

# Milkayngu Mununggurr Hard Tongue Didgeridoo

## Exercises in Northeast Arnhem Land Yidaki Style

By Christian Som

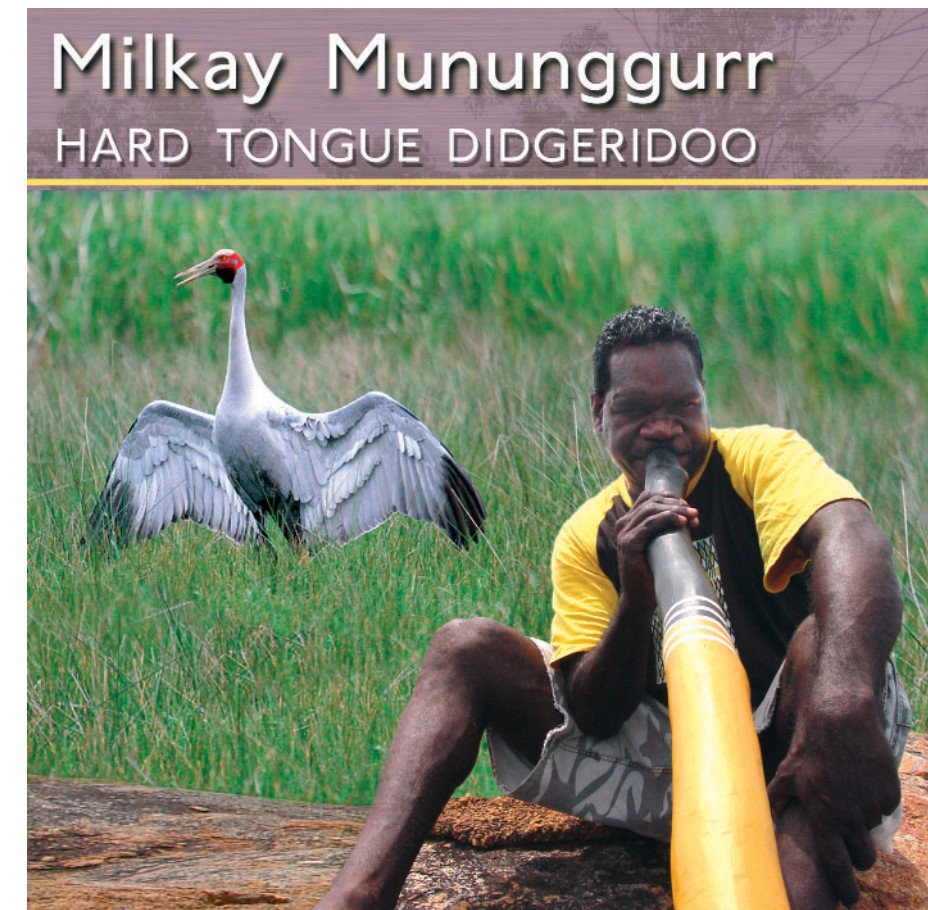
As someone with a great interest in traditional playing techniques, an instructional CD dealing with individual techniques is just what I've long been wishing for. Up to now, I've learnt everything I know from listening to contemporary and older recordings of traditional music and trying to imitate what I heard. The rumours about a CD with "trad" lessons, which started to percolate through sometime this year, have now become reality. The first CD with step-for-step instructions has appeared, featuring no less than Milkayngu Mununggurr. As Milkay is currently 'out bush', I talked to Randy Graves, who produced the CD.

*Well Randy, that definitely sounds like a really exciting project. Can you tell us a bit about what triggered the whole idea?*

It's such a great project to do that it didn't take much triggering!

In 2003, I announced I was moving to Yirrkala to do a master's thesis about yidaki. Several people asked me if I might continue my "Your Didjeridu Companion" instructional CD series with a "Your Yolngu Didjeridu Companion." I had of course already thought of that, and the answer was, "I'd love to, but we'll have to wait and see if it's meant to be."

I think a big reason for the demand for this is Djalu's teaching CD's. They are great, but many people complain that they can't really learn from them. I do know a handful of people who have learned very successfully from Djalu's CD's, but it does take a lot of work. Truthfully, that's a more Yolngu way to do it, but Yolngu would start from the day they're born, and speak the language that yidaki playing tongue movements come from. For outsiders who want to learn the style, a CD that breaks the playing down to the basics first would be a huge help. Once the fundamentals are understood, students will finally really be able to learn from and appreciate Djalu's CD's. It's a matter of really understanding the vocabulary he uses when he sings the rhythms. Then it all makes sense. So that was one agenda for me to do this - to increase the appreciation for and usefulness of Djalu's CD's.



My original idea was to release it on my own label as part of my series, but I knew there would be difficulties in doing international business with Yolngu. Then not long before I came to Yirrkala, Jeremy Cloake decided to take some time away and asked me to fill in as yidaki specialist at Buku-Larrnggay Mulka, the art centre in Yirrkala. I was hesitant at first, but decided it would be the best thing to arrive and become a part of the community, interacting with all the yidaki makers, rather than just showing up as the next in a long line of researchers with cameras and recording equipment. I mentioned the CD idea to the coordinator of the art centre, knowing that the moment I did, it would no longer be my project, but the art centre's, which is for the best. This CD which is about transmission of Yolngu knowledge from a Yolngu person is fully owned by Yolngu, rather than an outside business.

Discussion as to who should be the teacher didn't last very long. Milkayngu was the obvious choice, as someone who is both known in the outside world and a respected player in Arnhem Land, and as someone who is well-educated in English and experienced at communicating with outsiders.

I brought it up with him soon after, and he was keen to do it. He's a bit shy, but really wants to get out into the world as a yidaki teacher and performer. He's sort of waiting by the phone to be invited to events around the world. We've had two successful trips together in Australia so far, but that's another story. Actually no - it is very related, as the bonding we did on those trips helped motivate us to work together to get the project done.

Progress was slow, largely due to both of our



busy schedules. One thing that ramped up the project was the decision to make it a part of my thesis project. So I had to actually get it done within a certain timeline. Along the way I also became officially hired as the art centre's Assistant Coordinator, and the CD is being released by the art centre, so it was a good way to combine my day job with getting my thesis done!

*What is the consensus among Yolngu (if at all?) about this instructional CD? I could imagine that the idea of teaching Westerners is not really approved by everyone.*

I can't say I've talked to everyone here in Northeast Arnhem Land about it, and probably the few who would object are people I don't see much of. I am trying to reach as many points of view for my master's project as possible, but I have yet to find any negative opinions on the CD.

For one thing, the CD actually isn't very interesting for Yolngu. Many see that we're working on a project with Milkayngu teaching yidaki and get excited. Then they hear the repetitive exercises that are targeted at non-Yolngu players and they get bored. They'd rather just hear some really good playing or some super secret flashy techniques. But instead they hear the basics that they already know, and that are all

they need to know to develop their own super secret flashy techniques if they practice enough. So while this CD should be a huge revelation to outside didge players wanting to learn Yolngu style, it's really not very interesting at all to Yolngu, so they would hardly bother objecting.

As for the whole concept of outsiders learning yidaki, out here away from the cities, I have never heard an Aboriginal Person say that non-Aboriginals should not play didge at all. If someone shows up here playing non-Yolngu styles, Yolngu don't tend to be impressed, but don't condemn it either. But if you show that you've been trying to play "properly," the Yolngu way, then Yolngu are impressed and encourage you. There are however some Yolngu who object to outsiders learning Yolngu songs. Why should someone on the other side of the world be playing sacred music that belongs to this place and to specific clans? Does this weaken or strengthen the power of these songs and what they invoke? These are the questions that you won't get consensus on. So this CD addresses the problem by teaching technique without teaching songs. No Yolngu claim that there's inherent sacred power in retroflexing your tongue. Anybody can do it.

*When teaching the little I know about playing didge to other people, it is often a challenge to be really analytical about what I'm doing more or less subcons-*

*ciously during my playing. I imagine that for such an accomplished player as Milkayngu, who has been playing since his early childhood, and learned through probably very different teaching methods than ours, this must be a huge challenge. How did you address this issue?*

To be a bit egotistical, this is why it was so important to have an experienced non-Yolngu didge player and teacher working on this project with Milkayngu, to ask him the right questions. He didn't know many details of what he was doing, and we had to work together to figure it out. My favourite story about this involves German player Markus Meurer, who was in the area at the time. He asked Milkayngu how Yolngu kids learn circular breathing. The answer was, "learn what?" It's not even a concept here. You just start playing when you are young and it comes naturally if you play the proper way.

The first thing we did was to arrange a lesson. It was good that I had been playing for 12 years and working on Yolngu style for a few years (but not having much success), while Markus had been playing didge only a few years, not working on Yolngu style at all. So we had two different student perspectives. If Milkay could get us both making progress, then we would know the techniques worked. We recorded the lesson, in which we tried to identify all the necessary individual techniques and come up with exercises for them. Afterwards, I edited down the recording into a sketch of the CD.

It was huge for me - 5 years after my first visit to Arnhem Land, I finally got my tongue moving right thanks to that one lesson. I was shocked how quick it was, and how few techniques Milkayngu identified. I was dubious, but then listened to a lot of Yolngu music that had seemed like a string of different techniques to me before, and suddenly understood it all! Not that I have mastered it in my own playing, but at least I understand better now.

It was also important in terms of instrument choice and lip technique for me. When Milkayngu was picking instruments to use for teaching, I showed him a few at the art centre that I liked, and he rejected them all, instead picking one that he had made that I didn't like. I had a hard time maintaining the drone and switching from trumpet to drone. But he said it had "good balance." After that, I tried to play that yidaki a few minutes every day at work, and after a few weeks decided to buy it to learn from it. It was the first didgeridoo I ever bought specifically because I didn't like it! I have learned a lot from it and now it's one of my favourites. Actually, it's the one Milkayngu is

pictured playing all over the CD booklet, and is used on the trumpet exercises.

Getting back on topic, there was a lot of discussion throughout the recording process on how he was doing what he did. One important decision was to record all of the exercises before recording the instructions on how to do them. I took time listening to all the tracks so that when we worked on the instructions, I could ask questions in detail, and so that he could know exactly what he was describing rather than just having a general idea. We also had a few workshops during the recording process, at the Garma Festival and at a didge shop in Sydney, in which to try out the techniques on other students and see what questions we hadn't thought of. That was important; as we were reminded we hadn't even thought to answer the obvious question of when to breathe. Following the model of my own CD's, we recorded his breath on the tracks so it's audible, but it's still important to acknowledge it in the liner notes and voice instructions.

*What I find particularly useful are the illustrations of not only the individual tongue positions but also the illustration of the whole movement sequence during a specific sound element. But how much variation is there between players? And how 'general' are these patterns for the different styles in for example North-East and South-East Arnhem Land?*

There certainly is some variation between players, and that is acknowledged in the liner notes. But the variation is kind of in between the tongue motions, such as with voice or mouth shaping, or the very fine details such as how far retroflexed the tongue is at any given time. The tongue doesn't have to move the same every time. So the CD teaches the fundamentals that are common to all Yolngu playing, but it's up to the individual to study other recordings and/or make up new variations. Where you'll find the most difference is listening to older recordings, or even the rare elder who still plays, like Djalul'. This new CD will vastly increase your ability to understand what those older players are doing, and you will appreciate what makes them great so much more!

I don't want to say too much on comparisons to other didgeridoo music as I've only done intense study on this one style. I do know that motions in and out of retroflexed positions are common to all the styles, and that Milkayngu compared the soft tongue "witj-dju" exercise on this CD to styles from other regions. I think the smart thing to say would be that this CD very specifically covers Yolngu yidaki playing, but that there are elements that will apply to styles from other Aboriginal groups of the Top

End. This CD will definitely not teach you Western or Southeastern didjeridu playing, but it should give you a background from which you can understand those styles better.

*You've had the opportunity now to see the whole set of instructions in action at a few festivals where Milkayngu was teaching yidaki classes. How did people react? I bet it allowed many participants to progress rapidly.*

Yes, we've seen good progress using these exercises. It of course varies from student to student, usually depending on the individual's ability to let go of their own habits and imitate Milkayngu. For me, trying to play Yolngu yidaki was like starting all over with the didge. There was one student who had been playing two years, and had the uncanny ability to just do what he was told, and got the closest to anyone I've heard, pretty much immediately. On one occasion, we had a small group get to the

understand the vocabulary as well. Before Yolngu were only sharing the final product with us, not the building blocks. I can say from my own experience and from witnessing workshops that it really works.

Of course, not everyone becomes a master instantly, and that's not the goal. The aim isn't for every didge player in the world to be a master of Yolngu style. For that you need life-long immersion in the culture. Instead Milkay just gives the fundamentals from which the student can either study more Yolngu music with vastly better understanding, or to take the foundation of traditional playing and create their own hybrid style. Milkay always says in the workshops that it doesn't matter that people don't sound exactly like him. As long as they begin to understand and are somehow affected by the experience, whether it's an influence on their playing style or not, that's all that matters.

### Notes On Yolngu Spelling and Tongue Positions

On this CD, Milkayngu sings the exercises for you before playing them. The sounds he makes are natural for Yolngu-speakers, but use tongue positions others might not know. We've written these instructions using Yolngu spellings and diagrams that tell you exactly where to put your tongue.

Not every Yolngu person plays exactly the same. While this recording features the predominant style heard in Northeast Arnhem Land today, there are different styles due to change over time, clan and song-specific techniques, and individual creativity. The following techniques are fundamentals upon which all styles are based. Use what you learn here to study other Yolngu recordings and create your own variations.

#### N/ŋ

*tail-n* • The tail-n represents a soft 'ng' as in "singer." Look for it in words like "Yolngu" and "Milkayngu." In words like "Mununggurr," the soft tail-n is followed by a hard 'g,' as in "stronger." It could be argued that "dhu" should be spelled "dhuŋ" and "jo" "joŋ," with the breath on the 'ŋ.' Some Yolngu use the term "dith'thuŋ" to describe yidaki playing. Tail-n is not used in the exercises.



#### 1 dh/th

*interdental position* • 'th' is not pronounced as in English. Place the tip of your tongue between your teeth, the blade of the tongue against your gum ridge, and pronounce a 't' as you would in English. Same goes for 'dh.' Say the letter 'd' with your tongue starting from that position. In "dith," your tongue lands in this position. In "dhu," your tongue pushes away from this position.



#### 2 dj/tj

*alveodental position* • The tip of the tongue touches the back of the bottom teeth, while the blade, or middle of the tongue, touches the gum ridge. In "witj," the tongue moves from rest to this position, and in "dju," the tongue pushes off from this position.



#### 3 d/l

*retroflexed position* • The tongue curls back just a bit so that the bottom of the tip of the tongue touches the edge of the gum ridge just behind the top teeth. The tongue does not push any further back.

point where they understood the motions well enough that we could write a whole short piece using Yolngu terminology, and they could play it together. It was great fun! So I feel good about how we're doing this. The reason Yolngu can communicate songs to each other by singing their mouth sounds is that they have a common language that they learn basically without trying, just by growing up with it. I think this CD is the first thing going out into the world with a master Yolngu player who's good at communicating in English explaining clearly in terms we understand what the mouth sounds they sing means, so that we can

## INFO

Sound samples are available at :  
[www.serioussticks.com](http://www.serioussticks.com)

The CD is available at:

Australia: [www.yirrkala-arts.com](http://www.yirrkala-arts.com)

USA: [www.gingerroot.com](http://www.gingerroot.com)

Europe: [www.serioussticks.com](http://www.serioussticks.com)

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