

## Promised the earth, delivered Atlas

*By Austen Tayshus\**

Recently, I performed at the Spring Festival at Queensland's notorious Palm Island.

I was more than a little apprehensive, as it has the reputation for being one of the most dangerous places on Earth outside a war zone. The great Australian artist and shit stirrer, Martin Sharp, one of my closest friends, had paid me to go there. I heard second hand that he thought I needed a challenge.

Not that I am afraid of danger, as I have been involved in hundreds of on-stage skirmishes in a three-decade career, performing in pubs to White Australian audiences of alcohol-fueled maniacs. But I was wary, having called the only motel on the island on numerous occasions and gotten no response. The same with the Palm Island Council, and assorted Aboriginal elders, and rank and file.

But Palm Island is a place of no hope. Four thousand people live on the island, and 90% are unemployed. Manufacturing has fallen by the wayside, as with many other towns in Australia. Chloe Hooper's excellent book 'The Tall Man', which chronicled the Cameron Doomadgee death in custody and subsequent trials of the police officer involved, is a disturbingly accurate description of the misery that pervades everything on the island. The young people with nothing to do get pissed and pissed off, can't stay out of trouble. Much the same as unemployed White People.

The place is a mess. Successive governments try this and that, short term solutions, then throw their hands up and walk away. No votes on this issue. No-one cares. Forget these people. We've tried everything. Ungrateful bludgers!

Before I performed at the Elders dinner, I was preceded by a litany of talented Indigenous performers, singers, raconteurs, comedians, etc. Heartfelt.

I opened my set by talking about how the White Man had arrived in Australia and immediately started pushing people around. The Indigenous people played the didgeridoo for them and then said 'F..k Off You White C..ts!' This almost got a standing ovation.

Then I said the White Man stole their country, and the Blackfella took their revenge on the Whitefella by introducing them to alcohol, drugs, gambling and domestic violence. We have said sorry, now it's their turn to apologize to us for the damage done to that table (...pointing to the only table of white people in the room, made up of police and bureaucrats). This brought the house down.

The Aboriginals loved the irony as much as a Jewish audience. Irony seems to take on a special quality when the people in the crowd have suffered deeply.

Whenever I perform for an Indigenous audience I feel very satisfied. They are respectful and they love to laugh very hard and pick up on all the nuance. Indeed quite a few people came up to thank me after the show, shaking my hand very gently.

But on Palm Island itself I felt the desperation of the hopelessness. I would love to come up with something constructive to fix the future. It occurred to me that all Big Decisions should be the responsibility of the female Elders. They have seen so much, they are tough, and are knowledgeable and experienced dealing with the non-stop violence.

Another idea I had was to bring Andre Agassi to Palm Island and numerous other Indigenous enclaves, and seek his advice. He has had remarkable success tackling hopelessness with thousands of low income families in the United States by paying for the education of numerous young people from diverse ethnic groups. He has managed to get them excited by education and they have committed themselves and achieved remarkable outcomes.

I will not hesitate to revisit Palm Island in the future.

\* Austen Tayshus is probably Australia's comedian of highest standing. For more info on him: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Austen\\_Tayshus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Austen_Tayshus) This article appeared first in The Canberra Times on 28 Sept 2012.