

# DECLASSIFY

## Episode 4: Listening to First Nations Stories

Guest: Brenda Gifford

Host and Transcription: Victoria Pham

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### CHAPTER TIMECODES

0:00 - Welcome to Country

00:26 - Introducing Brenda Gifford

01:16 – Brenda’s Experiences – A Performer and a Composer

08:46 – Diversifying Figures beyond History

12:50 – Story-telling and the Common Language of Music as Collaboration

18:52 - Intermission I: 4-minute excerpt of Brenda’s work *Bardju* (meaning ‘footprints’ in the Darug Language), performed by Ensemble Offspring

22:35 – Culture as Creation and Diversity within First Nations stories

28:38 – Collecting Oral Histories

36:44 - Intermission II: 5-minute excerpt of Brenda’s work *Mungala* (meaning ‘clouds’ in the Darug Language) (2019), performed by flautist Claire Chase

42:10 - Education and Learning about stories

48:00 – Jandamurra and collaborative models with Indigenous artists and communities

51:00 – First Nations stories and repertoire – Strengthening an Industry through Diversity

55:40 - Wrap Up

### SUMMARY

Thinking about our past through the lens of music and art often brings to the fore, how can we understand the diversity of our history and of culture in order to represent it, to engage with it and to tell its stories? This week’s guest is Yuin Woman and First Nations contemporary classical composer, Brenda Gifford. Brenda has written and spoken extensively about how her culture is the basis of her music, having toured Australia and internationally for the last 20 years as a saxophonist and now as a composer. In this episode she talks about her experiences as a First Nations musician, the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art-making in the last 100 years, the significance of music education and access to such education is necessary in being able to set a path into the world of professional art-making, and how the groundswell of growing support with larger Australian institutions and funding bodies is creating more acknowledgement of the talent that has always been present across Australian Indigenous communities.

# TRANSCRIPT

[Welcome to Country]

*Declassify would like to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people who are the traditional custodians of this land, Canberra, on which we are meeting and speaking upon, and wishes to pay respect to the Elders of the Ngunnawal Nation both past and present. We extend this respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are listening and are in attendance today.*

Victoria Pham (VP): Hello, hello. And we're back for another episode of Declassify. I'm so excited today to be chatting about more music and art-making, especially because this time my guest is composer and saxophonist, Brenda Gifford! Brenda is a Yuin woman and a First Nations Contemporary Classical Composer. Her culture is the basis of her music. She is currently writing a story about her experiences as an Aboriginal woman musician on the road and the adventures she has experienced. Brenda was a member of the Band Mixed Relations with Bart Willoughby from No Fixed Address. She toured extensively nationally to Aboriginal communities around Australia and Internationally to Native American communities and the Pacific Islands. So, I'm really pleased to welcome Brenda onto the podcast this week. So, thank you so much Brenda for coming onto the podcast, I really appreciate it.

Brenda Gifford (BG): Oh, thank you! Thanks!

VP: Oh, you're welcome! Well I thought, as I suppose I've done with every guest so far, is to start off by us talking about your widespread experience as a musician, because you're really interesting in that you were a saxophonist and now you've started to branch into contemporary, classical composition? How has that been experiencing deeply the worlds of performing and composing together?

BG: [laughs] Ok Okay, yeah. So, it's kind of like, it's a long road. Kind of back in the day, I learnt the saxophone in kind of school and went on to do that and study the horn, and went on and played in different bands and jazz quartets, big bands and kind of, rock reggae. So, I was doing a bit of this and a bit of that with the horn, yes [laughs].

VP: So, was it saxophone as well? I recall seeing images and videos of you playing earlier on in your career.

BG: Well, I really just had the tenor. I didn't have an alto but that's not that hard, but I just played tenor at that time and I was potentially looking at getting a soprano but thought I sounded a bit like a duck when I was playing that, so just stuck to the horn, the tenor saxophone.

VP: Would you say that all your experience playing everything from big band music all through to reggae, which I was looking you up and there's so much of you playing reggae which is amazing. Has it influenced your music-making in terms of how you approach writing for live musicians coming from your specific performance background?

BG: Yes, I think so, in that if you're coming from that background, you understand the basics of it, and I think that it creeps thorough into the music that I'm writing. I just really like the idea from the playing days from a festival or a pub, when we were doing the tour type thing. It

was just nice have an element of – although I’m not sure of the term – an element of freedom within the piece whether it’s a solo within a piece in a reggae band or just a standard jazz-in trading four to eight. So yeah, I think that’s definitely come through in my writing.

VP: So, when did you start thinking of composition as another way of expressing your art or music?

BG: That’s the thing! I hadn’t really thought about it and this was about going back 3 years ago, that’s when Dr Chris Sainsbury from ANU (Australian National University) literally said, “I’m putting together a program. Brenda, would you like to be part of it?” And I said, ok. The thing is that composing is a different ball game and a different set of rules and structures, so since then it’s been a different learning curve for me. But yeah, I had played with people as a horn for hire but hadn’t really written music in, as we say, a classical setting. A couple of years now to, yeah.

VP: And when you first started out was there someone whose music you looked to or aspects of musical discovery that you sourced and sought out when you were first engaging compositionally, that you referenced when you began experimenting with this different part of the music industry?

BG: Um, yes. The well-known stuff because I’m been listening to more of what we term “classical music” but Vivaldi, the well-known ones like Beethoven. As you can say the top 20 well-known standard classical musicians. But from my world, it’s more kind of like where you had Miles Davis where he was doing sketches of Spain, you know, where he had elements of, what I would say, of classical music within those structures. You know, the way he wrote and just bits and pieces coming through. So, it was well-known in terms of what you would think of as classical. And as simple as listening to the ABC, they just have some amazing musicians, what are those brothers? But yes, not necessarily... they’re classical guitar. So yeah, just kind of listening to what you call mainstream classical, but that’s kind of the reference point and then just bringing my ideas to that.

VP: And also, that time when Miles Davis was coming up and a trumpeter, or training, there was also a groundswell of new music in the sense of the rise and popularity of jazz, Motown and pop. I’m sure it was over a series of decades but having recently watched the QUINCY documentary, which by the way I would highly recommend for everyone to, Quincy Jones the big music producer and composer he was also trained classically, in that he eventually after some experience touring and mastering his craft in the States, he then moved to Paris to study with none other than classical music queen and absolute powerhouse that was Nadia Boulanger. And to quote him, and I think if I remember correctly he was actually quoting her, in that although we’re coming from different places, playing, performing and writing different music, we’re all just playing around, in a Western sense, playing around with the same 12 notes. It’s all the same notes and we’re just organizing them differently.

BG: And that’s the thing! Exactly what you’re saying. So like James Morrison can sit there and play Bach on trumpet and trombone and he’s just amazing, and he can both play classical and jazz. He’s a killer jazz musician, Australian jazz musician. And then we have people like Wynton Marsalis who plays trumpet and I’ve played with his brother who I love his playing. And so, Wynton Marsalis who comes from a whole kind of history of black community in America, being jazz, and yet he can get on stage and play any kind of Classical, or specific Classical style. And he’s done both across both genres effectively.

VP: And do you think that even, like Wynton who beyond his performing magnitude, is a prolific and Grammy-award winning composer, that even though all this classical music training that we come from, we study intensively like the ones you mention – Vivaldi, Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms – that as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the industry or the entire artform has a chance now to diversify the voices that tell these stories hopefully well beyond these exclusively historical figures?

BG: Oh, yes definitely. There seems to be a kind of groundswell in generally out there, and the other thing is you've had people like William Barton who has been doing it for a long time, he's been playing digeridoo and composing for a long time, including playing with top orchestras around the world. And I think there seems to be groundswell throughout the industry through programs like Nurraburria, you just come in there in a gentle way and look at classical music. And then the other things is where you have programs like that. I'm working with with, what am I? I am the inaugural First Nations Composer with Ensemble Offspring. And programs like that where you are actively getting supported by some of the best musicians in the country, is really fantastic because I think it's having access to musicians of that caliber and being able to talk to them. The other thing is classical music is its own set of rules, structures and rules. And the other thing is, when you ask that question, there seems to be a willingness to take or listen to other voices, and other voices telling stories through what we call, the term "classical music." Whereby, there are other voices emerging. I think this type of thing when we say diversity of voices, it can only strengthen the industry because styles and genres of music can only grow if the one constant is change. I think it's the process, in a way, of changing. But I think if the industry lets a different, or a diverse range of voices in there can only strengthen the industry, because it's giving it a different view and telling different stories and that can only help.

VP: I think so too because without that we cannot sustain an industry that is at its core an artform if we continue to play the same standards. I mean those standards are beautiful and of course I enjoy listening to them and attending performances of them, but there's a point where I question its relationship to what you call the 'constant of change.' If we keep engaging with living practitioners, this world of "classical music" has a chance of representing the world that we actually live in by including voices such as yourself, or William Barton all the way to like people I've spoken with like Felicity Wilcox, where it broadens what is possible and what stories and musical thoughts can be heard. It doesn't create a narrow world of competition, but broadens this form to beyond what we expect to hear.

BG: Yeah, exactly. It's kind of like that thing, and we've talked about it, which is story-telling. Aboriginal culture is an oral-based culture, it's telling stories. And this is just, and I kind of put that in my blurb. Music is a medium for me to express my culture. And when I say culture, it's all terminology here. Culture is dance. Culture, for us Aboriginal people, culture is dance. Music is culture, dance is culture, visual arts is culture. So, it's not that monotone, although I'm not sure of the world, it can be really diverse but it's still an expression of culture and that can only strengthen the industry, I think.

VP: Coming from this background and integrating, as you say, your culture through the medium of music, have you found that working with Western classical trained music or writing music for the concert has been an interesting process in which to express aspects of your First Nations culture?

BG: Yeah, it's been interesting. And I was talking to somebody from the Ensemble Offspring mob... it's the common language of music of yeah, and then things that might be different. In the beginning I thought that "Oh wow, this is kind of music," but the other things is, if you talk to another muso, there will always be a point of commonality where by you can bring it down to, this passage, this chord, this chord structure. It's like a common language. As long as the lines of communication are open, two way or both ways, I think for me it's been a really interesting growth period for me. It's really like an ongoing conversation. I've been really lucky like working with people like Ensemble Offspring. I had a session with, with Jason! About a week ago and we were talking about his new contralto clarinet, and he's got a bass clarinet, and we had a session where I was just tossing out ideas. And he was saying "Well, ok, we can do A, B, C, D," and that kind of thing is really valuable for me. And for all composer, being able to throw ideas at ensembles and musicians where they go "Ok yeah we can do that. Or no not really, how about A, B, C?" So, it's kind of like that communication and having that open line of communication.

VP: That's the amazing thing with working with as a composer especially when you're emerging or starting out, being able to work with individual musicians or small ensembles is possibly the best way to learn. For example, you're working with the amazing ensemble that is Ensemble Offspring. Not only because they're incredibly proactive in running the role you currently hold as First Nations composer in residence, but also, they are also very leading in terms of how they run their ensemble internationally. I think they're also the first ensemble in Australia to sign up for the PRS Foundation's Keychange Initiative which is trying to represent equally the music they program, so 50/50 in terms of gender representation.

BG: Yeah, no they're really, like you're saying, really strong in supporting young composers and new music.

VP: Has it been different for you working with something much larger in terms of force and number of musicians, like an orchestra? Because I know you have something coming up with Sydney Symphony.

BG: [Laughs] That's really interesting, a good one, because it's kind of like amplified and it's the whole thing amplified. And yes, it's made me fulfill my ... bringing things into a tighter frame. Like you have that section featuring the strings, and then you can have that be a horn or brass section, and then you could have other sections of the orchestra feature. It's good because it's forced me to pull it into focus, my ideas because I tend to waffle on. It's food, not force, but teaching me to bring things into focus because I can go off on my own tangents. But when you have an orchestra, you have to tighten the ship.

VP: There are just so many of them! That's what happens when there's an orchestra, there are just so many musicians and limited rehearsal time, so you lose the sense of workshop you get when you work with someone like Ensemble Offspring [laughs]

BG: Yeah. Yeah, so it's like at the other end [laughs]

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## INTERMISSION I

VP: For our first little intermission today is a recent work by Brenda called *Bardju*, meaning footprints in the Darug language, performed here by Ensemble Offspring in 2019.

Follows a 3:30 excerpt of Brenda Gifford composition *Bardju* (2019)

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VP: So, in terms of what you were talking about before, integrating your culture and the stories and histories that you wish to tell, how does that process start for you when you're commissioned for a new work, or when you just want to start writing your music?

BG: I think it depends on what the piece is. At the moment I'm about to be doing the *Sonic Sites* with Ensemble Offspring and one piece is working the local cultural language – it's a young bloke down there from the South coast whose name I can't remember his name sorry – but he has a song that refers to the nature down there and it's English and other languages, about three verses long. And I'm putting the local Youth Orchestra as a backing to that, so that's really good because I'm being given a set text which is a song and language from down there – the South Coast – and working with this young man to write something so the kids can sing it and the youth orchestra can play it. So, this is part of that Ensemble Offspring thing, not thing, the *Sonic Sites* at Bundanon [that's it]. And then I'm actually, there are some interesting ones. I'm working with a young Wurundjeri Dancer – we just did some stuff as part of my studies with Professor Liza Lim as part of my Masters – a project with the Sydney Dance Company with some students there. And I got approached by a young Wurundjeri Dancer, Joel Brady, to do some stuff and we had our first meeting and he's got a great idea and a great dance. And so, I'm working on a piece for that which might be a string quartet. So that'll be really interesting because he's got his own take on his own culture, Wurundjeri Culture, and that'll be really interesting.

Well, actually this weekend and Dr Chris Sainsbury are going to meet up in the Griffin Ensemble to do rehearsal down here in Canberra for a piece called a 'Songs from a style on Senate' which put, these are some of the really interesting ones whereby they've given us text from the Senate and mine's Malindari, and I've forgotten her second name, but she's an Aboriginal woman from up top there, and it's her response to the death of a young man in Yuendumu. And I've got the text there and I've put it together with the Griffin Ensemble. So, it can be anything from that which I really enjoy because some of the text is not grabbed out of the air, it's actually from the structures that run this country and it's actually a response to, and I think it's relevant with Black Lives Matter and the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system. So yeah, it's a real mixed bag but I'm really enjoying it.

VP: Do you feel that it's somewhat your responsibility as an artist to engage with the more political sides of things through your art?

BG: Ah yes, and this is just me. And my thing like with the band, No Fixed Address with Bart Willoughby, back in the day we did all those kinds of black death rallies and kinds of things all over the place, and that was just part of it going and playing through the prison system to

our inmates, and going overseas and playing to inmates in Vanuatu where you have 10% of the population making up 30% of the prison population et cetera, et cetera. So, been there and done that, but I think that's ingrained in me and I'll pass it onto the next generation, where I did some stuff with Dobby – Ryan Chapman – and he's a young hip-hop artist. He's just released a piece called 'I can't breathe' and he was one of the young Narraburra who came through with me for that First Nations Composers Program. It's just all in the mix there, and it's really up to the individual. We had somebody who was writing about a vampire and they composed music about the vampire, and she was a she-wolf, all through to representation of those in incarceration so yeah

VP: It's amazing that you've pulled all your history and process together in order to engage with a totally different kinds of art forms, through dance and working with the youth orchestra. I have to ask because it says in one of your bios, I can't remember where, that you collect a lot of oral histories. Does that inform your work?

BG: Yeah, I used to work at the National Film and Sound Archive, and in the indigenous branch and fortunately they supported me, and they said it's crucial that we actually get out and interview people like artists who have been there and done that, and have a history. Artists like Bart Willoughby who, you know, was the First Wave. No Fixed Address were the first wave of Aboriginal reggae bands back in the 80s, and they were part of that history and actually paved the way and captured the stories. I went back and spoke to Stevie and Alan Pigram, and some of those people who have passed. And actually getting their stories on the record, on the official record and represented in a national institution. It is that whole thing about representation. We've been there, we've been doing it; Howard Blaire, Jimmy Little ... I can kind of ring them off... Jimmy Little, Uncle Roger Knox. There's a whole lot of Aboriginal musicians who have been there and done that. So you've got stories that are been there and done that, who have been representing, but haven't necessarily gotten the mainstream exposure. There's always been that level of talent within the Aboriginal community and like the 80s where you had the First Waves, like No Fixed Address or Rumpy that had the first top 40 in language, in using an Aboriginal language. Although don't quote me on how I said that in terms of the language name – Out of Jail. So, it's really important to have those voices and that's where it came from. From wanting to capture and have those voices represented in a national institution to go "Ok so how did we get to someone like Jessica Mauboy? Or Christine Anu?" It doesn't just come out of thing, you know? Like Uncle Mix Sims wrote Sleeve Notes, one of the first protest albums when he wrote when he was in Long Bay Jail. So that whole history of Aboriginal music and representation, and actually having it there, so that's where that came from.

VP: And that's really important work that you've done, because it gives us, what you have already said, a long history in just the last 30 years of First Nations people engaging with all this media. And I have a bit of a weird question because I'm not sure how to phrase it. I can only really speak to my own experience but occasionally when I've met members of the classical music industry, audience-inclusive as well, they tend to be some senior musicians or occasionally a patron of the arts, I get asked a lot about maybe writing music that represents my people – being Asian people - and because my surname is inescapably Vietnamese, I get asked 'Why don't you tell the immigrant story? Or why don't you musically explore boat people in this new commission or new piece you're playing? Or Why didn't you do that?' Does it ever feel like you're occasionally tasked or slotted in a certain way, because there is *so* much diversity within First Nations culture and cultures. Languages alone there are 250-300, that we can estimate so far, across Australia and in terms of dialects from 800 to 1000.

BG: There is so much diversity! And excellent within First Nations. But the other thing is, so it's artistic choice. If you want to be the guy who's in the community who wants to play in all the funerals, and the NAIDOCs and all the ceremonies or celebrations, or to take it up a notch and be the band that does the local touring, or you want to concentrate on doing the festivals, or you want to be the guitar player or a Jessica Mauboy. It's about artistic choice and everybody has their own idea of what they'd like to do artistically so it really comes back to that. And I was talking to somebody about jazz representation, Aboriginal jazz representation in the jazz scene. I'd love to see, well we seem to have things going on in contemporary music, but I've love to see, and I've said this before, first or second violin in Sydney Symphony Orchestra, having a blackfella there. Or having a blackfella having their own jazz quartet, having their culture inform that. Or just wanting to get up there and do the blues. So with those, if you have, that's there thing and it's really up to the individual's artistic choice, if they want to and if you, you don't have to. Long-short [laughs]

VP: Do you think that education and access plays a huge role in that? I was personally very fortunate in that really early on my parents invested in me having piano lessons in a way that some of my peers didn't have that opportunity, in order to have that trajectory to either you become any kind of musician, pop, jazz or classical?

BG: Yeah, I think that's really important and using the example of Ensemble Offspring going out to Brewarrina and I've forgotten the name of the festival but it's an annual festival. Playing the composers' music and then you get the little fella coming up wanting to play the violin or having a play on the piano. And that's planting a seed, but there's got to be, like you're saying, a path in place whereby the next generation can get there. And Deborah's got the small Aboriginal chamber group so that's a starting point. And then you have feeder programs into that and you've got Gondwana, and Deborah's children choirs, but you actually need to have feeder programs and fully government supported and funded, so that you can actually have a next generation whereby, in 2030 we might have somebody in there. But there has to be support and an actually well thought-out plan fostering the next generation of Aboriginal artists, in classical and in jazz.

VP: And even access to instruments themselves can be really difficult, but that's a whole other conversation and whole other kind of consideration when it comes to that kind of financial investment...

BG: That's a whole other thing, but even yeah, having a school band would help but that's not possible in all communities, you know.

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INTERMISSION II

VP: For our second Intermission is another work by Brenda called *Mungala, meaning clouds in the Darug Language*, performed live with Brenda and also by acclaimed flautist Claire Chase.

Follows a 5-minute excerpt of *New Work* (2019)



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VP: And you mentioned before that you're working with a youth orchestra. I mean, that's a whole other sphere to education, but do you think that writing music about your culture to musicians that are really young and upcoming is a way for them to widen their own repertoire. For example, me coming from what seems like a really strict classical training, a lot of the repertoire I played shaped how I viewed the industry in general and you have to play a lot of Bach and Mozart, and then you start to think that's all that's out there, obviously that's not the case. Do you think that's going to change through working with young musicians?

BG: Yeah, I think I've done stuff like taught in schools and TAFES, and I really think it's the youth and next generation because the other thing is, kids are like sponges. They haven't necessarily taken in all the stuff that happens as you grow up, so if they had school programs and access and equity type thing, that would be great.

VP: Brilliant, and if I'm just jumping off the back about First Nations cultures being very diverse, and there are a lot of people listening who might not be from Australia who don't know that for example there are 200-300 languages to 800-1000 dialects within Aboriginal culture itself. Do you think that collaboration is the best way, not just to navigate classical music in that you're collaborating with classical musicians who are already there, but collaborating with other First Nations creators as a way to understand different levels of diversity?

BG: Yeah, that's a great question. Diversity within the First Nations, so you've got a collaboration like if you have musicians from up the top end and then musicians from Central Australia and WA, and form around the place. It's another process of learning and the other thing is, the outcome would be amazing because if you've got the diversity within the group which we're calling "Aboriginal" and really it's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Aboriginal, I think the outcome would be really interesting. And that's the other thing, even within a language group and the dialects, and I'm not a linguistic, but even the inflections and that type of thing within the version of the language would be interesting. And I think, like you're saying, for non-Indigenous musicians to, like when I've toured and done stuff with non-Indigenous musicians, it's been a two-way learning process. It's us learning from them and them learning from us. And that's kind of been in the education section, and that's a process that they could call a two-way learning. Yeah, I think that kind of thing whereby you've got diversity within the group is really good.

VP: And what I love about your music is that it gives an audience and up-and-coming musicians the chance to understand the depth of First Nations practices beyond, if I'm honest, when I was younger and in my teenage years studying about First Nations musical practices, they were just streamlined and you only get an understanding of what a didgeridoo is and what kinds of sounds it makes, and then it became the symbol of what all Indigenous music is, which is obviously not the case. There is so much more that happens in it and so many stories across the country. So, your music gives people a way in which to understand Indigenous culture beyond the stereotype of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century where there were some Australian composers dipping their fingers and toes into Indigenous culture but aligning and representing it to this kind of stereotyped model.

BG: Yes, that's a good point and I think, that's our thing, and I say for mainstream Australia to have a listen and we're out there amongst it with the music. Have a listen! And that's the other thing, it's music and everyone takes away something different from a piece of music, and

that's what I'm learning this composing thing. So, I have this idea of what this is and what it represents to me, and then you play it and it's out there with the public and the people. Everybody has their own take on it, or take away with it, and that's the beauty of music is that people can have their own space and their own interpretation. I think in these mad times that we're in, I think it's more important than ever to do that.

VP: Definitely and as a side anecdote, I actually was part of Gondwana for a while and they have a great training program for young composers. And the first year I did it, it was with the composer Paul Standhope and it was during the time when he was composing Jundamarra for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and for Gondwana Chorale. And he was talking about how high the level of collaboration he had with the Indigenous community in order to create the work and tell their story of Jundamurra, and they were actually on stage for the performances. And it was stage again, I think last year, with them at the Sydney Conservatorium. And from what I remember, it was a 50/50 partnership in terms of story-telling. Do you think that's a way or a model in terms of adopting when it comes to collaborating?

BG: Yes, I think that's a great model to go forward and operate – the 50/50 model. And going back to Chris. Chris put a paper and a small book out at Narraburria that has recommendations at the back about how to be a good ally and how to work with and effectively, as opposed to non-effectively, with community and Aboriginal musicians. And what you were saying then sounds like a great idea.

VP: And it creates a relationship between artists and musicians, where sometimes it seems like it doesn't exist because as you said at the beginning, classical music has very specific procedures and protocols and structures. And if we branch out, the industry then has a chance to collaborate and we learn different traditions from each other and it doesn't, the word classical itself doesn't need to apply to a Western or European, but to look at First Nations traditions which are quite frankly much, much longer in time and richer as a result, we could tap into that as well.

BG: Yeah, and that's a great point as well about the term classical. But also, when they held the, I didn't get to the performance but I think I saw it on YouTube and I thought that is really a whole, from having, it depends who you are collaborating with and having the people actually onstage whether they're sitting or standing. All that stuff on stage is actually, or can be, a component of culture. And it's that thing of depending on who you are, like we're saying there's a lot of diversity, depending on who you are collaborating with, that's in the mix. And I think what I saw, how he explained it, and what I've heard it [Jundamurra] was a really successful collaboration. And it can be a little thing, you know, like other members of the orchestra being painted or not being painted. There's layers and layers. And then you've got people like the Australian Art Orchestra who work with Aboriginal people and custodians, so there's definitely a way forward.

VP: I would have loved to have learnt more when I was in high school because it's not really part of our curriculum. If you're in NSW we have this thing called the HSC where if you take music you have to learn about the last 25 years of Australian, Contemporary music and it's the same rotation of high-level classical composers and of course what is "Australian music" and if we think about it, it obviously encompasses far more than that.

BG: [Laughs] yeah, and that's it more the area of education, but if they could incorporate that somehow and have some sort of language component, I think that would be great because the

local people and that all enriches creativity. It's really important kind of having people in those positions because, what's the word, it brings another lens, another viewpoint.

VP: So how do you feel about how everything is going? You mention earlier that you have this enormous groundswell of support from, for example, Australian Arts Council, Ensemble Offspring, even Western Australian Opera even commissioning a piece from local Indigenous composers and storytellers?

BG: Yes, yes. I think it can only go forward and upwards, and it's kind of keeping the momentum going and three or four pronged, you know. Kind of like what we're touching on, the youth having a supported pathway. What's happening now and developing an Aboriginal ensemble, orchestra. There are things kind of in place that need to be supported and developed further and programs. And people like, APRA and Canberra International Festival where you've got Roland [Peelman] there and John [Davis] from Australia Music Centre, they're all support systems that are helping Aboriginal composers. And then people like Professor Liza Lim, Deborah Cheetham who's a professor now at Monash, all these things where you're actually getting Aboriginal people in these positions and non-Indigenous people and organisations who are there and helping us. So, I just more of what's happening now because there seems to be a groundswell, and now some really interesting voices coming through in composition and Indigenous voices coming through. I think it's just supporting and especially getting kids in it at an early age, because I think going forward having that support from a young age is really important, yeah.

VP: And all of this will give us, regardless of age, the chance to listen to new things and that's always an exciting adventure, especially classical music loves to talk about itself as the absolute truth of all sound experience, so I think it's about time that it opens itself up so we hear all these different voices from a country that is really multicultural, so that we're not just hearing the same repertoire over and over again.

BG: yeah, and that's great and you've said it all in a nutshell. And my point of view is that just having different voices heard, you can only strengthen the industry going forward.

VP: Yeah, I think we can only keep going forward. I think you've covered everything so efficiently, so thank you for spending your time with me and answering all my curious questions, and broadening my mind. I know that for sure I've learnt more things about First Nations culture just talking with you so thank you for being on the podcast today.

BG: No, thank you for having me, it's been a pleasure!

VP: So, thank you so much again for taking the time to talk with me about story-telling and the multifaceted First Nations cultures across Australia. You can check out more of Brenda's music on her website, and keep your ears peeled for upcoming projects from her position as the inaugural First Nations Composer in Residence with Ensemble Offspring through to upcoming commission from the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Thanks to everyone for listening and catch you next time!

**DECLASSIFY is a podcast available for listening and subscription on Spotify and Apple Podcasts. It is hosted and produced by Victoria Pham.**

## RESOURCES

Brenda Gifford

<https://www.brendagifford.com/>

Ensemble Offspring's Inaugural First Nations Composer in Residence

<http://ensembleoffspring.com/media/news/brenda-gifford-our-inaugural-first-nations-composer-in-residence/>

First Nations Contemporary Music Program

<https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/funding/funding-index/first-nations-contemporary-music-program/>

Protocols for working with Indigenous Artists

<https://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/about/protocols-for-working-with-indigenous-artists/>

Indigenous Australian Languages

<https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/indigenous-australian-languages#:~:text=Indigenous%20Australian%20languages%20today&text=More%20than%2025%20Indigenous%20Australian,are%20still%20acquired%20by%20children.>

National Film and Sound Archive: <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection>

Jandamarra by Paul Standhope and Steve Hawke, Performed by the singers, actors and dancers of the Yilimbirri Ensemble, Gondwana Choirs and Sydney Symphony Orchestra -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R85ZFjAjl68>