



Andrew Baylor, "Strange Land", The Bush is Full of Ghosts 1993-1996. For this and more music by Andrew go to <http://www.andybaylor.com.au>

Warwick Thornton's *Samson and Delilah* begins with Charlie Pride's *Sunshiney Day* ... *In my heart its gonna be a sunshiney day... when you got a love like ours Every day is gonna be a Sunshiney Day*. Samson wakes in his furniture-less concrete room and takes another sniff in his cut-off baked bean can full of petrol. Welcome to another sunshiney day in Jay Creek.

Many critics are acknowledging *Samson and Delilah* as Australia's cinematic masterpiece of all time. For those of you who haven't seen it, the *Palm D'Orr* winning film is about two Aboriginal teenagers in the void between traditional Aboriginal and mainstream Australian society. Like its mythic namesakes, it is about

strength and resilience, the cutting of hair, betrayals, saviours, tragedies but most of all, it is a love story for all time that transcends culture and language.

Our music for this Letter from Australia, very appropriately, comes from the great Arrente guitar player and singer Warren H. Williams. Thanks to an agreement with APRA/AMCOS I am very pleased to be able to spotlight great Australian talents like Warren that do not get the airplay they deserve in the South East commercial and public radio stations. I hope that this podcast will encourage you to search out Warren's website and demand that his songs be more actively played by your favourite radio stations at home and abroad.

Warren H. Williams, "What A Night (This would be)", <i>Where my Heart Is</i> . For this and more music go to http://www.emusic.com/album/Warren-H-Williams-Where-Mv-Heart-Is-MP3-Download/10857935.html
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Despite its international and critical success, for many Australians *Samson and Delilah* is hard to watch because the film uncovers a world irreconcilable with the prosperity of mainstream white Australian life.

I first saw the movie in a regional town and there were audible gasps throughout the film. When the lights came on I looked around me and many of my fellow mainstream white Australians were in a state of denial, anger, tears, despair and shock. Many simply did not last the distance.

Since the turn of the 19th century and especially after World War II when Australian Aboriginal activists were able to develop their own effective polity, Australia's mainstream white middle classes have been on a slow journey of realisation. Step by step they have started to understand various dimensions of the exploitation of Aboriginal society. Politicians have congratulated themselves on how far they and their fellows have come. Over the past decade media organisations like News Limited have specialised in shock horror poverty of Aboriginal communities to sell newspapers and to favour a sort of integrationist politics that wants to make Indigenous people into mirrors of white family, community and business.

Samson and Delilah takes the shock value that media predators prey on and makes it into something more engaging. The shock for contemporary Australians is the normality of deprivations for young Indigenous teenagers and the lonely resilience of many Aboriginal young people growing up without the guidance and discipline of traditional society and with no hope in the mainstream.

One can go back:

- to the horrific scenes of devastation when European diseases devastated the Indigenous population in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century,
- to massacres throughout nineteenth century Australia,
- to the Nazi like break ups of Aboriginal family in the twentieth century
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but the void in which an increasing number of regional and remote Aboriginal young people live in is as bad as all that has come before.

It is Warwick Thornton's skill to have captured this empty void in its rawest detail. But the story is about survival against all odds and forging a new identity that is very different from the mainstream models often propagated by the national press and which is also challenging for Aboriginal elders.

Former Prime Minister Howard called dwelling on the historical alienation of Aboriginal people, black armband history. *Samson and Delilah* demolishes such ignorance in a slow burning fire of contemporary reality. What contributes to the horrific void in which Samson and Delilah find themselves? It is every single accumulating historical exploitation and destructive factor that continues on unhindered in contemporary society.

Samson and Delilah also demolishes the public relations government of Kevin Rudd – a kind of version of what people in Great Britain called - Blair Bollocks. When he came into government Rudd was big enough to say sorry for White Australian governments' eugenic inspired cultural war on Aboriginal families from the late nineteenth century to mid twentieth century that involved separating young Aboriginal children from their families. But so what? he and his government have provided no compensation to those families and communities, continue to botch any support for young people like *Samson and Delilah* and lead a bureaucracy that seems to thrive on the continuing despair of Aboriginal people.

Governments like Rudds are in some ways a bigger curse than overtly racist governments like the former Howard government because they are just plain *gamin*. They appear to be doing something, they appear to be sincere, they are rewarded electorally for apparently, sincerely doing something, but when you look at what is really happening on the ground, life grows worse for shamefully vast proportion of Aboriginal young people.

Warren H. Williams, "Learn My Song", (Chris Rea), <i>Be Like Home</i> . For this and more music go to http://warrenhwilliams.com/store/be-like-home/

In the closing scenes of *Samson and Delilah* I felt a great and big smile come over my face. While my partner and most of my fellow audience members were crying, devastated or in shock, I was smiling because I just felt full of admiration for Warwick Thornton and his team and the message they had created.

The other reason to smile midst the devastation is that *Samson and Delilah* is a film of inspiration for Aboriginal Australians and particularly young people like its two leads Rowan McNamara and Marissa Gibson. The masterly Thornton has allowed McNamara and Gibson's own voices to emerge and, as I understand it, they had a big say in the final denouement of the film. Their message is: no matter how disconnected we become, no matter what is thrown at us, no matter how dark it gets, we will survive and grow.

That McNamara and Gibson were wonderful in their roles was not because they had been to acting school but because everything they did was literally in their heart and souls. As 16 year old *Samson and Delilah* they are representative of a very large part of the Aboriginal population. In contrast to the white population, the Aboriginal

population is young and growing. Samson and Delilah are the future of Aboriginal society as well as the future of Australia.

In a real version of *Mad Max* Samson and Delilah live on the fringes of what I call the Australian gulag. Since 2000 the rate of imprisonment for Indigenous people in the Northern Territory has risen a staggering 53 per cent and if there is one area of unreality about the film it is that on more than one occasion they would, under normal circumstances, have been bundled into a paddy wagon and put into detention. In all likelihood they would have been put away for years and would probably have been separated for all time.

There is exactly the same percentage of 18-34 year old Indigenous Australians in prison as in university. To approach the national norm of educational participation, Indigenous 18-34 year old numbers in TAFE and university would have to increase five fold and prison numbers would have to fall by 91 per cent, unemployment numbers would have to fall by 66 per cent and employment numbers would have to increase by 53 per cent.

The physical numbers are not overwhelming. They are in the thousands. But no government or private sector organization has yet grasped the magnitude of the revolution that is required to turn the situation around. There is just not the will or the know-how to get down to the level of reality that is so grippingly portrayed in Samson and Delilah either in the private or public sector. I have come to the view that if things are going to change in Australia it has to be about individuals taking direct action to make a difference in defiance of the received wisdom and institutional-think of governments and corporations.

Samson and Delilah also alerts us to something that is just not on the radar screens of the contemporary Australian media or any Australian government and that is the idea that Aboriginal people might want to do something very different with their lives than is prescribed or thought desirable by the mainstream. Samson and Delilah go back to live on what many mainstream Australians would perceive to be another squalid house in another impossible area of the country. But it is Delilah's turf. It is where she belongs. It is where they both feel safe. It is where they have a bright future.

Unlike the community in which they had been living - where they had been thrown together with family and no doubt other clan and language groups that would not normally live together – on their own country, they have the independence and the space to make their own lives. This is what time after time since the horrors of colonization began, Aboriginal people all over Australia, have expressed as their true desire. The mainstream time after time rejects any investment in this desire to live independently on homelands. It is seen to be a combination of too expensive and too different from the norm by government.

But the powerful message of Samson and Delilah is that until we in Australia '*get*' homelands, '*get*' the delicate inter-relations between clans and extended families and '*get*' Aboriginal life priorities and protocols - then Aboriginal young people – the adults of tomorrow – will live in a gulag, will live violent and anti-social lives and will never have a satisfactory relationship with mainstream society.

Warren H. Williams, "Free People", *Places in Between*. For this and more music go to <http://warrenhwilliams.com/store/places-in-between/>

Samson and Delilah is a triumph in more ways than just the sheer excellence of its craft. In 2005 I recalled sitting in the Broome twilight and then moonlight at the great Goolarri studios. Dot West, who along with Thornton and Roberta Perkins is revolutionising Australian television and cinema, told me she dreamed of the day when Aboriginal film makers would make films for, by and with Aboriginal people. For Dot it was about creating an Aboriginal art and voice and not worrying about the mainstream. I think I said at the time, that if that happened, Australian cinema would win a world audience and a new level of engagement from the mainstream Australian audience.

Samson and Delilah, and the recent SBS television series *The Circuit* that Dot has been writing for, signify to me that the day of a true Aboriginal media and arts industry has partially arrived. I say partially because the capability is so clearly there and has probably always been there but the question is whether the creative companies with all their production and financial capacities can be supported, created and evolve to support the next phase of the development.

What is needed is for the anchor companies, like Alice Springs CAAMA and Broome's Goolarri to be as well funded and endowed as Australia's mainstream universities. Feeding off the anchors and sustaining themselves with private investment should be the individual creative companies of Indigenous artists, film makers and producers like Thornton and West.

As a result of *Samson and Delilah*'s international success I hope many people start to ask: where does this film come from? Not just, who produced it? Which part of Australia does it emerge from? But which institution, which acting school, which theatre company, which creative agency could have possibly produced it? The answer is no mainstream Australian institution or graduate could have produced or made it in a million years.

The voice that people like Warwick Thornton and Dot West so assiduously work for comes as a result of a flukey creative space that has emerged around grass roots community media enterprises like Goolarri in Broome and CAAMA in Alice Springs. Sure Thornton did his cinematography degree in Sydney but his creative guts were forged in the red dust. A very serious group of world beating thinkers, writers, cinematographers, sound technicians, broadcasters, musicians, artists, theatre writers, production experts have also literally emerged with him. It should be observed that the creative anchors CAAMA and Goolarri are usually funded for peanuts when compared to the big South Eastern educational institutions.

Is it a mirage to think that creative companies that are as well financed and supported as Home Box Office in the United States could emerge in the desert and remote centres? I hesitate to think that if government got more involved the fragile creativity might be totally destroyed, however, there is a lot of locked up Aboriginal capital presided over by appointed committees that need to be invested in the anchor points

and productions of what has proved itself to be in the parlance of management speak – the highest quality, value adding export oriented production companies.

Wouldn't it be nice to think of world class television and cinema production companies headquartered in Broome and Alice Springs and not just raw materials based resources and energy companies? This is what we in Australia and I hope you overseas now need to start pushing for by watching out for the names Thornton, West, Perkins and supporting their creative work.

Warren H. Williams, "Diamonds", (Chris Rea), *Be Like Home*. For this and more music go to <http://warrenhwilliams.com/store/be-like-home/>