

Of country and country: Twang and trauma in Australian Indigenous popular music

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Over the last half century, as part of a wider struggle for recognition, respect, reconciliation and justice, Indigenous Australians and others supporting their claims have increasingly been heard in popular music. Indigenous musicians are increasingly insistent that white Australia must change.

By the time Jimmy Little released his much loved song, ‘Royal Telephone’, in 1963, he had long been Australia’s most prominent Indigenous recording artist. His music was out of the US gospel tradition via Nat King Cole and Jim Reeves. The “royal telephone” of the song describes the direct line between believer and god. With one exception, Little was silent in his music on the plight of Indigenous Australians although his earliest years were spent on a reservation that a large number of people eventually walked off, so poor were the living conditions. Little was a rare Indigenous presence in Australian music, respected for his individual talent and probably liked because his work did not raise uncomfortable questions about the past.

Liking and respecting individual Indigenous people while disliking and rejecting their culture is something white Australians have successfully psychologically negotiated for decades. For example, Christine Anu’s (1995) cover of ‘My Island Home’ (1987), which celebrates Anu’s love of her Torres Strait island home and was a major hit in the year of its release, featured as one of the songs in the closing ceremony of the Sydney Olympics, and now has well over 1 million views on Youtube. Yet, arguably, many Australians find no contradiction in recognising their own relationship with their island (continent) home and the dispossession of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Indigenous artists rarely pierced, with popular music, white Australian consciousness half a century ago. How many white Australians know of Wilma Reading who, in the 1960s and 1970s, performed on The Johnny Carson show, had a residency at the Copacabana club in New York, and toured with Duke Ellington among many other career highlights? Nonetheless, over the years, and along with sports, music is one way that Indigenous peoples have found their way into the hearts, and minds, of other Australians.

In the early 1970s, Aboriginal boxing world champion, Lionel Rose, whose exploits commanded national recognition, used his moment of fame to record a couple of innocuous country-music tracks and an album. Auriel Andrew, in 1970, became just the second Indigenous woman to release an album in Australia. Both were silent on the politics of disadvantage, of massacres, of the practice of removing Aboriginal children from their families, and of the other forms of structural and personal violence endured by Indigenous Australians. However, Bob Randall's (himself one of the Stolen Generations), recording of 'My Brown Skin Baby They Take Him Away' came to public attention in 1970 when it featured as part of an Australian Broadcasting Corporation documentary on the practice of separating Aboriginal children from their families, something few non-Indigenous Australians knew of. This song too forms part of the Aboriginal country music tradition.

The later 1970s and early 1980s saw a sea-change in curiosity about the experience of life for Indigenous Australians. Bands like No Fixed Address with their 1982 Reggae infused song 'We Have Survived' ("we have survived the white man's world/ and you know/ you can't change that") drew upon the consciously political genre of reggae. Coloured Stone's 'Black Boy' (1984), celebratory, and upbeat about black identity and the Warumpi Band's 'Blackfella Whitefella' (1985) ("Blackfella/whitefella/ it doesn't matter/ what your colour/so long as you are/ good fella"), a similarly upbeat, pop-rock appeal to "stand up and be counted" tapped into a growing white Australian questioning of the country's past and future.

It was not only Aboriginal bands prodding at the consciences of white Australians. In 1982, Goanna, released 'Solid Rock', a now beloved rock anthem, introduced by a digeridoo, underpinned by a rock drum beat and plainly spelling out the theft of the country from Aboriginal Australians ("they were standing on the shore one day/ saw the white sails in the sun/ wasn't long before they felt the sting/ white man/white law/ white gun/ Don't tell me that it's justified/ because somewhere/ someone lied"). Australian musicologist, Ian McFarlane, describes the song as a "...damning indictment of the European invasion of Australia" (McFarlane 1999, 257).

Two other non-Indigenous acts helped prise open white Australian minds. Midnight Oil, one of Australian music's most successful bands, combined a positive experience of the Australian landscape, with universal concerns about the impact of mining and environmental degradation in ways that also managed to highlight the plight of Indigenous peoples. In songs like 'The Dead Heart' (1986) and 'Beds are Burning' (1987) the Oils lay bare the choice white Australians face and must make ("the time has come to say fair's fair/ to pay the rent, to pay our share/ the time has come, a fact's a fact/ it belongs to them, let's give it back"). These were profoundly important songs in shaping what might be called left-wing, popular Australian nationalism, folding and blending themes of environmental awareness, anti-US feeling, anti-corporate sentiment and Indigenous issues.

The other significant white performer is Paul Kelly who after a career spanning 40 years is now an Australian national treasure. Kelly has written numerous songs about

the predicament of Indigenous Australians including ‘From Little Things Big Things Grow’ (1991) (co-written with Indigenous musician Kev Carmody), which documents the Gurindji people’s walking off Wave Hill station, their subsequent fight for land rights, and the eventual ceding of control over portions their land in the mid-1970s. This was the first such Commonwealth government recognition of Aboriginal land rights. Kelly also mocked complaints that Aborigines are somehow treated differently, better, than other Australians. In a series of verses in his song ‘Special Treatment’ (1992) he sings of various forms of Aboriginal mistreatment and underpins them with the ironic chorus “He, she, I or they got special treatment/ special treatment/ very special treatment”. There is little doubt that the popularity of the Oils and Kelly facilitated growing awareness of injustice and support for some form of recognition and reconciliation in sections of the Australian community. However, Kelly, in particular, also identified and fostered talent amongst Aboriginal musicians introducing to a national audience singer song-writers such as Archie Roach and Kev Carmody. Carmody’s 1988 album *Pillars of Society* is a searing, unsparring critique of the treatment of Aboriginal Australians by whites. Bruce Elder of *Rolling Stone* (Australia) described it as the best protest album ever made in Australia (see Stafford 2018). Upon appearing as support for Kelly in 1989, Roach’s song ‘Took the Children Away’ was met with stunned silence followed by enthusiastic applause (Marshall 2019).

By the early 1990s, Indigenous Australians were increasingly impatient with the Commonwealth Labor government’s promise of a treaty between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The mixed ethnicity band, Yothu Yindi, released the first ever song by a predominantly Indigenous band to chart and the first in any Aboriginal language to gain international recognition. The song’s danceable urgency captures the impatience of Indigenous peoples for recognition and legal standing after decades of frustration (“treaty yeah/ treaty now/ treaty yeah/ treaty now”). The song now sits among the 30 most important Australian songs of all time as selected by the Australasian Performing Right Association and forms part of the National Film and Sound Archive’s Sounds of Australia Registry. However, 30 years on, no such treaty has been concluded and, indeed, the decade after the mid-1990s was marked by a sharp reversal in relations between Indigenous Australians and government. The Howard administration (1996-2007) was actively hostile to what the Prime Minister referred to as the black armband view of history and severely retrenched material support of Aboriginal organisations and undermined the discourses of respect and reconciliation. John Howard bluntly refused a state apology in the wake of the *Bringing Them Home* report (1997) that documented the extent and horrors of forced separation.

Yet this grim period in Australian history is marked by an efflorescence of Indigenous musical talent with an ever broadening embrace of different musical genres. Whereas much of the earliest recorded popular music made by Indigenous Australians forms part of the fairly politically conservative country music tradition, both reggae with its focus on dispossession and injustice, and rock with its protest heritage, provided established pathways to giving voice to discontent and demands for justice. But from the

1990s onwards, Australia's interpretation of hip-hop included distinctive Indigenous approaches to the genre. It is an open question as to whether the predominantly oral cultures that characterise Indigenous Australia make hip-hop a particularly suitable form of storytelling, but there are a notable number of Aboriginal hip-hop performers. Music by The Last Kinection and A.B. Original provide two simple examples of a significant change in their complete disregard for artefacts that a considerable number of white Australians hold dear.

Peter Allen's much loved anthem *I Still Call Australia Home* (1980) begins: "I been to cities that never close down/ From New York to Rio and old London town/ But no matter how far or how wide I roam/ I still call Australia home". The opening was reworked by The Last Kinection (2007) as: "They invaded, degraded, polluted our land/ Stole all the children and raped our women/ But no matter how long or how far I roam/ I still call Australia home". The song also samples racist material from Rolf Harris's 'Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport' (1960) ("Let me Abos go loose, Lou/ Let me Abos go loose/ They're of no further use, Lou/ So let me Abos go loose"). In other words, at least some contemporary Australian Indigenous hip-hop has moved on from critical observation or asking for change to blunt rejection of white Australian shibboleths.

For example, the music of A.B. Original (Always Black, Original), a hip-hop duo, is described by one music journalist as "...angry, polemical, brutally frank and meant to inspire a response..." (Zuel 2016). Indeed, their debut album, *Reclaim Australia*, (2016), takes for its title the name of an extreme right wing, anti-Islamic group operating around the fringes of Australian politics and directly confronts the racism of white Australia. Reviewing the album for *beat.com.au*, Ariana Norton notes that it immediately invokes the rage of hip-hop group NWA and is wholly unapologetic in its ferocious presentation of the deep pain and anguish of Indigenous Australians. As Norton notes, it demands that "...we sit up, take notice and take action" (Norton 2016). Australia's controversial national day, January 26th, is a particular target. Briggs and Trials sing:

"You can call it what you want/ But it just don't mean a thing/ No, it just don't mean a thing/ Fuck that homie/ You can come and wave your flag/ But it just don't mean a thing to me.../They screamin' 'love it or leave it' (love it)/ I got more reason to be here, if you could believe it/ Won't salute a constitution or whose underneath it/ Turn that flag to a noose, put a cease to your breathin'".

While the sentiment is familiar in much hip-hop, it is unthinkable that even a generation ago, Indigenous Australians would threaten to lynch white Australians with their own flag. And this while achieving significant critical recognition, and sympathy, for the political positions expressed! Does the success of A.B. Original and many other Indigenous artists articulating multiple ongoing injustices in their work suggest a growing acceptance among white Australians that a reckoning must be undertaken? Or, worryingly, might Ghassan Hage's suggestion that white Australian enjoyment of the creative endeavours

of Aboriginal musicians is indicative of the containment of their collective demands for justice, a recognition that Indigenous peoples “...no longer constitute a communal counter-will in themselves” (Hage 1998, 111)? Despite the glacial progress of policies and practices of genuine respect, recognition and reconciliation in Australia, I am increasingly inclined to the view that governments are falling further behind wider community sentiment in favour of the taking of significant steps to address long-standing injustices. That said, the polarisation of the US and UK finds its own expression in Australia and that complicates the tasks even for governments of goodwill. The ever growing presence of Indigenous popular music artists in Australian culture may, or may not, endure. Certainly, I do not mean to imply a necessary progressive trajectory from ‘Royal Telephone’ to ‘January 26’. To paraphrase Buffalo Springfield, there may be something happening here, but what is not exactly clear.

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