



His energy was electric. While he spoke freely and from the heart, his words were captivating and there was no question of his purpose. His warmth was palpable. Meeting Tommy Crow in Perth in October 2012 was nothing short of inspirational and his story is one that everyone should hear.

ON COUNTRY WITH TOMMY CROW

KELLY JP CLARKE WITH MARCO ATLAS



Tommy was born in Cunumulla in remote South West Queensland to a stockman father and mother who also worked in a local shop. The family had little money and led a simple life in the bush. A tin humpy (makeshift shelter) was their home; there was no electricity, only a fire outside for cooking, light and warmth. When it rained, nail holes in the tin roof allowed water to leak into the house. Tommy and his four brothers and sisters slept together in the same bed. For fun, the kids loved to fish for crab and hunt animals like kangaroo with elders from the Mardgany tribe. Tommy relished the opportunity to fish with his brothers and uncles who taught him the cultural ways. Learning survival skills and his culture were an important part of Tommy's upbringing and that is evident to anyone who meets the man today.

Sadly, both Tommy's parents passed away when he was young and at thirteen, he moved to Toowoomba, South East Queensland to live with his Aunty Zona. Tommy completed Year 11 high school there and at 17, began an apprenticeship in spray painting. After completing his trade certificate, he hit the road, working throughout North and Central Queensland. Tommy finally settled in Roma, where he worked as a spray painter for four years before he once again yearned for new adventures.

Alice Springs became Tommy's new home in 1987 and has been ever since. He took up work as a spray painter and began crafting and painting didgeridoos. Three years later, Tommy's didgeridoo business partner left "the Alice" and Tommy has been an independent painter and "didge" performer ever since.

Tommy paints distinctive landscapes and his style is thoroughly unique in the Aboriginal art world. He was inspired by his Uncle Lenny and other Indigenous artists he met on his travels through Queensland in the 80s and 90s. While Uncle Lenny painted, Tommy would sit and watch, asking questions and absorbing the craft that would one day see his artwork distributed all over the world. Tommy tells an exceptional tale of how his style developed and became his own: *I developed that through a dream I had, the spirit come [sic] to me... and I went straight out to my studio and put it down on canvas. And that's why I actually go out... I go out and talk to the spirits myself... and play the didgeridoo. So when you come back into town, you're revived, you're stronger, you paint more, you feel more free and at ease- it's a great thing.*

In the years since, Tommy Crow has woven himself into the fabric of the Alice Springs community. In addition to his renowned artwork, he is an accomplished didgeridoo performer, playing across Australia in such grand venues as the Sydney Opera House and around the world. Creative exploits are not enough for Tommy; his real passion is investing in the people of Central Australia and so he started an Indigenous art company called Sunset Dreaming. Sunset Dreaming's driving mission is to close the life expectancy gap that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians; this striking disparity currently sees non-Indigenous Australians live approximately 10 years longer than their Indigenous counterparts, a sad and confronting reality for the country. ▶

Focusing on young people, Tommy and his business partners are working to bring private partnerships to remote Aboriginal communities that deliver culturally appropriate living, learning and work spaces. The partners want to connect and motivate some of the most marginalised youth in the country by instilling in them a sense of purpose, belonging, independence and generosity. Using his public persona, Tommy is connecting with the corporate world in order to draw attention to the need for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia to work together to close the life expectancy gap. A highly respected Indigenous mate and business associate, Ken Lechleitner, summarised the importance of coming together: "For too long we've been focusing on differences, but not on what is common- what makes us human beings... Otherwise we're just two halves. For us to survive collectively, we have to share and... come together." Ken's sentiment directly addresses this troubling Australian divide, and the reason that Sunset Dreaming exists. Tommy and his partners are driven by giving back to their community and leading and living by example, and little by little they are making an impact in remote Central Australia.

I had the pleasure of reconnecting with Tommy for this issue. He answered the following questions on his career, his inspiration and his country.

Destinations: Tommy, you grew up in the unique surrounds of the Australian Outback with your Aboriginal culture central to your upbringing. Since then you have travelled extensively around the world. What is your favourite place?
Tommy Crow: The desert around Alice Springs.

Destinations: Tell us a bit about your connection to traditional Aboriginal culture.
Tommy Crow: It's the way I am. It's the way I grew up. Being around Aboriginal people on country is the heart of Aboriginal culture.

Destinations: You learned to paint from your Uncle Lenny and were inspired by other Indigenous artists as well. Can you recall your beginnings as a spray painter and aspiring artist?

Tommy Crow: I learned to be an artist from Uncle Lenny and spray painting came later. I started painting in year eight while sitting around with Uncle Lenny. When I left school in Toowoomba, I went straight into spray painting and decided to do an apprenticeship to get my skills up to get into the workforce.

Destinations: Your style of art came to you in a dream. Can you tell us more about how the spirit and energy of the land gave you inspiration?

Tommy Crow: Someone in my family guided me in a dream to come up with this style of art and after a while I got it down to a fine art.

Destinations: You're also an accomplished didgeridoo performer. Can you tell us how long it took you to master the didgeridoo and why you take your "didge" to the bush with you?

Tommy Crow: It took me six months to master the "didge". I take it to the bush and play because it connects my spirit with the land and environment.

Destinations: You've played and painted in many places including Germany, the US and South Korea. Where did you most love performing and who was your favourite audience?

Tommy Crow: South Korea. They were humble people and love culture- they're cultured people.

Destinations: Besides your amazing artwork and undeniable performing talent, what I recall most about you, Tommy, was your strong sense of giving back to the community, particularly with kids. The mission of Sunset Dreaming is to close the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Can you tell us more about how you are working to close the gap?



Tommy Crow: We're doing it. I'm part of a bigger team bringing Indigenous young people together with non-Indigenous young people on country in Central Australia. Connecting Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people is common sense. It matters to First Nations people to teach respect and to teach the importance of connecting to country and culture and each other.

Destinations: Finally, in your Nat Geo advert, you say, "Come to the bush to see Australia". Are there any spots in particular you would recommend visiting?

Tommy Crow: I was acknowledging the place in the Central Australian desert where I filmed the National Geographic ad. On the whole, I'm referring to all of Australia. When we dance and sing and hunt on country, we're massaging the back of Mother Earth. ■

For more on Tommy's art and Sunset Dreaming:
<http://www.sunsetdreamingaustralia.com.au/>
For more details or to support the social inclusion that Sunset Dreaming participates in, please email admin@spiritofthedesert.com.au
A remarkable social inclusion project with Ken Lechleitner that is supported by Spirit of the Desert:
<https://vimeo.com/149240225>
To view Tommy's National Geographic ad:
<https://youtu.be/Kni81ADwRqW>

