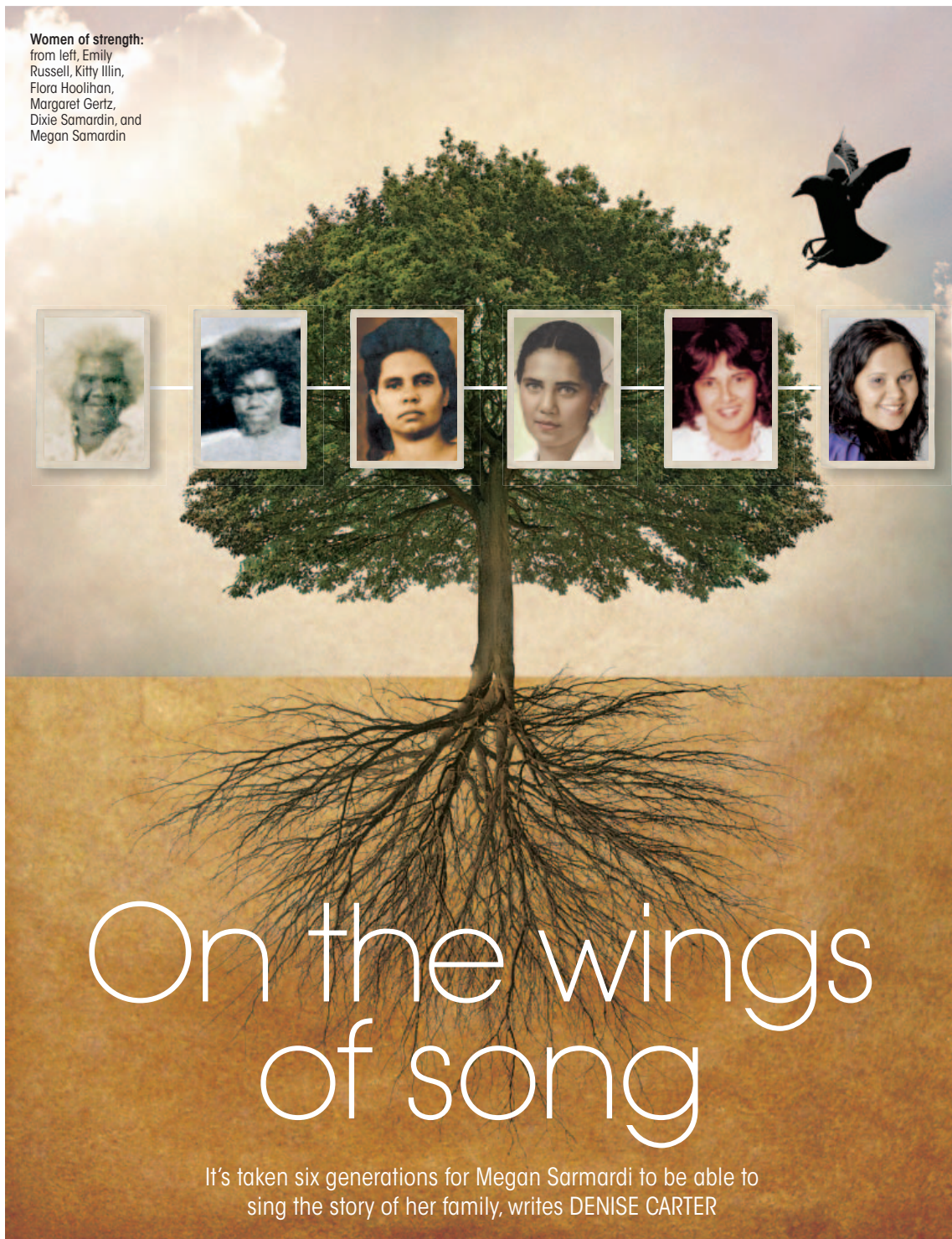


Women of strength: from left, Emily Russell, Kitty Illin, Flora Hoolihan, Margaret Gertz, Dixie Samardin, and Megan Samardin



On the wings of song

It's taken six generations for Megan Sarmardi to be able to sing the story of her family, writes DENISE CARTER

Blackbird is a story of six generations of women with a history that traverses north Queensland.

Megan Sarmardin stars in what she describes as a song cycle about her family with accompanist Jamie Clark on guitar.

"I always thought it would be a nice happy story I could share with everybody," she says.

The 26-year-old, by all accounts, is set to take the world by storm.

She has already had some success. Megan has taken up a songwriting residency, was in a production, *Bobcat Dancing*, for

the Queensland Music Festival, and she has taken part in *Women in Voice* at the Playhouse in Brisbane.

She has even been in the top 50 for *Australian Idol* in 2006.

"It was different," Megan says, laughing, from her home town of Mt Isa. "I wouldn't do it again."

When she was 19, Megan was in a sense adopted by Australian musicians Leah Cotterell and John Rodgers when they spotted her at an audition in Mt Isa.

"It was immediately obvious that she was very musically mature, more than she had any right to be," says Leah, creative producer of *Blackbird*, and a

singer in her own right. Since then the pair have flown her to music events in Brisbane and in the past five years, have collaborated with her on the tale of her family in *Blackbird*.

John is co-writer and composer and has described the show as "weepee but in a good way".

But Leah says it's way more than that.

"It shows John's virtuosity and how he crystallises sentiments," she says. "Sometimes it is uplifting and funny but the other half is about the deep struggling that happened in the past, which is compelling and theatrical."

Megan's family story was

already documented in the book, *My Dark Brother*, written by Russian academic Elena Gover. Megan says used the book for research as well as simply talking to three generations of women in her family still alive.

The positive aspect of *Blackbird* is the strength of the Aboriginal women it portrays as they battle the odds in their north Queensland lives.

"I did it from the women's point of view because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in particular are a disadvantaged group," Megan says. "And my mother, grandmother, and all the previous generations of women

were really strong ladies."

Each woman's point of view is portrayed with songs in different genres.

"There are rock songs, gospel tunes, pop and country music."

Emily is the oldest generation represented. A woman from the Ngadjon-ji tribe, she lived in Malanda on the Atherton Tableland, and escaped transportation to an Aboriginal settlement until she reached her 90s. She was sent to Palm Island.

"They tricked her," Megan says. "They told her that it would be nice to go on holiday to Palm Island."

Emily's Song, then, is about the grief she endured at being removed in her old age away from her home-town and the people she had known all her life and dying in a foreign place.

"When I first sang it, I found it very difficult to perform," Megan says. "She was an old lady at the time and I was pretty angry in the way it happened, and disappointed too."

The next generation portrayed is through Kitty, Emily's daughter, who defied white man's law and the scorn of her kin to marry Russian immigrant Leandro Illin in Innisfail in 1915.

"Leandro and Kitty were so gutsy and resilient getting to Innisfail," Leah says.

The famous tale is locked into the oral history of Megan's family, and in *My Dark Brother*, which contains old family letters.

Leandro went to great lengths to marry Kitty. He wrote to the chief protector of Aboriginals in Brisbane asking for permission and enclosed recommendations from the Yungaburra constable and the Atherton protector, but he was refused.

Kitty had children from a previous partnership, who in those days were referred to as "full-blood", and two children fathered by Leandro.

Now Leandro's biggest fear, that Kitty and her children would be taken to a reserve, was set in motion by his letter which alerted the chief protector to their situation. The treatment of Aboriginal people is revealed by the way in which they were referred to during this correspondence.

The Chief Protector wrote:

"I am very much averse to the marriage of full-blood Aboriginal women to white men and especially where, as in this case, the woman has three aboriginal picanninies.

"Return Illin his documents and please advise him I cannot grant his request... Perhaps it would be wiser to remove the woman and picanninies to a reserve."

Leah says the "motor of the play is the promise Leandro made to keep the family together".

Leandro followed up his letter with another to the home secretary in Brisbane and

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