

# Singing The Land

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Since colonisation Aborigines have chosen to adopt aspects of European music into their own music and have embraced other musical genres, most notably country and western and rock music.<sup>2</sup> This has enabled them to continue to use song to



convey important historical and spiritual meanings attached to their land as well as contemporary 'messages' such as taking responsibility to avoid HIV / AIDS and prevent petrol sniffing. The underlying theme of contemporary Aboriginal music remains that of land – love of and connection to it, loss of land and reclamation of it. Fundamentally, the embodiment of the people in the land to which they belong is embedded in the lyrics and performance of Aboriginal rock music songs.

Land has been the major site of contestation in Australia since the arrival of the British in 1788. Aboriginal people's defence of their lands has been documented by their own oral histories as well as by historians such as Henry Reynolds who have drawn on a variety of written sources. For colonial immigrants land was a site of desire, which many such as the Irish and Scots had been dispossessed of by the

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<sup>2</sup> For a synthesis of this process see my 'Stompen Ground: A site of resistance', *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues*, Vol. 4, No. 1, March 2001. It should be noted that many Aboriginal rock groups comprise both Indigenous and non-Indigenous members, while some, notably NoKTuRNL prefer to leave open the question of the identity of the group.

English prior to themselves becoming (often particularly violent) dispossessors of Aborigines in Australia.<sup>3</sup> Land was a commodity which many of those who migrated to Australia would have not otherwise been able to obtain, due largely to class inequalities in Britain. Thus Australia was regarded by many colonists as a place of opportunity, out of which arose the ideology of individual land ownership, whether of the quarter acre suburban block or the yeoman dream of farming the land.

During the colonising periods, which ranged from the late eighteenth century in the southern parts of the continent to the early twentieth century in parts of the north, land was the focus of Aborigines' resistance to colonisation. The violence of the dispossession process and the mentalité of the European colonisers have been the themes of a number of songs of Northern Territory group *NoKTuRNL* which tell of the 'soul that will never mend' in response to Aborigines being shot for the land. For *NoKTuRNL*, singing about this historical violence and its legacy is a 'message that will never end', there being little faith placed in government-sponsored palliatives such as 'Reconciliation'. The video clips that accompany their songs visually evoke their sense of country as well as the continuing struggle for land rights in the face of opposition from present day racists such as Pauline Hanson.

Since colonisation Aborigines have fought not only to protect their lands but also to prevent its degradation and destruction. We are all now living with the consequences of the destructive impact of European settlement upon the ecosystems in Australia, but for Aboriginal peoples this strikes to the heart of their relationship with the land. Early records of colonisation of Victoria, for example, include evidence of Aborigines' dismay at the loss and defilement of their lands and their sense of despair about a viable future for their people. In the 1840s Jaggajagga man Billibellary told William Thomas (Guardian of Aborigines) that 'blackfellows all about say that no good have them pickaninneys now, no country for blackfellows like long ago'. Similar despair was recorded by the magistrate Hull in 1842, of 'a procession of 20 or 30 blacks walking the boundaries of [Melbourne] ... bewailing the occupation of this place by the white man. They were singing low and plaintive songs'.<sup>4</sup> More recently the Mirrar people of Jabiluka in seeking to protect their lands from uranium mining have explained that such desecration causes sickness in Aborigines. Kimberley group *Fitzroy Xpress* sing with urgency of how 'country is calling ... don't let the white man come and destroy it'.

From the beginning of their occupation of what is now called Australia, Aboriginal people have sung for and about the land, song being at the core of all ceremonies and also orally transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations about their belonging to the land and their responsibility to care for it. Such singing of the land has entailed communal performance and ceremonies, which involve and belong

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<sup>3</sup> For the written sources on dispossession and resistance see H. Reynolds (1987) *Frontier*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, and (1982) *The Other Side of the Frontier*, Penguin, Melbourne and D. Watson (1997) *Caledonia Australis. Scottish Highlanders on the Frontier of Australia*, Vintage, Sydney, for an account of Scottish settlers' dispossession of Aborigines.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in S.W. Wiencke (1984), *When the Wattles Bloom Again. The Life and Times of William Barak Last Chief of the Yarra Yarra Tribe*, S.W. Wiencke, Woori Yallock, pp. 37, 47.

to each member of a group. In this way the songs connect directly with their audiences/participants and can be defined as 'history songs'<sup>5</sup> conveying lore relating to land and custom. Today songs continue to impart such knowledge as well as linking with contemporary concerns.

As is illustrated by selected rock music songs discussed in this article, Aboriginal rock music has provided a contemporary medium through which Indigenous performers around the country proclaim customary and continuing connection to land, or 'country' as it is often termed, and show that this connection remains strong throughout Australia, regardless of the intensity of the effects of colonisation. This selection of songs is used in this article as texts that have been offered to a wide audience of Indigenous and non-Indigenous listeners within Australia and throughout the international music 'scene', often accompanied by performances when individuals or groups go on the road or on video. Listening to and watching Aboriginal rock music being performed since the 1970s, I have become increasingly aware of how it has the potential to teach non-Indigenous listeners such as myself important lessons about Aboriginal peoples' connectedness and deep sense of belonging to their country. Inherent in their songs have been historical accounts of the struggle to protect and regain their lands and articulations of land as the source of strength and identity. Specific locations are frequently referred to in song, such as those of the *Warumungu Women*, whose recording of their songs in the Warumungu language arose from a dream by an old woman on their country in which she was 'given the songs and healing powers by her husband who in her dream passed on the songs from the Mungamunga women'.<sup>6</sup> In these songs language, music and performance are tied into Warumungu country. For Arnhem land songmen *Waak Waak Jungi*, rock music merges with 'traditional' sounds and songs. Some of their performances are in the Gunalbingu and Djinang languages of the band members and are expressive of customs, such as the 'Initiation Song' from Roper River / South East Arnhem Land, which is sung traditionally by the women as their young sons are taken away by the men for initiation and for the duration of the ceremony. The cyclical pattern of life is intimately connected to land in the songs of *George Rrurrambu* of Galiwinku (Elcho Island) on his first solo CD following the disbandment of *Warumpi Band* after twenty years. Intricate details are conveyed, such as when *Marryilyil*, the north wind, starts to blow and 'brings fish into the bay and makes the cashews ripen', and how some Gumadj children are named 'Lapu', which is the name of the driftwood that lands on his beach. Being given this name 'means they are beautiful in nature, on this land'.

A sense of being embedded in country is also evident in songs from less 'traditionally' oriented communities or performers and is articulated within rock music around the country. *Richard Frankland*, a singer and songwriter from

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<sup>5</sup> A term defined by ethnomusicologist Catherine Ellis. See L. Hercus and G. Koch (1995), 'Song Styles from near Poeppel's Corner', in L. Barwick et al (eds.), *The Essence of Singing and the Substance of Song*, University of Sydney, Oceania Monograph 46, Sydney.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from CD sleeve of Yawulya Mungamunga (2000), *Dreaming Songs of Warumungu Women*, Papulu Apparr Kari Language and Culture Centre, Tennant Creek.

Gunditjmara Duhuttuwurru, expresses the beauty of 'Red River Gums' and of how the 'dusty smell of Australian bush/can almost make you cry', with eagles flying 'way up high/those eagles call my name/way up high/this land and I the same'. Frankland also evokes how 'coming from two lands ... ain't easy': his mother being 'Mara/father from overseas', his identity is firmly proclaimed as being 'a child of Gunditjmara', a child of his land. *Andy Alberts* also sings of his belonging to 'Gunditjmara Land' where the 'forest is like a school, we all learn from that land/and I'm proud to say that I am Gunditjmara clan'. Similarly the Kimberley's *John Albert Band* sing of their longing to 'go back home now to Lombardina'. For some, location in place is linked not only to dispossession of the land but the cruelty of government policies resulting in the 'stolen generations', as sung by *Archie Roach* of a time when 'life was good and life was free, not like it is today', when the forest is weeping 'now that the children are gone'. This freedom and 'sweet, sweet laughter' of the children was told to Roach, the song reveals, by the late Uncle Banjo Clarke of Framlingham. *Ruby Hunter*, who like Roach is a survivor of the 'stolen generations' sings multiple locations of land, gender and place in 'Ngarrindjeri Woman', of her pride in being a Ngarrindjeri woman and 'remember[ing] stories when [she] was a little girl' and of being 'still here today/to carry on our culture/in ngarrindjeri women's business ways'. The land as 'our mother who will hold us/close in her arms' is proclaimed by Victorian group *Tiddas* as the source of 'strength of identity' and their resolve to 'not wear the mask/of another culture/and pretend we are something else'. Reflecting the impact of colonisation and the subsequent degradation of the land and its resources by the invaders, a number of songs lament what Deborah Bird Rose has termed 'wounded space', land that has been 'torn and fractured by violence and exile, and ... pitted with sites where life has been killed'.<sup>7</sup> Thus *Bart Willoughby's* 'Ethnic Cleansing' likens the atomic tests of the 1950s at Maralinga, his father's country, with the genocide during the 1990s in Bosnia, and Victorian group *Blackfire* in 'Stricken Land' sing of the 'poison clouds [that] block out the sun', while *Tiddas* liken the treatment of the land to the deception of a 'guileless virgin' who has been lied to and taken 'mercilessly til she doesn't have a shred/of her former self left'. Queensland's *Kev Carmody*, whose songs have been likened to Bob Dylan's 'protest' songs, combines anger and irony when he sings of 'some strange strange people [who] inhabit this earth/they destroy the land and sewer the sea/try to own and control both you and me'. Their strange behaviour involves 'research [that] arms the military man/leave us a legacy of cremated land', and makes the earth live 'in fear of their uranium mines', all of which is driven by 'a system of human greed'.

The connection between land and Indigenous people's struggles to regain their human rights and their land is made by *Yothu Yindi* in 'Written on Bark'. Linking the timelessness of their people's connection with the land on which they 'stood proud

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<sup>7</sup> D. B. Rose (1996), 'Rupture and the Ethics of Care in Colonized Space' in T. Bonyhady and T. Griffiths (eds), *Prehistory to Politics: John Mulvaney, the Humanities and the Public Intellectual*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, p. 190.



and strong/singing the land' and the dispossession that occurred 'in the name of a king', *Yothu Yindi* also connect with Rose's 'wounded space' concept, singing of how the dispossessors 'mine the land [and] turn it to steel...stand on our land tell us what to do', without the permission of the owners of the land. They sing for a 'deal' to be struck, one which would honour the 'poor black man's rights/written on a bark', referring to the Yirrkala people's 'Bark Petition' to the federal government of 1963, which protested about the secrecy and failure to consult them about the government's decision to grant mining leases for a \$100 million bauxite mining project on land to be excised for that purpose from the Arnhem Land reserve. This petition, which today hangs in Canberra's Parliament House, was presented in both the Yolngu and English languages and signed by 17 leaders of the Yirrkala community. The wording of the petition was typed on paper that was glued to a sheet of stringy bark which was framed by Yolngu symbolic motifs representing the meanings of the land to the Yolngu people. It spoke of how the land in question had been the hunting and food gathering land for the Yirrkala people 'since time immemorial' and was sacred to them 'as well as vital to their livelihood'. The petition has immense historical significance, being the first document that effectively bridged Commonwealth and Indigenous laws and was a significant step in the Yirrkala groups' claim for land rights in the subsequent (and unsuccessful) Gove Land Rights Case of 1971.<sup>8</sup> *Yothu Yindi's* reference to the petition in the song 'Written on a Bark' and the ongoing demand for recognition of their land rights connects their music to the historical struggle, as the song simply puts it to be 'set ... free'. The song links with others on their *One Blood* CD, about their 'timeless land' and the demand for a treaty which recognises that 'this land was never given up/this land was never bought and sold'.

A profound statement of loss is made by *Blackfire's* 'Big River', dedicated to the late Auntie Marg Tucker of the Yorta Yorta people, who was removed from her family by police and Aboriginal Protection Board officials as a part of the 'stolen generations' policy, and later became a leader within the Melbourne Aboriginal community.<sup>9</sup> In this song, *Blackfire* recount a dream of a big river on both sides of which were bush camps, in the middle of which stood their people 'singing songs and clapping sticks'. Looking around, in this dream, the singer sees happy children and a 'strong man standing proudly / And I say to myself / Why has this gone'.

The theme of displacement is also linked to re-emplacment in the songs of some performers and groups. *Warumpi Band's* George Djilynga (Rrurrambu) in 'Wayathul' is sung and danced by 'the old people' back into the land after a long time away from his country. Travelling through his grandfather's country he was unable to find anything to eat and felt the land as 'strange' because it 'wouldn't

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<sup>8</sup> The Gove Land Rights Case began in 1968 and in his 1971 decision Justice Blackburn accepted that Yolngu had been living at Yirrkala for tens of thousands of years and that their law was based on intricate relations to the land, but that Australian law did not recognise these as property relations and thus *terra nullius* at the time of colonisation could not be disproved.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Tucker's life story reached a wide audience through the video *Lousy Little Sixpence* and her book *If Everyone Cared* (1977), Ure Smith, Sydney.

recognise' him. So he 'laid down on the beach' and 'dreamed about the people of that place' who in his dreams came to him and 'rub[bed] their sweat on me/singing and dancing, old people'. When he woke up he was 'changed [because] the land had recognised [him] again/cause old people... are looking after [him], coming to him in his dreams and still caring about him. 'Wayathul' illustrates the indivisibility of people and land, custom and performance, and the ways in which (re)connection with country can restore well-being.

For *Kev Carmody* the land continues to nurture after death, and he sings of his desire to be buried 'in the sacred ground... where the stars can see my soul'. He is not to be buried in a coffin or shrouded sheet but wrapped in 'Mother Earth so [he] can nurture the land's rebirth', and as this song reaches its climax he rejects the notion of stone monuments, making his final line a call for restoration of his rights to land – 'give back my land in which to lie'.

An underlying theme in all the songs I have selected for discussion is that land and people cannot be considered as separate, the people belong to the land which is what defines them and gives them strength, culture and identity. Alongside this theme is that of Indigenous peoples' rights – the denial of these through colonial dispossession of land and the uncaring ways in which Europeans have used and abused it, as well as the denial of human rights through policies such as removal of children from their lands, families and communities. A further, inseparable, theme is that of the struggle to protect and regain land and rights and of the survival of a people. Through their use of Aboriginal rock music, individual performers and groups continue to sing for, about and to their country, making this clear to all of us who wish to not only enjoy the songs but also to hear what they have to teach us, a process that is in accordance with customary uses of song since the beginning of human time. Thus for example, the sheer beauty of the land evokes powerful memories and knowledge and gives cause for *Yothu Yindi* to sing in both Yolngu and English about how this 'takes my mind/back to my homeland far away/it's a story planted in my mind'. Addressing 'you people out there' *Yothu Yindi* ask 'how come you ain't fair/to the people of the land' and invite us to 'try my, try my, sunset dreaming'. At the same time the 'children of the land' are warned not to be 'fooled by Balanda [European] ways' because this 'will cause sorrow and woe/for our people and our land'.

Another dimension of Aborigines continuing to sing the land is the extent to which the use of rock music with its wide appeal both in Australia and internationally is an act of generosity, of sharing information about the totality of the spiritual connection of people and land. This generosity is perhaps most notably shown by *Warumpi Band*, one of the early Aboriginal rock groups and the first to perform a song in an Indigenous language (Luritja). In line with an optimism redolent in many of their other songs, most notably the anthemic 'Blackfella Whitefella' written in 1985 and predating the formal 'Reconciliation' movement with its declaration that 'it doesn't matter what your colour/as long as you a true fella', *Warumpi Band* sing of their anticipation of a time when 'everyone will join in/ and understand our way of life/ and how we care for this land'. Singing also of the 'many sad stories of our

people's struggle/as we try to keep our land', it is clear from the song 'We Shall Cry' that for *Warumpi Band* land is something around which Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can potentially unite. Such unity will enable the latter to appreciate the meanings of land and to join in celebrating as well as 'crying for the land'.

### **Discography – in order of discussion:**

- NoKTuRNL (2000), *Neva Mend*, Mushroom.  
Fitzroy Xpress (1992) *Fitzroy Xpress Live In Broome '92*, Tube Records.  
Warumungu Women (2000), *Yawulya Mungamunga. Dreaming Songs of Warumungu Women*, Festival Records.  
Waak Waak Jungi (1997), *Crow Fire Music*, Larrikin.  
George Rrurrambu (2000), *Nerbu Message*, Black Wing Music Productions.  
Richard Frankland (1997), *Down Three Waterholes Road*, Larrikin.  
Andy Alberts (1998), *Gunditjmara Land*, Australia Council for the Arts.  
John Albert Band (1992), as performed at Broome's *Stompem Ground Festival*.  
Archie Roach (1993), *Jamu Dreaming*, Mushroom.  
Ruby Hunter (2000), *Feeling Good*, Mushroom.  
Tiddas (1999), *Show Us Ya Tiddas*, Festival.  
Bart Willoughby (1997), *Pathways*, CAAMA Music.  
Blackfire (1998), *Night Vision*, Blackfire.  
Kev Carmody (1995), *Images and Illusions*, Festival.  
Yothu Yindi (1999), *One Blood*, Mushroom.  
Warumpi Band (1996), *Too Much Humbug*, CAAMA Music.