

Mark Atkins

Dubbed by French critics as ‘the Hendrix of the didje,’ the Tamworth-based artist is undoubtedly one of the finest and most famous didgeridoo players in the world.

by CHERENE SPENDELOVE

Through Mark’s lips the air blows as natural desert sounds, in old ethnic chants, in polyphonic melodies of astonishing rhythm that have been captivating audiences at festivals and shows in Europe, the USA, in Asia and Australia for two decades.

One of the few players able to work across most styles of music as a soloist and ensemble player, Mark’s prodigious talent has taken him around the world, working with musicians such as Robert Plant and Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin, Donal Lunney in Ireland, Peter Sculthorpe, James Morrison, Phillip Glass, Sinéad O’Connor, Ravi Shankar and many more. In 1996 he featured at a Festival Hall concert with the London Philharmonic Orchestra. In 1993 he performed a body of original work with the Sydney Philharmonic and played didje on the sails of the Sydney Opera House in a 20th birthday celebration mega-media event he helped to create with REM Theatre. Mark has performed, solo and with his own cross-cultural band, ‘Kooriwadjula’ (‘black man/white man’) at countless major festivals in Europe, the USA and Asia as well as in Australia.

Mark is not only a master of the didgeridoo but he is also a storyteller, song writer, drummer and visual artist. He is also a prolific instrument maker, making and painting didgeridoos from the logs he collects on trips into the bush near his home town of Tamworth NSW — not commercially — just for himself and other musicians. Originally a drummer, it was not until he was in his early twenties that he was introduced to didgeridoo, by an uncle at a funeral. He came to north west New South Wales in 1989 to pursue his musical career. “I still miss my country and people back home,” he told me, “but there are a lot more opportunities for work here. It is more accessible.”

One of the challenges Mark faced when he came to New South Wales, however, was finding work as an Aboriginal artist. “Venues would employ me but they didn’t want the Aboriginal audience that I attracted,” he said. I asked if this is still an issue and he said it was, “just more in the closet these days.” He stays in Tamworth because “This is where I brought my kids up.”

One of things I had been told about Mark is that he uses his work to engage people with the land and their environment. “I am a story teller,” he told me. A descendant of the Yamiḻi people of Western Australia and of Irish-Australian heritage, Mark grew up hearing stories from both his mother’s and his grandmother’s countries: the



Mark Atkins in Black Arm Band murundak at the Melbourne International Arts Festival, October 2006, produced by Arts House. Photo: John Sones Photography

Irish stories of the little people and the fairies — “Don’t hit that bush the little people might be under there” — and the stories of the Yamiḻi — “Don’t throw rocks at birds.”

“It is about us belonging to the environment,” Mark says. “They are the same sort of stories. The stories are the traditions that kept families together — looking out to the environment. Without the stories we are in trouble.”

For Mark, his music and his art are more than entertainment — “I like people to walk away from my shows after an experience,” he says. If the review from Womadelaide quoted on his website is anything to go by, things are to his liking: “Mark Atkins has taken the didgeridoo and extended it beyond purely traditional interpretation. The didgeridoo creates myriad colours in his hands; percussive and prickly, a screaming solo voice, part jazz exploration, part trance dance electronica, part ancient drone. Importantly, Atkins is a storyteller, and his words spoken in the songs spin around the rich atmospheres created by his music.” An experience indeed. ■

Mark Atkins website www.atkinsmark.com

Mark Atkins will be appearing in Black Arm Band murundak as part of The Sydney Festival in January 2008.

December

1 December

🎵 Seraphim Trio plus Jacqui Cronin
Presented by Tamworth Arts Council and Musica Viva Australia **TAMWORTH** Chapel Theatre, Marius Street Tel 02 6766 6911

1 December

🎵 Lexi @ Great Eastern Hotel Lexi, Zwish, The Night High List, Kat & Georgia, King Foo Fo & the Mooncalves, Bearfax. Great Eastern Hotel, **YOUNG** Tel 02 68322411

1 – 2 December

🎭 *Amahl and the Night Visitors* An opera by Gian-Carlo Menotti. A Christmas story about a young shepherd in first century Judea. Old Gazette Theatre, **DORRIGO** Tel 02 6657 1217

1 – 15 December

👁️ *4th Youth Art Awards*. Vibrant exhibition of works in the competition open to all regional youth in years 10, 11 & 12. **COWRA** Regional Art Gallery Tel 02 6340 2190