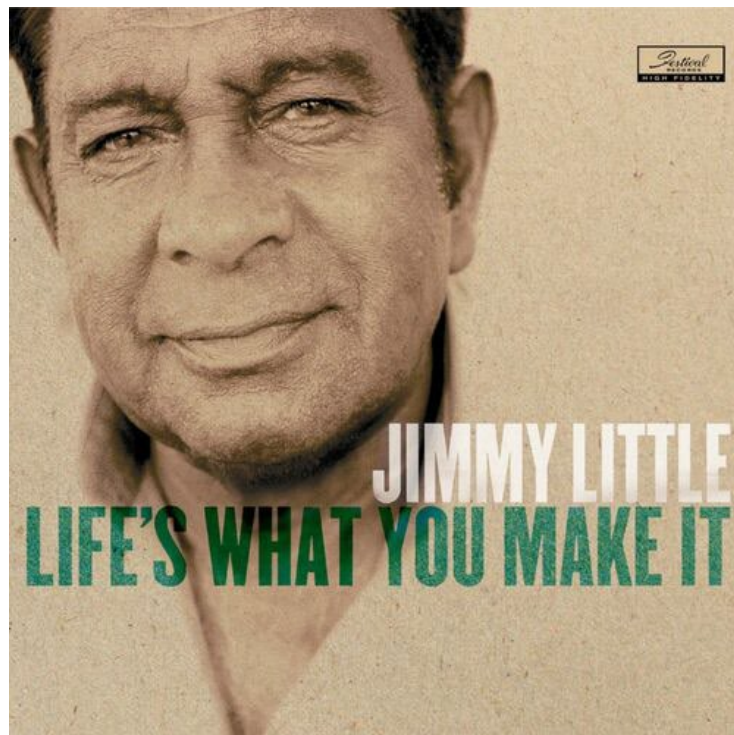


## The Invincible Spirit of Australia's Great Aboriginal Ambassador: Jimmy Little



Anyone who met or saw Jimmy Little sing was struck by his quiet, loving dignity, his unforgettable voice and stage presence. I first saw Jimmy play in King George Square Brisbane in the early 2000s. After decades he was riding high on the re-birth of his career with *Messenger (1999)* that brought his voice to new generations of admirers. It was one of those disorganized festival events and people were finishing work, catching buses or heading to Roma Street Railway Station. Another performer of his status might have been frustrated. But there was Jimmy, ever the professional, with only an acoustic guitar, the master of thousands of performances, and his voice and delivery just stopped you in your tracks. I was in awe, knowing nothing of Jimmy only that I was in the presence of greatness. I had not planned to be there but I found myself lingering and waiting for his next song, song after song. I walked back to work on a cloud thinking myself the luckiest man alive, determined to find out more about this mystery man. This must be a common experience for so many Australians and now thankfully we have a biography written by his daughter Frances Peters-Little.

Jimmy Little was the Aboriginal brother, father, uncle that every Australian wanted and needed to embrace. He was a quiet hurricane. To see Jimmy Little perform in such a relatively small informal event was a privilege and a blessing. Like so many thousands of Australians who saw him play live in clubs, regional halls, talent quests, the power of his song enveloped you like a long lost friend. The performance was not contrived, it reflected his deep philosophy and character. As Dan Sultan says “..he’s not just once in a life time, he is once ever”.(p208)

Greet “ignorance with ignorance’ was his credo. He refused to descend to a base level of prejudice, arrogance or false pride. He consistently and carefully took the higher road: “I never wanted to be White in all my life; I just presented Jimmy Little, a shiny, glossy, natural and intelligent Black”. (p.161)

There was something learned in the corrugated houses and shanty towns, from his mother’s mighty Dungala country and Cummeragunja and his father’s South Coast lands and his wife’s Walgett extended family that Jimmy transmitted, and which the whole country needed and embraced. In Yorta Yorta country they call it “the invincible spirit’ after the great, undefeated Aboriginal sporting

teams from 1898 through to the 1940s, it was not just about winning, it was about spirit and fairness and loving in the face of hatred and prejudice. It was about lifting everyone up winners and losers.

When non-Aboriginal Australians feel and embrace this spirit it enhances everyone and everything. It is something like the soul of the country. Jimmy recognised that non-Aboriginal Australians were as capable of this higher road as much as his own country men. When he sang he embodied and carried this spirit and possibility everywhere he went.

Frances Peters-Little's biography of her father, **Jimmy Little A Yorta Yorta Man A Celebration of an Australian Legend**, Hardie Grant Books, 2023 , is a wonderful book that brings Jimmy Little's remarkable journey to us in intimate ways that enhance our understanding of many parts of contemporary history as well as Jimmy Little himself. It deserves to be in every school library, and on every Australian household's book shelf, read with reverence while perhaps listening to a few of the great man's songs.

To be an ambassador one has to be engaging for friends, enemies, strangers and different cultures all at the same time. In the assimilationist era Jimmy Little and his wife Marj were unapologetic success stories with a difference. "I wanted to be a success as a singer, and I was proving that point to myself and to my immediate family that I have qualified to become a responsible and popular singer and I wanted to make an honest living out of that , and I didn't want to use it or abuse it or let it become manipulative of my nature. I wanted to hang onto my character, hang onto my culture, hang onto my identity and hang onto my status", (p124) In this way Jimmy Little created a role model for many others in the post- mission days when there were opportunities and freedoms to be embraced a he did so in a way that won the applause of more revolutionary figures like Bobby Mc Cloud, whose family grew up with the Littles at Worrigeer and Silver City in South Nowra. (p.149)

By winning the respect and admiration of the mainstream Australian audience and the Aboriginal community, Jimmy changed the country and it was no accident that at critical times he was looked to as a trusted voice of reason. Though he never considered himself political, he was there when it counted always from the 1967 Referendum and he applauded a new wave of Aboriginal activities such as Frances Peters-Little herself who had the benefits of university education and could speak out both with new skills and capacity.

Frances Peters-Little writes that she was reluctant to write her father's biography at first. Thank goodness she relented to her father and mother's wishes because this book shines new light on contemporary Australian history. The first two chapters of the book are about how the South Coast Yuin and Dungala Yorta Yorta cultures interacted through travelling 'gumleaf' bands and vaudeville acts. Jimmy Little's father, Kunkus, who was an accomplished singer and performer, and mother, Sissy McGee, met at Cummeragunja where memorable concerts and performances were held. Later this same community would give rise to the Sapphires and several other actors and singers including Archie Roach, Jimmy's niece Deborah Cheetham (both removed from their families) and Aunty June Murray from Cowra, another talent quest winner, also lived there and on the famous Maroopna flats. Jimmy was two when he was carried off in the arms of his mother and father as part of the now famous 1939 Cummeragunja mission walk off. In many ways Jimmy and his future brothers and sisters embodied the hopes and aspirations of those families who wanted something more than the repressive mission life of rations and circumscribed racialist prescriptions of what life could be.

Jimmy's family came to his father's Yuin country to Worrigeer, Silver City and South Nowra to make a new life. "We had madness, gladness and sadness, But little would I care to change, Living down 'Worrigeer' Lane" Tragedy struck when Jimmy's mother died when he was just thirteen years old.

Then followed taking away But at Worrigee, Aboriginal families could find a level of freedom not enjoyed on the missions. They were important and valued workers as bean pickers and timber workers.. and Jimmy, with the encouragement of his father, literally rode a bean truck to the Sydney markets and he began to find work as a singer.

In all of this complex feelings and events are explained gently and poignantly by Frances Peters-Little using her father's songs and verse. In the chapters which plot how Jimmy came to become a national recording star in the 1950s and meet the love of his life Marj Peters there is also a revelatory narrative about how Aboriginal families came to Sydney and congregated in different suburbs. People from the North of NSW in Redfern, from the South at La Perouse and from Central NSW around Glebe. There is so much here to appreciate and learn from.

Glyn Davis has written a book that talks about "Life's Lottery" about the random luck of being born into a poor or well off family in Australia. Being born into the wrong circumstances can determine your life chances of poverty or wealth, health or sickness. Jimmy's philosophy again reflecting the "invincible spirit" of Cumeragunja was expressed in verse as follows "Life is like a lottery, Taking chances on the trot, Even though there's so much out there to deplore, Pride, good character and fairness, Will enable us to win, Our deserving lucky first prize at the door".

My last memory of Jimmy was at Gove Airport when we were waiting for a plane that was running late. Jimmy drew up close to my 16 year old son on a seat, there for an hour he enquired with extraordinary interest into his ideas, his aspirations, sports, reading and school as if he was the most important person in the world. This was the mark of a man who all Australia came to love and revere. I sometimes saw him walking too around RPAH for his dialysis appointment and it seemed to me that something akin to a hallow of light shrouded him.

Frances Peters-Little, **Jimmy Little A Yorta Yorta Man A Celebration of an Australian Legend**, Hardie Grant Books, 2023

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