

Cat Empire's Felix Riebl on his song for Ms Dhu: a 'devastating' story

***Exclusive:** Dhu's family hope song about her death in custody will draw international attention*

By Calla Wahlquist
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The family of Indigenous woman Ms Dhu hope that a song written about her death in custody will draw international attention to their campaign for justice.

The song, produced by Cat Empire vocalist Felix Riebl in conjunction with the Marliya singers from the Gondwana Indigenous Children's Choir, will be released officially on Wednesday but has been shared with Guardian Australia.

It tells the story of Dhu's 45 hours in custody at South Hedland police station, Western Australia, before her death from septicemia and pneumonia on 4 August, 2014.

The 22-year-old Yamatji woman whose name is not used for cultural reasons, had been arrested and ordered to serve four days in custody to "cut out" unpaid fines worth \$3,622.

Her death was attributed at inquest to a severe infection in the bone of a rib broken in a domestic violence incident, which spread to form a large abscess and eventually entered her bloodstream.

A coronial inquest into her death last month found some of the police charged with her care acted in an "unprofessional and inhumane manner," and that the care provided by some hospital staff who saw her less than 24 hours before she died was "unsatisfactory".

CCTV footage of her treatment in custody, also released last month following a long campaign by her family, showed Dhu being dropped by one police officer and then dragged and carried from her cell.

Riebl said he was working with Marliya Indigenous singers in the Pilbara in 2014 when he first heard of Dhu's death. "It got to me more because I was working with young Indigenous singers over there and having such a joyful time with them that the proximate tragedy of her death just really shocked me," he said.

"It's just devastating. It's one of the most devastating stories that I have ever seen."

Riebl contacted Gerry Georgatos, an activist who works with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, about turning it into a song. Georgatos in turn connected Riebl to Dhu's family, who gave him permission to work on the song.

The first person they showed was Dhu's uncle, Shaun Harris. "That's actually helped me get through some rallies and stuff for the last six months – just having a quick listen to that on the train on the way," Harris told Guardian Australia. "I fell in love with it straight away."

Riebl said he intended this to be a protest song to help the family's campaign for justice, which is now focused on the dual tasks of ensuring the coroner's recommendations are implemented and attempting to get some civil redress for Dhu's death.

He also wanted to convey his disbelief at how she was treated. "First of all it's disbelief and after that it's hurt and anger that this person was let down every step of the way," he said, adding: "It's disbelief in that I didn't think it would have happened to a non-Indigenous woman."

It's part of a broader project called Spinifex Gum, which will feature Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists Briggs and Emma Donovan, as well as Peter Garrett.

Dhu's grandmother, Carol Roe, said she had only heard part of the song but hoped it would draw more attention to her granddaughter's story. "They see the footage and they hear the song and maybe something is going to be done now," she said.

Roe said she was unhappy with the coroner's findings because they did not find anyone was at fault for Dhu's death. Instead the coroner recommended sought-after changes such as the introduction of a custody notification system and an end to the practice of jailing for fines.

"We never got no justice, I never got no justice," she said. "Our Aboriginal kids, my granddaughter paid the biggest price."