



*“ Happy, happy people of Punmu*

*Back in the land where they belong*

*Hunting and dancing and singing a song*

*Happy, happy people of Punmu.”*

*- As sung by the children of Punmu*

The second independent documentary project of August Productions led me on a three month solo expedition across Australia. My mission was to chronicle how Aboriginal children are learning to keep their 50,000 year old culture alive into the 21st century. I wished to experience this culture with neither the eyes of a journalist nor tourist, just curious eyes hoping to live and interact with a community of human beings.

The Aborigines lived an unchanging, semi-nomadic hunting/gathering lifestyle for over 50,000 years. The creative acts of the Dreamtime built the foundation for their profoundly spiritual worldview. The Dreamtime creation stories speak about the beginning of time, when ancestral creative beings journeyed across the continent creating life and shaping the land. They carved the valleys, created flowing rivers, and raised the mountains. They filled the land with living plants, animals, and people. The spiritual ancestors returned to the sea and underground, but their creative forces remain active in the land, animals and people. The Aborigines hold deep spiritual links with their lands, which are filled with the energy of the Dreamtime ancestors.

The English founded their first colony on the Australian continent at Botany Bay in 1788. To the Aborigines this is when the invasion began. The settlers declared Australia "terra -nullius" or land without people, so the Aborigines were not considered to have land rights, nor human rights. Within 150 years, imported diseases and bullets would destroy 80% of the Aboriginal population. Many Aborigines were forced to live at government-controlled reservations and church-controlled missions, losing the sacred land that shaped their identities. The rapid development of cities, mining com-

panies and pastoral industries, lethally mixed with the introduction of alcohol and loss of sacred land, would quickly accelerate the destruction of the Aboriginal culture and spirit.

Upon arriving in South Australia, I was quickly enlightened about the difficulty of this mission. I carried the naive notion that my documentary production background and status as a United States citizen would be welcomed by awaiting arms. The first few days were initiated by cold and abrupt phone conversations. I contacted over a dozen Aboriginal communities, and was beginning to feel like another white man with a camera. One skeptical voice asked, "What do we get out of this?" I nervously responded, "A chance to educate." The voice became a dial tone. Although I was nearly destroyed by this lack of response, I knew that this documentary project would be made solely upon the strength of my contacts. I had grand schemes when I left the United States, but quickly realized that I was at the mercy of destiny. I had a lot of trust to build.

The most promising lead came from a man named Michael Rae, who is based in Port Hedland, a mining town in Western Australia. He oversees three remote Aboriginal communities located in the Great Sandy Desert, one of which is Punmu. We had a couple of brilliant phone conversations, and he sensed a significance in this project. He asked me to stop into his office when I traveled through Port Hedland. Although I had flown into South Australia, I felt an instinctual notion to follow this faraway lead. I faxed him a proposal and told him that I planned to be in Port Hedland within two weeks.

I flew from Adelaide to Perth, rented a car, and spent two weeks driving up the Western coast of Australia. The landscape was

dry, littered with spinifex and thirsty trees. The penetrating desert heat increased with each kilometer. I slowly accepted the reality that for the rest of this journey, unrelenting desert flies would be mining for moisture on my face. As I traveled through such towns as Roebourne, I saw my first large populations of Aborigines. They congregated in family sized groups on porches and under the shade of trees at the town parks. The eye contact was hesitant, yet powerful. Many penetrating stares revealed the pain of this land that lay beyond the tours and gift shops.

When I arrived in Port Hedland I stopped by Michael Rae's office and more rewarding conversations ensued. He seemed confident in the possibility of my visit to the Punmu community. He explained that the Martu people of Punmu were some of the last Aborigines to come into contact with white people, some as late as the 1960's. Many were taken from the desert and forced to live at reservations and missions; others left the desert willingly because of severe droughts and curiosity. As I listened to his treasure chest of insight, I noticed the artwork of Aboriginal children that graced every inch of his wall space. He eagerly shared the story of Punmu:

In the 1970's, it was proclaimed by Martu elders that their dying culture could only be saved by returning to their desert homelands. They believed that the establishment of traditional communities could be the solution to the devastating impact of European culture on Aborigines. In what became known as the homelands movement, several different groups of elders boldly took their children and returned to the desert. They wanted the children to once again live in relationship with the land of their ancestors and to liberate them with a school that promotes their language and customs. Sev-

eral traditional Aboriginal communities were founded in Australia during the 1970's and 1980's. The Punmu community was born from the homelands movement in 1981.

I spent the next few days holed up in a Port Hedland hotel room awaiting word from Michael Rae. He suggested that together we pitch the idea of my visit to Peter and Janet McClennan, the administrators of the Punmu community school. Peter and Janet are a non-Aboriginal husband and wife team that live out at Punmu and have dedicated their lives to the two-way education of Aboriginal children. The school, named Rawa, is an independent school that is overseen by a group of Aboriginal elders. The two-way education was developed with the notion of balancing between the amount of Aboriginal and English studies. At Rawa school the students learn about their own Martu heritage and Manyjilyjarra language, while learning to read, write and speak English. The main focus of the education is to keep the Aboriginal culture strong in the hearts of the children.

Over a speaker-phone conversation from Michael's office, we discussed the documentary proposal with Peter and Janet. They asked me to explain the purpose of the project. I stated that I wanted to come and live with the community and spend time with the children at Rawa school. I wanted to allow the children of Punmu to teach me about their lives and to help produce an educational video about their culture, so that it would not be forgotten. A global story about the importance of cultural roots, that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students could learn from. Peter and Janet liked the proposal and decided to pitch the idea to the Aboriginal elders of Punmu. The elders always made the final decision about any visitors to Punmu.

Over the next few days I took many walks, alone, down a deserted Port Hedland beach. I looked out on the ocean and a wave of clarity gently washed my soul. I believed that I was in Port Hedland for a reason. I felt that the story of Punmu would uniquely shed light upon how the Aborigines are finding balance between the spiritual and material worlds. I had already seen and felt the destruction of this culture; Aborigines who lay on the city streets, numbing the pain of loss with the blinding lure of alcohol. I had heard the nasty tones of many non-Aboriginals who only see these walking wounded and believe all Aborigines to be drunk and lazy. I felt that the story of Punmu could bring hope to Aborigines in the cities, and awareness to those who don't understand.

My eyes counted several brilliantly painted red and purple Australian sunsets as I sat on the sand and deeply thought about the two worldviews. The Aborigines were living an unchanging lifestyle for over 50,000 years, and were dragged into a world that is in continual change. They have been forced to survive in a material world while fighting to retain their own spiritual identity; a familiar story to original people from many lands across the planet. What is the

purpose of a world where people have to fight to be who they are? During my first month in Australia, it was difficult to watch the tourists being led around by their wallets, the cruel past cleverly buried. I wanted them to know about the culture that lay beyond the air-conditioned buses and luxurious hotel rooms. I looked out upon the vast, beautiful ocean and prayed for the opportunity to learn from the people of Punmu.

The initial response from the Punmu elders was "no." Although I was stunned by the opposition, I was not surprised. Fortunately, Janet and Peter had viewed a copy of my first documentary and believed in the potential importance of this project. They said that they would try to explain to the elders that the children would benefit from a video. That generations of Aboriginal children would learn about the importance of their own culture.

The next couple of days, my long hot, fly-filled walks provoked the familiar demons of self-doubt. Was I here for a purpose? The elders vote of "no" echoed in my mind like a pained scream from a wounded past. When I arrived in Port Hedland, and Michael



shared with me the magical story of Punmu, I knew that the story was here. Although I was unsure about the future, I arranged for the rental of a 4 wheel drive and reserved my hotel room for another week.

Later in the week, I attended a two-day cultural awareness workshop recommended to me by a man at the Port Hedland Aboriginal language center. The event was the

first annual of it's kind and was taught by Aborigines at the local college. The goal of this workshop was to teach people about the past, present, and future of Aboriginal culture, from an Aboriginal perspective. The elders spoke of how the spirit of the people dies with the depletion of the land. The fight for land rights is where many Aboriginal people see the future of their culture. Today much of their sacred land is being mined for uranium, which is used for nuclear energy and weapons. The courtrooms across Australia are filled with one-sided fights for land rights, the importance of economic gain greatly outweighing the Aborigines spiritual land claims. An elder woman at the workshop simply summed up the Aboriginal philosophy, "The land owns us, we do not own the land."

The other great hope that the elders spoke about is the education of their children. They are concerned about the young people; those who favor television to going out bush and learning their culture. They see it as soul sickness, this loss of identity. The young people are filling the jails and destroying themselves with petrol sniffing, drugs, and alcohol. The elders spoke about the alarming Aboriginal suicide rate, which is six times that of the non-Aboriginal population. They believe that the great hope lays in returning to the land and re-educating young people about their roots. A return to culture before all the teachers are gone and it is too late.

On a Friday afternoon I returned to my hotel room after the second and final day of the workshop. I noticed a note under my door:

*"Phone Michael R ae."*

I immediately ran to the pay phone and Michael excitedly shared the elders decision to invite me out for two weeks. My heart reached marathon pace. I was to depart Sunday morning. At the workshop I had spoken with people about the 700 km drive to Punmu, and was told stories about those who had perished in the desert heat from a broken down vehicle. Punmu is a nine hour desert drive from Port Hedland and one of Australia's most isolated communities. I was told to bring plenty of food and water, and warned that it may be unsafe to drive to Punmu alone.

On Saturday, I made all of the necessary arrangements. I picked up a 4-wheel drive Landcruiser, purchased a cab-load of food and water, and packed up my clothing and video equipment. That night every possible human emotion danced through my soul like an ancient tribal celebration. I was traveling deep into the desert, alone, to live and interact with an Aboriginal community. I would sleep little that hot Australian night.

In the morning, I awoke and phoned Peter to let him know my precise departure time. I loaded up the truck, said a prayer, and began the nine hour drive deep into the heart of Australia's Great Sandy Desert. Many thoughts and feelings would quickly become my travel companions.

*How much of their culture would be left? Would the children of Punmu want to become involved with creating the video? Would they trust me?* As I turned off the main highway, the road quickly transformed into an unpaved, isolated path. As the passing cars became non-existent, I felt the magic of life awaken. The dreams that had accompanied me on the long flight from the United States had become real.

I was traveling down the road to Punmu.