

FILM AUSTRALIA'S OUTBACK DVD

Interview with David Batty

Q: How did *Bush Mechanics* come about?

DB: I had visited central Australia in the mid 70s and got a liking for the place. And I shifted to Alice Springs in the early 80s, about 1981. And very early in the piece I got involved in using video, and I got asked out to go on field trips with land councils to document land claims and things like that. Then I was asked to help set up a TV unit at CAAMA in Alice Springs, the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association. So I helped establish that TV unit. Yuendumu is one of the biggest Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, so it was obvious that I would have something eventually to do with Yuendumu and the Warlpiri people, and Warlpiri is a pretty substantial Aboriginal language in central Australia. So mainly through CAAMA and my association with CAAMA I got to know people at Yuendumu and did video things. That was the early stages of it.

Q: Why did you keep going back to Yuendumu?

DB: I only ever went to Yuendumu when I was requested to. I came and went a bit when I was working at CAAMA in Alice Springs, then I was asked to go out there towards the late 80s. I was asked to make a children's TV series. The satellite was about to be launched, people out there were worried that Aboriginal people in remote Australia would be bombarded with western TV shows all in English. They thought a good recourse would be to make their own TV shows in their own language for their children. They wanted a sort of Sesame Street style show that was all in Warlpiri. So that's when I really went out and spent an extended period of time there. They wanted me to make ten shows in a matter of a few weeks, but it turned out that I made ten shows over a period of three years, going out and studying at Yuendumu for three or four months at a time. So I have had a long association with the people there.

Q: What is the attraction for you in going to that country?

DB: From the moment I first went to central Australia it was like being in another country. I always felt that. It was nothing like being anywhere in the east coast of Australia, to the south. I had had a good look around at a lot of places as a child, a lot of bush places.

From 20, 25, 30 years ago when I first went to central Australia, it just struck me as going to another country. It's like going overseas and still being in Australia. You're dealing with a very different landscape, a very different climate and dealing with Indigenous people of that area. And I think that combinations of things, plus the big wide open spaces, all those cliches, and the freedom of just being able to go anywhere and throw out a swag on the ground and sleep next to waterholes and river beds and go bush with people and go hunting or go do things with the Aboriginal people there, I just always found that attractive. It's always appealed to me. And then I guess I wasn't drawn to film it, I wasn't compelled to go there and make films. I really made films there because of people requesting me to. The whole thing just rolled along and developed. I didn't have this idea that I wanted to go to that country and film it and make films. It was more like I really like being in that country and while I was there people asked me to make films.

Q: How did the making of *Bush Mechanics* come about?

DB: I was asked to make a film in Yuendumu about young men and cars. So I went down there and made this one film and we called it *Bush Mechanics*. I was working with Francis [Jupurrula Kelly, co-director] and this bunch of guys who, by the way, I knew from the children's series, a lot of them. I had known them for a long time so it was very easy for me to slot in there and to make films, because I'm more or less part of the family. But going on the strength of the first *Bush Mechanics*, Film Australia contacted me and said, would it be possible for you to make a series based on the first documentary which was so successful, and I said yes, sure. I contacted people at Yuendumu, and contacted Francis and the other bush mechanics, the guys that were in the first film. And they were very keen. So we picked it up from there and, after a lot off argie-bargie went down, made the series.

Q: How did you and Francis come up with the ideas?

DB: We would go down and sit in the riverbed. Francis would always have to get out of town. It was very hard for him to concentrate - like it would be if you were in your lounge room and your kids running around and people coming around wanting to borrow things, and all the comings and goings of your own house. If you have a big family or an extended family, it's very busy. For Francis, the whole community is like that so you've actually got to extricate yourself from the community and get out. We'd go and sit in a creek bed, often under a shady tree, or go to the top of a hill and just find a bit of space and sit down and nut out a few ideas. I have been around the bush a lot myself so I knew a lot of bush tricks and I could run them by Francis, and he knows every trick in the book. Then he would come up with his own ideas. We would thrash out some narrative ideas and, between the

two of us, come up with the ideas for the film. Then I would go off and write the ideas up and actually become the "writer", because I'd actually write it. But like all films, stories, songs and lyrics and stuff, they all come from somewhere, from your experience or your discussions with people or your own world view. It's all derivative, really.

Q: What about you and Francis co-directing, how does that work?

DB: We have a very close personal relationship, and when it comes to making films, Francis, he's not a technical person at all, but he does have a good eye and sometimes when it comes to actual camera placement he will get me to place the camera here or there or suggest some things. Some of them are way out of line and other things are good ideas. But his real attributes when it comes to directing and working on the *Bush Mechanics* is working with the guys. When we're out shooting he would direct them to do certain things in Warlpiri, because the whole thing is produced in the Warlpiri language, so we need someone there to direct in the language and Francis, you know, he's older. They are all brothers, they are all Jupurrulas. In fact, I am a Jupurrula as well which means we are all skin brothers in their kinship system so they've got to listen to him and do what he tells them to do. He will be on the sideline and direct them in language to do stuff. Very rarely we will do second takes but, if everything falls in a heap, we will turn around and have a go at something again. But normally we just do stuff as it happens and if it doesn't happen and if it doesn't work properly, well then bad luck, we'll try something else. It really is hands-on when we're shooting, and it's by no means a token gesture - Francis's involvement in the making of the films. He really is integral and essential to making *Bush Mechanics*. He brings himself to it, he brings his own wacky sense of humour and he sheds light and puts a window on the world of the young Warlpiri man in central Australia, which I haven't seen in many other films.

Q: Why did you shoot partly on film and partly on tape?

DB: We more or less did a drama shoot on a documentary budget. But the smaller video format, the DV cams, are ideal for something like *Bush Mechanics*. We can have a large camera when we want nice pretty pictures with lots of depth and have a good lens on the camera, and then we can use a small camera, this big, and I can jump around on a car, get on the bonnet, climb on the roof or get inside the car. And with a camera this big it's so incredibly flexible. So long as you address the sound in one way or another - use a radio microphone or whatever you're doing with the sound - those little DV formats are just fantastic.

And when it comes to post-production it means we can make a perfect digital duplicate. Sometimes on that same day in the evening, we'll be watching the rushes and running off a clone at the same time. It means that we can duplicate everything in the bush where we are. Because we are 300 kilometres from Alice Springs, anything that's coming or going would be reliant on either driving that 300 kilometres to town, put it on a plane, send it to Melbourne, or on a mail plane which only comes twice a week. So having a compact integrated system where we can make a clone, like a safety master, put that in a safe somewhere and then we can, with Firewire technology, use a computer, even a laptop, to make the media files. And we can do virtually all the post-production on site in Yuendumu. And for a project like *Bush Mechanics* there's a lot of pick-ups that we need to do, there's holes and gaps and we are making a four-part series. Even if it's a shot of a tree or if it's a shot of people watching football or whatever, we need to go back and shoot things. Everything is in Warlpiri, so we can get translations done on the spot. We can get finer translations done of things that we know that we are going to use. The DV format is just perfectly suited to something like making *Bush Mechanics*.

I did shoot a lot of 16 mm. There's 16 mm segments in *Bush Mechanics*. I used it for two reasons. Occasionally, just for the look, to get that kind of filmy look. And I still don't think you can duplicate the film look on tape or through computers or with computer programs. You can get close. I did a 10-part children's series called *Manyu Wana* down there in Yuendumu with some of the same guys and with Francis and a few others, and we did the whole lot on 16 mm. So we'd established a sort of a style of working, using these funny little 1950s wind-up 16 mm cameras, which originally we did out of necessity because it was all I could afford. And I got the film for nothing and I got it processed cheap. When it comes to post, it's actually incredibly economic time-wise and everything else when you're working with 16 mm.

Using 16 mm on *Bush Mechanics* I could construct a little scenario and shoot it quite quickly. The camera is very small and you don't have to worry about sound because you can't record sound at the same time when you're using a Bolex, the little wind-up cameras, because they're so noisy. We shoot them silent, so we're not worried about any other sounds coming and going, which is a really big problem when you are making films. And I can also change the speed that I am shooting it at, so I can shoot it at 16 or 18 frames a second or something like that. You know, vary it. The Bolex has got a knob on it and you can turn it to 12 frames a second right up to 24. You can go right up to 64 frames a second and shoot slow mo. But a lot I shot at about 16 and 18 frames a second. And when you do that it gives everything a sort of Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton style look. And it's just immediately very funny. And it's a technique I've realised is funny, like probably half of the world did watching Charlie Chaplin.

So you shoot this thing and it looks funny, then you cut it, a little story, but you have this problem of making a soundtrack. But instead of it being a problem, I just look at that as being part of the process of creating something which is unique and is going to be funny and entertaining. So we'll create these little vignettes, these little stories out of 16 mm, cut them, get all the people back that were in the shot. They're all watching a little screen, they've all got headphones on and standing next to microphones and then they just act out the parts, their parts that they're looking at. So we have the actors kind of making a soundtrack to go with the thing that's already edited, rather than the other way around where you get actors to say words like it's a stage play and it's very heavily scripted and then you go back and you edit the verbal script according to what is said rather than the pictures, because it's usually just talking heads. This way we do it the complete opposite way around. We shoot all these scenes and scenarios and little stories and then we get the guys to put words on it. One of the reasons for that is because they speak Warlpiri and my Warlpiri isn't good enough so I wouldn't know what they were saying anyway to cut it. This gives them a way to interact directly with the story and to create the story themselves. And the other thing is they always have this comical element, because if they're watching something that is sped up and funny, it's going to make them react in a funny way and create dialogue which is funny. So the whole thing becomes quite comical and it's a formula that always works. I mean I always find that to work. And you wouldn't get that if you shot videotape.

Q: Is that where the magic happens?

DB: It does, it really gives it a magical element. There's something about it that just works, it looks magical. Sometimes it looks so real that it's sort of unreal. Yes, it really does take you into a magical realm. Everything is sort of softer and nicer and the colours are brighter and you've got this offbeat thing where when they are making the soundtrack, we're not trying to get lip sync at all. They are acting something out, and they're talking first person, you know, "Hey, pass me that spanner", "What about that wallaby over there". They create all of this dialogue and I don't know what they've said entirely until it's translated. So then you get that translated, because that's all in language, and they just come out with the funniest stuff! It empowers them really to create the story themselves, to add those elements which are real Warlpiri humour. You go bush with those guys, with a bunch of young Warlpiri men, and you're all familiar, particularly if you're all skin brothers or something, and you go out for a few days in the bush and it's hilarious. The stuff that happens generally is everyone has a really fun time. And Francis, particularly in the evening, will just keep everyone in stitches laughing, often at someone else's expense and someone of a different skin name's expense. They will make fun of a particular person who has a skin name which makes them a target for ridicule. It's a real way of capturing that central Australian Aboriginal sense of humour from those people.

Q: What about working within a community such as Yuendumu? How does it work with the logistics of film production?

DB: It's kind of like you have to put reins on the chaos. Working in those communities, communities like Yuendumu, there's a lot going on. You'd think it'd just be this sleepy little backwater where people are sitting around on porches smoking clay pipes or something, but in actual fact they're tumultuous. There's so much stuff going on there all the time. They get visited by delegations from overseas, you have these curators from museums, anthropologists from land councils, you have bureaucrats coming out, a continuous stream of bureaucrats. You have a continuous stream of politicians. You have visitors. You have all these people that are coming out for a gawk at these people, these supposedly "primitive" Aborigines living in the wilds of Australia. So you've got all that going on and then you've got all their own personal lives. They operate as a community, as a collective. It's like a commune so one thing affects everybody, one death will affect the entire community. And they're still quite traditional in terms of ceremonial activities, so there'll be men's business that comes along that affects the entire community. You have to keep all those things in mind when you're there. You might have this incredible agenda, in that you're making a film, or you have to get a shot that day, or you've only got this particular window to do something, for you, that's your one goal. But to everyone else that's kind of like the tenth notch down on their list of priorities. For them, it might be more important that they go to the store at 10 o'clock because they have to see someone and ask them about a spare part for their car. People's priorities are very different there and you have to work around that. You have to work in with it.

You've got to allow a lot of time, you know, at least double, triple the amount of time that you would expect to do something, triple it and you might have a chance of trying to achieve what you want to do. Especially making a television series in a place like that it is very difficult, really difficult. I mean, it's difficult enough as it is normally, but somewhere like that...When we did the *Bush Mechanics* series, there was men's business came through, there were three deaths with funerals, there was women's business. We had an incredible amount of rain, we had hail, lightning storms. We had a resurgence of football, which completely consumed the whole place. We had wind storms. We had a continuous stream of people wanting things. That's the territory, that's where you're going, that's what you take on board when you go there. You're not going to the supermarket to make a film about how to eat Corn Flakes. You're going to the wilds of Australia and dealing with a whole bunch of factors which are often difficult to grapple with. And then there's the equipment.

Q: How did you deal with the elements, for example, dust in the camera?

DB: I didn't have any disasters with the equipment when I was out there and I guess one of the reasons for that is that I've only ever worked in the bush. I've only ever worked in remote Australia. I've only ever made films in those sorts of places. So I'm always pretty prepared. I always use gear that I know will work. And I'm rough on equipment too, I'm very rough with the equipment. I lose my lens caps. I buy a camera and the lens cap is gone the next day and I'll never ever see it ever again. It's not something that I'm proud of, but to me they're tools to capture and to make something that you want to make. We did have problems with dust, and we bought a newer, a larger DV cam. And we shot one sequence and I watched that in the evening, and there were just dropouts all through it. I had a look at the camera and I discovered that the way they designed the camera, they'd left all these big holes underneath the shoulder pad and all these areas that you couldn't actually see from the outside. So I'd just get the gaffer tape and I gafferred up the whole camera, every little gap and space and the seal around the door that comes out. They are shocking for dust, those cameras. We did have trouble there but it wasn't a disaster, it was just something we dealt with. The computers kept on working.

The video side is always very touchy with dust and we had dust problems. But the 16 mm, I mean, those things have been going into war zones for a long time. They're sort of little wind-up cameras, not much can go wrong with them. Wind-up spring. No batteries. On the 16 mm side they are just absolutely perfect and I guess in the back of my mind as a backup I always know that I can shoot 16 mm and make the soundtrack later if all the video cameras break down. I find them to be incredibly durable. I've thrown them around and you jump in and out, off bonnets, onto roofs, on the sides of cars, and race into the bush to get a car driving by, mounted them on the bonnets and bashed through scrub and leaves and bushes. I think they are remarkable.

Q: It sounds like the whole shooting thing was an incredibly physical process. How much do you think that affects what you have ended up with?

DB: You're dealing with young men, you're dealing with cars and you're dealing in the outback, so you've got to place the camera in places to capture that. There is a lot of action going on. There were no rigs, no big crew. We haven't got any camera mounts; the only camera mount we had was a tripod, so you have to become the camera mount. It means taking your belt off and tying it onto the bull bars so if you do fall off you've got some sort of attachment to something that you're not going to go under the wheels. One of the reasons I did shoot it is that I don't think I could have asked anyone to

do what I knew I wanted done. I had a few close calls, two or three times I nearly fell off the cars. And the guys, you know, the bush mechanics, some of them would be really worried - depending on who was driving - they would be really worried with me sitting on the bonnet there and they're tearing along. Someone like Simeon, for example, he'd just tear along regardless of whether I was half off the front of the bull bar or whatever. He was oblivious to it.

But I think those little cameras, they get you into a place that you really capture the action. And that's how you get those pictures. And it is a very physical exercise to do all that. I mean, if you were standing back and the cars were zooming along there and you're 10, 20 feet away with a tripod, and if you only ever got the cars going backwards and forwards, you wouldn't catch it. You have to be in there. Those little cameras get you right in there.

Q: Can you tell us a bit about editing? How long did it take?

DB: When it came to post-production and the editing process, we edited an entire TV series on a Mac computer. We did it on site, we did it in Yuendumu, and that meant that people could be involved in that process, they could come and watch, sit in on the editing if they wanted to. Sometimes we had 20 or so people sitting behind the editor just watching what's going on. And that also gives you instant feedback. You've got something going and you think it's a bit mundane, everyone's just cracking themselves up laughing, you think, oh, crikey, is someone saying something here that's really funny. You get that added bonus of instant audience participation by editing on site.

Because when we were doing this series, we actually started editing before we'd finished filming. We brought the editor out so it would minimise our time there and it also meant we could have a concentrated effort on the whole thing. The editor came out while we were still shooting some of the episodes, and it meant that we could construct things a bit more.

We got to the stage where we had assembly-rough cuts at Yuendumu and we had a lot of the translations done and some of the subtitles. And once we were satisfied we actually had the guts of the stories, and we didn't need to shoot any more, and we had a pretty good idea that we had a four-part series shot and editable, we then took a break - because we had been there for six months - over Christmas and New Year, then we went to Sydney and we continued editing in Sydney for about another three months. Then we went to Alice Springs and we edited in Alice Springs for a month, because we were having trouble with one episode and we really thought we needed to

relocate to really get a handle on that. We were having trouble with episode three [*The Chase*], which was the car chase, and we weren't getting anywhere with it in Sydney, although I was always extremely clear on how it would be cut, but others were having difficulty with it. So we decided to shift camp and move to Alice Springs and we rented a house there and I think we were there for six weeks. And it also gave us the opportunity to go and shoot a bit more material if we needed to, just race out to Yuendumu, which we ended up not doing.

The editing process really took around six months, and we really grossly underestimated the time it would take. And what stretched it out a bit was the fact we were dealing with the whole thing being produced in a language that was foreign to us, and a language that very few people speak. That sort of slowed us down a bit, getting things translated and making subtitles. And also the other thing was from time to time we'd have to construct the narrative in the edit room. You know, we'd have to re-jig things. We did a lot of re-cuts of episode two [*Payback*], just to make everything work, to tell that story properly. Episode one [*Motorcar Ngutju*] just cut like butter and went together very quickly. So did episode four [*The Rainmakers*]. In the end, episode three didn't take us that long to cut. Episode two - we spent a lot of time trying to get that right.

Q: Were there any limitations to the sound cutting around unscripted dialogue?

DB: We did have some problems. Because the film is sort of semi-documentary, it's not really scripted and so there's no set dialogue. The guys just say stuff. Like they might just talk about any old thing, or they'll stick to the general plot and where we're headed, like going to town to pick up the nephew from jail, for example. There was a lot of dialogue in the car, you know. And stuff that I didn't have a clue what people were talking about quite often. So it meant, when it came to editing, there would be some gaps in the dialogue. We did get Simeon in to say a few lines, just to bridge some bits of dialogue, to make sure things would work. But not very often. It's just a lot more work, working around unscripted dialogue, but you generally can make it work.

Q: Who are you potentially making the films for? What audience?

DB: I think in the back of my mind, I'd made films for Aboriginal audiences for a very long time. And the very first *Bush Mechanics* I think I made for an Aboriginal audience. I mean, you're not really totally conscious of it. I like to make things that are appealing to everybody, but I guess I've been around that Aboriginal sense of humour and around that territory and around those people and stuff making films for a long time. It's the only place I've made

films, 90 to 95 per cent of the films I have made have been with Aboriginal people. And primarily the audience for the films I've made have been Aboriginal people. So I guess I made the very first one for an Aboriginal audience. When it came to making the series, I made that as much for a white audience, for the broader community, for the rest of Australia, rather than purely Aboriginal. But I definitely keep an Aboriginal audience in mind, absolutely. No particular reason. I just think that it's their humour, it's their style. I think with Francis's involvement, and with the bush mechanics' involvement, I think they're directing that stuff towards an audience of their own people. And I know the films are absolutely loved by Aboriginal people right across the country, from Broome to Darwin to Queensland. I know Aboriginal people really have embraced the very first one and the series as well.

Q: Did the weather cause any problems during the shoot?

DB: During the making of the series when we were down there, we had record rainfall for central Australia. The rivers flooded, the creeks were flooded. We had a very difficult time getting out there. And then funnily enough, when we did the last episode, which was about rainmaking and about the tradition of rainmaking and the fact that they use pearl shells for the rainmaking ceremony, the last episode they travel to Broome and get the pearl shells and come back and Jungala, who is a rainmaker, he does a rainmaking ceremony and sings the rainmaking songs, and it absolutely bucketed down for, not just days and weeks, but for months. The Tanami Desert had record rainfalls. Rabbit Flat, the little roadhouse in the middle of nowhere, was isolated for six months. We got back to Yuendumu after shooting the pearl shell episode to do some post-production on it, and hail. Twice in one week. And no one had ever seen hail before. It was just absolutely unbelievable. And we had lightning. Lightning every night for weeks. Incredible lightning shows, every night. It was absolutely astonishing.