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Wally Umbulgarri



At Wyndham, Wally Umbulgarri, with whom we spent the afternoon while taping his songs and didgeridoo-playing, was an especially intelligent and likeable man. He proudly told us he was a person of some status in his community, which we believed, from both his behavior and the behavior of others toward

him when he took us to the Aboriginal camp where he lived. Initially he accepted Dan's request to make a didgeridoo (or didjeridoo) for him. But as we drove along with this destination ahead of us, Wally decided we had to stop so he could get this action approved from some particular individual who was in charge of Aboriginal Affairs. Otherwise, he suggested, he might lose his welfare check.

Evidently, when Wally went into some kind of office to make the arrangement, he was instructed to arrange a purchase from a nearby store run by a European man -- although we felt we had to allow for the possibility that Wally was using us to curry favor in some fashion.

To our great astonishment, Wally appeared much later in Perth after our return from Wyndham. He was scheduled to be on a late-night television program something like Johnny Carson's show in the USA. By that time we knew that it was appropriate for us to consider Wally an artist, particularly for his renditions on the didgeridoo of the calls of various birds such as the mopoke owl and the dingo and brolga. Gradually we learned that his reputation was widespread for his skill with the didgeridoo. We found a story about him in a magazine, and eventually he told us that a professor from somewhere had taped his playing. More than one person assured us that "Umbulgarri" was the greatest didgeridoo player in Australia. We were appalled that the people in charge of the television program in Perth required Wally to perform as an accompaniment to guitar-playing by a Caucasian individual, apparently some kind of star of the show. Additionally, and depressingly, they had dressed Wally solely in a loincloth, painted him up for the show, and sat him cross-legged on the floor!

Someone had taken Wally to the Perth zoo in the afternoon, and it was said that he was so preoccupied with watching the primates, which apparently he had never seen before, that he remained at the zoo for so long that he was not able to practice for his late-night performance. The next morning Dan and I raced with the Land Rover to the place where Wally was staying so we could greet (and comfort?!) him, but it was too early in the morning: he had already gone.

Wally's eyes were an umber sparkle in a grey mesh of wiry beard.  
He opened his shirt to show the cicatrices,  
proving he was a real bushman.

I apologized for mispronouncing his last name, asked him to repeat it,  
explaining that we have trouble with some Aboriginal words.

He touched my shoulder lightly with his fingertips,  
saying sympathetically, "*Ahh -- well -  
Mebbe when you come back next time . . .*"

Chasely said he strove frantically to learn the dialect in Arnhem Land  
before the Aboriginals incidentally learned English  
from listening to him and his wife,  
but he failed.

One night at the campfire they suggested politely  
that it might be easier if he would simply  
converse with them in English.

When Wally took us to his people's camp, a tall slim lubra came  
near and called to him concerning us, laughing smoothly,  
and Wally smiled faintly, then frowned,  
"*You're a naughty girl!*"