

Black fellas and white fellas - we still need that story

by [Janice McEwen](#)

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“When we heard about the stockmen walking off Wave Hill we were in a drovers’ camp in Queensland. We came in for our tucker and Mum had been listening to the ABC news and she told us ‘The black fellas have walked off Lord Vestey’s station’. We thought they’d end up in jail. But they didn’t. We were glued to the ABC for the next nine years”.

For Kev Carmody, the co-writer with Paul Kelly of *From Little Things Big Things Grow* (the song which has helped keep this important story alive), the memory of that August day in 1966 is still vivid and the promise of the Wave Hill Walk Off continues to be significant for all Australians. For him that significance is “the realisation by non-Indigenous Australians that this struggle transcended the issue of wages and was for the return of their land, which for the Gurindji stockmen and their families as for all Aboriginal people is the source of our culture, spirituality and identity. It is also the recognition that we had a historical, sovereign right to that land.”

Kev will be performing at Kalkiringi on 18th and 19th of August this year when the communities of Kalkiringi and Daguragu with supporters from all around the country will celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the Wave Hill Walk-Off with the 40 Years Freedom Day Festival.

The festival commemorates the strike by the Indigenous pastoral workers of Wave Hill station, led by Gurindji leader Vincent Lingiari, which was very much the beginning of the land rights movement in Australia. And, as Indigenous leader Pat Dodson puts it, “Lingiari started us on the road to reconciliation”.

Although seen initially as a strike for wages and living conditions, the struggle of the Gurindji was essentially about the issue of access and rights to their own traditional land. After nine years of intense struggle they were finally given the title to the land in an official handover ceremony by the then Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam in August 1975. .

“Freedom Day” is celebrated annually in the Kalkiringi and Daguragu communities, about 800 kilometres south of Darwin. This year, the 40 Years Freedom Day Festival will be a special event marking this important anniversary, and to honour and recognise the vision, determination and hope of Vincent Lingiari and the stockmen and their families.

This festival of arts and culture in the widest sense of the words begins on Friday 18 August with a Community Freedom Day BBQ in the Victoria River bed (the initial camp of the Gurindji after the Walk Off). The festival will also feature important Indigenous ceremony and traditional dancing, exhibitions and sales of artwork by local artists, speeches and discussions, tours of the Walk Off sites, displays, a collaborative art project, films, an exhibition and sale of student artwork from Kalkiringi Community Education Centre. Indigenous contemporary dancer Gary Lang is taking workshops with



A banner created to commemorate the 40th Anniversary of the Wave Hill Walk-Off and the 40 Years Freedom Day Festival. [Photo: Courtesy, Top End Arts Marketing]

young people in the community and will perform at the festival. The set of beautiful commemorative banners created by the community with Joanna Barrkman and Chips Macinolty for the 30th Anniversary Celebration will be on display.

The two Freedom Day Concerts on Friday and Saturday evenings will feature national and local performers including Kev Carmody, Warren H Williams, Mary G, Nokturnal, Nabarlek Band, Shellie Morris and local Aboriginal bands the Lazy Late Boys and Yartulu Yartulu.

Like Kev, the other performers I've talked to express their sense of being honoured to take part in this historic festival and are quick to point out that the Wave Hill Walk Off is significant for all Australians. As Vincent Lingiari put it "We want to live in a better way together. Aboriginals and white men. Let us not fight over anything. Let us be mates."

Important guests at the festival will include some artists coming home to their country who are Gurindji descendents of some of the many children stolen from the community and these include singer June Mills, and artists Brenda Croft and Eddie Kitching.

Many other visitors are long term friends of the community. These include Gabi Hollows, Founding Director of the Fred Hollows Foundation who worked with Fred Hollows in the community in the 70s; the Hon Les Johnson AM who was Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in Gough Whitlam's 1975 cabinet and organised the moving symbolic handover ceremony when Gough Whitlam poured a handful of soil into Vincent Lingiari's hand; Graham Paulson the first Aboriginal ordained Baptist minister who worked with the people at Wave Hill from 1970 to 1975; author Frank Hardy's son Alan Hardy and daughter Shirley Hardy-Rix who will be bringing copies of the timely new edition of their father's classic story of the Walk-off, *The Unlucky Australians*.

VIPs attending the festival include Federal Labour politicians Peter Garrett, and Warren Snowdon who is the local member, and Northern Territory politicians including Chief Minister Clare Martin and many members of her cabinet and party. Unions NT are organising buses from Darwin out Kalkaringi for the event. The Liberal and Country Liberal Party are notable for their total absence.

Another VIP, songsmith Ted Egan the writer and performer of Gurindji Blues who is now the enormously popular Administrator of the Northern Territory and who will be visiting in his official capacity and as a long time friend of the people of Kalkaringi and Daguragu, puts the significance of the event this way,

*Poor bugger me, Gurindji
Me bin sit down this country
Long time before the Lord Vestey
All about land belongin' to we
Poor bugger me, Gurindji.*

In a moving tribute to Vincent Lingiari Ted Egan says "When the definitive history of Australia is written, there will be many Prime Ministers who won't rate a single line, but the name Vincent Lingiari will be there. Future Australians will know of and hopefully revere the simple, dignified stockman who took on the combined wrath of the Australian Government and the Vestey's empire in England, on the grounds that he wanted to be treated like a human being, not a dog. It was he who led the 1966 walk off from conditions approximating slavery on Wave Hill station. It was he who put the words "land rights" into the Australian vernacular. It was he who said we should all be mates. It was he who graciously offered friendship to all, when he finally won the battle to have his people recognised as the traditional owners of the land he inherited from his ancestors. What a mighty man, old Julama."

According to another popular performer at the festival, Mary G. "This is not Aboriginal history this is Australia's history and ordinary Australians Citizens standing for their rights.

"The public announcement of the way business is done with Aboriginal people set the precedent in Australia by the actions of the late and great Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji people of Wave Hill. The walk off, was in fact the walk on, in exposing Australia's shameful attitude towards Aboriginal Australia.

"Sadly very little has changed in terms of attitude to wards its own Indigenous people. But I am proud to be invited to be there amongst not only the spirit of the vent but among the spirit of those gone who stood up for our rights. I am so proud and honoured. To perform there is the greatest opportunity for me".

According to Central Australian band Nokturnl, who will also perform in the Freedom Day Concert, "Our music makes a lot of statements, often expressed quite cryptically, about the history of Australia and the violence and oppression of Indigenous people. Actions like those of the stockmen and their families who walked off Wave Hill Station are necessary for our salvation to take place – they're an important and necessary thing not only for Indigenous people, but for all Australians".

Kev Carmody describes the threats to land rights, the changes to industrial relations legislation and the demise of Aboriginal representation as "another tidal wave sweeping over us" but draws inspiration from the coming together of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in events like the 40 Years Freedom Festival as opportunities to find a new way forward.

As his song says:

*...this is the story of something much more
How power and privilege can not move a people
Who know where they stand and stand in the law.*

For more information about the Wave Hill Walk Off and the 40 Years Freedom Festival visit www.freedomday.info

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