

Transcript Movements & Sounds Podcast with Dominic Allen

Charlotte 0:00

Hi and welcome to Movements and Sounds, a podcast focusing on contemporary Indigenous musics and sounds in Australia and issues related to this topic. At SOAS Radio, we are excited to bring stories from the other side of the world to our studio in London. Thanks so much for listening to Movements and Sounds. I'm Charlotte, the facilitator of this podcast, it is important to know that I am a non-Indigenous person. However, I support decolonization and giving lead back to Indigenous peoples.

Today I'm in conversation with Dominic Allen. Dominic is a film director and producer and is a guest here today to talk about his film slash virtual reality experience Carriberrie. Before we start I'd like to acknowledge the custodians of the lands we're speaking from today. The Gadigal people on Eora, and the Arakwal people on Bundjalung. Sovereignty over these lands was never ceded.

Okay, Dominic. So first question, could you describe in your own words with the Carriberrie project entails?

Dominic 1:04

Yeah, so Carriberrie is a multi-platform project which involves a virtual reality experience at its core. It also has a fulldome experience, which is a planetarium-style projection that goes on to large scale cinema screens which are domes, either in planetariums, or in in pop up domes. It also exists as an interactive exhibition. So for example, the National Film and Sound Archive, have components of different elements of it, and exhibit the film on VR, also online as an immersive website. And also using tablets and other mobile devices for the mercy of 360 playback. And so it is genuinely a multi-platform project. And really, at its core, it's celebrating the history of Australian, Indigenous Australian song and dance.

Charlotte 1:53

Yeah, awesome. What inspired to on a personal level to initiate such a project?

Dominic 1:58

I've had a background working with First Nations people in documentary as a documentary filmmaker. And along the way, I was doing a project in Arnhem Land and a little place called Gunbalanya, which is near the East Alligator River. I met a dancer there. His name's Joey Nganjmirra, when he was contributing to a documentary we were making at the time. Part of the experience I had with Joey was getting to witness him perform what he calls a Sorry dance, which is funeral type, song and dance that people do. As part of the process of Sorry business, which is, you know, mourning the death of the past community member, Joey's role in the community, there's to perform that ritual whenever someone dies, and it's pretty

intense. And it's a deeply moving experience. And so I saw Joey do that on a road, this kid had died from a car crash. And so Joey, took us out to somewhere nearby and in the middle of a dirt road and performed this dance. And being a camera operator, you get to be very close to people when they're doing these sorts of things. And it provides a really intense, full-on connection to the person and also to the context of what's happening. And it was at that moment, seeing Joey perform that dance and wanting to kind of understand that, that I just thought that using virtual reality as a tool to try to get more audiences into places like Gunbalanya, which is to say, very remote locations, very difficult to access, harnessing the technology of virtual reality, to be able to share that visceral experience with more people could be a really powerful thing for both the audience and also for the dancers and different First Nations, performers and ritual practice, sort of custodians that we that we have all around the country. And so that was the fundamental moment that I thought, Carriberrie could be a great experience. And then I spoke with a lot of traditional owners and leaders among some of the communities that I had some contacts with already. And just just wanted to get a feeling for whether or not that would be a welcome project and got a really warm response from Annette Kogolo in Walmajarri Country up in Fitzroy Crossing and then Delta Kay, who's a senior Arakwal leader here in Byron Bay, where I'm based now. And so that, that everything just sort of snowballed from there. But it was really the experience of seeing Joey and just wanting to use this technology to bring this experience to more people.

Charlotte 4:26

Has there ever been like friction or something? You just explained how it started with you wanting to document a ceremony around Sorry business. Was that at all welcome to have a camera around?

Dominic 4:39

Yeah, of course. And I think, you know, we we did a very slow and very sort of involved discovery period with each group where we showed them the technology and, you know, made it really clear what we were hoping to do. And then of course, after we did our filming, shed the filming and got permission on what parts should of shouldn't be included. And I mean, the practices that as a non-First Nations Australian that you that you practice working with intellectual, Indigenous, cultural, intellectual property are quite rigorous. And thankfully, there's some great guides for that sort of stuff. But no, I wouldn't say there was friction. I mean, there was, there's been friction around the project in other areas about kind of, I guess, you know, who we chose or not, didn't choose, but who we got to sort of fill with our resources, and potentially not having enough diversity, or not being able to really show the full depth and diversity. But I mean, of course, that's going to be the case in the country where there's hundreds of First Nations communities, you know, it's going to be a situation where there's, you know, there's no way with with one small project, you're able to document them all. And so we just made that really clear in our project philosophy that this was just a very small quantity that represents, you know, in no way the totality of the depth

and diversity that's out there. But there was no friction with the, with the community members or dance members or participants.

Charlotte 6:03

Yeah, about the showing the diversity, who decided who to..

Dominic 6:09

We worked with, under the leadership of Marilyn Miller, who is a very experienced, First Nations woman, in dance and song in Australia, she's had a number of prestigious and important roles around the country, and also done things for festivals like Leura in the past, where, where, you know, it's incumbent upon her to make decisions about, you know, who to select, and who to sort of focus on for whichever season or year or whatever. And so Marilyn Miller really led that process for us, introduced to us by Tara June Winch, who's the Indigenous author of the script, the voiceover, so Marilyn played a really crucial role. And we really looked to Marilyn for leadership on, you know, who should we approach? And how do we only with nine different groups or nine different entities, you know, how can we try to show some of the diversity? And so really, we just took the lead from Marilyn on that.

Charlotte 7:02

Yeah. And I've seen most of the groups that are included in Carriberrie are based in rural areas. Was that also a deliberate choice?

Dominic 7:13

I wouldn't say so. Actually, I mean, Bangarra is a very core group to the, to the film, and of course, they're, you know, the one of the most sophisticated dance or performance companies in Australia, full stop, based in Eora Nation, there in Sydney. And, you know, the Dubai Dances are also urban women, you know, they're very modern kind of leaders of the Byron Bay community, the Lonely Boys, even though they're from Ngukurr, they're from an remote area themselves, that they're all again, pretty urban guys, you know, they're rock and roll performers who live around Darwin, and Alice, and some of those other areas, which, again, are pretty urban. And, I mean, the, the Anangu community who are based in Mutitjulu are certainly living on Country, you know, in a very meaningful way, still and living out by the big rock there. So they're probably one of the more remote and sort of country based groups that we met. And of course, Joey, as well, who I just mentioned, he lives deep in Arnhem Land, you know, he's, he's sort of not so much in that urban environment. But again, the Mayi Wunba group who are in Kuranda, you know, they're all living around Cairns, and also, you know, in an urban environment, and then the Naygayiw Gigi dance troupe who are the Northern Thunder Saibai dancers.. Bamaga is a pretty big town as well, which is at the very end of Australia. Um, so actually, you know, I would say, and the Spinifex Gum girls are all, you know, really trendy young performance in Cairns, too. So, actually, I think the majority of the groups are you know, city based and, and living in very modern situations.

Charlotte 8:55

Yeah, yeah. Who is the experience made for I had a look at the the teacher's guide that is provided. Super useful. So this is this is just provided on the website. Even people can download it from there. And there it stays. The aim of the project is "to capture, share and celebrates traditional and contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander music and dance." So yeah, what was the audience you were trying to reach?

Dominic 9:21

Look, I think there's a lot of people, unfortunately, who are still really ignorant about the depth and diversity of Australians First Nations culture, and it's clear from the experience I've had, that anyone that has an opportunity to learn more about it has a profound experience. And it can in some cases, be life changing for them and lead to a much greater awareness and respect for the First Nations people. And so we were targeting, if we targeted anyone, curious people really and also people who have a sort of openness to song and dance and you know, it is a universal language and that's what David Gulpilil, who has now passed, but he provided an introduction to the film. And he says at the start that, you know that it's the sort of language of the first people where I think that song and dance is a really great thing that all humans can share. And we can all sort of access together. And so that was, you know, the tool, I guess, to disarm some of those separations or barriers that might be in the audience members and other people. And so it's, yeah, I think we were really targeting any curious Australian, first and foremost, but then also, specifically people with an interest in song and dance and culture. And that's, it's that second group that people with an interest in song and dance and First Nations culture that have responded so powerfully to the film overseas. And obviously, you know, there's a very, very large interest in First Nations Australians from all parts of the world. And it's been great to see so many people overseas resonate with the project as well.

Charlotte 11:01

Yeah. So can you tell me a little bit about that? I know the film has been featured in the Cannes Film Festival. Do you know a little bit about like, the ways in which people have engaged, has being used as a as a teacher's resource? Or? Yeah, do you have an example?

Dominic 11:16

So internationally. Yeah, of course. Yeah. Internationally, predominantly, the films been seen by people at festivals, and film festivals. So kind of being the first international screening of the virtual reality version, which is when you put a headset on and you'll sit in a room together and watch it in 3D in 360. But also, as I said, it is a multi-platform project. And so we have fulldome versions of this. There's a fulldome Planetarium in Zeiss, Germany. Sorry, Jena in Germany, which is called the Zeiss Planetarium, after Carl Zeiss, who invented the optics, and still have his name on Sony lenses, which is kind of interesting. But he, he has

this great theatre named after him there. And we were part of a global fulldome festival. And so the film plays there in a 45 minute version. So you know, everyone from German planetarium enthusiast to, to kids in San Francisco at the San Francisco Dance Festival, who then watch this film, again, in VR. You know, there's been a very broad interest. It's played in France, played in Mexico. And look, it's played all over the world. And I honestly say in probably 20 countries, and the majority of those being headset base, but also on fulldome. The website is predominantly focused in Australian kids, the current website. So you'd have to ask the National Film and Sound Archive if there's been use of that overseas. I couldn't tell you.

Charlotte 12:41

Yeah, right. And the website is, is produced by..?

Dominic 12:45

The the version of it, which is called Carriberrie Online, which is I don't know if you've seen that. Yeah. So that's a kind of co-production between us as filmmakers and producers, and the National Film and Sound Archive in Canberra. And so they've partnered with us to host that experience into to build it into their website and make it accessible to their audiences and preserve it in their catalogue so that it can be accessible for generations to come.

Charlotte 13:14

Yeah, right. Very cool. What was the what was the choice behind VR specifically as a medium for this project?

Dominic 13:24

Well, VR has several unique properties to it, which don't translate in other mediums. And one of the sort of most important for this project, being the feeling that you've done something or been somewhere that people have after VR. They did a test in Northern America, where they showed a bunch of kids at the start of the year tour of Rome in VR. And then at the end of the year, they said, "has anyone been to Rome?" and more than half the class put their hand up, even though they hadn't been to Rome. Because they just thought they had been to Rome off the back of that experience. And it's different to "have you seen a film about Rome", in which case, in traditional medium, that there's that distinction about what you've experienced, and what you've seen. And VR is more experienced-based than kind of watching-based, it's more immersive, and it's more memorable. And it has also cognitive impacts on you. So you will feel different than when you've watched something just on a flat screen, which is why VR is used in phobias and skills training and other sorts of motor function and memory based function training areas as well. Because you know, it really accesses your brain in a very different way to traditional video. And so the reason we wanted to use VR for this was, as I was saying a bit earlier, just so you could fully embody the experience of having a one-on-one kind of witnessing of this incredible cultural and, you

know, historical power that's being practiced by First Nations songs, singers and dancers all over the country.

Charlotte 14:54

Yeah. What made you decide to set the experience - so beyond the videos of the performances - it sets in a desert landscape of Australia?

Dominic 15:06

The website is in a desert landscape, predominantly, because Uluru, you know, is metaphorically the heart of the country. It's also traditional First Nations kind of cultural practices was a great meeting place for lots of different parts of the country, the online website is sat around a campfire, and all the different groups are located around it and that kind of concentric ring. And that's in some ways, you know, a pretty relevant motif or structure for this kind of content. Because, you know, a lot of it is about journeying off into different specific cultural practices or different specific artistic practices around the country. And then returning back to this kind of central half, which everyone, you know, everyone can access, and then going off on another journey. So that was a bit of a nod to the significance of Uluru, I guess, and, you know, the, the central desert is the country's heart and soul.

Charlotte 16:00

And has the projects had any feedback or responses from from community members whose cultural expressions are displayed in the project?

Dominic 16:10

Yeah, very, very much, very much. So. I mean, we've, we've really been very strongly involved in kind of co-production with all of those groups, really. So everyone was involved the whole time, we also invited everyone to screenings in different rural areas as it screened around the country. You know, Delta Kay, again, who's the Dubai dancer, and her family have been very involved in other components, she came down to the National Film and Sound archive and presented the film there, and also has, you know, been involved in creating the education resource. And there's lots of lots of kind of different ways that the different groups have been involved. So yeah, that has been something that we've definitely kind of kept contact with. And everyone's, you know, had a chance to sort of participate with the spreading of it in their own areas.

Charlotte 17:04

Yeah, awesome. You touched upon this a little earlier, as well. But I wanted to go a little deeper. So, you mentioned before you worked on this project, as a non-Indigenous person, of course, but you had to cultural advisor, such as Marilyn Miller, Annette Kogolo, to advise on cultural protocols and sensitivities. So can you tell a little bit more about that collaboration, that way of working together?

Dominic 17:26

Yeah, sure. I guess the key thing to recognize in working with First Nations content is that the intellectual property, and the content itself doesn't belong to the creator in the way that, you know, usually, as a, as a non-Indigenous Australian, when you're making creating something as a producer or director, it becomes your intellectual property, that's just not the case, when working with First Nations content, or First Nations artists. And so, I think it was just about really doing the right work to position ourselves as facilitators and, you know, technical collaborators in this project, and at every stage, you know, doing kind of due diligence and taking the right processes to establish that dynamic, and then also being able to really live that by allowing for time in which people would kind of reflect on what they wanted to do, and at their pace, and, you know, kind of, in every different communities' sort of speed and also at what and how was the focus of the dance for them. So it was kind of consultation, under the framework of acknowledging ICIP, which is the Indigenous Cultural Intellectual Property protocols, Screen Australia has got a great guide, which is Working with First Nations that I was able to share with all the crew. And so everyone really understood the context of that. But, you know, it was a pleasure kind of having those cultural advisors on, they're more than cultural advisors, I mean Marilyn, set their sort of list. Annette, has been a constant kind of cultural advisor for the whole theme and approach. And then Tara June, she is a First Nations Australian, she wrote the, the script. And so you know, she had full authority and kind of leadership over that. And then as I said, with each different group on a one-on-one basis, it was a matter of just setting the right intentions, and then being patient and, and also being willing to go with the flow and follow the leadership when it came, and so very much so it was, was less, I'd say consultation and more looking to each different group as as genuine bosses, and then, you know, taking direction on when and how.

Charlotte 19:28

Have you experienced or received negative responses at all?

Dominic 19:32

Not really, at all. I mean, it's been an overwhelmingly positive project from start to finish. There are always some people who are - quite understandably so - suspicious of white Australians working with such precious cultural property, you know, and cultural kind of history and cultural practices. And I respect that. I mean, there's there's been a lot of very questionable exploitation of First Nations culture and First Nations, you know, rights as artists and as cultural custodians over the last 200 years since the invasion year. So it's been something that I think First Nations people have a right to be really sensitive about. So there has been some people that have been understandably nervous or tense about the whole premise. But we've found through, you know, through empathy and listening and just being kind of very involved in in taking that on and, and explaining our values back, that it's always

been a very collaborative process in the end. And, you know, this, some of that stuff is really important as well, because it just needs to be done. And we need to keep going through the process of responsibly dealing with those concerns and those priorities.

Charlotte 20:41

Yeah for sure. One of the groups that is part of Carriberrie is Spinifex Gum. It features the Marliya choir which is an all Indigenous, female choir based in Cairns as you said before. They sing in both English and Yindjibarndi. I know you worked with them on several projects. Can you tell something about your collaboration with them?

Dominic 21:02

I've been very fortunate to work with Spinifex Gum and Marliya choir through a friendship I have with Felix Riebl, who's an artist and performer, the founder of the Cat Empire band and does a number of other projects. He had worked with Lyn Williams, who's the conductor and musical director of Gondwana choirs. And there are quite a few young, Indigenous youth around the country. Felix had worked with them on a couple of offshoot projects around Australia Day back in many, many years ago, and probably in the late 2000s, or mid 2000s. And out of their meeting, this offshoot choir called Marliya started, which is a smaller group of the Gondwana singers, all girls, mostly based up in Cairns, and probably 16, or 20, 20 of them originally. And with Felix, they wrote this music. And then Deborah Brown, who's the former dancer from Bangarra is their choreographer and artistic director in some ways, in terms of their movement and other other bits and pieces, costume and whatnot. So she she came on board too and it's been a collaboration between Felix, Deb, Lyn and of course, the girls in the choir. And then of in terms of the Yindjibarndi stuff, you know, none of them speak Yindjibarndi. Yindjibarndi is the language and is from the Pilbara. They're a traditional owner over near Karratha. And Michael Woodley and Lorraine Coppin, who who run the Juluwarlu Aboriginal Corporation over there have written some really powerful stuff about their TO experience, traditional owner experience, about their history, and Felix had come across that some years earlier. So in some ways, it's a bit of a unlikely connection of all of these different elements. But the voices of the girls in Cairns and at Marliya, singing these stories from the Pilbara is also a deeply unifying experience in some ways. You know, that's something that I think the Yindjibarndi community, led by Michael, in this case, and also the choir were really excited about and some guest artists have come in with Briggs - is a very powerful hip hop artist. And then also Emma Donovan who's very strong singer of all sorts of capacities really. And so there's been a lot of collaboration from different performance around the history of that, and that, that band or that group has gone from strength to strength, really, and it's quite, you know, it's quite a high-impact performance and, and it's played at a lot of festivals. It's also played at the Sydney Opera House in front of, you know, some of the country's kind of most, most powerful leaders, I saw Malcolm Turnbull in the audience at the time, and he was when he was Prime Minister, and it was it was just great to see Briggs singing about Aboriginal incarceration, you know, and having to see the Prime

Minister swimming in his seat, you know, just a couple of seats back. So it's, it's a project that really brings a lot of important things to the fore.

Charlotte 23:57

Yeah, for sure. And what is your role been in this project?

Dominic 24:00

I've created all the video content in the background. So I've shot all the projections, there's, there's constant projections in the in the show. And so I filmed all that stuff with Felix in the Pilbara and in Cairns, and it's very kind of textual material stuff like train tracks and rocks and, you know, water and so it's, they're really kind of fundamental primal elements, really. And so we shot a lot of that stuff, and that goes behind the choir and, and I've also had the privilege and joy of working with them on a number of music videos. And of course, they featured in Carriberrie. And so they've seen one of their key pieces, which is Marliya, which is Bush Honey, and it's a beautiful, beautiful piece and it's at the end of the film, and everyone says, you know, it's just such a lovely way to finish what has been different peaks and troughs, you know, been a big journey to finish with the voices of this young choir. So yeah, mostly my experience with them has been through the concert but also a little bit in Carriberrie.

Charlotte 25:01

And yeah again, this project is highly interactive again. I read on their website that they encourage schools to use their music and create their own versions of the songs, which is really cool. So why do you think interactive projects like this are important?

Dominic 25:17

You know, there's something about not being a passive bystander to this stuff. And also, you know, interacting, whether it's with music, or in the case of Carriberrie with 360 videos, gives you a deeper immersion as an audience member, and you know, you become more involved and engaged in the material by nature. And I think that that's, you know, it's important for this audience and for people these days too because we're such a kind of overwhelming quantity of material out there, it's, you know, it's helpful, I think people can engage a bit more richly than just having stuff wash over them.

Charlotte 25:54

If there is one message that you hope projects like Carriberrie and Spinifex Gum would bring into the world, what would it be? And how do you think a project like Carriberrie enables the circulation of that message?

Dominic 26:09

I don't know if it's so much a message for me. But I think what's important is that, as Australians in particular, that we understand the immense power and dignity and sophistication of First Nations culture in this country more, and you know, that through projects like this we, we can get a way to build better relationships with the First Nations communities who are still very much suffering from all sorts of political and cultural bias, and, you know, arrogance and violence really from from Australians. And so I think that, you know, the important thing is to recognize the - contrary to being something that a problem that we need to fix, you know, - that First Nations people can teach us about their country and about, you know, the place we live and have so much kind of incredible beauty in their culture and history that that can really inspire us as contemporary Australians as well. So I think you know, that it's about growing awareness and growing kind of experience and breaking down biases and breaking down barriers, so that we can better respect the will and intention and culture of First Nations assurance. And again, I think it's, it's just just sort of the number one thing is just listen, just go and have a look and listen to and kind of witness you know, it's it's a great opportunity for us to change our perspectives and to grow into better humans by looking into the kind of culture and practices and leadership of our First Nations people globally, you know, especially when there's such massive challenges going on with economics and social issues and climate issues. And you know, I mean, again, and again, there's just more and more leadership, I think that that we can accept from First Nations people that have been practicing harmonious cultural practices for so much longer than post-industrial global world has, been so there's I think there's just so much to celebrate and so much to learn.

Charlotte 28:13

Amazing. If you're listening to this, and you're curious, you can explore Carriberrie online and the teachers' guide is there as well provided if you'd like more information, so yeah, thanks, Dominic, so much.

Dominic 28:24

Thanks Charlotte, thank you. Pleasure. Yeah, thank you very much.

Charlotte 28:28

Thanks for listening to Movements and Sounds. This is a not-for-profit podcast. However, thanks to the SOAS Students Enterprise Fund. For every episode, a donation will be made to Seek Mob, an Indigenous-led organization in Australia fighting for climate justice. Find out more about this incredible organization on seekmob.org.au. See you at the next episode!