End Stage 4 English student work sample – Grade A

Gurrumul Yunupingu

The lights beat down on Gurrumul from his vantage above the crowd. The music begins to play softly and he joins in with his guitar. Now he adds his voice to the music and the crowd is hushed. Thinking back to the beginning, he remembers his first moments.

He was born in 1970 on Elcho Island Arnhem Land, Northern Australia about 359 miles from Darwin; in the Gumatj clan of the Yolngu. He remembers the struggle of being blind and shy but knows that he has always designed to impact the world in a way not many others could – through his music.

Gurrumul remembers learning the guitar through unusual circumstances. He would hear the guitar in church, enjoying the sounds of the strings and imaging the feel of the guitar in his hands. One day someone had placed a guitar in his hands to play; perhaps seeing his avid attention when the band began. The memory makes him smile. Without instruction, just guided by instinct, Gurrumul had just started to learn it by himself. Later everyone told him he played upside-down, not that he would have let that stop him.

He was proud of his music; his family supported him, looked after him and nurtured his gifts with musical instruments and his voice until he was able to perfect his art.

As the music begins to lull, moving into a voiceless melody, he thinks of The Saltwater Band and his part as the singer and co-writer of their music until recently. His skills in drums, keyboard, guitar and didgeridoo have helped him, he knows; but he still enjoys singing the most.

He would never have guessed the reaction his music would receive. He remembers fondly what one fan had said in response to one of his songs, “Geoffrey is blessed with the voice of an angel. A fellow Australian Aboriginal, he fills me with pride and to see a brother sing so exquisitely makes me realise that music is the universal language and is the instrument to help us rise above all adversity.” His heart had been touched by these reactions. He knows now what his music has done to help further the bridge the gap between black and white Australians.

His mixture of Gospel, Soul, Folk and World is the reason he is up here today. As the crowd begins to sway to the new tune that has just begun, Gurrumul realises the peace he is feeling comes from being on stage. His usual shyness leaves him whenever he is in this familiar place.
His talent must have been as obvious to others as well as to his family. He is playing for Australia at the Arias because of his award winning album. Gurrumul shakes his head again in amazement at the sheer impossibility of it. He still can’t believe that his album has won the best independent release and one of the songs on it has received the Best World Music release. Of course he has won other awards over time: three awards at the 14th Annual Deadly Awards; Single of the year, Artist of the Year, Album of the Year and the Act of the Year; Artwork and Design of the Year and Song of the Year for ‘Wiyathul’; but playing at the Arias is an achievement greater than all of the others. It tells him that Australia has now truly accepted him as the person he is: black, and proud of it.

Even though his tour is part of him; his career and his lifestyle, he still looks forward to getting back home. Though his traditional Aboriginal life confuses some – why would you want to live in such a way? – It is where he can speak only his native language and can embrace his own traditions and culture.

The song fades away to silence and the crowd bursts into rapturous applause. With a gentle smile on his face, Gurrumul leaves the stage still in his own world of thoughts and music. Though the crowd will move on to other songs, Gurrumul’s music will stay with some, touching lives one at a time.

Grade Commentary

Tai has demonstrated a very high level of competence in composing an imaginative narrative with a clear sense of purpose, audience and emotive appeal on the contribution of Gurrumul Yunupingu to Australian society. A strong sense of context, character and narrative voice is apparent, and the response shows extensive knowledge and application of the conventions of biography and narrative. Research has been integrated into the confident narrative and shows a strong personal engagement with the subject. A sophisticated structure, with a variety of sentence and paragraph lengths, shows a clear intent to shape meaning. There are few errors in spelling or punctuation.

Tai’s response demonstrates characteristics of work typically produced by a student performing at grade A standard at the end of Stage 4.