

music

The music of survival, pride, and indomitability

For a long time, the Indigenous music of Australia was commonly associated with the sounds of the didgeridu (historically an instrument in fact only played in certain parts of the country), clapping sticks and traditional singing. As revealed in Clinton Walker's book, CD and film, Buried Country, there is another, more recent, if often forgotten tradition in Australia in which Indigenous performers made American country and western music their own. Contemporary Indigenous music takes many forms. The country tradition is still very much alive. There are the musicals of Jimmy Chi (Bran Nue Dae and Corrugation Road) and Wesley Enoch and John Rodgers (The Sunshine Club). There are opera singers. There are rock bands and solo singers of many styles who are enormously popular across Australia. As Gary Burke has pointed out in "Contemporary Aboriginal Music, an overview," the songs often express a connection with the land, are personal and frequently political. As well as providing a rich means of expression, and careers, Indigenous musicians are keeping alive tradition, communication and, as singer and arts festival director Robyn Archer argues here, are developing innovative and exciting forms.
Editors

I imagine the first music I heard from Aboriginal Australia was Jimmy Little's Royal Telephone. That was the 60s—and I too was on Bandstand, the popular music TV show. Jimmy was a handsome young pop star and there was nothing about his chart success then that could possibly mirror his second coming in the charts today. Today's context is politically charged, and any cultural manifestation from Aboriginal Australia bears the whole import of those politics. A couple of months ago on Australia's National Day at

EXPO 2000 in Hannover, Germany, it was no accident that Deborah Cheetham was compere and that the evening concert included not only Mara!, Fruit, and The Australian Art Orchestra with the Sruthi Laya Quartet (from India) but also Jimmy Little singing with Karma Country and Nabarlek, a very tight eight piece rock outfit from an outstation in Arnhem Land in northern Australia.

My next awareness came in the 70s through Auntie Leila Rankin in Adelaide. Though Leila passed away some years ago, the Ethno-musicological Centre she set up as an autonomous department of Adelaide University still bears fruit. In those days you'd go to the Centre and find an elder teaching a little kid to paint, or a big meeting with everyone on the floor and a feast of Kentucky Fried. Leila would call the place whatever she wanted—what she did there was much more than music. But there was the 'Aboriginal Orchestra.' You'd go to rehearsals and see young girls and boys sawing away at violins and blowing trumpets (under a whitefella baton) to render a Bert Kaempfert hit from Swingin' Safari. Leila always said it was to keep the kids off the streets, but for some it meant more than that—like the little Vietnamese boy in calipers. He had been adopted by white Australian parents and identified more strongly with Aboriginal kids than with his white Australian counterparts. And out of that orchestra grew not only a great little jazz ensemble, but the enduring band No Fixed Address.

When I was working with Ningali Lawford on her one-woman show, Ningali, her grandfather's words echoed constantly—"you lose your language, you lose your culture." Now when I hear Nabarlek or Saltwater Band, both from up north, singing in Language, you

realise that the popular music form was always a way of preserving culture and preserving language. For a while in the 80s, all the bands were into reggae, mainly I think because it was a music they heard being used politically in other contexts. It was a ready tool, and Aboriginal Australia's triumph in survival has been its easy ability to appropriate any cultural tool it needs to make strong statements. It wasn't long before bands like Yothu Yindi from the north and Scrap Metal from the west turned Aboriginal Rock into an artform. This in turn eventually led to the Broome revival, and Jimmy Chi and his collaborators appropriated a further form, the popular musical, to make a new kind of statement in the widely travelled and televised Bran Nue Dae and, subsequently, Corrugation Road.

When I started programming the 1998 Adelaide Festival, around mid 1995, I felt as if the great strengths of Aboriginal public culture were in visual art and popular music. I wasn't aware of huge new stirrings in drama or dance at that time. There were lots of choices in music and I ended up with concerts from Tiddas, Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter, and a wind duo with Tom E Lewis on didgeridu—a lovely fusion of black and white music. These concerts were very popular, sellouts in fact. The intimate surroundings allowed Tiddas and Archie and Ruby to be real 'singers'—the people that told the stories about their people and their land. It was exceptionally strong stuff.

The Olympics Festival of the Dreaming had given everyone a huge kick along in 1997. It allowed me to fill the 2000 Adelaide program with all kinds of Aboriginal presence and it wasn't hard—there were innumerable choices. We ended up with Beyond the Pale, a sensational contemporary visual art

exhibition curated by Brenda L Croft, the beautiful jewel Ochre and Dust featuring storytellers Nura Ward and Nellie Paterson, and the Indigenous Playwrights Conference as well as a play, The Story of Lanky, by Owen Love.

But front and centre was a new wave of bands. We were hearing about them from up in the Northern Territory. Hearing about the football matches that have always acted as meetings and how they were now sporting new young bands. There was an Aboriginal or Pacific band every night in the Festival Club—and we managed to incorporate Warumpi, Nabarlek, Kaha (a local Maori band), Onslaught and Letterstick. Lajamanu Teenage Band was on the list too, but the floods played havoc with their schedule. The opening of the festival was dedicated to this music, and at the end we were able to tour all the way up to the Pitjantjatjara lands in northern South Australia where a couple of thousand local people turned out.

And if that's what I was aware of, as a city-bound eclectic, then all of that was just scraping the surface of what's actually out there. Up in Darwin in 1999 there was one night that knocked me out—a concert in the Smith Street Ruins. Lots and lots of people and Letterstick Band going for it with a song that had the whole audience jumping and yelling, fists in the air "Freedom for East Timor! Freedom for East Timor"—the rock music form appropriated at first to express Aboriginal strength, anger, passion, history, culture—now strong enough to stand up on its own two feet and lend its strength to others in trouble. And at the same time they were making it a blast, a delight, a night for dancing.

In Hannover, the audiences and organisers were amazed by Nabarlek. In Germany, where there

have been continuing problems in grasping the nature of contemporary Aboriginal culture (the desire only for dot paintings, only 'authentic' dance and lots of didjeridu,) this felt like a step forward. The guys are very quiet off stage and amazingly powerful on. Their ability to go unplugged for some traditional song and dance only strengthened the case of their unadorned and powerful rock performances. Unlike the theatricality of Yothu Yindi's great performance, Nabarlek appear just as musos—black jeans and T-shirts and a down-to-business act. They seem representative of the power that underlies Aboriginal Australia's cause in the twenty-first century. And there are very many like them throughout the country—many of them coming from places just as remote as Nabarlek's outstation. The simple power of these bands, their eloquent position on any stage, makes a mockery of a lot of the empty rhetoric surrounding Aboriginal issues—especially the kind that seems ignorant of this relatively new straightforward statement of survival, pride, and indomitability.

And while the sets of these bands, and the smaller ensembles (like the Stiff Gins) and individual singers are always entertaining, and in many ways just bloody good music, their pleasure for me continues to lie in the power of the medium for other ends. As a singer who's always been pre-occupied with content in song as much as form and style I guess this is predictable. But for those who haven't yet tasted this new wave of bands, I guarantee it's every bit as satisfying as pleasure in the detail of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island visual arts at present—and that's some claim. At first hearing and sight you might just think 'rock', but the more you hear, the variety of style, the claim on language, you realise just what a form this is, and how many riches can be enjoyed from its ever-growing store.

Robyn Archer

Singer and music theatre performer Robyn Archer was Artistic Director of the 1998 and 2000 Telstra Adelaide Festivals, and is Artistic Director of both the Gay Games VI, Sydney 2002 and the inaugural 10 Days on the Island festival, Tasmania, 2001.

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The Australian Music Centre in Sydney has an Indigenous music catalogue of books, cassettes and CDs available for sale, as well as an extensive resource library.

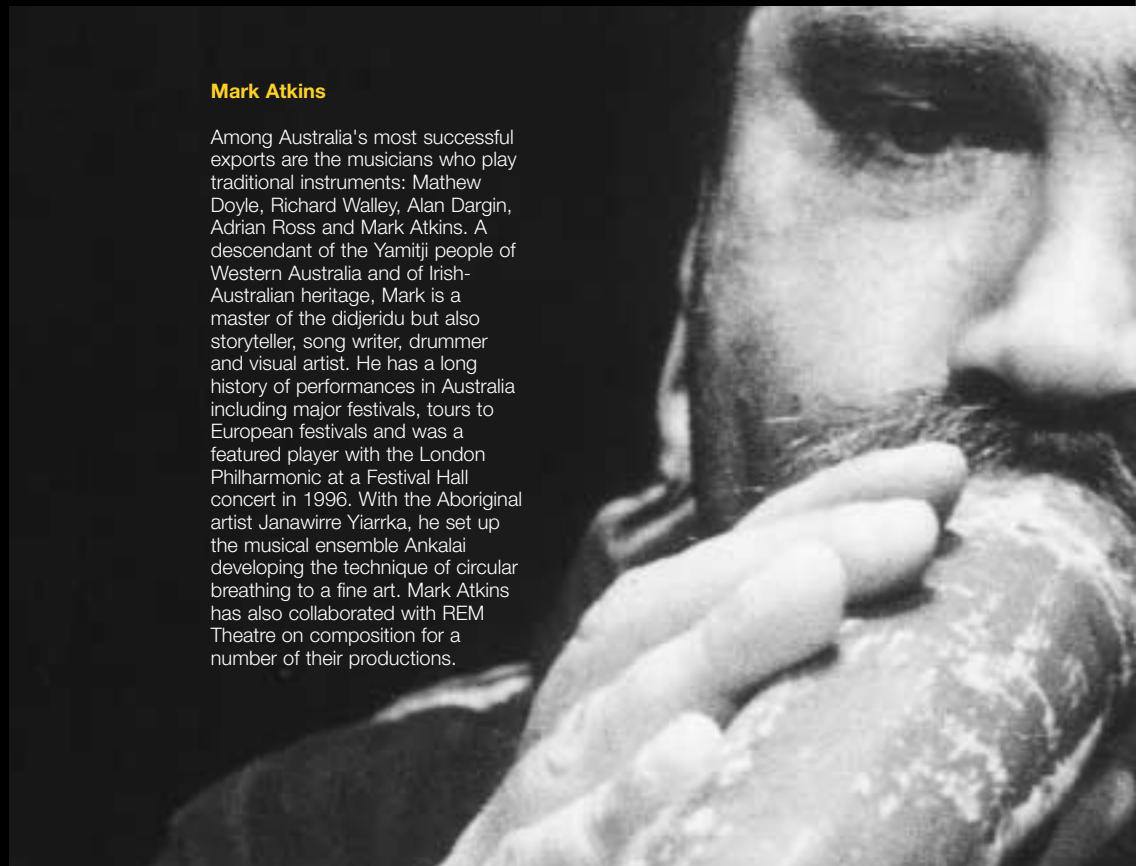
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Christine Anu

A Torres Strait Islander, Christine graduated from the National Aboriginal and Islander Dance School and worked extensively with Bangarra and the Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatres. More recently her career has included major roles in musicals such as *Little Shop of Horrors* and *Rent* and film performances, including Baz Luhrmann's forthcoming *Moulin Rouge*. Her highly successful first album *Stylin' Up* won her an Australian Recording Industry Award (ARIA) for Best Female Artist in 1996. She has performed at music festivals and events throughout Australia and internationally. A number of her own songs appear on her new album *Come My Way* (Mushroom Music).

Mark Atkins

Among Australia's most successful exports are the musicians who play traditional instruments: Mathew Doyle, Richard Walley, Alan Dargin, Adrian Ross and Mark Atkins. A descendant of the Yamiitji people of Western Australia and of Irish-Australian heritage, Mark is a master of the didjeridu but also storyteller, song writer, drummer and visual artist. He has a long history of performances in Australia including major festivals, tours to European festivals and was a featured player with the London Philharmonic at a Festival Hall concert in 1996. With the Aboriginal artist Janawirre Yiarrka, he set up the musical ensemble Ankalai developing the technique of circular breathing to a fine art. Mark Atkins has also collaborated with REM Theatre on composition for a number of their productions.





Kev Carmody

Kev Carmody is a key figure in the important history of Indigenous solo singer-songwriters, effectively blending the personal and the political. His debut album, *Pillars of Society*, was released by Larrikin Records in 1988 and acclaimed for its political power—"the greatest protest record ever made in Australia" (*Sydney Morning Herald*). In *Buried Country*, Clinton Walker writes, "It was a mark of the Australian music industry's increasing maturity that, by the late 80s, artists like Kev Carmody and Archie Roach were able to relatively readily establish themselves on the professional circuit." Carmody has made eight albums with Festival Records.



Troy Cassar-Daley

At twelve years of age he busked in the streets of Tamworth, at sixteen his band Little Eagle toured the North Coast of NSW and Troy then travelled outback Australia developing his songwriting skills. His debut EP *Dream Out Loud* was released by Sony Music in 1994, the title track topping the country music charts. His debut album *Beyond the Dancing* won the 1995 ARIA Award for Best Country Record. At the 1996 Country Music Awards Australia (CMAA) in Tamworth, he won Best Male Vocal Award and toured with his lifetime idol, Merle Haggard. At the 1998 CMAA Awards, Troy won three Gold Guitars and the Entertainer of the Year Award. In 1999 he again took out Best Male Vocal and Song of the Year at CMAA, performed at the International Showcase at Fan Fair in Nashville and made his second appearance on the Grand Ole Opry.

Coloured Stone

Starting out as a family band playing at community events, Coloured Stone released their first single titled *Black Boy* in 1984. It topped the charts on CAAMA (Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association) Radio in Alice Springs for nine months as well as the Radio Australia lists in the Pacific Islands. Their first LP *Koonibba Rock* was named after the sacred rock hole corroboree ground at Koonibba in South Australia, home of the band's leader Bunna Lawrie. For over 20 years, the band has travelled to remote communities, towns and cities throughout Australia, toured internationally, been nominated for ARIA (Australian Recording Industry) Awards, and in 1999 won the Deadly Sounds National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Music Award for the most outstanding contribution to Aboriginal Music. In 2000 Bunna Lawrie was awarded the prestigious Don Banks Award by the Australia Council's Music Board—the first time this award had gone to a rock musician or an Indigenous artist. Members of the band are Jason Scott (lead guitar), Dwayne Lawrie (drums), Russell Pinkie (bass), Ashley Dargen and Bunna Lawrie (singer/songwriter and rhythm guitar).
8th Festival of Pacific Arts, 2000

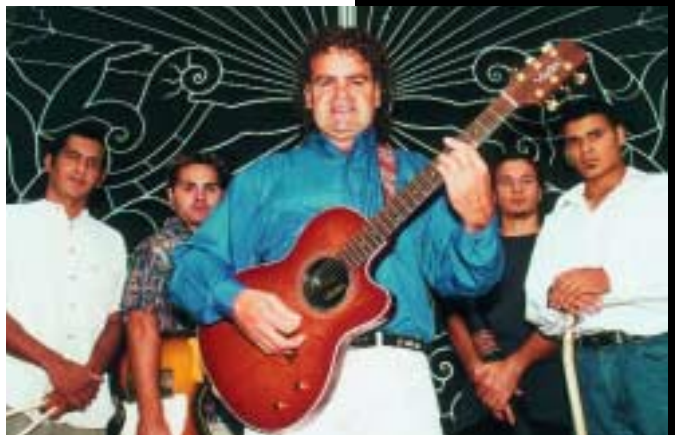
Aboriginal music was transformed in the 1980s by three groups—No Fixed Address, Warumpi Band and Coloured Stone—who ushered in a new era of black rock and ultimately killed off the dominance of country music. In this big three's wake, Aboriginal music exploded, spawning a wave of 'settlement bands' that led all the way to Yothu Yindi.

Clinton Walker, *Buried Country: the story of Aboriginal Country Music*, Pluto Press, Sydney 2000



Mathew Doyle

Of Aboriginal (Nation: Muruwari) and Irish descent, Matthew Doyle trained at NAISDA (National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association) in dance and music and became a founding member of the Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre. After 1992 he freelanced, primarily as a didgeridoo player, singer and dancer in numerous collaborations and through his business, Wurunini Music and Dance. He has released four CDs and in the worldwide millennium ABC TV broadcast he played a new work by Australian composer Ross Edwards from the top of the Sydney Opera House sails. He choreographed parts of the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney. Blackman Whiteman, Matthew's collaboration with experimental singer and instrumentalist Colin Offord is touring internationally.



Ruby Hunter

Ruby Hunter (Ngarrindjeri clan of South Australia) was forcibly removed from her parents at eight years of age, experiencing a traumatic upbringing in institutions and white foster homes. She had always sung but says she caught the music bug watching Archie Roach, her long time partner, who encouraged her to write and sing. Her debut album, *Thoughts Within* (1994), was nominated for an ARIA award. She wrote all twelve tracks for her new album, *Feeling Good* (Mushroom Music, 2000), her inspiration drawn from every aspect of her life including her travels to places as isolated as Aurukun in Cape York. *Feeling Good* was also nominated for an ARIA Award. Ruby Hunter has toured with her music to Europe, Canada and the US, and performed all over Australia including special guest spots with Archie Roach, Suzanne Vega and Patti Smith.





Roger Knox

Roger Knox was born in Toomelah Aboriginal Mission, growing up with country music and gospel. In 1984 with his Euraba Band he recorded *Give It A Go*, followed in 1985 with *The Gospel Album*. The more his popularity grew, the more interested he became in playing to neglected Aboriginal audiences in remote communities and prisons, including banding together with Vic Simms, Mac Silver and Bobby McLeod in 1990 for a tour to detention centres and Indian reservations in the US and Canada. Back in Tamworth for the 1991 Festival, Euraba played a triumphant homecoming. Roger is currently working on a new album for Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) Music.



Saltwater Band

The band consists of eight young musicians from remote Elcho Island off the coast of North East Arnhem Land. Their first release, the album *Gapu Damurrun*, showcases two styles of contemporary Indigenous music—traditional songs that sound as if they were written yesterday and contemporary pop songs influenced by reggae and ska. The Saltwater Band is Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, the band's most experienced musician, songwriter and former member of Yothu Yindi, lead singer and songwriter Manuel Nulupani Dhurrkay; Jonathon, Nigel and Andrew Yunupingu; Joshua Dhurrkay and Lloyd and Adrian Garrawitja. The band has a strong commitment to issues that affect Aboriginal people.

Jimmy Little

Born at Cumberagunja near Echuca on the Murray River, Jimmy Little is an Australian music legend with nearly 50 years in the entertainment business—Australia's first black pop star in the 60s and Pop Star of the Year in 1964. He has recorded over twenty seven albums and toured the country, acted in films by Tracey Moffatt and Wim Wenders and spent several years teaching. Jimmy made a triumphant comeback in 1995 when Festival released his new album, *Yorta Yorta Man*. In October 1999 he was inducted into the Australian Record Industry Association (ARIA)'s Hall of Fame following the commercial success of *The Messenger*, an album of classic Australian songs from writers such as Neil Finn, Paul Kelly, Ed Kuepper, Nick Cave and Steve Kilbey. International appearances include EXPO 2000 in Hannover, Germany. *The Messenger* won the 1999 ARIA Award for Contemporary Album of the Year.





Stiff Gins

Nardi Simpson, Kaleena Briggs, Emma Donovan are the Stiff Gins, three vocalists who met at a contemporary music course at The Eora Centre in Sydney. All have in common musical families. Emma's experience is in country music. Kaleena first appeared on Koori radio in a compilation of young Indigenous music. Nardi has training in classical and contemporary music and is a talented arranger and composer. Stiff Gins won the University Bands Competition (1999) and since then their many appearances in concerts, on radio and television have been greeted enthusiastically by audience and critics. *8th Festival of Pacific Arts, 2000*

Nabarlek Band

Nabarlek come from Manmoyi, a tiny community in central Arnhem Land. Their success as a traditional dance group performing Dreamtime stories at community festivals allowed them to purchase instruments—guitars and keyboards and a real drum kit instead of upturned flour tins. The title of their first CD, *Munwurrk*, means bushfire and was suggested to the band by the old people of their community. Bushfire is essential to the existence of the people as it helps the hunting of the kangaroo and brings renewal to the country. The songs on the album derive from traditional stories and songs rewritten within a contemporary format. Nabarlek have toured extensively in 2000, starting with the Adelaide Festival, regional South Australia and the Northern Territory. They recently appeared at EXPO 2000 in Hannover, Germany.

Archie Roach

Archie Roach is a singer and songwriter, a poet and storyteller in the tradition of his ancestors recounting real life as well as Dreamtime stories. Born in Framlingham Aboriginal Mission in South West Victoria, Archie was taken from his family and spent time in institutions before being fostered by a non-indigenous family. In 1990, his album *Charcoal Lane* was produced by Melbourne musicians Paul Kelly and Steve Connolly and featured the song *Took the Children Away* which has become an Aboriginal anthem. The album won two ARIAs and a Human Rights award, hit US *Rolling Stone's* Top 50 and has since gone gold in Australia. His album *Looking for Butter Boy* (1997) won three ARIA awards in 1998. Archie has travelled extensively in Australia, appeared at festivals such as *Womad*, toured Europe and Asia and remote Aboriginal communities in Cape York. He is currently collaborating with *Bangarra Dance Theatre* on their production, *Skin*.





Richard Walley

Richard Walley is one of Australia's leading didjeridu players, appearing throughout Australia and internationally. To preserve his Nyoongar culture of South Western Australia, in 1978 he formed the Middar Aboriginal Theatre which played a key role in developing a generation of Indigenous performers. Walley has acted, written, designed, danced and worked as a musician in numerous stage and television productions. He is currently director of the Perth-based Aboriginal Productions and Promotions. In 2000 he was appointed Chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Fund of the Australia Council and a Member of Council.



Ebony Williams

A Sydneysider of Wiradjuri and African American descent, Ebony Williams' career as a rapper "translating Indigenous Australian experience into the language of hip hop" dates back to 1995 when she took part in Hip Hopera, an initiative of Urban Theatre Projects, a community theatre company based in Sydney's western suburbs. Her song Open Up Your Mind, dealing with the Indigenous struggle and the rise of Pauline Hanson and right wing politics, appears on First Words on the Mother Tongues label, the first all-female hip hop label in the world. Ebony appears with Amber Romeril and guests at the 8th Festival of Pacific Arts, 2000

Yothu Yindi

In Buried Country, Clinton Walker describes the hugely popular Yothu Yindi as "The first Aboriginal band to break out on the world stage". They blend Western and Aboriginal music, aiming to embrace all peoples through international touring and drawing on ancient traditions and modern sounds. Their Tribal Voice (1991) CD included the band's first hit single, Treaty, an Australian Top Twenty hit that was 22 weeks in the national charts. It was also the first song in an Aboriginal language (Gumatj) to gain extensive airplay and international recognition. They have produced numerous CDs with Mushroom Music. Their latest (and sixth album) titled Garma contains "songs about country, songs about history, songs of hope and a couple of love songs as well." Yolngu members of Yothu Yindi live in the tribal homelands of north-east Arnhem Land 600 kilometres east of the Northern Territory capital of Darwin. Some live in Yirrkala, a coastal community on the Gove Peninsular that was originally established by the Methodist Missionary Society in 1935. Others live in Galiwinku, a former mission on Elcho Island originally established in 1942.

