

# RIVER

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# ONE LIVING ORGANISM

Director Jennifer Peedom explores the extraordinary collaboration between filmmakers and musicians that led to the making of *River*.

When immersed in the creation of *River*, I had recurring dreams that Richard Tognetti would make me perform on stage with the Australian Chamber Orchestra, at an event like the one you're at tonight. It was like one of those dreams where you find yourself naked in public. I also experienced these dreams during our earlier collaboration, *Mountain*.

I played the violin as a kid growing up in Canberra and performed in various school and amateur orchestras, but never to a high standard. At the end of high school I put away my instrument and haven't picked it up since. Faced with the challenge of bringing a story to screen worthy of performance by this incredible orchestra, those long-ago days of performance anxiety came flooding back.

My love of music endured. Over the years I have attended many ACO concerts and watched the musicians with awe. To experience this young, dynamic orchestra in performance – Richard conducting with his eyes, his violin, and his movement – is to be transfixed. The ACO seems to me to be an orchestra of soloists, of individuals who have an uncanny ability to live and breathe as one organism and become the music.

*River* tells the story of rivers through the ages. Central to the story is the fact that rivers are the arteries of the planet and were crucial to the development of human society.

I often think about my responsibility as a filmmaker to respond to the climate crisis. This drove the making of *River*. Wild rivers are essential to support our growing populations, yet more rivers are dammed every day. Meanwhile, Sherpa friends who live in the upper reaches of the Himalayas are witnessing daily how the glaciers are shrinking and causing catastrophic flooding.

*River* was designed to inspire awe and wonder and connect people back to nature. My hope is that it can also play a role in helping us understand the dangerous consequences of our actions and how our future depends on the natural world.

One thing we learned in our research for *River* is that when efforts are made to reverse the damage, it's amazing how quickly nature can repair itself. We just have to give it the opportunity. This gives us all some necessary hope.

Like *Mountain* before it, *River* was conceived primarily as a concert film. While both films exist as standalone movies for cinema, they are designed for live performance. The recent



boom in popularity of the cinema orchestra concert has seen *ET*, *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* films performed in concert halls worldwide; but few films are designed that way from the start.

Having music in *River*'s DNA from the outset added tremendous technical challenges, but also an opportunity for close creative collaboration, which is one of the most rewarding aspects of filmmaking.

The foundation of the soundtrack of *River* is the existing classical repertoire. In general, this kind of music is very challenging to edit in a way that both maintains its integrity and meets the very specific requirements of film – its need for music to fit the length of scenes, for example, or to carry and influence the emotional responses of audiences. It's no wonder that writing bespoke music for film is common practice. But I was privileged to be in partnership with the ACO, one of the greatest chamber orchestras on earth, and its artistic director Richard Tognetti, and that made all the difference.

Richard's decision to include Johann Sebastian Bach's *Chaconne* in *River* is a testament to both his determination and his extraordinary ability for arrangement. *River* includes an amazing drone shot, part of an early scene-setting sequence about the birth of rivers. When Richard saw it,

Willem Dafoe, Jennifer Peedom and Richard Tognetti after the premiere of *Mountain* in 2017. Photography by Maria Boyadgis

he was adamant that he wanted to use the *Chaconne*, even though it is 15 minutes long and written for solo violin. For months he explored how he might make the piece work for the smaller ACO ensemble. I was initially sceptical, but every time I watch that sequence in the finished film I get goosebumps.

Richard also worked with the music of Radiohead guitarist Jonny Greenwood, Antonio Vivaldi, Gustav Mahler, Jean Sibelius, Maurice Ravel, Pēteris Vasks and Thomas Adès, making many fascinating creative decisions along the way. He is passionate about music, and he is passionate about providing his audiences with a transcendent experience in the concert hall.

For any filmmaker, the opportunity to work with Jonny Greenwood's music would be a thrill. The ACO commissioned Jonny to write *Water* in 2012 and the plan was always to include it. We initially placed it elsewhere in the film, but because it includes the Indian string instrument the tanpura, Richard felt it should sit with the scenes of funeral pyres on the edge of the Ganges in Varanasi, India. The result is spine-tingling.

+

About half the music in *River* is classical repertoire, with the rest original compositions written by Richard, Piers Burbrook de Vere and William Barton. The final soundtrack immortalises extraordinary performances by Richard, William and the ACO.

One of the great joys of working on *River* was William Barton's inclusion in the creative team. He has a peerless profile in the classical music world as an Indigenous composer, vocalist and didgeridoo player, and a long history with the ACO. The film explores the relationship between Indigenous cultures and rivers and Richard put us in touch after recognising William was the perfect talent to express this spiritual connection.

Richard, William and Piers collaborated over many weeks to compose what would become three cues in the film. When he arrived at the studio to record the final vocal track, William asked if he could take some time to respond emotionally to the film. What followed was an uninterrupted, improvised 15-minute vocal performance. When it was over I looked around the room, and we were all in tears. It is haunting and sublime. When he returned to the control room, he told me he had channelled his ancestors and ancestral ties to Kalkadunga country.

“William Barton asked if he could take some time to respond emotionally to the film. What followed was an uninterrupted, improvised 15-minute vocal performance. When it was over I looked around the room, and we were all in tears. It is haunting and sublime.”

During the production of a normal film there is a clear chain of command, with the director sitting at the top. By giving the music more heft from the outset, myself and co-director Joseph Nizeti were, in effect, handing more control to Richard. For a film like this, where live performance is the end goal, this is at once essential and challenging. Treating the visuals and the music with equal weight adds another layer of intricacy to the already complex process of filmmaking.

My aim as a film director is to take the audience on an emotional journey, to make them think and feel. Most films follow human characters, but *River* doesn't; the rivers needed to become the characters. My challenge as storyteller was to compel the audience to go on a journey with them. If by the end of the film, the audience cares about the fate of rivers, then we have succeeded. Sound design and editing also contributes of course: *River*'s editor, Simon Njoo, and sound designers Rob McKenzie and Tara Webb, helped achieve a cinematic language that is unique, magical and poetic.

The evocative narration, written with the extraordinary wordsmith Robert Macfarlane and performed by Willem Dafoe, is the final essential element. I was thrilled that both Robert and Willem returned, having been such important elements on *Mountain*. Sadly, due to Covid-19 our work together all took place virtually. There were many months on Zoom calls with Robert in Cambridge in the UK and with Willem while he was filming on location in Atlanta in the US.



Joseph Nizeti, co-writer as well as co-director of *River*, was fundamental. During the making of *Mountain* I discovered Joseph's strengths as a storyteller and he afterwards worked with us at our production company Stranger Than Fiction. His background as a musician made it a natural progression for him to step up beside me on *River*. He took the lead on the research, scouring the world for the best footage available, with great results.

How did I get tangled up with the ACO in the first place? In 2013 Richard was looking for a filmmaker to work on *Mountain*. We were put in contact by ACO cellist Julian Thompson, who is married to an old friend.

I pretended not to be too excited, but I was so excited. I remembered being in the audience for the ACO film *The Reef*. I was struck by the diversity of the audience – classical music lovers sitting alongside surfers – and inspired by the possibilities of this type of production.

At that point, I had spent several years making films on mountains, including Everest, but Richard said that my film *Solo* – about the death of Andrew McAuley during his attempt to cross from Australia to New Zealand by kayak – particularly interested him. A keen surfer and skier, clearly Richard was fascinated by risk-takers and adventurers, and there we found our common ground. We are both interested in what drives people to achieve – and up for throwing ourselves into intense experiences.

During the making of *Mountain*, I realised Richard has more in common with risk-takers than I would have first thought. Watching him perform is like watching elite athletes lose themselves in a state of flow. As an artist he is a tremendous risk-taker, routinely pushing the boundaries of the classical music world.

After accepting the gig on *Mountain*, I went off and made my 2015 film *Sherpa*. It began as an exploration of the disproportionate risks that Sherpas take every year, in assisting foreigners to climb Everest, and ended up documenting the worst disaster in the history of the mountain. Sixteen Sherpas were killed in an icefall as they carried supplies to higher camps. The experience undoubtedly informed the making of *Mountain*, which explores the nature of human fascination with mountains.

Having the experience as a filmmaker to watch your film with an audience is always a thrill, but to see it performed live in a concert hall is an experience I will never forget. I'll always be grateful to Richard and the ACO for that opportunity. Thinking back to those recurring dreams, I realise now that they stopped after the first performance of *Mountain*. I'm hoping the same will happen with *River*!

The ACO performing *Mountain* in 2017.  
Photo by Maria Boyadgis



# FLOW

Environmental writer Huw Kingston explores why we should fight to keep our “rivers of paradise”.

Crossing the shaky suspension bridge, I watched a rivulet of water run down Richard Tognetti's violin case. At a metal clasp it braided, as rivers do, before confluencing below the buckle. Then into freefall, a tiny cascade dropping five metres to the Snowy River below.

That rain was falling late on a dull September afternoon as Tognetti and I trudged into the gloom. We had plans for a few days' backcountry skiing, hopes for an improvement in the weather and thoughts of high jinks with a violin.

We woke the following morning to blue skies and, after brewing coffee for need and porridge for necessity, skied away from our camp and climbed onto the main ridge of the Snowy Mountains.

After skiing a couple of glorious runs on sun-softened snow, Richard swapped ski poles for the violin. Then, as a celebration of mountains and rivers everywhere, in surely one of the finest venues he had ever played, he took off, linking turn after tune after turn.

The rainwater that had fallen from the violin case the day before, dropped into the only section of the Snowy River still running free, a meagre stretch below the slopes of Mount Kosciuszko. How long, I wondered, would it take that water to travel 400 kilometres to the sea at Marlo? Guthega Dam would hold those molecules first, then Island Bend.

“The rainwater that had fallen from the violin case the day before, dropped into the only section of the Snowy River still running free, a meagre stretch below the slopes of Mount Kosciuszko.”

If they did escape beyond those walls, they might bounce down into the expanse of Lake Jindabyne. Here they could be held for months or years before gaining freedom through a release into the Snowy below Jindabyne Dam. The ingenuity of the Snowy Scheme meant even that was no guarantee. Tunnels and pumps might take that water far from its natural course, under and across the mountains and away into arid lands to nourish cotton, rice or almonds.

Just two months later, in the warmth of late spring, I paddled the Snowy River below that final dam in Jindabyne, astounded by the terrain. Deep in the gorges, one rapid catapulted me out of my craft. I swam, pinballing off rocks that hurt me despite the cushioning of the water piling onto the smooth, waterworn, granite boulders.

For decades, a miserable one per cent of natural flow was allowed to dribble down this artery. The past 20 years have seen this increase towards a fifth, thanks to a huge campaign in the '90s to save the Snowy. But water that flows from a dam is not the same as water that flows naturally. It is often colder, taken from the bottom of a pondage and lower in nutrients. Such water impacts the natural biorhythms of the waterway below.

At camp, a pair of bee-eaters entertained us all afternoon, flitting about the branches of a single, dead gum. Platypus popped up for a look from the pool below our tents and a flightless emu looked up longingly at those that could. A pair of dingos looked on nonchalantly. Had the water from Richard's violin case yet arrived in this part of the Snowy, I wondered? Or was it still making its way uncertainly down the river?

When that one per cent did flow, it was far from enough to sustain life on the river. Weeds choked former rapids and, having nowhere to swim, fish died away, as did the birds that fed on them.

Freshwater makes up less than one per cent of the water on the earth's surface. That one per cent must sustain not just us, but every animal, insect and plant that exists, grows and dies on this planet. We ask much of that one per cent, perhaps too much.





Still from *River* by Christian Fletcher

Deified rivers. Drained rivers. Dramatic rivers. Dammed rivers. Diverted rivers. Defiled rivers. Dry rivers. Disputed rivers. Desert rivers. We cross them, stop them, travel on them, drink from them, trade on them, fish them, swim in them, worship them, fear them, bridge them, tunnel them. Flowing or ephemeral, fresh or salted, tepid or iced. We know they bring us life and lift our spirits. Too often we return the favour with abuse.

Globally it is estimated that less than a third of the 177 rivers longer than 1000 kilometres still flow free, remaining untainted by blockage or diversion. One could be optimistic, looking at a glass a third full. But every year one or more of these 177 rivers swaps sides on the ledger. The threats to our wild and free-flowing rivers are ever present.

In Australia, the major Lake Eyre basin rivers – the Warburton, Georgina, Eyre, Diamantina, Cooper, Thompson – are some of the few Australian rivers untouched by dams, weirs and flood control. An integrity saved by the fact they so rarely flow naturally.

Early in 2019 two massive rain events hit northern Queensland. Over the following months floodwaters soaked south for thousands of kilometres toward Lake Eyre/Kati Thanda, Australia's lowest point and largest lake. A lake that rarely holds water, the desert absorbing any flow as it travels towards it.

I saw no-one for the week I kayaked upon the flooding Warburton. But I saw birds by the thousand, incredible in their variety and mass. Squadrons of pelicans grunted as they strained to take off in front of my boat. Kites whistled above flocks of squawking corellas, decorating riverside trees like white baubles. Herons naggled, bitterns chuckled, cormorants dived. Feathers floated down the fast-flowing, caramel-hued waters or caught in the coolabah branches dipping into them.

There are mysteries of rivers here. How do those birds know the river is flowing? How do they judge when is the right time to arrive? How do they calculate their landing time in order to allow enough fish to breed and grow into worthwhile meals for the masses?

It was easy to become lost in the life on the river, down below the level of the surrounding land. But camp each night would remind me exactly where I was. With the tent perched atop a dune, the desert stretched endlessly away into the dunes and the gibber plains.

Driving home, I crossed the Murray River. The subject of so many books, articles, commissions, acts of parliament, acts of bastardry. How we finally and finely balance the threats and opportunities our longest river system endures and offers will be a measure for our future. It is a waterway in peril.

When we dam a river how much do we damn it? The thin blue lines that vein any map of Australia are our life. We do well to remember that each time we fill a water glass or savour the juice from a handful of grapes.

Rivers are beautifully dangerous. Who has not stood in awe at the edge of a waterfall? Or stared, mesmerised, at the churning rapids of a flooded mountain creek or the conveyor belt of a wide river moving fast across a floodplain? Rivers are also destructively dangerous, wiping so much from their path when they choose that way.

Swimming only recently through a deep, narrow chasm in Central Australia, it was easy to remember that if water can create such spectacular defiles over millions of years, then it can, with ease, flick a human any which way it wants in seconds.

For nearly four decades I have travelled through mountains. While respecting and dodging their many dangers, it is rivers that have most often caught me out. It can be too easy to underestimate the power of their flow, too easy to challenge their water. The Big River in Victoria, which is actually rather small, held me under for too long – far too long – one winter. The flow swept my legs from under me when trying to cross its mere 10 metre width. In the wilderness of South West Tasmania, a 250 metre swim across an estuarine river, towing a backpack on an inflatable ring, proved too far, too cold. My body shut down in a manner the like of which I had never experienced.

“Rivers are beautifully dangerous.  
Who has not stood in awe at  
the edge of a waterfall?”

Children, like most of us once did, spend hours trying to divert little streams or dam little creeks. It entertains the engineer in us all. The fish traps on the Barwon River in Brewarrina are perhaps the oldest man-made structure on earth. Australian First Nations people understood that you could divert a little, play a little, but never to hold back the river.

Our childhood efforts were invariably doomed to failure, but we were in good company. Between 2005 and 2013, 173 dam failures were reported in the US alone. The 1975 failure of the Banqiao Dam in China killed an estimated 171,000 people and made 11 million people homeless. Under international humanitarian law, dams are considered installations containing dangerous forces. The power of water will eventually, always, overpower that of humans.

In a world of rising population and rising temperature, it is easy to see the problems, but less easy to see the solutions. We need water to drink, to generate power, to cultivate food. We know that in many places, Australia included, climate change will bring less rainfall. Perhaps we should treat water as a treat, like a good wine? Use it with respect, use it in moderation. We hear very little about saving water, at home or in industry. Perhaps it is too cheap? Perhaps we need to look much more closely at what we take and what we need? A new coalmine is not just a contributor to global warming, it is a contributor to national draining. Can we really sustain suburbs of swimming pools? Can we afford to allow our waterways to die under blankets of algae?

Some rivers, like the Snowy, are dammed in their upper reaches. Others have blockages down low. The Shoalhaven River flows free for all but the last kilometres of its long journey through southern NSW.

Our canoe trip, in November last year, was the first day in 2020 that the Shoalhaven gorge had been open. Flames, floods and fever all to blame for the long closure. We paddled up into the gorge from Tallowa Dam, an embankment that has held back the waters of the Shoalhaven for half a century. It is possibly the finest flatwater paddle in NSW, a paddle that exists only because of the dam.

“Finally in early February, we rejoiced and relaxed as torrential rain hosed the fires, filled dams and drenched the blackened land. The Shoalhaven flooded.”

But for 150 kilometres to that dam, no road touches the banks of the Shoalhaven. It runs, rages, boils and twists through deep gorges and wild rapids before slowing to a crawl and then a stop in the backwaters of Lake Yarrunga.

The Shoalhaven gorge was a barrier of sorts to the massive Currowan fire that ate its way north through Morton National Park, travelling further than the length of the river. A fire that hit my own little town early in January 2020. Throughout that month, the nights passed with the sky glowing red from fires burning in the deep gullies of the national park. The sound of sirens, the sight and smell of smoke, were our black summer.

Finally in early February, we rejoiced and relaxed as torrential rain hosed the fires, filled dams and drenched the blackened land. The Shoalhaven flooded. While the deluge was welcome, the devastated country along the length of the Shoalhaven offered no protection to the now bare ground. Countless tonnes of soil and ash washed straight into the river, accelerating the siltation and shallowing process that affects all dammed water bodies. Sandy beaches were now knee deep in mud. Individual leaves and sticks were left high and dry on mud plinths as mini sculpture parks while in the backwaters, burnt, dead tree trunks stood tall in now deep water.



# *RIVER*

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What joy there is to be upon a wild river. A river that flows freely for every day of every year. A river where you know that each drop has followed a natural course, not held back by dams or diverted to irrigation channels, not turned turbines or been spat out of a tap.

Thirty five years ago, I paddled the Franklin River for the first time. That journey into Tasmania's wild south-west was just a few years after the river was saved from the dam builders. I was a backpacker having a fun year in Australia, not the immigrant I became. That river changed my life in ways I am still understanding. Many wild places have taken my breath away, but the Franklin nearly suffocated me in its power, its beauty, its freedom.

"A brown ditch, leech-ridden, unattractive to the majority of people," was how Robin Grey described the Franklin. Was he, the Tasmanian Premier at the height of the campaign to save the river, truly blind or just unwilling to see?

Texts of Islam, Christianity and Judaism talk of the rivers of paradise – Pishon, Gihon, Tigris and Euphrates – flowing with water, wine, milk and honey. Hindus revere Mother Ganga. Greek mythology offers the rivers running through the underworld – Acheron, Styx, Lethe, Phlegethon and Cocytus.

Those attending the live performance of *River* in Sydney's City Recital Hall are sitting bang above a little river. It gave sustenance to the Gadigal people for thousands of years before the first white settlers of Australia (mis)appropriated it 233 years ago. The Tank Stream, then a clear little waterway, became an unofficial sewer within decades, an official one in 1857. Now it dribbles in a series of tunnels and stormwater drains below us. From paradise to the underworld indeed.

The cleverness and curse of humanity is our adaptability to change. So we build our nests, shit in them and then adapt to live in the mess we create. By degrees we accept less. We accept to swim in once clear waterways now turbid with silt or to travel down rivers glistening with plastic. Shouldn't we fight harder to hold onto our rivers of paradise, to stop creating more rivers of hell?

Darwin's final paragraph of *On the Origin of Species* is written as he looks out across a river from a "tangled bank" and marvels at the variety of life. For the survival of the species, perhaps we too need to look out from such a riverbank and contemplate what we need, what we have lost and what we must do.

# DEEP WATERS

For Indigenous peoples, to speak of rivers is to speak of the essence that sustains them. Here Tristen Harwood yarns with composer and leading didgeridoo player William Barton about the profound meanings of rivers.

Still from *River* by Yann Arthus-Bertrand

*In language you called it munniim-muniim:  
light on the quiet water... That was my  
name in the water.* <sup>1</sup>

Sunlight refracts the river's silver, shuddering surface, wind catches in the sparkling water. Amid sounds of riparian scrubs, green laces its banks and deep-brown earth mud smells and swells.

We are kin to rivers, connected in ecology and spirit. To speak of Indigenous peoples' connection to rivers is to speak of the essence that sustains us in the world. The river is language, song, philosophy, ceremony, life-source, our social world. As with Munnim, whose name is in and of the water, the river constitutes who we are: freshwater people. The river also connects us to saltwater and desert people, the way we relate.

William Barton is a Kalkadunga man, a composer, producer, multi-instrumentalist and vocalist who's recognised as one of the country's leading yidaki (didgeridoo) players and composers. Here we yarn about Indigenous peoples' deeply-woven connection to rivers.

Our connection to rivers persists deep in our flesh, in how we relate to each other, even though colonisation has sought to sever these ties. William grew up in Mt Isa, where Leichhardt river ends, my mob is from Roper River on the other side of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Leichhardt River carries the name of the colonial explorer Ludwig Leichhardt, Roper River was named by him on one of his expeditions through Gulf country. The supposed death of Leichhardt gave Isaac Nathan (the "father of Australian music") material for his 1845 composition *Leichhardt's grave: an elegiac ode*. This marked a shift in Nathan's topical focus away from a sympathetic alliance with Indigenous peoples – previously he'd adapted a song based on verses from Eliza Dunlop's 1838 poem *The Aboriginal Mother* – to a position aligned with the prevailing colonialist paradigm: celebrating "heroic" expeditions.

For William and I, this coincidence is a way for us to begin talking about our old people. "There's those lullabies our grannies used to sing to us, you know, around the bushfire, by the river," William mentions.

It's true: when I think of my Nana I think of Roper River, the songs she would sing me, her memories now wrapped in my own, when we would go driving down the river, swimming the cool water beneath blaring sun.

William tells me about Kalkadunga Country, which is at the heart of his music: "going back to homelands, what's powerful is the rivers, they're the bloodlines of mother country, and these bloodlines are interconnected with us, who we are". To the blood that flows through our own arteries. In its connection to the ancestral essence of who we are, "there's a purity to that water on Country and when you drink it, you embody the DNA of that land".

The DNA of the land, these rivers, swell with creative spirit. Alexis Wright, in her graciously operatic novel *Carpentaria* (2006), writes of an Ancestral serpent come down from the stars billions of years ago. It went "scoring deep into – scouring down through – the slippery underground of the mudflats, leaving in its wake the thunder of tunnels collapsing to form deep sunken valleys" in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Sea water followed in the wake of this glistening serpent, ocean blues changed to the yellow of mud, filling the ancestor's swirling tracks "to form the mighty bending rivers spread across the vast plains of Gulf country". When it was done, it made one last river where it now lives, deep down in the earth. The serpent permeates everything, it is the river, and the river is it, "and is attached to the lives of the river people like skin".

In *Carpentaria* the serpent is the river, the setting and the story itself – "it permeates everything. It is all around in the atmosphere" – so it is also the story listening back to itself. Here is storytelling as listening – to the river, its tidal breaths, its elation and strife.

*“Sea water followed in the wake of  
this glistening serpent, ocean blues  
changed to the yellow of mud, filling  
the ancestor's swirling tracks...”*



“Whales are keepers of water song. Humpbacks sing for hours, complex arrangements of howls, sighs, and cries, deep echoes of ghost song.”

This is the kind of significance the rivers hold for us. Rivers teach us how to be, to sing. “As I sing, I’m picturing my old people, my uncles and aunties – my ancestors – and it transports me to home Country, even though I might be singing alongside visuals [in *River*] that are from around the world,” says William.

It takes particular knowledge to hear and to sing the river. In September last year, three humpback whales appeared in the shallow waters of East Alligator River in Kakadu. The whales’ inexplicable detour into this river is something that is said to have never happened before, at least in recorded history. Two of the whales swam back out to sea, but one male remained in the river, in murky tidal waters too shallow and too warm for this 16-metre-long creature.

Whales are keepers of water song. Humpbacks sing for hours, complex arrangements of howls, sighs, and cries, deep echoes of ghost song. In the media, journalists quoted marine ecologists, scientific experts, who spoke of the humpback in bewilderment. What message does this whale bring and sing to the gleaming green river, for those who know how to listen?

I ask William about how he was introduced to music, to the yidaki. “I fell in love with the mystery of what that [yidaki] sound was, brother – it’s grounded, you know – and I wanted to be a part of that mystery and I still am.” Uncle Arthur Peterson, a tribal old man, who spoke several Indigenous languages and was a medicine man taught William how to play yidaki when he was 11 years old.

William’s music is entwined with the life and legacy of Uncle Arthur, and playing yidaki resounds Uncle Arthur’s connection to Country, just as Uncle Arthur’s playing did the ancestors before him. He was taught how to listen to the language of the instrument and passed his own yidaki onto William.

“The yidaki embodies everything of the land, because it’s from the tree, it’s the breath of life and the land, of sustenance to us as human beings. It embodies the history of those old trees. The yidaki has memories, it’s the breath of our ancestors, particularly when the instrument is passed on physically from one person to the next,” William tells me.

In *That Deadman Dance* (2010), Kim Scott writes of a clever man that can slip into the whale’s blowhole. He can “fly inland one moment, back to ocean the next”. Inside is like a “breathing cave that resonates with whale song”; the whale’s heart beats with the warmth of fire, the clever man embraces the blood-filled heart and lets his voice join with the whale’s roar, and the two sing together that song the clever man’s father taught him, “as the whale dives, down, deep”.

The water bulges, air from the whale’s spiracle bubbles up to the surface. The breath goes in and out of the blowhole, like the breath that travels through the didgeridoo, so that even if we don’t realise it, part of the whale songs travels through the didge’s reverberations.

Collaboration is an important part of William’s music. He’s worked with his mum Delmae Barton, who’s a singer, songwriter and poet, many times before. He tells me that, “even when I perform some of my string quartets where I’ve had Mum singing and improvising before, even if Mum’s not there, I can hear her voice in it. You know, it’s like when I was searching for a certain melody, that chant in the river, it’s a form of nurturing, like that, and passing on of language, river language.”

Our connection to rivers is expressed through relationships. Like mother to child, from one mob to another. It’s impossible to speak of Indigenous peoples’ bond to rivers without also speaking of the sea: this is part of the relation. The river and the sea connect us to each other, freshwater and saltwater people. Water sites are not only lively physical entities, with purpose and use in the connected environment, but they also have also social, emotional, cultural and spiritual significance.

Recently I was reading an interview with Sandra Harben, a deeply wise Whadjuk Nyungar Boodjar woman, who works as a researcher and cultural consultant. She tells of Waugal the ancestral spirit who lives in bilya (fresh water). Waugal lives in all freshwaters in the Nyungar world.

He is the Nyungar rainbow serpent, spirit of bilya and creator of Boodjar (Country). River systems sustain spirit and life – the two cannot be thought separately, because of the belief in Waugal the freshwater being and because they’re places “rich with sources of food, medicine and plants, and habitat for native species and birdlife”, to quote Harben.

Waugal is essential to life. Freshwater, the river, underpins the Nyungar belief system, as the place in which Waugal’s spirit resides. He cannot live in saltwater. Harben tells the story of the relation between warden (the ocean) and bilya. While at times when the tides rise, the ocean and the Swan River used to mix, there was – before the creation of Fremantle Port – a clear separation between the two. It was Waugal who created this separation. He “fought the saltwater crocodile so that the salt didn’t come down into the fresh water”. Waugal bit the tail off the crocodile who floated back out to sea, his body forming the islands currently known as Carnac Island, Garden Island, and Rottneest Island.<sup>2</sup>

Enmeshed but demarcated boundaries like the one between ocean and river are defined by language, cultural and sociopolitical practices, ecology, ceremony and by worldly actors who inhabit and take care of place. In Indigenous practices of place-making, boundaries transform undifferentiated space into specific localities, places and home. Harben goes on to explain how Nyungar law meant that Nyungar people never camped on the edge of freshwater. This ensured Waugal and the river ecology was respected and protected. Our connection to the river is about caring for, maintaining and conveying its stories.

These stories of creation are animated by everyday practice. The simple four-line hook of the 2002 pop song *Down River* by The Wilcania Mob, a hip-hop group of five young Indigenous musicians aged nine to 14, expresses joy and reverence of *being-with* the river:

*When it’s really hot we go the river and swim*

*When we go fishin’ we catchin’ a bream*

*When the river’s high we jump off the bridge*

*When we get home we play some didge*





Still from *River* by Yann Arthus-Bertrand

I can still remember when I first heard this refrain, got it caught in my head. I didn't think too much about it then. The Wilcania Mob would've been singing about Paroo River in the Murray-Darling Basin. The song reminded me of the place in the Swan River where'd I'd jump into the water from the branch of a tree. My Aunty fishing just upstream would yell at us kids that we'd scare the fish away – her voice skimming like a stone across the water. My Nana taught me how to skim those stones when we lived by Avon River in Northam. My memory is dipped in the river that doesn't go away.

I wanna know what William's first memory of a river is, but there's too many to name just one. I realise that I can't really answer my own question either. Rivers shape the land, so they shape our own being. William mentions the big river in Mt Isa where he was born, how everyone would rock up down the river when it broke its banks. He remembers the rivers like arteries flowing from the heart of Kalkadunga Country, the creek full of turtles swimming around: "Near there was sacred rock site, with all the old artwork, cave paintings by our people, the work of our ancestors."

Ancestral time spills forth, floods our veins. William recalls "being in that water, the feeling of it, how it can be so still and then you see the leaves just drop on it and just float across its surface". Your body awash in ancestral water, all the spirit and life it holds, just like that.

These are just some of the ways and some of the rivers Indigenous peoples are indelibly connected to, that we care for and that nurture our being. William tells me about a yarn he had with legendary Murri musician Uncle Joe Geia: "A melody might be real deadly and draw people in, but then they realise the meaning in that song." This text is a prompt for readers to follow that meaning, consider and respond to the deeply entwined connections Indigenous peoples have to local rivers.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Mandi, or Muniim, explains how he got his "blackfella name". It was given to him by his father, who observed the way the sun scintillated on the water, in language the sparkling water is called munniim-muniim. This conversation is recorded in Bruce Shaw's 1986 book *Countrymen: The life histories of four Aboriginal men – as told to Bruce Shaw*.

<sup>2</sup> Sandra Harben interviewed by Rosie Halsmith in *Future West*, Issue 5, (2018).



Still from *River* by Pete McBride

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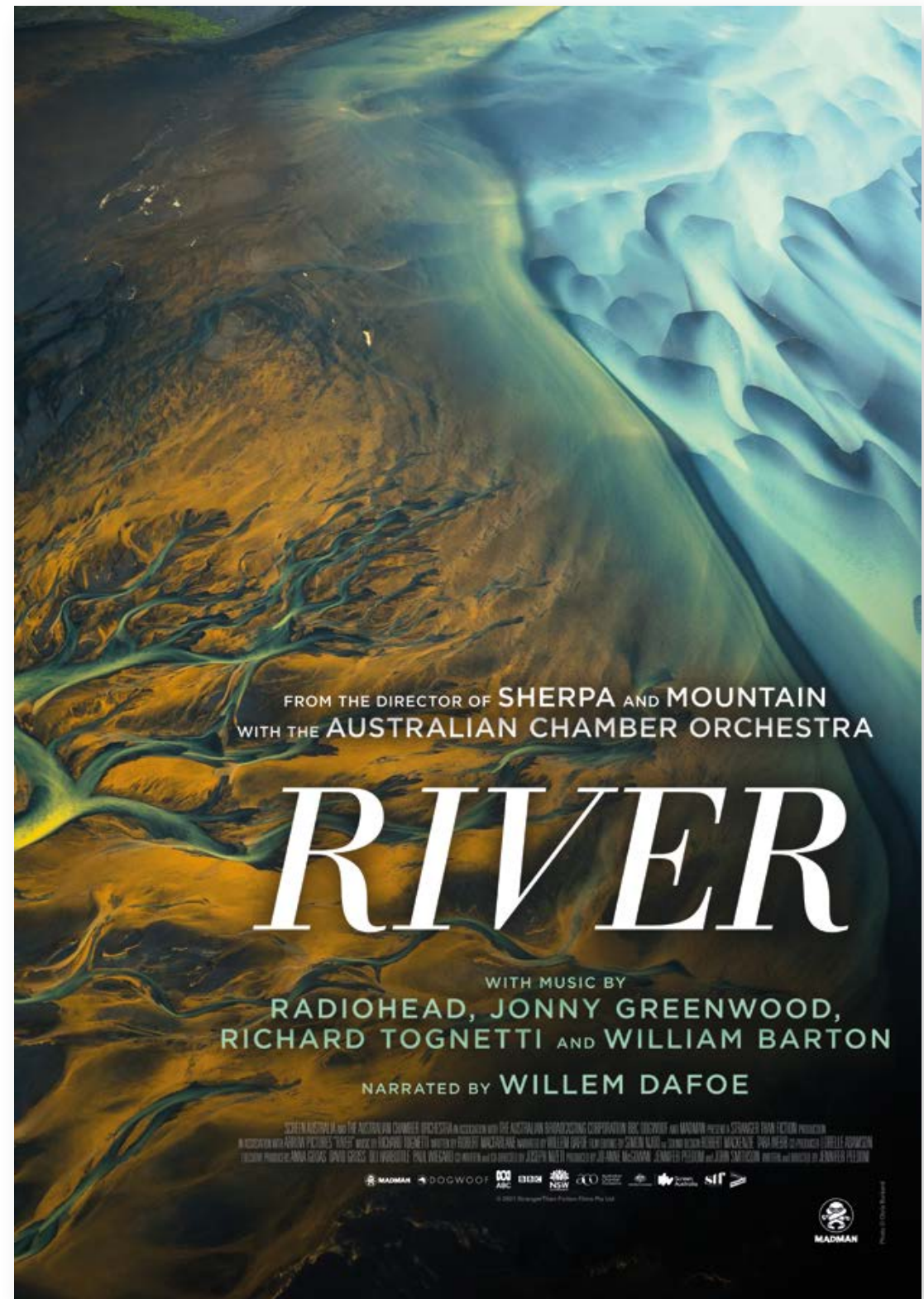
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