

‘The spirit, the heart and the power’: an interview with the ‘Stiff Gins’ on music, friendship and history

Therese Davis

The ‘Stiff Gins’ are Nardi Simpson and Kaleena Briggs — a vocal duo known for their stunning harmonies and what one critic describes as ‘a nice line in self deprecating humour’.¹ They have also received critical acclaim around the world for the originality of their song writing. One Scottish music critic wrote ‘they are women born to sing and who have no small amounts of true song writing smarts between them’.² And despite their youth, critics have recognised a certain maturity in their music: ‘whether offering a strummed guitar and harmonies, a boisterous *a capella* or a piano gospel lullaby these young women convey a striking maturity. ... They can sing beautifully and with joy’.³ The Stiff Gins have received numerous nominations for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous music awards, winning several awards for Best Live Act. In 2003 they were recipients of the Centenary Medal for ‘Services to the Community through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Music’. These and other accolades (see Appendix) reflect widespread appreciation by audiences of their unique voices, songs and performance style.

Nardi and Kaleena are great friends, and this relationship is central to the Stiff Gins’ unique sound and their success as a vocal band. Nardi Simpson is from the Yuwaalaraay people with roots in Sydney’s inner west and country New South Wales. She began studying music in high school. She majored in voice for her Higher School Certificate, and after two years of a Bachelor of Arts degree at Sydney University, enrolled at the Eora Centre in Redfern where she met Kaleena and, not long after, started the Stiff Gins. Kaleena is from the Wiradjuri and Yorta Yorta people — southern New South Wales and northern Victoria people — and was born in Melbourne. Like Nardi, she began studying music at high school and continued that study through to her Diploma in Contemporary Music at TAFE (College of Technical and Further Education) in 2000. Their friendship is openly celebrated on their first album *Origins* (2001). The second album *Kingia Australis* (2005) is regarded as a stunning follow-up, demon-

1. On Radio Forth FM 97.3, Scotland as cited on the ‘The Stiff Gins Website’, Pandora Website Archive.

2. *Evening News*, Edinburgh, as cited on ‘The Stiff Gins Website’ Pandora Archive Website.

3. *Sydney Morning Herald*, Metro as cited on ‘The Stiff Gins Website’, Pandora Archive Website.

strating their maturity as musicians and songwriters. It is very much a coming of age album.⁴ *Kingia Australis* reflects on childhood experiences of loss ('Absent Friends') and chronicles an early split in the band that had a profound impact on the direction Nardi and Kaleena chose to take from this point onward ('Hear Now'). On this second album their friendship is referenced in their expressions of shared and individual experiences of the highs and lows of adulthood: freedom ('Spinning'), self-image ('I Am'), loneliness and social alienation ('One of The Millions') and unrequited love ('Untitled'). These songs, as well as many new ones not yet recorded, also draw on the experience of travelling as performers overseas, 'the imprint', as Kaleena describes it, of the many cross-cultural exchanges they have undertaken in recent years.⁵

The distinct and what is often described as 'mesmerising' sound of the Stiff Gins music is also underscored by strong ties to family and Aboriginal communities. It is a hybrid musical style that draws from Nardi and Kaleena's formal training in styles ranging from folk to jazz. But their sound is also shaped by what Nardi refers to as 'the oral musical tradition' of her family. The result is a musical style characterised by its mix of song and spoken word, shades of lightness and melancholy. 'Soar', the first track on the latest album, for example, is a joyous, rich mix of Stiff Gins' harmonies with spoken word and laughter, the latter provided by family and friends. This use of multiple voices reflects the Stiff Gins' aim or 'vision', as they call it, to bring a community voice into their music. This commitment is also central to the way in which they use music to think historically about the present. In live performances they pay respect to Aboriginal family members, elders and communities, present and past. They invite us through song to consider the importance of social memory — how we remember elders, ancestors and past times, how we understand the relationship between the past and the present, indeed, how the past makes itself *felt* in the present.

In 2005, I met with Nardi and Kaleena in Marrickville, Sydney, to discuss their music as a means of exchanging history. They were extremely open, thoughtful and generous, and through the conversation I came to understand that history emerges in the Stiff Gins' music in a number of different ways. In some songs the past is addressed directly and in ways that calls historical knowledge into question. 'Legacy', for example, juxtaposes the historical experiences of the ANZACs at Gallipoli and the Aboriginal warrior Pemulwuy, offering a new, bi-cultural viewpoint on Australia's past. History also emerges in their music in indirect ways. Drawing on and often blending forms of personal and social memory, their music serves as a vehicle for exchanging very particular forms of historical experience — growing up black in late twentieth century Australia, being a young, black Australian woman living in inner city Sydney, performing as a black Australian female singer in both local and global music cultures. In this regard, the history of the Stiff Gins, as a name, as a band, as a 'whole way of living', reveals a great deal about the relationship between the past and the present in

4. See Message Stick, Black Arts review, <http://www.abc.net.au/message/blackarts/review/s1338623.htm>, accessed November 2006.

5. Nardi and Kaleena have performed together at cultural institutes in New Caledonia, Vietnam and Spain; been part of cultural exchanges to Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Egypt and Cyprus; played festivals and shows throughout Canada, the US, Ireland and performed extensively throughout Australia.

contemporary Australia. For in this particular history we see how two young, proud and exceptionally talented black women draw on their friendship and their strong, ongoing ties to family and community as a basis for contesting official forms of history and generating new forms of historical imagination.

I. Stiff Gins: the history in the name

Diyin: Noun Aboriginal: Dharug woman, wife (1788)

Gin: Noun (often derogatory) an Aboriginal woman (1789)

Gin: (Standing) Proud & tall, carried by the strength of those who went before (1999)

— The Stiff Gins archived website

Therese Davis: Let's start with the history in the name — the Stiff Gins. Obviously this word has a history. Could you tell me a bit about that? Why did you pick this name that is so full of historical meaning? And what does it mean to you?

Nardi: When we were looking for a name when we first started, one of our white friends was talking about her sister-in-law who was preparing for her daughter's wedding, and she said 'Oh yeah she is really stressed out, she is not doing anything without three stiff gins in the morning.' And there were three of us at that time and we all looked at each other and ... for me, something just kind of clicked then. We knew the history of the name; gin as a derogatory term. White people had taken the word on and used it as an insult for Aboriginal women, but before that, many thousands of years before, it was an Aboriginal word for woman or wife.

So that's one of the things. [The name] had a layer to it before we even started, so we thought if we take this on we want to align ourselves with the strength and the power of the word before everybody knew it as something else. So if, say, we call ourselves Stiff Gins and we sing, and we practice hard, and we represent something that is opposite to what everyone thinks about that word, then people will first of all start thinking about it and then questioning it ... not just allowing it to remain as a slur. And also, through our singing, we will get to educate people about how the length of time that it was known as woman far outweighs that tiny little space in time, you know 200 and whatever years, when it's been used as an insult. So it was us wanting to claim our heritage, where we are from, wanting to interpret it in a different way and wanting to create a path forward, a new, forward thinking use of the word.

But other people's knowledge of the word gin was only one part of a whole. We also just liked it, because when we first started children's music workshops, [at the Eora Centre, Redfern] ... all the lads would jump on the equipment and it would just be the three of us [Nardi, Kaleena and Emma Donovan (who left the band in 2001)] left there and we thought 'Well we better do something you know, we can't just sit here and back them up all the time, it's boring.' For some people the name Stiff Gin can mean a drink, for some women it can represent a time where people were not respected, or women in particular weren't respected. But there's also the possibility for the meaning to be changed and reclaimed in the future, so, as I said, the name has many levels to it. Singing is one level, but there is also friendship and the similarities that we have and our differences. All the people and family that we know and the networks and all that kind

of stuff we have, are also part of it. Singing was just part of a whole. And so the name suited us.

Therese Davis: And what were people's responses to the name? Did you have any negative responses?

Kaleena Briggs: When we first started I didn't actually think we were going to have any negative responses ... I knew what the word meant but I didn't realise that it still meant something negative to a lot of people. We were at some gig in Adelaide and this lady came up and said 'Look I respect what you girls are trying to do but I don't like that name. I'm sorry I cannot stand that name.' And from that point on we realised we had to explain ourselves at gigs; why we took this name and what we were trying to do as young Aboriginal women, reclaiming a word. But most of the time the response has been positive; it was only like once or twice that it [a negative response] happened.

We had an article in the *Koori Mail* and [after it was published] this man wrote in and said along the lines of — we didn't know what we were talking about and we shouldn't use this name because it was hurtful. But Nardi wrote back on behalf of us. She wrote this really fantastic letter telling them we knew exactly what we were doing. Because when we realised that this was such an important word we went and researched the word and found out all the meanings we possibly could, so we could tell people 'We are not ignorant, we know exactly what we are doing.' And we also try to make people understand that, although we are young, we do know what we are talking about on this subject.⁶

Nardi Simpson: And that we knew that Stiff Gins was not just a band name, that if we were going to do all these things that had already had all these consequences, then we would have to conduct ourselves in a way that would be respectful to the people who have been hurt by that name. So we knew if we mucked around and got drunk and smashed up places, while called the Stiff Gins, then that is shameful to those people; that is giving more hurt to the people who have been insulted [by the name]. We knew from the very beginning that we were making a commitment to a way of being which was respectful to elders and which was also forging new ways and [new] understandings of the past ... So it's a band name but it's also a way of life for us. It sounds pretty full on, but we enjoy it with all the levels of stuff that come with it ... all the great experiences. The singing is kind of incidental because we are such good friends and the experiences and the people that we meet in the band are more important than the getting up and singing.

II. 'Soar': performing history

I have no pretences
All I am is what you see ...
A thousand times more humbled
Than I ever thought I'd be.

'Soar', 2005, Nardi Simpson and Kaleena Briggs

Therese Davis: Would you like to talk a bit about your performances? One of the things that I was really struck by when I saw you in Newcastle is how you use spoken

⁶ Chicka Dixon, Letters, *Koori Mail*, 31 October 2001: 9.

word as well as song to connect with the audience. I know a lot of bands do this but this was just a very different mode of talking, so friendly and respectful and open. It's hard to describe, you can see, as you say, that it comes from your strong friendship. So I was wondering if you could say a few words about how you work together in your performances? Is performance something that you think consciously about? How important are the stories and the talking?

Nardi Simpson: We've always talked more than we sing.

Kaleena Briggs: Just for example there was this gig we had to do, it was for an hour and we only had like four songs and we thought: What are we doing? And we ended up talking the whole gig and ... if you give us a microphone, or even without one, well we just love talking ... You want to make people feel as comfortable as you are plus you want to get across what you are trying to sing about as well. And you always think, 'If we just give a little bit of an explanation, they will enjoy it and understand it more, and maybe they will relate to it in some way.' But most of the time it's just getting up there and telling stories.

Nardi Simpson: But a lot of it comes from that point we make that the singing isn't everything; it's not really even one of the best things about us. (laughter)

Kaleena Briggs: Because it only lasts for like 45 minutes.

Nardi Simpson: It was like that in the beginning, the singing wasn't the only point. We got proud of what we could do well, we both did, and we tried harder to get better. But with any of our songs in our set list now, if we sang it and we didn't say anything about it, then I would feel like something's missing. There is all this other stuff that you need to know around it [the song], there is a before and an after, and a continuation of all those songs.

Kaleena Briggs: It's a trilogy.

Nardi Simpson: The song is just that one moment in time; there is a whole experience around it that for us is just as important.

Therese Davis: So would you say you give the songs a history? That you bring the history of the song into the performance?

Nardi Simpson: I reckon we never wrote song that doesn't mean anything. I have written maybe one that means nothing, that's just a musical expression of something. Everything else is part of a bigger whole.

Kaleena Briggs: And I think that is what we are trying to convey on stage, it's like we are singing the songs but there is this whole back-story to it as well. So you have to explain it or at least just say where it happened.

Nardi Simpson: It's very interesting the bits that you can't put into song. Like some things suit a song format and some things you just have to tell people.

Therese Davis: For me, it's that you provide a context rather than explaining the song away. There's still a lot of magic and mystery in the songs, the way they unfold, the incredible harmonisations ... But you give us a context in which to hear the song.

Nardi Simpson: That's good. We don't have an idea of what is going to happen, like we list our songs in order and then everything else is up to whatever happens at that time. And that is what we are conscious of, of never trying to script a whole lot of

stuff, because when we try to be a little bit formal or something we stuff up. I get really nervous.

Kaleena Briggs: But the crowd is important too, like you can feel the vibe from the crowd and the atmosphere, and there are some songs that we wouldn't sing at certain places, we just don't feel that people will listen to it and we just feel ... Like there is one song that is very important; 'Belong' and it's got this history about Nardi's family and her grandfather and I just don't want to sing that song at some places. And 'Gogo' which is about a young boy in Redfern who fell off his bike and there are just some places that you will not sing that because you think: 'Oh that crowd! They're not going to listen.'

Therese Davis: Talking of different crowds, do you ever feel expectations to perform in a certain way from a crowd? Do you think some people come with preconceived notions of you and your music?

Nardi Simpson: Overseas we'd done a few gigs which had been advertised as 'Aboriginal Vocal Trio' ... I don't know what they thought. This was in Edinburgh ... and there was this group of about four old Scots and when we started singing our manager heard them say 'They're not Aboriginal, where is their paint? Where are their costumes?' And they walked out. And we were conscious when we went overseas at that time that people have this idea of Aboriginal performance, and if you don't do that then it confronts people, so they leave rather than think about it. And so at that time we were sort of struggling personally about how we were going to continue. Identity was not an issue to us, but it was something that was weighing on us a bit because we say we represent something, we come over into a different country and yet there is nothing recognisably Aboriginal about us to those audiences. Nothing. We don't even look Aboriginal to them. And that makes us think 'Well what have we got to do to represent ourselves over here the way that we feel about ourselves back home?' So all that kind of stuff was happening. And we just came home from that tour ... and I don't know, we never had a discussion about it, we just started to write songs that meant something to us. People have got to deal with it [the issue of Aboriginal identity] that way.

III. 'Legacy': re-interpreting history

The warrior, his red carved on his chest
 The soldier with them medals pinned,
 swinging from his vest.
 The crow and the flame –
 Promise to remember them.
 They spilled blood for their secrets.
 They drew blood for a future.
 Young and free.
 They fought bravely on foreign shores.
 They fought bravely at our back door.

Frontline, Frontier.
 And oh what a price was paid.
 Legacy – At the battlefields and at the graves.

'Legacy', 2005, Nardi Simpson and Kaleena Briggs

Therese Davis: So there's the history in the name, and the history around the songs. But you also have some songs that deal directly with historical events and things. There are even a few songs that pinpoint places where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal history intersect. I was wondering if you'd like to say something about songs such as 'Legacy' and 'In Paradise'?

Nardi Simpson: 'Legacy' ... I was doing a correspondence course ... I was trying to finish off my degree and I went to open learning and they had an Australian Studies course ... So I was going through all this Australian studies stuff and they were looking at the Anzac legend, and how a lot of that was really created through the press, and how the legend grew not because Australians were any braver or anything than any other mob that fought over there but because it was the beginning of Australia's identity as a nation ... And you can see it still now: I don't know anyone directly who fought in any of the wars, anyone in my family, so Anzac Day for me is something I watch on TV and I can see, I can understand, where all the feelings are coming from, but I don't feel anything. I get sad when I see the old fellas marching and I think: 'They're the last of that generation.' And that's sad. But I don't feel the close swelling of pride of fighting, even though I'm very proud of being Australian.

Anyway, a while ago, like maybe two years before [I did the course], I read a book by Eric Wilmot; *Pelmuwuy*.⁷ It was about Pelmuwuy the warrior out there in Parramatta ... about the conflict in the first contact and the Aboriginal story that wasn't told and all this other stuff. So [when I was doing the course] I was learning about when Australians were fighting for their homeland — which was seen as England you know, Great Britain — and I was thinking, 'But wait; there is this imbalance here in the information.' A lot of Aboriginal history is oral, so people don't give any credence to it, but I could see they [the Anzacs and Pelmuwuy] were both fighting for country ... for different things but also the same things. And I felt like I was in the middle, well not the middle, I could understand the Anzac thing and [at the same time] I wanted recognition for those old times with the old people. I wrote a song was a comment on that.

Therese Davis: It's a powerful song. We really get a sense of what you're saying about being caught in between two views.

Nardi Simpson: Yeah, the first time I went on that river cat [ferry] out to Parramatta, out to his [Pelmuwuy's] homeland there, ... I left from Circular Quay and half an hour down the road I was in mangrove swamps, you know. I thought it was like a physical time machine and those two things that seemed so far away [Pelmuwuy's frontier resistance and the frontline fighting at Gallipoli] were next to each other on that ride. So that ride triggered my thinking about those two different conflicts and how both people were fighting for country. But what is country? And I really get a vision of all those medals swinging when the soldiers march and how the old fellas used to have scars you know, it's the same kind of thing, it represents a lot of similar things in a way. So I walked in that world where I've got that history, that Aboriginal history which forms part of me, and also Australia. White history is part of my history too, and I don't see any conflict there. I like to comment on both sides, so that is what the song is about.

⁷ Wilmot 1987.

We don't sing that song much. I feel sometimes it's a bit too deep and because it's slow too, I think people are waiting for it to finish anyway. When I wrote it, I liked it.

Kaleena Briggs: I love it.

Therese Davis: And 'In Paradise'?

Nardi Simpson: Yeah Norfolk Island was just a funny old place, eh. When we were there it was very weird, it's got an aura about it, and the people were really lovely.

Therese Davis: Yeah it was interesting for me that you chose to sing a song about the history of Norfolk Island, a land 'claimed for a king'. I was interested that you actually took up that history for them. It puzzled me. And then I was thinking of the line where you say 'Ghosts of yesterday make people what they are today' and what that might mean to you in relation to the particular history of this island or Australia in general?

Nardi Simpson: Well that's one of the things that's true for you; black or white, that is true for people. And again I suppose it's the idea of time and how people move through it is really interesting for us as a band, eh.

Kaleena Briggs: True.

Nardi Simpson: If you are good at your craft you can comment on either thing — black or white history — equally as well. The things that aren't as important to your core, you can still sing about them, and make a good song.

Kaleena Briggs: But that's what it is anyway, it's what you see and what you find interesting, and would like to talk about.

Therese Davis: Yeah, that's what I think is interesting. You comment on experiences from your unique perspective. Going overseas and everything, bringing back stories of Africa, say, responding from that perspective. This was what I was thinking about in terms of your music as a form of exchanging histories: you taking your histories, our histories, to places like Edinburgh and Africa, but also you bring histories of those places back.

Kaleena Briggs: But that's what we want to happen. In Africa, we thought 'Oh this will all be great inspiration to write songs and everything', and then we actually got to write our songs about Africa (but we haven't actually played them yet) and I was thinking, 'Man I don't know if I want to play this song because the only people who will get it are the people who actually went over with me.' And I thought: 'I've got to change this song in some way.' But maybe every time I get up there I'll just sing it for them, the people I was there with.

Nardi Simpson: No, but I disagree with that. I reckon people listening will go there, because they can see that place when you sing about it.

Kaleena Briggs: Well that's hopefully what it'll convey. I wanted so much to write about Africa because it made such an imprint on my life and also because of the people who I went over there with. It's a tribute song.

IV. 'Hear now': the history of the band

Time has passed, and it's all new.
Walk the path of destiny.
A different beginning
and new ways to move.
Fly on, creating our history.

'Hear Now', 2005, Nardi Simpson and Kaleena Briggs

Therese Davis: What about your own history? I know you've been through a split with an original member of the band, changes in line up.

Nardi Simpson: Kaleena's got a song on *Kingia*, 'Hear Now'. It's the last track. It's the history of our band ... like we keep referring back to it. It was a big deal then but it's not so important to us now. It was written when that third member [Emma Donovan] left, so that song is the history of our band up until that point. You know we can sing about where we are, and what we have read, and who we have met, but if you don't give a bit of your own thing then I don't reckon you improve or mature or whatever. But that's a really good song, I really love that song. It's a really good history lesson about us.

Kaleena Briggs: Yeah, it goes back to 2001 ... we were very excited, and this is when the other girl was still in the group and we were about to go on our first world tour. And we were going to like so many places, from Vietnam to Amsterdam, the UK and over to Canada and to New York, so it was all over the world, it was fantastic; it was going to be amazing. And the day we were supposed to leave, she [Emma Donovan] didn't come to the airport and we were going away for nearly three months. And at that point we were all best friends and Nardi and I kind of had an inkling that she didn't want to go — she'd pulled out of the band a few times before and we kind of had to talk her back in. We were freaking out. We had to take Nardi's younger sister, [Lucy Simpson], who knew all the songs to Vietnam; we had the best time over there. And then we had to get another girl, [Mihi Rangi (Vanessa Fisher)], to come over and do the rest of the tour. She had to learn the songs on the plane!

So all these things were happening — we were going overseas, plus we just had our new album out (not this one, our last one), and she was all over it. It was a really hard trip because we were with people we didn't really know. I mean we were fine because we knew each other so well, but for everybody else it was kind of hard. But then Nardi wrote a song over there ['Untitled'], and that song was kind of the turning point when we realised we could sing more personal songs. ['Untitled'] captures all that experience of where the change happened — it was in Edinburgh. All that stuff with Emma and everything just collided there. We were not happy with the way things were happening around us. That whole experience with Emma changed the focus of our band and I knew then that I could write that song ['Hear Now']. It was kind of telling her off but also explaining to everybody what we were doing.

Therese Davis: So how would you describe the change? What was the focus when there were three of you? Was it more political?

Kaleena Briggs: No. The thing is the band subtly had been all about Emma. We were in the background. I don't think we even realised that until she was going — holy

crap! ... And we didn't realise we wanted to take the band this seriously. It was just fun up until that point. And then we realised: 'Man, we really want to do this, we want to keep this thing going.'

Nardi Simpson: Up until then, we never really wrote any songs of any substance, because we were so young and we didn't really know how to, like we didn't have the skills to write the songs that we are writing now. Then all the songs were all about how isn't this great, we are having a great time, we are best friends. It was all about fun in the beginning. And that proved to be a good training ground for what we do now. But there was never any depth.

Kaleena Briggs: It was all sunshine.

Nardi Simpson: It was through that whole experience [of Emma leaving] — and Kaleena's song ['Hear Now'] is a reflection of us changing. We thought, 'We've got to step up here and own this kind of thing.' Yeah, so that's how it changed.

Kaleena Briggs: There was that point where we seriously thought, 'Well we can't do that.' But that was fleeting, and then we thought, 'No we've got to keep going.' Because we knew it was a good thing and there aren't a lot of young Aboriginal women doing this stuff, not that we knew of. We thought it was just important to continue, and especially for us as well, because I don't think at that point we had any confidence in ourselves. And then it became a breeze — 'Man we can write our own songs. This is great.'

Nardi Simpson: Yeah, I have been very privileged to have seen a journey in Kaleena herself, but also in her writing, fully big time.

Kaleena Briggs: But it's the same with her as well, because Nardi at the beginning of this band was not confident at all in her ability to sing, she was hiding, especially behind the guitar. But the band has progressed and her song writing ... well she just has kind of Whoosh!, you know, she's come out so much really, she is very honest.

Nardi Simpson: We see a lot of Indigenous women, young girls so shy that they can't look at you. They will sing their guts out in their room to Maria Carey and sound better than her, but if there is room for their friends there they won't do it. And I reckon there's a big step between trusting yourself that you are good — as good as you think you are — and then telling other people about it. And I think that your song 'Paranoid' (Nardi says to Kaleena) mirrors a lot of people's insecurities about themselves and you just singing that song that helps them ... But, yeah, so much shame, so shamed. And you [Kaleena] had a bit of that, we all did. I was hiding behind the curtains. I never spoke onstage. I just sung with the girls, they were the ones who did the talking. We used to say I was the mysterious one 'cos I just wouldn't do anything. I was just really shy; sing a song and that's it. And then I had no choice. I had to talk.

Therese Davis: Yeah, I can see how you've matured in lots of ways. And lots of the music reviews comment on the maturity in the new album and the fact that you took complete musical control from the writing through to the recording. Do you want to talk about the new album? The title is interesting. It takes us back to the history in the band's name.

Kaleena Briggs: As we said before, like the name Stiff Gins is kind of a play on words, like gin and that. With this one it was the same kind of deal; *Kingia australis* is

the botanical name for the black gin plant; it's related to the Black Boy. The *Kingia australis* is a ...

Nardi Simpson: Grass tree.

Kaleena Briggs: Yeah, grass tree, it's indigenous to Western Australia and we did our research on this plant because we wanted to make sure we just didn't have a name for an album, that we knew what we talking about. So for about three or four months we went out trying to find this plant but we couldn't find it. It's only in Western Australia, and it takes a very long time to grow. Like we saw pictures of these big long ones that are like hundreds and hundreds of years old. And we liked the story behind the name because this plant flowers after a fire, so we felt like we were flowering after what had happened to us. Like in adversity we were blooming. So we felt a connection to this plant, but if you ever actually look at this plant it's quite ugly. (laughs)

Nardi Simpson: I don't think it is.

Kaleena Briggs: I don't think it's got nice flowers at all.

Nardi Simpson: And the blackfellas used to use it as a fire stick and all the birds are attracted to it after.

Kaleena Briggs: And the resin from it, when it drops, it's made into this stuff called yakka, and that's where you get [the term] hard yakka from. Yeah, so it's got this whole long history behind it.

Nardi Simpson: There's something else too. It's a plant and organic and all that stuff, and we recorded this album at home. We had one fella to help us, Warwick [Saville] from SBS [Special Broadcast Service], who we knew; he was a friend of ours. And we got our mothers and sisters to sing on it, and we got our friends to play, so we just sort of borrowed from our environment as well, and it's deliberately not a polished album. That's how we wanted it.

Kaleena Briggs: It was recorded at Nardi's where a lot of the Stiff Gins started, our writing songs. We always used to hang out at Nardi's mum's place.

Therese Davis: So the name is really apt.

Nardi Simpson: Yeah I hope so.

Kaleena Briggs: Yeah, and we are really proud of that one, I think because it was our first album. Just us two.

V. 'Facing the world'

Given time, you will find your song –
Hidden cadences made by you becoming strong.
I'm standing on the edge
I'm looking up, straight ahead
Counting pots of gold and possibilities that lie ahead –
I'm facing the world ...

'Facing the World', 2005, Nardi Simpson and Kaleena Briggs

Therese Davis: And plans for the future?

Nardi Simpson: We've got a few plans. We just finished with our manager so this is a time of movement, like you always reassess yourself, and you worry about your

weaknesses. Anyway it's a time where we are going to have to do a lot of thinking and creating of our future on our own for a while. I think we are going to be by ourselves without a manager for a little while.

Kaleena Briggs: Which is something that we have realised: that doing this you really need to do a lot of the stuff yourself because a lot of people just won't get your vision, which is kind of what happened.

Nardi Simpson: That's the thing, I think people who work in the music industry don't have time to see or to take in all this stuff here that we are talking about. People can get us gigs but that vision of the whole ... we are really missing having someone who can share that. Anyway, we are going to do a tour in July 2006.

Kaleena Briggs: An intimate tour of places, we are going to Newcastle definitely, rural, remote or not remote ... maybe but lots of places around Australia, and then we are going to tour overseas.

Nardi Simpson: We are organising that tour by ourselves, so that's going to be a good thing for us. And we are going to do work at the Commonwealth Games in March 2006.

Kaleena Briggs: We are going overseas in January and February; we are going to Cairo and Cyprus.

Therese Davis: Wow, you girls really are world travellers!

Nardi Simpson: But that is the thing that we say, like we've done nothing really to deserve that. Like someone's come along and said 'Oh, Stiff Gins they would be good for Australia Day in Cyprus.' And they ring us. And now we are going to go, you know.

Kaleena Briggs: It's going to be full on. So we are doing Australia Day for some peacekeeping troops in Cairo, and it was like 'What?'

Therese Davis: Wow, that's history making, isn't it?

Kaleena Briggs: Yeah, like Nardi was saying before: the music sometimes is second place to all the other experiences that happen. Like being in this band we are able to go to so many places and just ... well that's all I wanted to do. Just travel and meet people and see interesting places and have great food. And with this band we just have been able to do it.

Nardi Simpson: And we are at the point where bands our ages are starting to drop off, you have a family or you get a job that earns you money to set yourself up. So we know that the next part is important for us. I think we've set ourselves up all right. We want to keep going till we're dead, eh.

Kaleena Briggs: My kids will be in the band then. (laughter)

Nardi Simpson: And of course, I'd love us to win an Aria [Australian Recording Industry Association award].

Kaleena Briggs: That would be our top thing for the moment.

Nardi Simpson: Because that would mean people would know us and because it would show that quality can win that stuff — somebody who sings about something

which has some kind of depth to it and that is musically interesting as well. I'm sick of bands that sort of sound good but that's it.

Kaleena Briggs: And not only that. Just for us I would like a little bit of recognition ... You don't want to sound like you're full of yourself or anything but we have been doing this for six years and we get to go to all these amazing places and everything and you want people to realise how cool that is and how not a lot of people are doing that kind of thing. And we did this new album all by ourselves and there is a lot of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists doing the same thing but especially, I think, as we are young Aboriginal women as well, well that's cool.

Things have changed —
A light surrounds the future.
We survived, the test is done
The tasks were set
And we completed each one.
Fly on, creating our history —
With the Spirit, the Heart and the Power.

'Facing the World', 2005, Nardi Simpson and Kaleena Briggs

References

- Dixon, Chicka 2001, Letters, *Koori Mail*, 31 October: 9.
'The Stiff Gins Website', Pandora Website Archive, accessed 6 December 2006, <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/15443/20031202/www.stiffgins.com/index.html>
Wilmot, Eric 1987, *Pemulwuy, the rainbow warrior*, Weldon, Sydney.

Appendix - Awards and nominations

- 2005 Nominees, Album of the Year; Band of the Year; Single of the Year,
The Deadlys, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Music Awards
2003 Recipients of the Centenary Medal for 'Services to the Community through
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Music'
2002 Winners, Songlines Award,
Australian Live Music Awards Best Indigenous Live Act
2001 Winners, Best Single,
The Deadlys, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Music Awards
2001 Nominees, Best Live Act-NSW,
Australian Live Music Awards
2000 Winners, Most Promising New Talent,
The Deadlys, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Music Awards
2000 Nominees Best Female Artist,
Australian World Music Awards