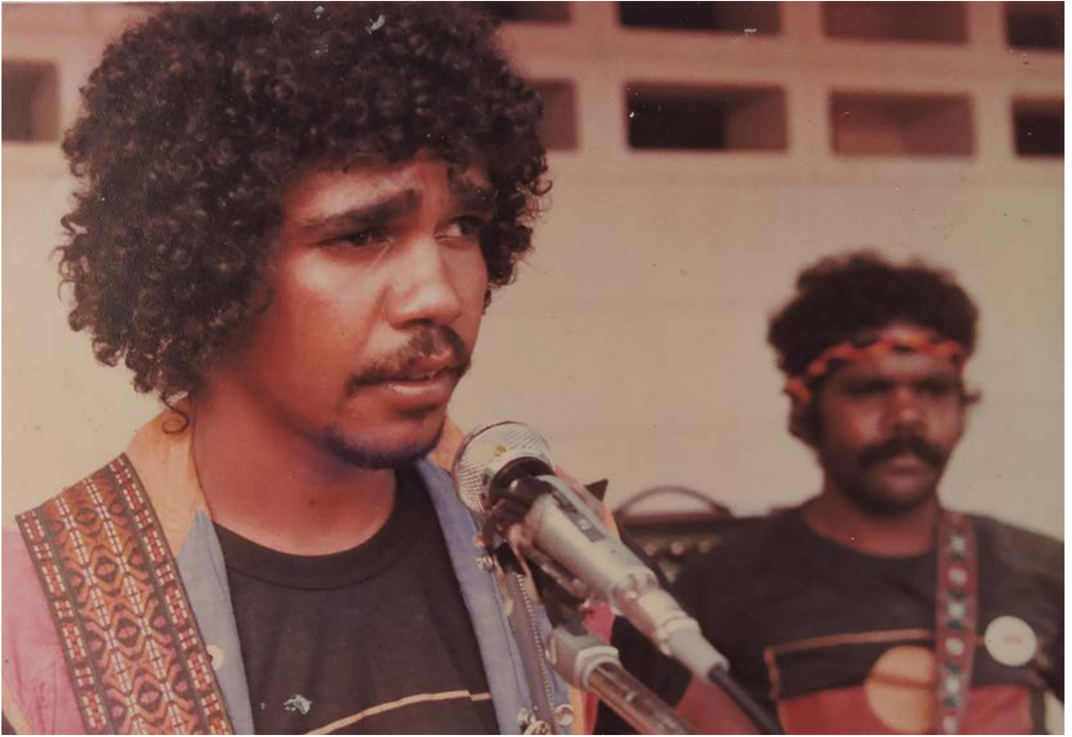
"Living in Kuranda" was one of the first reggae songs Willie wrote for the band, and it became one of their most enduring hits. But getting the reggae sound right took Mantaka much time and practice. Willie said it was like riding a bike—you fall off, get back on, then fall off, then get back on, again and again. Then, suddenly, bang! They had it:

Living in Kuranda is fine
Living in Kuranda is mine
Living in Kuranda is fine
Living in Kuranda is mine

I say look all around now
What do you see
No concrete jungle
But green trees
Now everybody is feeling fine
Cause the feeling of Kuranda
Is in my mind
Well I'm going downtown
To see my friends
Who are just living
Around the bend
I'm going down
For a party
For a while
To see my friends
See my friends
Waiting with a smile
When you're living in Kuranda

That first reggae song was simple, pure, and full of joy, and it opened the way to many more. Mantaka also had fun "reggaefying" some old

 DOI 10.2979/transition.126.1.07 • Transition 126



Willie Brim in the 1980s when Mantaka was touring nationally. Image courtesy of Willie Brim.

songs: "Put Your Sweet Lips Closer to the Phone" and "He'll Have to Go" by Jim Reeves, and the Drifters' "Under the Boardwalk."

Mantaka's reggae became "the main transporter of the struggle of the Buluwai people." It also carried a simple message of love. And, Willie says, it was love of his people and their land that led him to reggae. The philosophy of the Buluwai is called "The Dreaming." It involves the sharing of knowledge. Under the stewardship of Willie and his bandmates, music has become part of this knowledge-sharing practice. Through the band's music, the Buluwai share the emotion and experience of being "on country" and then they are able to sing about it. Willie entertains, but he also has a message. Reggae is the vehicle for that message. He writes songs and composes music in a way that brings the Buluwai experience to the fore.

This focus on his Aboriginal culture sets Willie apart from international reggae artists. When Aboriginal people write songs, they write about spirituality. In contrast, the tradition in reggae music has been to write about "the system, the man, the wrongs, the oppression." Willie draws on both these approaches. He writes about the culture, values and ethics of the ancestors. But his songs also teach of resilience

and resistance. This approach to reggae has remained constant since Mantaka's founding.

Since Willie first connected his culture's struggle with reggae, many other Aboriginal musicians have followed his lead. During a recent tour of the Northern Territory with his sons, Aaron and Astro, and their band Zennith, Willie discovered that many Aboriginal bands have "dropped all the other genres" and chosen reggae or ska as the central means by which to communicate their cultural message, their survival and their resilience in the face of hard colonisation.

In the 1980s, Mantaka gained an impressive following. The band opened for many top name Australian groups and others visiting from overseas, such as Eurogliders, Red Gum and UB40, and toured for four months with Warumpi Band. In 1982 and 1984, Mantaka had runs of gigs in Sydney, and they played several Spirit Festivals in Adelaide. In 1984, with a new bassist, Robert Denman, and a new percussionist, Alby Baird, Mantaka toured with the Warumpi Band from Brisbane to Canberra and then back to Sydney. Though Mantaka never toured internationally, their music has made its way to other countries, including Jamaica.

"when we dance, we dance for three days and nights"

Willie's celebration of Aboriginal culture and music extends outside his band, and even outside music. He teamed up with other Rainforest Bama to form what Willie calls a "barrier-breaking force" in the celebration of Aboriginal music and dance.

This project began when a man named Don Freeman cast roles in a new theatre production. The piece would open Aboriginal culture to a wider audience as never before. Willie helped source seven Aboriginal men to collaborate with Freeman: David Hudson, Irwin Riley, Alby Baird, Dion Riley, Neville Hobbler, Wayne Nicholls—and Willie Brim himself. To Willie, this production was part of a "cultural revival in Kuranda." Elders from the Aboriginal community—including Granny Danny Coleman and Granny Maggie Donahue—guided the performers regarding what aspects of Aboriginal culture were appropriate to share with the broader community. "[These old ladies] were the ones that gave us, the young men, the go-ahead to do what we were doing." After twelve weeks of rehearsal, Willie says the performance "ran like a dream, the way we dedicated ourselves and our art to this cultural revival." When the older women gave up watching the television soapie "Days of our Lives" to watch the dance practice, Willie knew they were onto something important for his people.

The performance surprised non-Aboriginal audiences. Willie laughs, "When we dance, we dance for three days and nights and that's

something Christian people find real hard to swallow." The humour was also unexpected, how Aboriginal people could poke fun at themselves. "Well," says Willie, "we are funny people when you get to know us properly, and we know that laughter is the best medicine."

Thus, in 1987 Tjapukai Dance Theatre was formed.

The TDT was a smash hit and a new challenge emerged: exposing the rest of the world to this cultural revival. The group found sponsorship in Qantas Airways, which funded a tour of the United States, Canada, and various countries in Europe and Asia. Willie describes this journey as an expression of the Aboriginal cultural practice of walking over land as a cultural custodian, known as "walkabout." He says, "talkabout walkabout—it was flyabout!" He filled one and a half passports; catching a plane became like catching the bus to work.

In the Pacific and the Americas, Willie entered into cultural exchange with other Indigenous peoples. He learned things "you won't read about." Essentially, Indigenous peoples around the world consider Aboriginal people their "fathers," and thus approach Aboriginal people with a kind of reverence. They recognize that Aboriginal culture is the oldest still existent human culture in the world, and that it has much to offer. The remains of the so-called Mungo Woman from New South Wales are 68,000 years old. Rock art in Buluwai lands has been carbon-dated as older than the pyramids of Egypt. In Willie's view, Indigenous peoples around the world—freed at last from the yolk of colonial domination—may now begin to rediscover their own cultures.

They recognize that Aboriginal culture is the oldest human culture in the world, and that it has much to offer.

Back home in Australia, the Tjapukai Dance Theatre catalyzed the resurgence of Aboriginal dance and culture. The gates have opened, and these communities have begun to rethink the role of their cultural traditions in their lives. This has led to the bi-annual four-day Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival in North Queensland.

Willie believes the newfound spread of Aboriginal culture relates directly to modern technology. Their actual, physical contact with other people is so limited that without the internet and social media, Aboriginal people could not introduce their culture to the world. Willie has plugged in and developed a series of short videos that tell the stories of Aboriginal ancestor heroes and which contain the paradigms for human behaviour on Earth. He is very optimistic: with the help of technology, Aboriginal culture now has the capacity to transcend the walls of racism and colonialism. Further, music and dance can heal people of the deep impacts of these institutions. This movement helps white people too: cultural teaching relates to the spirit, which has no colour.

This is Cecil Brim's camp within Mona Mona Seventh Day Adventist Mission. Cecil and Dinah are together just right of centre. Image courtesy of Willie Brim.

The teachings of Aboriginal philosophy, including the Dreaming, are available for everyone.

Willie says the process of developing the videos was enlightening for him. He was new to these aspects of culture and he came to understand more about the Dreaming. "Since the Bama did not have a written language these stories told in the videos are essentially artefacts of our culture, as valuable as an ancient vase or carving." They include stories of the Great Flood; Wangal, the boy who became a boomerang; Damarri and Guyala; Kunindooran; the making of Buda Dji Dreaming. All are on YouTube, along with a documentary of the Tjapukai Dance Theatre World Tour.

"fortunately I'm one of the unbroken ones"

Born in 1960, Willie is of the second generation "born out of the bush" and on the white man's mission in North Queensland. As recently as one hundred years ago white settlers regularly massacred Aboriginal people. These massacres, euphemized by the whites as "clearances," "dispersals" or "bushwhacking," targeted adult men. Still, women and children were also killed indiscriminately. The attackers kidnapped stragglers fleeing the bush to escape the attacks, usually only allowing the children among these stragglers to survive. This is how Willie's grandfather Cecil and his grandmother Dinah came to live in the Mona Mona Seventh Day Adventist Mission on the banks of the Barron River

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in North Queensland. Following massacres, small children came by trooper, walking or on horseback.

Cecil William Brim was "the last child" to walk out with the troopers to Mona Mona in 1916 at about fourteen years old. It was a completely different world, and he would never return to his free life. On the day of the massacre that destroyed his family and community, Cecil was taking part in a ceremony in which older men initiated boys into manhood. Suddenly, gunshots rang out and the boys ran for the bush. Bullets felled the older men who were conducting the ceremony, along with many others. The attackers then piled the bodies of the severely wounded together with the corpses: all would be set on fire. Cecil's mother and two brothers—all still alive—were piled among these bodies. Luckily, sympathetic white people pulled them from the flames. Their lives spared, these three were sent north. Cecil remained with his sister, who went with him to Mona Mona.

Dinah, Willie's grandmother, died when he was an infant. Her people are Kuku Yalanji, from the headwaters of the Palmer River. Dinah was called a "half-caste" in the language of the times—she was the product of the rape of her mother by a white man. At the time, white men took advantage of unprotected Aboriginal women. Dinah's people had promised her to a man in marriage, but a massacre changed all that. Dinah's story is similar to Cecil's: she was amongst a group taken to a place now tellingly called Butchers Hill, fifty miles south of Cooktown. There, her people were murdered. Afterwards, troopers sought children who had run away from the carnage, and brought them to Mona Mona.

Dinah's story is similar to Cecil's: she was amongst a group taken to a place now tellingly called Butchers Hill

Willie believes whites terrorized Aboriginals to take over their land for cattle stations. Occasionally, an Aboriginal person would spear a settler's bullock. Whites used such small transgressions as excuses to go and kill as many people as possible.

Today in Australia, the most revered national holiday is ANZAC day. Like Memorial Day in the United States, it is a day when the nation stops to remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice in its military actions, including both world wars. Willie says, "Up here [the colonisation] is so fresh that my people won't celebrate ANZAC day because it is only 100 years since they stopped shooting our people up here in the hills."

Willie's father Ivan Brim was born in 1934 on Mona Mona Mission. He lived there until the mission disbanded in 1962. Willie's parents' marriage was forced by the missionaries—for the Aboriginal people on Mona Mona there were no love marriages. After his Mission days, Ivan

worked on the roads, cattle stations, railways and in forestry to support his family.

As a teenager, Willie lived with his grandfather. Cecil was wise in the ways of the natural world, and taught Willie to observe, understand and prosper from it. For example, from Cecil, Willie learned how to find birds' eggs, when the fish are running, and when certain bush foods could be found. Willie and his family still eat bush tucker, that is, seasonal food which grows in the wild.

Still, Willie grew up under a cloud of fear that grew out of Cecil's past. One of Willie's earliest memories is his grandfather saying: "Kids! Kids! Run! The preacher is coming!" Aboriginal people still fear forced separation from their children. Willie is proud that "the fifty-year concentration camp they set up here to break our language, our spirit, our soul" has not fully succeeded. A core of Willie's people remain deeply engaged in their own culture. They still have Bullaru the Creator and their own dreamtime philosophy.

Willie is proud that "the fifty-year concentration camp they set up here to break our language, our spirit, our soul" has not

But while some people are really connected to their culture, others are lost. For this, Willie blames the Europeans who colonised his people, and inflicted upon them genocidal violence and a foreign religion and language. Living in white society, Aboriginal people can feel lost and oppressed. "We love a beautiful peaceful community," Willie says. "It is what our people aim for." But this community does not exist in the world Europeans created around the Aboriginal people: "They have built a new ghetto for our people in Mantaka." This ghetto has grown from three houses when Willie was an adolescent to forty houses now. Many people living there experience trauma and dislocation from their traditional ways of being and doing. In this dislocation, Willie identifies with the Rasta, and recognizes that the two groups' movements are related.

"we had our own black power movement up here"

Willie considers himself lucky to have survived in an environment where he had to balance two major influences: Christianity and his traditional Aboriginal culture. Nothing connected these two systems of belief. He says Christianity was the norm—he grew up in it and did not know any different. Stories of his elders affected him deeply. Their impact on him has been deep and lasting.

There was also a huge difference between the way young people like Willie were treated by whites and by their Aboriginal elders. Willie and his friends dreaded the impending Christian Sabbath. On Friday

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evenings they watched the sun set over the mountains with trepidation, knowing that the next day they would have to pretend to be something other than Buluwai children. Whips and sticks would meet the children if they transgressed. The aim was to break the spirit of the young Aboriginal adults.

On the other hand, in his community, the warmth and love people felt for the children was tangible. Willie remembers the grand old aunties of Kuranda who had survived the mission days and who gave the youth all their time and all their love.

Then, when Willie was ten, the hippies came. At that time, just three hundred people lived in Kuranda, so the influx of this strange new kind of white people deeply affected the character of the community. These beings were a puzzle to local Aboriginal people. "They were not like these farmers and they were not like these Christians." The hippies did not distance themselves from the local Aboriginal people. Unlike the Christians and the farmers, the hippies were not critical of them or hostile toward them.

"Where did they come from?" Willie wondered. "Their dress code was next to nothing, their swimwear was nothing." In contrast, when Willie's grandfather arrived at Mona Mona, he was forced right away to cover himself in clothes and "came out looking like a white man." So then what kind of white people were the hippies, who swam nude in the river? Willie thought they could be the spirits of the ancestors, free and loving as they were.

The hippies got on very well with them, and made lifelong friends with the children. So great was their influence on Willie that he now classes himself as a black hippie. "There was no other connection with white people except for the Christians, the rednecks and the police who seemed to be just there to lock us up." The hippies shared with the local Aboriginal people a feeling of freedom. They brought laughter and fun, and "broke us out of the shackle and chain of the Christian era." Willie saw that relationships between black and white could be different—positive and supportive.

This was no small change. Racism was rampant in the area during Willie's formative years. Whites called the Aboriginal people black "bludgers," an insult meaning a person who shirks work, and swore at them with such violent language that, had an Aboriginal person used the same words back, he would have gone to gaol. There was one rule for the whites, another for blacks.

Willie and his family still receive racist abuse and death threats over the phone from time to time—he thinks "Jeez, don't they know that era is over?" And he laughs.

During the 1960s and 1970s, young Australian Aboriginal people found a vehicle for activism in the American Black Panther Party for Self

Defence. Through newspapers, radio, and television they had become aware of the Panthers in the United States. Dennis Walker and Sam Watson co-founded the Australian chapter of the Black Panther Party (BPP) in 1971, and declared it to be "the vanguard for all depressed peoples of the world, and in Australia the Aboriginal people are the most depressed of all." Their headquarters was in Brisbane, the capital city of Queensland, some 1700 kilometres from Kuranda by road. The party's activities were widely reported within Australia by radio and television. It was this movement that influenced Mantaka's peer reggae band, No Fixed Address, which grew out of the movement.

Because the Aboriginal communities in far north Queensland were so isolated, Willie and his contemporaries knew little of the BPP growing up. Willie says they were "stuck in the bush here" and their small, tightknit community created its own system to guard its members from racist behaviour. They had their own strong men who would fight the rednecks, and whom the local newspaper, the Cairns Post, referred to as the "black mafia." This was the only Black Power movement Willie knew of.

Later, the members of Mantaka connected with the Aboriginal rights movement and No Fixed Address. They travelled to Brisbane in 1982 for the Commonwealth Games, where Aboriginal people from across Australia came to demand land rights and protest against repressive legislation from the Queensland government: the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protection Act. "We jammed [with No Fixed Address], we clicked together we became friends immediately," says Willie. He and Bart Willoughby of No Fixed Address remain friends to this day.

"There's healing in its own right there"

Today, the sights and sounds of Aboriginal cultures are beamed across Australia on Indigenous Community Television (ICTV). Willie is especially fond of ICTV programs on music from remote communities:

> It is so alive—I just love it! It makes my hair stand on end now as I am talking, it keeps me in flow with all of our music brothers in the north. Community people load up the music clips and it is so full of talent and for me as a musician it is full of promise to have all of this raw music and that the community can stay free and dance. I have great admiration for our people and the kind of music they are creating, the rest of Australia don't know what they are missing out on. If only we could get it out to all

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The poster for the national tour of Mantaka and the Warumpi Band, 1984. Image courtesy of Willie Brim.

the country and the world then people might appreciate what Aboriginal music can do for your wellbeing just by listening to it. There's healing in its own right there, true.

Willie goes on, "I'm glad that I am still here at the time to see it all unveiling and there is hope and a future for our next lot of musicians and for the women too, I would like to see more women empowered." He cites Natalie Rize, an activist and musician who is currently collaborating and touring with Jamaican musicians.

When Jamaicans come to visit, Willie loves to take them out bush and explain his culture to them. The Jamaicans are fascinated. "This is the kind of brotherhood we like to create, real brotherhood, not just false brotherhood because there is money involved, but real because we *are* brothers as black people." Willie first recognized this brotherhood through Bob Marley and Peter Tosh. Now, "Jamaicans and the Marley boys are talking about Aboriginal music and that is a great thing." In fact, before his untimely death, Jamaican reggae legend Bunny Rugs hoped to work with Willies son's band Zennith.

Meanwhile, the Buluwai and their land face a new threat: climate change. Willie is aware of this looming crisis in the natural world, that the seasons and the species are out of sync. For instance, the crocodiles, which once ventured only as far south as Rockhampton, now appear just north of Brisbane. The crocodiles follow the barramundi fish, which have been forced south by warming northern waters. Meanwhile, in the far north, migratory animals arrive later in the year. Seasonal flowering and fruiting happens earlier than they once did, and species are rapidly disappearing.

Willie says the stories of the Dreaming predict another massive water rise in his country, which portends global catastrophe. According to Dumarri, the creative ancestor who controls the storms and rain, divine punishment will come if Aboriginal people cease their ceremonies. Willie, cultural custodian of the Buluwai, is part of a connected group of Aboriginal elders across Australia, working from within Aboriginal culture to fight the cataclysm.

Reggae, in which the message is culture, is an important weapon in this fight. The following Mantaka song commemorates the journey of ancestral heroes over country. Therefore, it is a fitting end this story of Willie Brim, custodian of the Buluwai, as he continues his lifelong journey.

I want to be just like Guyala
Don't want to be just like Damarri
I want to fly high in the sky
And watch this world
Go floating by—
Floating right on by
Floating by
Floating right on by

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Two brothers come sailing from the north
Coming down by raft
Past this place you know called Guyala
Guyala Guyala Guyala Guyala

I'm coming down Wangetti way
Wangal djungan where they gonna play
Yes with the Law
Coming up Barron River
Bringing laws, bringing laws, to the people
Tjapukandji, Irakanji, Buluwandji, Nyagulay
Yes I see

I want to be just like Guyala
Don't want to be just like Damarri
I want to fly high in the sky
And watch this world
Go floating by—
Floating by
Come on

Sitting on the banks was Guyala
He was making that fire rise
Higher and higher
Hey Damarri don't you stand
I want you to give me a hand
We gonna make this fire rise higher
Come on
Birri djanan
Birri djanan
Birri djanan

I want to be just like Guyala
Don't want to be just like Damarri
I want to fly high in the sky
And watch this world
Go floating by—
Floating by
Floating right on by