



THE COOLBAROO CLUB

RONIN FILMS

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The Coolbaroo Club

is a powerful study of what life was like for many Aboriginal Australians in post-World War Two Western Australia. From 1946 to the early 1960s, the club was a meeting place and a focus for the West Australian Aboriginal community. Coolbaroo was the only Aboriginal-run dance club in a city which practised unofficial apartheid, submitting Aboriginal people to police harassment, identity cards, fraternisation bans, curfews and bureaucratic obstructions.

During this time, racist government policies and prejudice affected many aspects of Aboriginal people's lives. Throughout Australia, indigenous Australians were denied rights which were given to other Australians automatically. They were not counted in the census, were not eligible to vote, did not have freedom to travel wherever they wished, were not able to buy and own land, and did not always have the right to marry without permission from authorities.

The Aboriginal people who tell their story in the film provide powerful insights into race relations in the late 1940s and 1950s. They discuss how it felt to be denied rights, and to be the victims of prejudice and racism, particularly in the context of The Coolbaroo Club but also the wider community.

The Coolbaroo Club provides us with an opportunity to gain insights into Australia's past through interviews with people who lived during this time. By sharing their memories, and through re-enacted scenes we can begin to understand what it was like to be a Nyoongar during these years.

Curriculum links

The Coolbaroo Club will have relevance for students of Studies of Society and Environment, English, Australian Studies, History, and Media Studies. It can be used in the classroom for students from upper primary to senior secondary levels in schools.

Before watching the film

■ In your classroom, begin your study of Aboriginal society by thinking about what you already know. Where has your knowledge come from? Have your ideas been formed with the benefit of adequate knowledge? For instance: have you read or seen any information about the impact of white settlement on Aboriginal Australians in the 19th century? Do you have knowledge of the deep and strong links which many Aboriginal people have with the land, particularly in the areas where they have belonged and lived? Do you know about the policies in the past which drove people off their tribal land, took their homes and their children? How much do you know about the recent movements which aim for 'Reconciliation' with white Australians? How well does Australian society recognise the diverse groups of Aboriginal people living a range of lifestyles in urban centres and traditional or non-traditional lifestyles in rural areas?

■ Do some further reading and draw up a wall chart timeline which goes back at least 30,000 years. Mark in some of the key phases of Aboriginal history.

You should include:

- The period before the white invasion. Comment on the diverse tribal groups and varied traditions and lifestyles of Aboriginal Australians depending on the regions and climates in which they lived.



- Attitudes of whites to Aboriginal people in the early 19th century.
- Government policies of 'Protection'. What did this really mean?
- Mass slaughters of Aboriginal Australians which took place across Australia.
- The Settler Wars - Tribal Aboriginal resistance to White Australia, resulting in retribution slaughter of Aboriginal people across Australia.
- The mission experience in the 19th century. What was this like? What impact did this have on traditional culture?
- 20th century policies which denied rights to Aboriginal people, including the policies of taking 'half caste' children away from their parents.
- The strong movements of protest which were organised by Aboriginal people. For example, in 1938 a 'Day of Mourning' was organised by Aboriginal communities when celebrations were held for 150 years since the first landing.
- Land rights movements; particularly since the 1960s.
- The 1967 Referendum resulting in unconditional voting rights to Aboriginal people across Australia.
- Mabo legislation.
- The Royal Commission into black deaths in custody.



After watching the film

Community organisations form an important part of society. The study of a particular community organisation such as the Coolbaroo Club or the Country Women's Association can tell us a lot about people, place and time. Complete the table below for one or more community organisation. Use the questions in the left column to guide your study.

Key Areas

- An organisation eg. the Coolbaroo Club
- Who was there?
- Recall some of the images or impressions of the people associated with the club in reality (not in the reconstructions).
- What impressions do you have of them?
- Were they very similar people, or did there seem to be diversity among them?
- When was it established?
- The Club existed from 1946 to the early 1960s.
- What does the film suggest about the nature of Australia at this time?
- Do you get a full and rounded sense of what was happening in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities?
- Where was it located?
- Did the place have any impact on what was happening there?
- Would other places have had similar things happening?
- What were its main features?
- What happened there? Why was this important and valued?
- Who were the 'characters' there?
- Who made the place 'work'?

- What special things did they contribute to it?
- What were some of the main stories associated with the club?
- What memorable things happened?
- What was its social context?
- Why was that group of people in that place at that time? By choice, or by force?
- Why did these people need and appreciate this club?
- How did it change over time?
- What main changes occurred?
- What effect or impact did these have?
- Another way of collecting information about a time in recent history is to speak with people who lived during that time. Listed below are some questions that you could ask such a person about their life and experiences during 1945 - 1960. Their answers will help you gain a broader understanding of Australian society during this time.
- Pool your results at school, and prepare a display and talk on aspects of what you have discovered.
- Suggested questions (feel free to add any of your own):
- Did you have any contact with Aboriginal people at this time? If not, why was that?
- What were you taught about Aboriginal people when you were at school?
- What stories did the newspapers carry about Aboriginal people at that time in your region?
- Where did Aboriginal people live in the town or city where you lived?
- Did you vote in the 1967 Referendum on the question of extending the right to vote to all Aborigines in Australia? How did you vote and why?
- What did you see as differences between Aboriginal people and Non-Aboriginal people in the 1940s and 1950s? Do you still feel the same way?



Researching key issues

The Coolbaroo Club can be seen not only as a real place, but also as a metaphor of Australian race relations at the time. Research the following areas to test the ideas and images which are presented in the film.

Australian race restrictions

The Coolbaroo Club offered Aboriginal people a refuge from discriminatory race laws, often described as 'apartheid' (or 'separateness').

- List some of the ways in which Aboriginal people were kept separate in the film. You could try to put these examples into categories - such as work, living places, community areas, etc. To what extent were these restrictions official, and to what extent were they unofficial?
- Why were unofficial practices, not enforceable by law, able to be maintained so strongly?
- Were these apartheid-type practices common to all parts of Australia?
- After watching the film, many people express surprise that such laws existed in Australia. Why do you think people know little about these laws and practices?

Laws and government policy

The film stresses the intrusiveness of police and government in lives of Aboriginal people at that time.

- List some ways in which this intrusiveness is shown. What was the role of the Department of Native Welfare?
- List some laws which were made against Aboriginal people.
- The film does not give any explanation of why police and government would want to behave in this way towards Aboriginal people. Discuss what you think the reasons might be.

One of the harshest criticisms in the film is of the policy of taking Aboriginal people and preparing them to be servants and labourers. The person who was in charge of the policy in Western Australia at this time was A. O. Neville.

Read this extract from a parliamentary committee's questioning of Neville and think back to his commentary in the film, and answer the questions which follow:

It seems to me that the task which confronts us is educating and training [Aborigines] to enable them to be assimilated into the white community... If the coloured people of this country are to be absorbed into the general community they must be thoroughly fit and educated at least to the extent of the three R's. If they can read, write and count, and know what wages they should get, and how to enter into an agreement with an employer, that is all that should be necessary. Once that is accomplished there is no reason in the world why these coloured people should not be absorbed into the community.

To achieve this end, however, we must have charge of the children at the age of six years; it is useless to wait until they are twelve or thirteen years of age. In Western Australia we have power under the act to take any child from its mother at any stage of its life, no matter whether the mother is legally married or not... It is well known that coloured races all over the world detest institutionalism. They have a tremendous affection for their children.

In Western Australia, we have only a few institutions for the reception of half-caste illegitimate children, but there are hundreds living in camps close to the country towns under revolting conditions. It is infinitely better to take a child from its mother and put it in an institution, where it will be looked after, than to allow it to be brought up subject to the influence of such camps.

Evidence of A. O. Neville, Commissioner of Native Affairs in Western Australia.

Bill Gammage and Peter Spearritt (eds),
Australians 1938, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates,
 Sydney 1987 p. 108 - 9

- What is meant by the term 'assimilation'?
- What do you think are Neville's aims for the Aboriginal people of Western Australia from reading the above text?
- In the film Neville says the policy is to 'help Aboriginal people in spite of themselves' and that 'the ends will justify the means'. What do these statements mean?
- What does he say is necessary for this policy to work?
- What problems does this cause the families involved?
- What does the film say were the effects of this policy on the Aboriginal people involved?



- With education for Aboriginal people being denied or limited to the 3R's – what do you think are the effects of this for future generations of Aboriginal people?
- What do you think Neville's reaction might have been if he had visited the Coolbaroo Club? What might the people at the club have said to him?
- The film does not offer any justification or explanation of the behaviour by the police or the government. Do you think this 'voice' should have been heard in the film? Or do you think it would have interfered with the story being told of the Aboriginal people's experience of the club?
- If you were the parent of an Aboriginal child who was forcibly removed from you, what emotions would you feel? Read some of the stories of people who lived through this experience to develop your understanding. (A reading guide is included at the end of this study guide.)
- In *The Coolbaroo Club*, we learn that at the age of 14, many girls who had been taken from their families were trained as domestic servants, given a cap and apron, and told to earn their keep. They frequently were not even paid wages. Find out more about these stories and experiences.

Did you know that:

- Neville's policies were based on the view that people were 'half caste'. This term is now considered to be racist. To be an 'Aboriginal Australian' in the 1990s you need to prove you are of Aboriginal ancestry, and be accepted as being an Aboriginal person by the community in which you live.
- A strong theme in *The Coolbaroo Club* is the importance of 'community'. What impressions do you get about Aboriginal people's sense of community. Is it different from white Australians'?
- Think about what Corrie Bodney says about life in the camps. What are his memories? Talk also about the section of the film where Gladys and Frank Bropho tell us about the White Seats. Why was this place so special? What happened there?
- What does the name Coolbaroo mean? Why was it chosen for the club?
- As part of the policy of 'assimilation' it became possible for some Aboriginal people to be granted citizenship. In what ways were they required to prove that they were worthy of citizenship? What rules did Aboriginal people have to follow once they became Australian citizens?
- Write a diary entry which describes some of the feelings a Nyoongar may have felt if he or she wanted citizenship to increase their freedom and rights, but did not wish to give up being part of their own community.

Share some of your writings in a class discussion.

- How were Aboriginal soldiers who fought for Australia treated?
- The film provides evidence of Aboriginal people becoming increasingly politically-minded in the 1930s and 40s. In what ways is this shown in the film? Why do you think they looked to the Communist Party for support? What is passive resistance?

Fun at the club

The re-enacted scenes from the club give us a good image of The Coolbaroo Club as a place where people really enjoyed themselves. What did they do there? How did they dress? What forms of entertainment were there? What was the role of the elders at the club?

Why did the club close and why do you think people were so sad when it did? How was the closure of the club reported in the press at the time? Was the report accurate? Explain your answer.

The women who tell us about the club talk with great emotion. How can you explain those feelings? Why do you think it was such an important part of their lives?

An extract from a review of the film by Robert Drewe says, 'More shaming than a hundred news stories, this alternatively chirpy and sad, dignified and scathing documentary ... lifts the lid on post-war relations in Australia'.

Ruth Hessey says, 'Who would have thought that Perth played host to a particularly cool nightclub way ahead of its time in the 1950s? Importing the latest jazz directly from America, and attracting visitors of the stature of Nat King Cole and The Harlem Globetrotters, The Coolbaroo Club successfully flouted discriminatory laws...' The Sydney Morning Herald, Friday 19 July 1996.

After reading the reviews above, write your own review of *The Coolbaroo Club*. Include comments about what the film tells you about Australia's past, the way the film is made and the story it tells.

Aboriginal people control their own lives – 'self-determination'.

The Coolbaroo Club was an organisation which was controlled by Aboriginal people themselves. The issue of self-determination is a key one in Australia today.

- How did The Coolbaroo Club make itself open to non-Aboriginal people but maintain control of the club?
- In what areas do Aboriginal people today exercise self-determination, or control over their own community organisations?
- What limitations exist on these areas of self-determination?
- Is self-determination an appropriate policy, or should all Australians be bound by exactly the same institutions?
- In what ways was the Coolbaroo Club more than just a social club - is there any evidence of trying to organise members for other purposes within the club? How do Aboriginal people today organise themselves? Are they effective in putting their views, interests and ideas forward? Look for specific aspects to discuss, such as native title legislation, rather than trying to answer this question generally.

Making connections between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people in Australia today

One of the main features of the Coolbaroo Club was that it was run by Aboriginal people who determined what access non-Aboriginal people had to the club.

- Do you think this approach of Aboriginal control of the club an appropriate one?
- What difficulties or problems might have existed if anyone had been able to hold executive positions at the club?

- Can the exclusion of one group from another's 'territory' or cultural institutions do harm, or good, or both?
- Government policies of the 1950s to the 1970s promoted the idea of 'integration'. Those of the 1980s and 1990s promote the notion of cultural integrity and respect for maintaining a separateness of identity. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach? Which do you think is preferable in helping to create a harmonious and respectful society?

The Film as a Representation of History

The film uses a variety of methods to get the story and its messages across.

■ Select an example of each of the following techniques used in the film, and comment on the effectiveness of each.

Historic footage

Narration by a participant

Historic still photographs

Live interviews

Reconstructions of significant scenes in black and white

Reconstructions of the club in colour

Music

One notable element of the film is its use of reconstructions, blended into the rest of the film to achieve the same effect as archival footage. This technique was necessary because media coverage of Aboriginal affairs was ignored during this time and no real footage exists.

■ Identify as many as you can of these scenes where actors are playing a part, but the film is treated to look as though it is archival material from the time.

■ Some people may believe some of these reconstructions are really archival documents. Do you think that is a problem? Should the filmmakers have identified these reconstructions as such in any way? How might the filmmakers justify this technique?

Conclusion

1. What would you now say were the main strengths of *The Coolbaroo Club*?

Do you think there are any weaknesses in the film. If so, how would you improve it?

2. Imagine that you are given the task of creating a plaque to place on the site of the Coolbaroo Club, to record its place in Aboriginal history. Describe the plaque which you would create, and the wording you would suggest Aboriginal people might want said about the place.

3. One reviewer of the film said *The Coolbaroo Club* 'delivers a lushly textured glimpse of an Australia - both lively and harsh - which most of us didn't know existed.' Would you agree with this comment on the film? Explain your reasons.

4. Have things changed? It may be beneficial for a guest speaker from the local Aboriginal community, or Ministry of Education to visit the class and discuss this and other issues relating to Aboriginal people.

5. Helena says 'thank you' at the end of the film? Whom do you think she is thanking? Why?

Useful classroom references:

There are many sources which provide information about the lives of Aboriginal Australians. Some recommended starting points are:

Encounters in Place, Outsiders and Aboriginal Australians 1606-1985, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1989.

Australians: Our Lives through time, Vol 1 to 1788, 1838, 1888, Vol 2, 1938 to today, L. Tudball (ed.) Rigby, 1988 (An adaptation for schools of the Australians historical library, Time slice history, Syme Weldon, 1988)

With The White People, Henry Reynolds, Penguin Books, 1990.

Telling It Like It Is, Penny Taylor, Aboriginal Studies Press, 1992.

Pride Against Prejudice, Ida West, Aboriginal Studies Press, 1992.

Specifically relating to Aboriginal children being separated from their families:

Take This Child, Barbara Cummings, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1990.

The Lost Children, Coral Edwards & Peter Read, Doubleday Press, Sydney, 1989.

When The Pelican Laughed, Alice Nannup, Lauren Marsh & Steve Kinnane, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1992.

Wandering Girl, Glenys Ward, Magabala Books, Broome, 1987.

For Their Own Good, Anna Haebich, University of WA Press, 1988.

My Place, Sally Morgan, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1988.

Sort Of A Place Like Home, Susan Maushart, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1993.

Films

Lousy Little Sixpence

How The West Was Lost, Market Street Films, 1987

(Both the above films are available from Ronin Films, PO Box 1005, Civic Square ACT 2608, phone: (06) 248 0851, fax (06) 249 1640).

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Charcoal Lane, Archie Roach, 1990

Note: An valuable reference for teachers is the National Principles and Guidelines, and Resource guide for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies K-12, published by Curriculum Corporation, 1995.



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