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"At the end of the day, the Black Panthers were a humanitarian group – it's just that they [in the US] were fighting for the constitutional right to carry a gun to defend themselves. We were barefoot Panthers, frightened of ghosts."

JUNE IS GOING TO BE A MONUMENTAL MONTH FOR MARLENE CUMMINS. IT SEES BOTH THE RELEASE OF THE RACHEL PERKINS' DIRECTED DOCUMENTARY *BLACK PANTHER WOMAN*, WHICH IS ALL ABOUT MARLENE'S TIME IN THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY OF AUSTRALIA, AS WELL AS THE RELEASE OF HER DEBUT ALBUM, *KOORI WOMAN BLUES*.

Marlene likes to describe herself in the words of Richard Bell: "an activist disguised as an artist". It's a role she has been playing since her involvement with the Black Panther movement, which began over four decades ago.

Marlene was only 18 years old when she met Denis Walker and Sammy Watson Jnr at a local dance in Brisbane. They got talking and that evening, Marlene became an early recruit to the movement. She moved into the house the Australian Black Panther Party would end up sharing and using as their official headquarters.

"This was a chapter of the Black Power movement, an organised headquarters – we didn't exist anywhere else in Australia," says Marlene.

"As part of being a Panther, you had to sit in the morning with Denis Walker and Samuel Watson Jnr and read all the [Black Power] literature, do your part around the house,

A woman of strength

The inspirational Marlene Cummins is excited about the release of a new documentary all about her time as a

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cook, clean, look for a job if you didn't have one, and then we'd go on rallies."

The idea for the documentary grew from a 19-minute short film Marlene produced for the Metro Screen competition. The comedic take on the Black Panther movement in Australia was called *Seize the Dreamtime*, referencing the 1960's protest-era book *Seize the Time* penned by African-American Black Panther member Bobby Seale.

"It was playing with the difference between blackfellas in America, who were gun-toting revolutionaries, as opposed to us being Panthers in Australia, from a comical perspective," recalls Marlene, "and the fact that we are very spiritual people and would be more likely to chuck the gun and run. We could never be these gun-toting terrorists."

"It was a comedy, but I was also stating the parallels between us.... At the end of the day, the Black Panthers were a humanitarian group, it's just that they were fighting for the constitutional right to carry a gun to defend themselves. We were barefoot Panthers, frightened of ghosts," Marlene says with a laugh.

Metro Screen loved the short film and encouraged Marlene to develop it into a feature-length documentary. She approached a few different producers but nothing got off the ground. It wasn't until Rachel Perkins, an old friend of Marlene's, had some free time in her schedule that the project really took off.

"It wasn't until recently that we were able to start working together," says Marlene.

"We actually go way back. We played in a band together, called The Amunda Band – me on sax and Rachel on lead vocals. So we have a longstanding and good relationship. I wanted to do the story with her.

"My initial idea was to focus just on this particular chapter of the Black Panther party, but Rachel wanted it to be about my story and encouraged me to open up about my experiences. I was a bit apprehensive at first, but I eventually went along with the idea."

While the story is mainly focused on Marlene, it also comments on the issue of violence against women, something that Marlene feels very strongly about.

"My documentary is also me being outspoken about abuses relating to women and children," says Marlene. "I speak from my own Aboriginal belief system; [in the past] Aboriginal women's strengths were recognised and played an integral part in the wellbeing of their community. They were shown an integral respect in the decision-making processes."

"The problems that I see in our community today, I associate with the racism of this country – the displacement of men's and women's roles [due to] being forcibly assimilated into a white system where men have inherited belief systems and judgments towards women that are abusive and controlling."

Throughout her life, Marlene has also fostered a passion for blues music, which started when she first heard Ray Charles on the radio. It was a moment she remembers clearly.

"The first blues song that I ever heard was 'I Can't Stop Loving You' by Ray Charles. When I look back and think about it, that song made me decide that I wanted to be a Blues singer – I could feel it in my 'gut'."

"Ray was the only black performer being played at that time – the media didn't like playing 'raw' blues

– but Ray had an orchestra behind him which kind of 'whitewashed' his music to be more acceptable."

Marlene's father was a talented multi-instrumentalist, so being surrounded by good music fuelled her passion. Playing saxophone in various blues bands and hosting the program *Marlo's Blues* on Koori Radio kept her in touch with this passion. Now, after many years, she is excited to be releasing her own debut album, which is titled *Koori Woman Blues*.

"I don't call myself a singer really. I'm not a Casey Donovan or Christine Anu. It's not about musical vocal athletics for me. It's about delivering a message that you feel strongly about," she says.

"This album has been a long process for me, it's quite personal. I felt a need to express my political beliefs through my music, but I also express my ability as a black person to laugh and to have fun through my music."



The worldwide film premiere of *Black Panther Woman* (rated 18+) directed and produced by Rachel Perkins will screen as part of the Sydney Film Festival at 6.15pm on 12 June at Event Cinemas, George St, Sydney (tickets at sff.org.au).

Marlene's album, *Koori Woman Blues*, will be released on 12 June through GoSet Music (gosetmusic.com) and iTunes.

ength
release of her debut album,
'Black Panther woman'

Marlene Cummins is a political activist and a singer-songwriter. She is the focus of a documentary called *Black Panther Woman* that documents her involvement in the Black Panther Party of Australia’s civil-rights movement of the 1960s.

It tackles the issues of violence against women within the movement. She has also recently released her debut blues album, *Koori Woman Blues*.



ACTIVITY 1

BUILDING READING SKILLS

- skimming and scanning for information
- reading headings, text boxes and pictures
- reading for meaning
- making connections between the text and your world.

There are three levels of comprehension questions:

- Literal** The answer is located in one sentence in the text.
- Inferred** You need to make links between sentences and graphics (such as illustrations, maps and tables) and what you already know.
- Applied** The answer is in your background knowledge, what you already know or feel.

1 What issues does the documentary *Black Panther Woman* explore? (inferred)



2 Explain how the images support the text. (applied)

Write your answer on the lines.

3 What is the overall purpose for this text? (applied)

4 Evaluate the effectiveness of this text in achieving its overall aims. (applied)

ACTIVITY 2

LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS – SPELLING

1 The spelling mistakes in these sentences have been underlined. Write the correct spelling for each word in the box.

Write your answer in the box.

They were fighting for constitushonal rights.

It became their headqarters in Brisbane.



ACTIVITY 3

LANGUAGE CONVENTIONS – PUNCTUATION



1 Write these three sentences correctly, correcting spelling and adding the missing punctuation.

this albn has been a long process for me its quiet personal i felt a need to express my political beliefs threw my music said marlene cummins

ACTIVITY 4

RESEARCH

1 Define the aims and objectives of the Black Panther Party of Australia.

2 Compare and contrast the American Black Panther Movement with Australia’s Black Panther Party.

American Black Panther Movement	Black Panther Party of Australia