

## **Listening to history: some proposals for reclaiming the practice of music.**

Last year at a Sydney university, a musicologist observed, “Everybody knows that music in Australia didn't really get going until the mid-1960s.” Significantly, this gem was spoken at a seminar that featured a film about the Ntaria Aboriginal Ladies Choir from Hermannsburg, Central Australia. The denial of a vibrant and significant musical history in white as well as indigenous culture has done this country a great disservice.

It may well be the prime reason why none of the twentieth century's great musical forms ever originated in Australia. Bebop, western swing, cajun, tango, and samba (to name but a few) originated in lands also saddled with a colonial history. A tiny country like Jamaica has given birth to no less than calypso, ska, and reggae.

To many, living in our current cut and paste paradise, this probably seems irrelevant and an irritation – why bother with the detailed sonic interconnectivity of the past when you can avoid both past and present by logging into say “second life”? I didn't add ‘future’ to the list of avoidance, because you can guarantee that the future will be mostly a rehash of the past. It's what we already have in Australia - everything from faithful copies of European Baroque to yet more hip hop, to concerts where almost any plink or plonk from the 20<sup>th</sup> century is attributed to John Cage.

Unless we investigate and value our own extraordinary musical culture, the dreaded cultural cringe will continue to define what constitutes the practice of music on this continent.

If you think that the cringe is a fast vanishing behavioural trait, then you haven't been observing the promotion from our national institutions or listening to ABC radio over recent years. But this lecture is not about my long list of favourite cringe

moments. I'm sure you have your own. My intention is otherwise. I want to describe a story of music, sometimes positive, often wayward, always interesting, which could point to a productive future.

So first to History.

It didn't start off so badly.

As Inga Clendinnen recalls in her book 'Dancing with Strangers'. The first hand account of Lieutenant William Bradley states that (and I quote) "the people mixed with ours and all hands danced together". Other dance events followed, musical gestures of friendship also took place "The British started to sing. The Aboriginal women in their bark canoes (quote) "either sung one of their songs, or imitated the sailors, in which they succeeded beyond expectation". Some tunes whistled or sung by the British became favourite items with the expanding indigenous repertoire of borrowed songs. Right there at the start, we have a cultural give and take from both sides.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century dancing and music, and you couldn't really have one without the other, offered significant levels of communication between indigenous people and the invaders. Dancing was necessary before any exchange of gifts or getting down to the business of the day – which was not always - how do we steal your land without you getting violent. Aboriginal mimicry (and general piss taking) of the soldiers parading, bowing, and bellowing at each other, was a method of comprehension, a way of accepting strange behaviour. Dance and music were the live commentary, the literal embodiment of the story. Records recall that Aboriginal peoples were, up to the destruction of their traditional way of life, the masters of 1.tactile learning and 2.the aural transmission of all cultural knowledge.

This early window of cultural opportunity vanished of course when Australia stopped being perceived as a jail and became instead a place of plunder. But this didn't mean that music as a

prime tool of communication became redundant. On the contrary, just about all aspects of colonial life are embedded in the musical record if you care to look. It's not easy as, until very recently, few historians ever took the place seriously. From the indigenous point of view, there may be images of whitefella's boats in rock art, but we'll never know what songs were dreamed about the invaders – after initially trying to ignore the crazed strangers, you may be sure that such a catastrophe quickly became part of the oral record – read Allan Marett's "Songs, Dreamings, and Ghosts – The Wangga of North Australia" if you doubt me – contemporary events are still subject matter for the comparatively few traditional song dreamers that are left.

Translations of Central Australian Aboriginal songs were belatedly undertaken by Ted Strehlow in the 1930s, but he had his own Lutheran agenda and concentrated on ceremonial songs, not personal everyday songs – he also wasn't interested in how they actually sounded, the sonic structures, the grain of the music. Strehlow sadly let both himself and the Arerrnte down, not only modifying the sacred texts for his own confused religious ends, but flogging photos of secret objects to the flashy & trashy Stern magazine in Germany.

There is a unique recording made in 1899 of Tasmanian Aboriginal Fanny Cochrane singing into an Edison phonograph machine. The photo is stunning too. But that is all there is until Elkin's first recording in 1949 – as far as I can ascertain. Audio recordings thereafter document almost exclusively the music practice in Arnhem Land.

Along with hundreds of languages, we have rubbed out thousands if not tens of thousands of ancient ceremonial and everyday practical songs without a trace.

That recording of Fanny Cochrane is arguably one of the most important 19<sup>th</sup> century musical artefacts from anywhere in the

world – certainly more important than the recording of Brahms playing his piano in the same year – with Johannes we still have the notation, without Fanny’s voice there would be nothing. And maybe that’s what we have wanted, ‘nothing’ to connect us to the horrors of Tasmanian history.

“An impossible past superimposed on an unlikely present suggesting an improbable future”. Here Wayne Grady, in his book *The Bone Museum*, is describing the nature of the palaeontologic record but he could be describing the culture of the modern Australian state. I find it a useful key. Let’s unlock some other musical history that has been documented.

We know that the first piano arrived onboard the *Sirius* with the first fleet. It was owned by the surgeon George Wogan. What happened to it is not known but we do know that the import of pianos by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had grown from a nervous trickle to a barely controllable flood. The famous statement by Oscar Commentent that Australians had already imported 700,000 pianos by 1888 may be unsubstantiated, but the notion of one piano for every three or four Australians by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could well be close to the mark. Here’s some statistics just from the port of Melbourne for that year:

Imported: 3,173 upright pianos 1,247 organs

But then by

1909 Australia wide it is 10,432 imported pianos.

1910 - 13,912

1911 - 19,508

1912 - 20,856

That’s 64,708 imported pianos in just 4 years.

Figures are from the *Musical opinion and musical trade review* November 1914

I'm grateful to Alison Rabinovici for these statistics.

And with regard to piano making within Australia, Beale and Company of Sydney may have started out producing sewing machines, but between 1879 (when they started) and 1920, they had already cranked out 60,000 pianos.

Which ever way you estimate, there were hundreds of thousands of "Joannas" in Australia by the time of the 1930s Great Depression.

These pianos didn't just stay in the capital cities. Dragged by bullock dray, lumped on the back of camels, these instruments ended up all over the country.

Let's look at how and what they played on all these pianos. Some quotations:

"Mr. Issac Nathan will preside at the pianoforte and will in the course of the evening give extemporaneous performances on that instrument" Melbourne Concert programme notes 1841

"For my own part, as a keyboard player, I had to learn quickly how to fake introductions, endings, modulations; spontaneously interpolate or leave out a section of music; transpose on sight or by ear; spontaneously 'fill-out' or otherwise modify a given arrangement...embellishing or otherwise varying each repetition of my solo."

John Caws – Goldfield pianist 1860s, Victoria. "

This empirical methodology would sound familiar to any professional musician who worked in the social and RSL clubs of Australia 100 years later. We'll return to the practical side of the piano later in this talk.

A read through John Whiteoak's groundbreaking book "Playing Ad Lib" (from which those quotes were taken) presents a strong tradition

of orality; and through observations of colonial Vaudeville, the music hall, the silent cinema, circus, and theatrical events, he exposes a lexicon of unorthodox music making more akin to the 1960s avant-garde and beyond, than repressed Victorian society. If you like – the colonial 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period of fecund instrumental technique, music making without the instruction manual.

Here is a description of a concert in 1918, it's Belle Sylvia and the first Australian Jazz band complete with Stroh (that's a Violin with a horn attachment for mechanical amplification). It's already in the Australian tradition of mimicry, send up, and pastiche. The performance included farmyard and jungle effects, the playing of two cornets at the same time, thunder, pistol shots, frenetic drumming with kitchen utensils and grotesque vocals.”

sounds more exciting than what you get at The Basement these days eh...

(Quote) “Descriptive pieces often combined familiar musical segments, innovative textures and individual sound effects to represent a particular event in sound. Some notable examples were performed in the early 1860s by the violin/cello duo Poussard and Douay. The duo interpolated variations (sometimes improvisations) on popular tunes and an array of unorthodox instrumental techniques to create complex and lengthy musical ‘descriptions’ of events such as The Burke and Wills expedition” (end of quote) That's also from Whiteoak's book.

So the evidence indicates that colonial music often pointed to the many characteristics of indigenous music practice, and through mimicry Aboriginal peoples rendered and made a place for the invaders music in their own repertoires; It was a Gebrauchsmusik – a Functional music embedded with common narrative and common frames of reference, a shared sense of purpose. Music that was practical, local - in which mimicry and improvisation were the prime vehicles of expression. Unfortunately from the gold rush onwards, the common purpose of the colonisers became clear. Even the most enlightened were engaged in the wholesale destruction of Aboriginal culture, a political economic

agenda formulated by the powerful and still entering the law books via the mining industry to this day.

Even where Christianity worked a more moralistic trail of destruction compared to the pastoralists, the practice of music was both the medium of conquest and the medium of survival. Whatever your view of history, when the Hermansberg Aboriginal Women's Choir sing the Chorales of JS Bach in their own Arrernte language, with their own articulation, gliding portamento and timbre, it is an extraordinary and unique music that is being made. Started by Lutheran Pastors Kemp and Schwartz in 1887, the choir's music is full of colonial cultural contradiction, but that music has also nurtured the indigenous population through times of persecution and extreme physical hardship. The choir has gone from a 40 plus membership in its heyday of the 1930s to the current situation where it is difficult to muster eight singers – on our way to record the choir two years ago, two of the choir's ladies had died in that week. This music could vanish in 5 years.

Mixed up with government policy to liquidate Aboriginal culture by placing mixed-blood children in institutions - In 1935 Aboriginal children with leprosy were “rounded up” (to quote the local newspaper) and placed in the Derby Leprosarium in Western Australia. An unexpected outcome of this brutal herding was the founding of The Bungarun Orchestra. To keep their fingers exercised, up to 50 patients performed Handel, Beethoven, and Wagner by ear, copying one of the sisters at the piano. And, according to their own testimony, the music helped the inmates escape the loss of their families and traditional cultural life, and also the painful injections of chaulmoogra oil into their bodies. Documentation of the orchestra shows dozens of violinists, the odd guitar, a didgeridoo, and some 4 banjo players. I'm not a fan of Wagner but I would pay big bickies to hear a recording of Wagner with Banjos. Unfortunately the only audio documentation seems to be the singing of an Anglo hymn; nothing from the classical canon.

In spite of the Nuns who ran the Leprosarium doing their very best, by 1960, 350 Aborigines had died painful deaths there from Hanson's

disease. It's a shocking frontier story but my point is that the practice of music fulfilled a vital if contradictory role – it was part patronising western hegemony, and part a genuine release, expression and consolation for those suffering. (The treatment under this regime was harsh - They had a jail at this Leprosarium – a fuckin' jail in a hospital?!)

“The Australian aboriginal music is beautiful and sprightly, like the Phoenician, whilst at times it is solemn and serious, like the Dorian. A native song of warfare, which would scarcely sound to us as such, is liable to drive the natives frenetic and to provoke them to fight. On the contrary, they get so touched by their mournful songs as to be moved to tears”

Another quote:

“The Australian natives associate, almost invariably, singing with dancing. In fact, they seldom put on any singing without finishing up in dancing, especially when a large number of them come together”

So wrote the inquisitive and insightful Bishop Salvado who founded the New Norcia Benedictine Abbey and mission in Western Australia in 1846. The commitment to music from Salvado and a 100 years later Dom Moreno, both skilled pianists and composers, is one of the most compelling stories of inter-racial music making in the history of Australia. Despite the vicious, racist policies of the Perth Government, the Spanish sought to ameliorate the sufferings of The Nyungara through constant music making – and a good Mediterranean diet. At the beginning there was a 20 piece string orchestra, which by 1885 had morphed into a 25 piece brass band. The Library at New Norcia has many documents that attest to the oral skills of the Nyungara children. Within 9 months they had mastered all the instruments of the brass band and a substantial body of the repertoire. Father J. Flood recalls that on one occasion he gave one of the Aboriginal kids a flute for amusement on a 40 mile journey by horse and trap; by the end of the journey he had (quote) “mastered all the difficulties of the instrument and could play some tunes really well; and yet he had never seen a flute



before”. Of course to an indigenous people whose oral skills were a matter of life and death, such a feat would have been seen as commonplace.

Naturally enough, everybody sang at New Norcia as well – including daily Gregorian chant. Think about it, Gregorian chant and Aboriginal song - both coming from ancient ontological forms. Can you imagine if this practice had continued leading to a unique articulation, bending and transformation of the rigid western melodic contour? Australia could have its very own hybrid tradition of monophonic song by now. Dr. Therese Radic suggests that the main reason for the collapse of the Aboriginal choir at New Norcia is that, once the inspirational and knowledgeable figures of Salvado and Moreno had floated off into the clouds, the Nyungara people just got fed up being forced to sing like a bunch of whitefellas by the musically inept monks that kept the place going.

I’m grateful to the library at New Norcia for this information.

Gumleaf playing may well go back thousands of years. Again the record is hazy. According to musicologist Robyn Ryan, It was documented first by pastoralists in 1877 in The Channel country of Western Queensland. The Gumleaf was used by Aborigines in Christian Church services by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and reached popularity in the Great Depression of the 1930s when the desperately unemployed formed 20 piece Aboriginal gumleaf bands like Wallaga Lake, Burnt Bridge, and Lake Tyers, and armed with a big Kangaroo skin bass drum, marched up and down the eastern seaboard – demonstrating a defiance in the face of the whitefella and his economic methodology. The spirit of this music was not to appear again before the 1970s Aboriginal cultural revival. Alas, the band music itself has disappeared.

What has happened to this tradition? The Wallaga Lake Band played for the opening of The Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1932. Why isn’t there a 20 piece gumleaf band marching down George street on

Australia day? This is the New Orleans jazz of Australia, who is looking after this, who is nurturing this?

The music history of this country is written with a cringing agenda and read in a state of amnesia. Let's take a history of a definable music, let's take electronic music for example. What are the guiding issues for such a history? 1. If it's any good, it can't have originated here, 2. No one really likes it anyway. Now let's re-write that.

1872 (That's where one might start it) The Telegraph line is finished linking Adelaide to Darwin and Australia to the rest of the world and with it the first transmission of electronic signals in the southern hemisphere, The Aborigines through whose land it passed, heard these and they heard something else new. They called it the Singing Line due to the Aeolian effect of the wind on the single line cable. What a great inter-media event - you got electronic music and the invention of environmental art, about 90 years before the word was coined.

1878 The first transmission of vocal and instrumental music from Melbourne Town Hall to South Melbourne Council Chambers via telephone.

1893 Percy Grainger conceives of his free music – a music of gliding tones which would not be realised before his experiments of the 1950s and the inventions of such analogue synthesizers as the Moog and the VCS3 in the 1960s.

1914 Audiences hear (classical and ragtime) violinist and inventor, Henri Kubelik on the vaudeville stages in Melbourne and Sydney. "As he played the fiddle, his 'Kublophone' transmitted electronic signals mysteriously around the auditorium." Quote.

1922, Mr. J. W. Hambly-Clark experimenting with Radio station 5AA cut his own Edison type cylinders as he played violin solos and broadcast these by placing a telephone carbon

microphone down the throat of the long phonograph horn speaker. That quote courtesy of Warren Burt.

1932 Jack Ellit invents a Musique Concrete style of collage using cinematic film stock – this went on in the cultural isolation of Australia 20 years before the French got hold of the idea.

1947 The Musik Maker Magazine on the 21<sup>st</sup> of the 7th states “Glenn Marks is very busy with his projected “electronic Orchestra” with which he hopes to startle the Sydney multitudes shortly. The idea is that the actual instruments of cellos, violins and piano emit no sound, but electronic devices pick up the vibrations, convey them to a central mixing control panel, where they are co-ordinated and blended before passing on through the amplifier, thence to multiple speakers”

1948 Australia’s first solid body Electric Violin is built by Lynn Johanson for his brother Eric, who designed the electronics and pick-up. It uses a standard magnetic phonograph cartridge that has the steel needle in contact with the underneath of the bridge creating a direct vibration pick-up rather than any soundbox and microphone.

One of my favourite stories was that of one time he was in a radio studio, waiting to perform solo. Another band were performing and Eric was just playing around with their tune thinking no one else could hear him as his violin made very little noise unamplified. However, he was plugged into the radio station's system and the guy on the mixing board saw a sound input and turned it up. He liked what he heard and turned it up more, making it a dominant sound on the performance of the other band. Well, the station phones rang hot about how much they liked that violin with the band - the band were furious that their playing was overshadowed by another performer that they never knew had been playing over the top of them!

Is that post-modernism or what?

1951 On 8th June the School of the Air was officially opened at the Flying Doctor Base. What has that got to do with electronic music I hear some ask? Shortwave radio produces all the sounds associated with analogue electronic music, white noise, ring modulation, phasing, delays. You name it, it's got it. So 100s of outback kids grew up listening to electronic music on a daily basis. They may not have particularly appreciated the fact that their radio sets went brrrrzzzzaaaawwiiiaaaagegegegege but as Arnold Schoenberg pointed out – “Neue Musik beim anfang ist niemals so schoen” new music is never very nice at the beginning”... inferring that if it is, it's probably not new.

1955 A Silliac computer, under the guidance of John Bennett head of physics, plays music at The World Conference of Automatic Machines, at the University of Sydney. When the computer played the University Anthem as a Death March, the critic from The Age reported that it ‘sounded like a refrigerator defrosting - but in tune’. I like the sound of that! According to John Whiteoak, that was the beginning of computer music performance possibly anywhere.

This has all happened in Australia and we are not even up to the official beginning of electronic music, which many commentators put at 1958 with the premiere of Poème Electronique at The Brussels World Fair. Somehow in the USA, the Silliac type of computer technology ended up as the RCA Mark II Sound Synthesizer at Princeton University (in 1958), utilised by such luminaries as Milton Babbitt. In Australia, we had to wait until 1999 for that machine to splutter into life again to be heard. I'll let you figure why that should be.

1964 Audio wave forms and magnets are used by Stan Ostaja-Kotkowski and Malcolm Kay to control the world's first home

made video synthesizer. That is imagery being controlled live by electronic sound.

Thanks to Stephen Jones for that piece of information.

1972 dancer Philippa Cullen, engineer Philip Connor, and composer Greg Schiemer produced electronic music whereby the movements of the dancer on stage played a synthesizer controlled by homemade Theremin technology. If you think about it, sonic sensation is only possible through movement.

1977 The world's smallest 100 watt amplifier and multi-speaker system was made by Don Mori in Sydney. Each unit was custom made for the customer. Disaster struck when the down pipe that Don used for the casing was changed from imperial to metric requiring the whole circuit board to be rebuilt. Buying a Mori amp had certain difficulties. If you put your amp in for repairs, there was always a good chance, that on your return to pick it up, you would find that it had been sold to some other customer in the queue. Don's reply would be 'Never mind I'll make you another one' or 'Look mate, I'm not a bloody corporation'.

1979 The world's first sampler is produced in Sydney by Peter Vogel and Kim Rylie, but at \$50,000 a unit it is soon displaced by cheaper copies, leading to commercial death by 1986. It's about the only digital invention whereby Australia is known throughout the music industry. Rock stars still hoard them; it's among the grand obsolete objects that you find left hanging about in the corridors at the ABC – aging homeless technology.

These items that I've listed are all precursors to the digital age of music and have led to such things as MIDI controlled instruments, interactive systems, MAX & JITTER, and the ubiquitous i-pod. Australians you might say moved from being innovators to consumers.

If you were growing up on Industrial noise and Disco in the 1980s, you would write your electronic music history to include bands like SPK, Severed Heads, Makers of The Dead Travel Fast, and their arty equivalents in Melbourne...all dreaming of becoming famous pop stars no doubt.

If you were a student or academic in the 1980s, you might write about how La Trobe University music department became a centre for experimentation in electronic music...and about how it got closed down by a philistine management.

I'm sure that do-it-yourself couple Joanne Cannon and Stuart Favilla who have developed their own hybrid instruments, including a laser light harp and the giant digital Serpent, without much help from anybody, could write a story of frustration and neglect.

Another history of electronic music might include the innovations of Percy Grainger, Tristram Cary, Keith Humble, and Don Banks – but then you would be adhering to the more official line.

My point is that you can and should research and write your own history – if it has content, it will ring true. It might also provide the materials with which to challenge the future. Throughout the 1980s Rainer Linz self financed and published a regular NMA music journal, articles and books – all of which presented an alternative paradigm for the development of an identifiable local music. The many issues of self-reliance dealt within those pages demonstrated a desire and passion for experimentation in the face of official mediocrity. Decades on, they make an interesting read of the future.

Attempts by Australian composers to incorporate a sense of place and 'Aboriginality' into European music have always been awkward affairs. In 1834 John Lhotsky arranged an Aboriginal woman's song from the Monaro Plains of NSW for voice and piano. Isaac Nathan

attempted the same kind of thing in 1849. Forcing non-tempered music into equal tempered scales was bad enough, but the simplistic harmonisation of indigenous music demonstrated imperial ignorance at its worst. Unfortunately the situation didn't really change for the better. The forcing of Aboriginal song and instruments into the western straight jacket has continued from Clive Douglas, through John Antill, to Peter Sculthorpe. 'Jindyworobakism' started out in the 1950s as a literary notion determined to make an Australian tinged style of writing. It became used to describe the above composers and others who dabbled in Aboriginality to flavour their orchestral cooking.

In 1923 however, music critic Henry Tate pointed us in a useful direction when he postulated that...

"The Australian composer, searching for native peculiarities to build a national music upon, must soon give attention to the very essential matter of striking and characteristic...bird calls, they supply us with an unfailing reservoir of varied and charming rhythms... when we have ears to hear them, we shall reproduce with effect the internal pulsations of our Australian music."

Except for a short piece by Nigel Butterley no one seems to have taken much notice, amazingly not even after Messiaen's visit in 1988. In addition to the dormant Homo Sapiens, Australia has several species with extraordinary musical abilities that should be standard knowledge and repertoire. This is Music that does not exist anywhere else on the planet. An Inter-species musical understanding, if not a praxis, is still possible – we haven't quite killed them all off yet. But with GM crops about to be introduced into NSW and Victoria – we better get a move on.

To quote Robert Fisk:

"The duty of an artist is to place imagination on a higher level than history."

So how do we line up with that notion?

Maybe we should look to musicians rather than composers to take tradition to a new level or at least radically altered context.

Instrumentalists have already done this. What is Aboriginal Australia's greatest contribution to new (let's use that horrible word) art music world wide? I would argue – the technique of circular breathing and voice additives to create multiphonics. The brass and woodwind virtuosos that have sprung up since the 1960s would be diminished indeed without these sonic wonders firmly planted in their chops. Evan Parker – saxophone; Jim Denley – flute; Leigh Hobba – clarinet; Heinz Holliger – oboe; Vinko Globokar- trombone; Melvyn Poore – tuba; Conrad Bauer – trombone; Axil Dorner – trumpet. The list must be in its thousands by now.

Yothu Yindi may have come closest to generating a new form or genre, mixing trad Yolgnu songs of the Gum-atj and Rirra-tjingu clans with (balanda) whitefella rock music, but the re-mix of their hit record 'Treaty' was formulaic dance music complete with excruciating multi-culti video. I don't think it represents a new form – and by now where niche marketing demands a new style name with just about every released album - it probably doesn't matter. Mandawuy Yunupingu's resulting initiative however – The Gama Festival is something to be truly proud of and is the kind of on going vital, cultural event where music at least is considered valuable.

In many ways the story of the piano in Australia has come full circle. The first fleet piano of George Wogan has never been found and was probably eaten by white ants within a few years of it being dumped at Sydney Cove. What happened to countless other keyboard instruments can be found in a few private museums such as Albert Fox's The Musical Village near Melbourne; and Margaret McDonald's collection of between 400 and 500 keyboards at Nowra, New South Wales. It is also suggested by the work of Perth piano player Ross Bolleter. Ross has become a specialist in performing on 'the ruined piano'.



These are instruments that are prepared by the actions of an extreme climate and/or human neglect. So the continent of Australia has had its say about the piano, the climate has simply destroyed the vast majority that were ever sent here. In recent years Ross has started a piano sanctuary at Wambyn Olive Farm WA, where these bastions of western culture can live out their remaining years crumbling to the tune of gravity and the odd cyclone coming in off the Indian Ocean. Bolleter's use of history to make new and poignant music is exemplary.

Other music has arrived in the 'now' through equally compelling circumstances. Drum and Fife music was probably the most utilised *gebrauchsmusik* played by the British military on arrival at Sydney Cove and it was used to punctuate speeches, toasts to the King, orders, floggings and hangings. To say the music inhabited the physical would be an understatement, bloody and corporal would be a better description. A few years ago as part of the Australia Ad Lib survey for the ABC, I came across Chris Nightingale alias "the whistler" playing dance music on his tin whistle and various percussion instruments attached to his legs at Central Station. Chris plays whistle while running for up to 4 hours at a time on the spot. This is exhilarating music, not to say exhausting, the flute sound is full of overblown harmonics... one notes the Drum & Bass influence on his rhythmic patterns. This is what he said about his demon whistle and percussion act.

"the running on the spot and the jumping up and down causes those extra little harmonics to pop out unexpected like, purging my body, purging my mind – I still smoke rollies though"

Here is a model of how an Australian artist might live their life today.

Her name is Roseina Boston, she is a Gum-bayun-girr elder from the Nambucca Valley. Her Aboriginal name is Wanangaa which means "stop" because she was so hyper active – she still is.

Born under a lantana bush on Stewart Island in the Nambucca Valley in 1935, her grandfather's brother Uncle George Possum Davis was well-known for his Burnt Bridge Gumleaf Band in the 1930s, by the age of eight she had acquired an excellent gumleaf technique. When you meet Roseina, within minutes you are aware of a polymath, as she recounts the travels she has undertaken to find the correct location of her dreamings; shows you the paintings with which she has documented these totemistic experiences, all interrupted by bursts of gumleaf playing – a rich sound with extrovert vibrato reminiscent of the soprano saxophone of Sidney Bechet. Her repertoire includes bird song mimicry – and the most extraordinary rendition of a Kookaburra that these ears have ever heard.

And since mimicry is fundamental to indigenous, avian and whitefella culture, why not own up and stop pretending that composers trained up to act like little Mozarts are somehow going to avoid this. And let's not call it post-modernism, the art of quotation and mimicry has been around since the beginnings of music itself. Mimicry is a transforming technique, it doesn't just lead to tribute bands, without it we wouldn't even have the western canon...I digress, back to Roseina.

That's all very well, she's Aboriginal, got innate abilities, what are the whitefellas going to do? Is there a white equivalent? Well yes, who do you know that makes up songs, invents musical instruments, can tell a yarn, and can paint? I'll tell you a bit more, he was a swimming champion in Western Australia, and early work included telling dirty jokes in strip clubs in Canada. His name – Rolf Harris. The ultimate royalist cringer, you might say. I would agree and go further to say that the saccharin outpourings of Rolf Harris - a man with so much natural ability – is proof of the non-existence of God. But you can find many other celebs of natural ability in the field of music who manage to lower our expectations too. Imagine if they didn't. Traditional societies are loaded with examples

where the leaders had to carry the entire cultural knowledge system through song, dance, story telling and visual manifestations. You didn't get the gig unless you could sing, tell stories and dance the best. Imagine a prime minister or president who can sing – only Hugo Chavez of Venezuela comes to mind. Unfortunately, we've just had 11 years of a leader who despised just about all culture, the arts, and education too. Rudd at least can dance a bit. Keating may not have cringed in front of the queen but he certainly cringed in front of European opera - he ended up being turned into a musical – great witty lines; shall we say the music was ordinary.

But these are our leaders, forget them, how could we make the practice of music ubiquitous. And I said music not muzak; music as a first hand experience, something actually played new by people each and every time.

Let's look in another direction.

Maybe we overlook the expression that exists between speech and song. Australia has its very own Sprechstimme – speech song. You can find it in the horse race commentary but above all you can find it in auctioneering. Being a born pom, I don't speak it...but I recognise it. The tone, the language, the speed, the inflections of pitch, the delivery, differ from State to State...It's the most definable State by State Australian musical resource I can think of – incredibly exciting and vigorous, based in history, unutilised. If you tell me that auctioneering is just about flogging living flesh, then you haven't witnessed MTV. The issue here is that Australian hip hop doesn't have to sound like an American copy, and a new Australian opera doesn't have to sound like the left overs from a voice training class at the conservatorium.

Can you still find live music imbedded in a communal activity? Well if you are an atheist, the church service will have to be ruled out. Even if you are a Catholic, you'll have to rule

the church service out as they got rid of all the good music back in 1965 at Vatican 2. I guess that leaves shopping and, much as I loath the activity, I'm please to report that at David Jones you can find an example of functional live music that still exists. Michael Hope is a pianist who provides hundreds if not thousands of shoppers in their various states of depression, loneliness, delirium, ecstasy with unique moments of the recognition of their plight. Delving into a repertoire of between three and four thousand songs, Michael's musical function expands from the role of background music, through the role of surrealist entertainer, into that of social worker – keeping members of our often dysfunctional society from collapse.

Significantly a few years back, some new suits in middle (meddle) management thought that Michael should be booted out and replaced with some buy, buy, keep on buying electronic hip-hop. Michael's shopping fans responded with a petition, he was reinstated, he's still there.

Imagine if every major store had live music, or even a lunchtime concert? It's not fantasy. In Tokyo in the 1980s, there were concerts of new music going on in department stores on a regular basis. And they paid well too.

Clearly people would still shop whether there was music or not. So let's look at some examples where music, in traditional Aboriginal terms, is life supporting – or as important as life itself. Not quite up there with the concept of “if you don't sing the universe into existence, it doesn't exist” but close.

David Harvey is a musical savant. He was born in 1989 with quite severe autism. From 18 months onwards, his mother noted that almost every action by David was concerned with music. Not only playing and singing music but making drawings of musicians and musical instruments, and conducting music. On his first visit to an orchestral concert at the age of 5, he jumped up onto the rostrum and proceeded to conduct much to the

amazement of all there. Later visits to parks involved David finding an ersatz rostrum and conducting trees, graves, people – the city as his own giant musical composition - making sense of his world through music. I'm not suggesting that we all go round conducting trees or traffic, but I find David's perception of a homogeneous musical environment much more compelling than any performance I've heard at the Opera house.

Others turn physical disability into musical ability – the Tasmanian guitarist Greg Kingston, who suffers from Tourette's Syndrome would be an example of that. Greg is an improvising guitarist whose speedy and explosive style of playing he directly attributes to Tourette's. Greg plays the music of his condition in a symbiotic relationship. If only guitarists without Tourette's could play with half that kind of energy.

Multiple Sclerosis sentenced John Blades to a wheelchair, where no doubt it was expected that he would spiral slowly out of view. The contrary happened and with committed zeal, he has become a major figure in the Sydney alt. music scene organising & conducting his Loop Orchestra, promoting & supporting new music and outsider art. Not only have his activities kept his mental state together, he tells me that his condition has actually been reversed through his involvement with music. Physical healing with music is not just the province of new agers – music can be as practical as taking aspirin.

When I met Scott Erichsen, he was 18 years old and studying jazz piano at the conservatorium of music but, unlike most of us, Scott carries with him a series of sonic maps each one of which is certainly much more complex to memorize than any tune, standard or set of changes. For every journey Scott makes, no matter how complex or trivial, long or short, he relies on his

ears to tell him where he is at any given geographical point.

His survival sometimes depends on it. Scott has been

completely blind since he was 4 months old. He has a knowledge of resonances or sonic shadows that guide his every move. Further more, these sonic maps, once learnt, must be constantly upgraded as objects and obstacles are moved in or out of his regular journeys. He must be able to hear the arrival of the unexpected and react to that. Armed only with a stick, he must be able to hear a world of total and unremitting darkness.

"Scott's perfect pitch helps in identifying the horn on his father's car, or any friend's car, from a dozen other similar horns from a dozen other identical models of car in the broad band noise of the urban environment "Oh that must be Steve, his car horn is an Eb major triad'." He told me.

Again, I'm not suggesting that we all have to be blind in order to create a more musical society. But I am proposing that if we developed even a fraction of the sensitivity of Scott's oral skills, our sonic environment would automatically improve beyond recognition.

Which takes us to the big outdoors. There are good models in our recent past, but these are fairly isolated events when you consider that all music was an outdoor affair up until 1788. I'm thinking of examples like

The Wottamolla happenings organised by George Gittoes in The Royal National Park in the late 1970s;  
The Maritime Rites of Alvin Curran performed in Sydney harbour in 1992: The Totally Huge festival taking place on a West Australian sheep station in 2001: And it's the towns of the outback that currently make Queensland's Music Festival, not necessarily what goes on in Brisbane; The Sounds Unusual

Festival in the dry riverbed of the Undoolya river at Alice Springs is a new addition. The NOWnow festival next year, held in the Blue Mountains, has organised outdoor events in its programme.

The spectacularly successful Gama Festival in North Eastern Arnhem land – I have already mentioned.

Here's what GALARRWUY YUNUPINGU says about the festival: "...it's about learning from each other the unique indigenous culture as well as the contemporary knowledge that we learn from the white man's world. This is about uniting people together and the weighing and balancing of their knowledge."

How can we weigh and balance knowledge of music when only 23 % of Australians get any kind of specialist music instruction in our public schools? It's not just that the standard of what there is, teeters from the bad to the abysmal, it's the fact that music is just not rated as a necessary life skill; not rated in the same way that the notion of music as a profession has become laughable. Vast sums of money can be spent on the bricks and mortar of Opera Houses and conservatoriums but no-one wants to pay the musicians. The punters might pay for celebrities but they resent paying for the real cost of live musicians and by that, we know what the value of music really is in our society. Rock bottom.

Here's some statistics taken in 2004 from the 'Music in Australia Knowledge Base'

Out of a population of over 20.1 million people, only 230,800 persons said they were involved as live performers of music. That's a lot less than the number of pianos in Australia in 1888 when the population was well under 3 million.

So how unmusical have we become? That figure 230 thousand

includes unpaid and paid, hobbyists as well as professionals. That's 1.47% of the population... and I would suggest that is an exaggeration. You know how people are...they want to give a positive answer "Do you play music" "Oh yeah I still play a bit of guitar now and then".

Out of that 1.47%, 37.4% of music performers worked less than three hours per week, 47.4% worked three to less than ten hours, and only 15.2% worked ten hours or more per week. That means that less than 3,500 musicians were employed anything like full time in this country during the Howard boom year of 2004.

What was their worth? There are no figures but of that initial boast of 230,800 people who said they had been involved in music somehow. Only 11,500 said they received more than \$5,000 in that year. And that number would be seriously warped by the millions handed out to Opera and the 5 orchestras. I disagree with the pronouncement from an ABC presenter who thinks that Classical Music needs defending – classical music does not need defending. Classical music has a hotline direct to the power elite of this country and has nearly the whole of the available subsidized cake and eats it too.

Anyway, tell that to the politicians and lawyers who have put the noose of public liability around the neck of anyone in Australia who tries to put on a public musical event outside the rigid confines of an official controlled venue. In a place like Sydney live music has been legislated to the edge of non-existence. The vibrant Pub culture of 30 and 20 years ago, was on the end of a vital live music history that started out as the 'free and easies' of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, which became the music halls, which became variety and Vaudeville of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, which spawned the Palais orchestras of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the clubs of the post war era.



Why is the night life zone of Kings Cross so dead? It's not just that Oxford Street has become the place to be seen, it is because there is no live music left on that strip.

Licensing laws are about to be changed in NSW, let's see if live music can come back from the dead.

For a musical praxis in the future to have any hope it must involve a high level of reciprocity; the ability to socially combine on a local and global level. It would have to be a catalyst that makes us more human. This has dangers – at its worst music helps us wage war more effectively; at best it brings us into communion with other selves, other species, the natural world from whence we came.

As Aboriginal models can teach us, it should be part of a continuum of creative practice involving sound, stories, and image. Something integrated and interchangeable with geographical location. Something that draws on all media – well we are all aware of that notion through the internet. Capitalism brought us the hierarchy of the specialist and the adoration of the masses, and now it brings us a paradigm where all consumers, at the click of a computer key, can pretend to be Hollywood directors, pop stars, whatever. That's not what I'm advocating. To become skilled in a continuum of creative activities does not mean jumping on the reductive band wagon to mediocrity, it just means you have to work harder – rigorously engaging with the physical materials of music and the processes whereby they can be experienced.

I'm also not suggesting a culture where there is some attainable level for the polymath, a measurable syllabus to ensure consistent creative output. As Oscar Wilde noted “Consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative”.

But we might be able to move from a position of musical impotence to one of strength if we chose to listen to the past. We are in a unique position to learn from the indigenous peoples of

Australia. That doesn't mean Nimbin hippie-style delusions of back to the bush; I'm proposing a society where there is, if not universal musical suffrage as was the norm in traditional societies, at least a situation where if you want to share knowledge, as when a Warlpiri woman tells a sand story, the most natural thing is to paint and sing this knowledge into existence. Technology can be used well to promote such notions but it cannot replace original content, social connection, environmental context, and the wonder of first hand experience, any more than we can replace the earth on which we have become uncontrollable parasites.

Digital technology could be an interface that links many human activities to a direct musical expression. Imagine that every time you witness music in a public encounter such as shopping, sport, or even a government debate, it is actually someone physically playing music – visceral contact. It is early days yet, but when the haptic feedback and kinaesthetic perceptions experienced on a traditional musical instrument becomes possible through interactive devices, we will be able to incorporate electronic media with an expressive physicality not yet possible. I'm talking here of a direct interconnectivity to each other and the physical world – as was practiced by traditional societies for countless generations - the opposite of virtual reality.

A few years ago Germaine Greer in her book “White Fella Jump Up” proposed that Australia's salvation might lie in becoming an Aboriginal Republic – an idea for which buckets of manure were poured over her head by the usual commentators. Well I'd back almost anything that got rid of the British hereditary ruling class and that ridiculous Australian flag. However, the rub of the issue is this; our current models of music have not and are not serving us well. Instead of importing the latest theoretical cultural package from the US or the UK, perhaps there are many elements in our indigenous and colonial history that contain empirical guidance for the future of music as practiced in this country. But we are going to have to believe first, that it is worth trying.

An Aboriginal guide Gerald Quale once told me, you white fellas got the three 'R's: well blackfellas got the three 'L's - look, listen, and learn. This strikes me as a good approach to our history and a methodology for the future if we want there to be music making of any value.

I think he's finished.