



ABLAZE

A film by Tiriki Onus and Alec Morgan

Produced by Tom Zubrycki

81 mins.

Melbourne opera singer Tiriki Onus sets out to uncover the mystery surrounding the life of his grandfather, William Bill Onus – charismatic Aboriginal cultural leader, entrepreneur, theatre impresario and, probably, the first Indigenous filmmaker.

SYNOPSIS

Opera singer Tiriki Onus sets out to uncover the mystery surrounding an untitled 75-year-old silent movie discovered inside a vault that has compelling links to his larger-than-life Indigenous grandfather William Bill Onus: charismatic cultural leader, entrepreneur, theatre impresario, television host and possibly the first Aboriginal filmmaker. Yet, there's much about him that Tiriki still doesn't know. As Tiriki journeys across the continent and pieces together clues to the film's origins, he unearths dark intrigues that shape the story into a real life thriller. During its making, Bill was shadowed by security agents. On the eve of its release, it vanished. When Walt Disney invited Bill to perform in America, covert government operatives prevented him from leaving Australia. Allowing this charismatic figure into the world stage was considered far too dangerous. But nothing could stop Tiriki's grandfather's struggle for the civil rights of his people.

STORY OUTLINE

Opera singer Tiriki Onus' world has been deeply influenced by his larger-than-life Indigenous grandfather, William Bill Onus. His first role in opera was playing "Uncle Bill" based on his dramatic leadership of the first Walk-off by the Aboriginal residents of a mission station in 1939. Yet, there remains much about him that Tiriki still doesn't know. The chance discovery inside a vault of an untitled 75-year-old silent movie that could have been made by Bill sets Tiriki on an emotional journey to uncover the mystery of its origins and hopefully, learn more about his grandfather.

Tiriki travels to Yorta Yorta country on the Murray River to the old Cummergunja mission that young Bill and his family fled from in 1916 to escape a police roundup of Aboriginal children. He learns with relative ease about his metamorphosis from mission escapee to champion boomerang performer on the travelling shows. Travelling throughout the country, Bill experienced the humiliation of segregation and witnessed the plight of his people. Bill became a man torn between two destinies: that of a rising star, the other as an inspirational political leader.

Tiriki shows relatives the film found in the archives. No one knows of it, but he soon discovers the location where some was shot: in Fitzroy, Melbourne. Inside this tiny impoverished Aboriginal enclave, Bill began his early political struggle for the civil rights of his people. He saw film as a powerful way to get his message across and learned the ropes working on Charles Chauvel's 'Uncivilised'.

Piecing together clues, Tiriki is able to pinpoint when the 'found film' was made in 1946. A pivotal year for Bill's campaign for Black Citizen's Rights. The film's content was uncompromising for the times, showing the poverty and degradation of the

Aboriginal community in Fitzroy. There is footage of a powerful theatre piece created by Bill in support of the Walk-off of pastoral stations by Aboriginal stock-workers in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. If the film was shown publically, it would have been politically explosive. On the eve of its release into cinemas, the film mysteriously vanishes.

Seeking clues, to the films disappearance, Tiriki unearths dark intrigues that shape the story into a real life spy thriller: secret files that show that during the making of the film found in the archive, Bill was under constant surveillance by the Commonwealth Investigation Service. If security agents knew of the highly charged content, did they take steps to prevent the films release?

Soon after its disappearance, Bill meets Mary, an impassioned radical, miss communist Party 1947. Theirs is a tale of forbidden love. Mary's marriage to a Black man outraged her wealthy parents who tried unsuccessfully to stop it.

With the fervent support of Mary, Bill re-sparked his campaign for Civil Rights by reviving lost Indigenous cultural performances in theatrical extravaganzas right in the centre of Melbourne. Although they played to packed houses, the press ignored his message of equality for all Australians.

Disappointed, Bill took a job on the wharves. He remained under surveillance by a new government spy agency, ASIO. When Walt Disney invited Bill to perform in the USA in 1952, ASIO informed the US embassy to deny him a visa. Speaking out overseas about the plight of his people was considered far too dangerous to allow. Tiriki begins to understand the high price his grandfather paid for his outspokenness.

Bill went into business and opened a shop selling Indigenous art and crafts in the Dandenong Ranges. If he couldn't go overseas, the world came to him. He was sought out by visiting celebrities like African-American singer Harry Belafonte who was a close supporter of Martin Luther King.

In the early 1960s, Bill became the first Indigenous television host in Alcheringa, a series dedicated to celebrating his traditional culture. It quickly rose in popularity. But, Bill's health was failing rapidly. He mustered enough energy to lead the Victorian campaign for the 1967 referendum to change the constitution in favour of Indigenous Australians. The vote was a massive victory. Soon after, Bill was struck down and passed away. He was only 61. High-ranking politicians and community leaders attended his funeral to pay their respects to the old warrior for equal rights.

In the final scenes of *Ablaze*, Tiriki flies to the Pilbara and screens Bill's 'lost' film for the first time to the descendants of the 1946 stock worker strikers on their home land. His journey of discovery is complete.

ALEC MORGAN

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Alec Morgan is a multi-award winning filmmaker with productions that have screened at over 50 film festivals, in cinemas and on television in many countries. His documentary credits include the landmark production *Lousy Little Sixpence*, that first exposed the story of the Stolen Generations and *Admission Impossible* that exposed the secret history of the White Australia Policy. His innovative hybrid feature *Hunt Angels* won 8 awards including 3 AACTA Awards and the prestigious Joan Long Award for contribution to Australian film history. He recently wrote and directed episodes of the ground-breaking factual series *Australia In Colour*, one of SBS's highest rating productions. He collaborated with Tiriki Onus to make his latest production the feature documentary *Ablaze*.

TIRIKI ONUS

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Tiriki is an opera singer, playwright, educator and filmmaker. He picked-up filmmaking skills by assisting on the production of, and appearing in, a number of documentaries including *Lin Onus: Bridge Between Cultures*, *Moomba: What's in a name?* and *Kwaya's Uganda Music Project*. He also worked with award-winning Indigenous filmmaker Richard Frankland on *Yinga-Bul: Stories of a Song Man*. He wrote and acted in the critically acclaimed musical drama, *William and Mary*, about the love affair between his grandparents, William and Mary Onus. He also studied to be an opera singer. For Deborah Cheetham's Indigenous opera, *Pecan Summer*, he created the character of 'Uncle Bill' based on his grandfather and played that role. He has also appeared in theatre works *Der Vampyr* and *The Tenderland*. Tiriki's directing debut on the feature documentary *Ablaze*, announces a career move from theatre to film on a subject close to his heart - the astonishing true story of his charismatic grandfather, the first Indigenous filmmaker William Bill Onus.

TOM ZUBRYCKI

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Tom Zubrycki has been making documentaries for over 45 years. He has won many awards for his work and his mentorship on behalf of the industry. As director Tom's documentaries have a distinctive observational story-telling style, and have focused around a personal response to the issues of the day. Films like *THE DIPLOMAT*, *MOLLY & MOBARAK* and *THE HUNGRY TIDE*. As producer and EP Tom has worked both with experienced and also new and emerging directors. Recent films include *THE WEATHER DIARIES*, *TEACH A MAN TO FISH* and *UNDERMINED – TALES FROM THE KIMBERLEY*. Tom is a recipient of the prestigious **Stanley Hawes Award**, and has actively championed the cause of the documentary sector. His monograph *The Changing Landscape of Australian Documentary* published in 2019 by Currency House was a Platform Paper about the state of documentary in Australia.

CREDITS

PRODUCER Tom Zubrycki,
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