

Taking Centre Stage—Indigenous Australian Activism and Popular Music in the 1980s

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are advised that this essay includes the names of people that have died.

It is 20 April, 1979, and darkness cloaks the audience packed into the Apollo Theatre in Adelaide. Suddenly, brightness flashes upon the stage from the lights above. One figure is illuminated. Bob Marley. When his band, The Wailers, begin playing, the audience starts screaming while bouncing in unison to the rhythmic vibrations of electrified reggae rock. Eventually, Marley saunters towards the front of the stage and, without hesitation, leans into the microphone and belts out the lyrics of his politically-charged song, *Zimbabwe*: "Every man got a right to decide his own destiny, and in this judgment there is no partiality." These messages of international black celebration, which circulated throughout the gig, would provide four young Aboriginal men with the stimulus to form the seminal rock band No Fixed Address.

During the 1980s, Aboriginal music elevated the Indigenous Australian experience into the national consciousness at unprecedented proportions. No Fixed Address prefigured this process by pioneering a revolutionary musical style that provided a voice for a new generation of Indigenous Australians. From here, Warumpi Band developed this musical expression and brought it into the mainstream by engaging with Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences alike. Towards the end of the decade, another musical outfit from Yolngu Country, Yothu Yindi, disseminated the ideas articulated by earlier bands to mass commercial audiences around the world. Aboriginal bands used music as an instrument of activism by amplifying voices once stifled. While many Indigenous Australian artists helped facilitate this development, No Fixed Address, Warumpi Band, and Yothu Yindi were especially influential and form the focus of this essay.

Aboriginal song and music traditions have been quite well examined, particularly by ethnomusicologists.¹ Most influential in the area is Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson's *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places* (2004), which presents a history of Indigenous Australian music from pre-colonial contact to present, although 1980s music receives scant coverage.² The study

¹ See, for instance, Jim Wafer and Myfany Turpin, *Recirculating Songs: Revitalising the Singing Practices of Aboriginal Australians* (Hamilton: Hunter Press, 2017); Åse Ottosson, *Making Aboriginal Men and Music in Central Australia* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); John Bradley with Yanyuwa Families, *Singing Saltwater Country: Journey to the Songlines of Carpentaria* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2010).

² Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places: Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004).

of popular Aboriginal music in the 1980s still remains a relatively untilled field. In a general history of that decade, Frank Bongiorno sketches a brief overview of a few prominent Aboriginal bands.³ A number of other works provide extended discussion on the influence of *specific* Indigenous Australian bands of the 1980s.⁴ John Castles and Marcus Breen, however, remain the only scholars to offer publications specifically dedicated to exploring Aboriginal rock of the 1980s.⁵ Still, these authors largely view the different bands of this decade as unconnected groups pursuing unrelated objectives. This paper revises these interpretations by demonstrating that many 1980s Indigenous Australian music groups had in common a preoccupation with contributing to a wider process of cultural and political renewal occurring within Aboriginal communities at the time; whereby Aboriginal Australians began reasserting their identity as First Peoples in contemporary social and political life. Moreover, this essay considers how these connections were entangled with larger transnational and global movements: namely, international musical development and political protest. By building on existing work, this essay seeks to contribute to our understanding of modern Indigenous cultural and political engagement and the place of music within it.

The transformation of Indigenous Australian music during the 1980s is situated within a broader sweep of music history. Music has always occupied a pivotal position in Aboriginal societies.⁶ However, when British settlers landed on Australian shores in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and increasingly dispossessed Aboriginal land, they also attempted to proselytise among Indigenous peoples by replacing traditional music and songs with Christian hymns.⁷ As historian Laura Rademaker shows, missionaries launched the most virulent of these evangelical campaigns, using worship music as an “instrument of control” over Aboriginal peoples.⁸ Musical proselytisation persisted throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

³ Frank Bongiorno, *The Eighties: The Decade That Transformed Australia* (Carlton: Black Inc., 2015), 247-252.

⁴ See, for instance, AW Hurley, "No Fixed Address, but currently in East Berlin: The Australian Bicentennial, Indigenous Protest and the Festival of Political Song in 1988," *Perfect Beat* 15, no.2 (2014): 129-148.

⁵ John Castles, "Tjungaringanyi: Aboriginal Rock (1971-91)," in *Sound Alliances: Indigenous Peoples, Cultural Politics and Popular Music in the Pacific*, edited by Philip Hayward, 11-25 (London: Cassell, 1993).

⁶ Breen, 'Desert Dreams,' 152-153.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Laura Rademaker, *Found In Translation: Many Meanings on a North Australian Mission* (University of Hawaii Press: Hawaii, 2018), 170.

And yet, Aboriginal peoples also transformed Christian music; entangling it with their ceremonial and spiritual life. As Ngarrindjeri musician Leila Rankine has noted, Aboriginal communities have long “related to the hymns” during “a joyous occasion”, as well as after “the passing of a loved one”, making worship music “part of our cultural heritage”.⁹ Since colonisation, then, Aboriginal peoples have been adapting and blending newly-arrived musical traditions to promote cultural survival—a trend that would continue long into the future.

Popular variety theatre, touring from Europe and America, became one of the dominant entertainment formats offered to settlers during the early-nineteenth century. Eventually becoming known as “vaudeville”, these performances regularly included “blacked up” minstrels singing derogatory “negro songs”.¹⁰ Also touring after the abolition of slavery in 1865 were African American jubilee singers.¹¹ With these routines came new genres: most notably, jazz, blues, swing, and gospel.¹²

Inspired by these shows, Aboriginal vaudeville groups started touring nationwide in the 1920s and became increasingly popular in the 1930s. During their performances, Indigenous musicians used traditional gumleaf instruments to recreate the newly-arrived sounds, some even reconfiguring lyrics for political purposes.¹³ One emerging performer, Jimmy Little Senior, drew upon the jubilee melody *Jordan River (I'm Bound To Cross)*—which referenced escaping slavery—to shine a light on the enduring effects of colonisation in Australia: regularly singing to his audiences that “I came to the river and I couldn't get across.”¹⁴

Radio arrived in Australia during the 1920s and had a major influence on the country's musical soundscape. American genres such as rockabilly, hillbilly, folk, western, blues, and yodelling were transmitted nationwide.¹⁵ These genres almost exclusively explored pastoral themes: horses and cattle, drinking and gambling, love and fighting.¹⁶ Younger Indigenous Australians

⁹ Cited in Marcus Breen, *Our Place, Our Music: Australian Popular Music in Perspective* (Aboriginal Studies Press: Canberra, 1989), 17.

¹⁰ Kathryn Wells, “Jazz Swing Gumleaf: beneath the mirrors of vaudeville,” 1860s-1960s, paper presented at the Musicology Society of Australia National Conference, Perth, 6 December 2018.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Dunbar-Hall and Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places*, 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Wells, “Jazz Swing Gumleaf”.

¹⁵ Dunbar-Hall and Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places*, 44.

¹⁶ Mudrooroo Narrogin, *Writing From the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature* (South Yarra, Hyland House, 1990), 63.

began turning their ear to these radiocast genres.¹⁷ The music seemed to reflect the new lifestyles forced upon them by colonisation.¹⁸

In the post-war era, Aboriginal musicians adopted these pastoral styles for political purposes: the Australian Aborigines League used the vaudeville format to protest exclusion from Victorian jubilee celebrations by presenting *An Aboriginal Moomba*; Jimmy Little Junior took his messages to Redfern; and returned Aboriginal soldiers, banned from entering dance halls, created their own jazz clubs.¹⁹ During the 1960s, Georgia Lee recorded politically-infused blues melodies while Vincent Lingiari and Ted Egan recorded a song about Gurindji land rights claims—*Gurindji Blues*.²⁰ Across time, Aboriginal musicians have blended emerging musical genres with traditional music for the purposes of cultural preservation.

The next major musical advance occurred when rock and roll swept the world during the 1960s and 1970s. As ethnomusicologist Tony Martin explains, other genres performed by Aboriginal artists at the time were reborn under the genre of “country music” and mostly appealed to an “older, predominately rural fanbase”.²¹ As seen, these new genres were routinely used for social protest, with artists discussing political issues relevant to all Indigenous Australians. Indeed, *Brown Skin Baby*, written and performed by Bob Randall in the 1960s, protested the widespread removal of Aboriginal children from their families.²² Still, songs emerging from such genres remained associated with pastoral themes and older fanbases, whereas rock music was largely seen as having a special relevance for youth audiences.²³ But before No Fixed Address, rock had only been performed by Aboriginal musicians in Darwin.²⁴ Urban Indigenous artists were yet to perform music highly relevant for a youth audience.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mudrooroo Narrogin, *Writing From the Fringe*, 63.

¹⁹ Kathryn Wells, "Saltwater String-Bands, Gurindji Blues, and Bagot Rock: global intersections and local rights movements in the Top End, 1950s-1970s," paper presented at the NT History Colloquium, Darwin, 27 October 2018.

²⁰ Kathryn Wells, "Georgia Lee—'Original Diva of Jazz and Blues Down Under' (1921-2010)," paper presented at the *Indigenous Biography Conference Slam*, Australian National University, 16 November 2018.

²¹ Toby Martin, *Yodelling Boundary Riders: Country Music in Australia Since the 1920s* (Melbourne: Lyrebird Press, 2015), 4.

²² Bob Randall, *Brown Skin Baby (They Took Me Away)*, Personal Release. 1964. Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3ytJioxKzI>.

²³ Martin, *Yodelling Boundary Riders*, 4-6.

²⁴ Wells, "Bagot Rock."

A large Aboriginal audience was growing for a new musical soundtrack. Throughout the 1970s many young Indigenous people moved from remote and rural areas to urban and metropolitan centres.²⁵ Geographer Fay Gale observed at the time that many were searching for new opportunities in education, employment, and social services while others were forcibly transported through state institutions.²⁶ Moreover, with the removal of the Aboriginal Protection Board, and government control over missions and stations declining, Indigenous peoples had more opportunity to move freely.²⁷ Indeed, in the 1971 Census, the first to include self-identified Indigenous peoples in the overall count, 44% of Aboriginals declared themselves as living in an urban area.²⁸ Still, the dominant settler society denied the political claims of these younger people, and many non-Indigenous citizens considered that Indigenous peoples residing within urban spaces lacked "authentic" Aboriginality.²⁹ Existing Indigenous musical traditions and genres, even with their adaptability and resilience, seemed to lack something for this new generation of urban Indigenous Australians, who needed a voice expressing their experiences and ambitions.

Transformations also occurred within Indigenous Australian activism during the 1970s. A cultural renewal took place as Indigenous campaigners reasserted their Aboriginal identity in political and social life. Activists had traditionally emphasised the *equality* between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples under British law.³⁰ But against the backdrop of global decolonisation and racial equality movements in North America and South Africa, activists began stressing that Indigenous Australians possessed a *unique* connection to Country and thus had a *special* political status.³¹ This mode of activism was reflected in the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in 1972.³² Its formation—outside Parliament House in Canberra—emphasised that Indigenous Australians had not surrendered their sovereignty. Aboriginal

²⁵ Andrew Stafford, *Pig City: From the Saints to Savage Garden* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2014), 156.

²⁶ Fay Gale, *Urban Aborigines* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1972).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ John Taylor and Martin Bell, "Continuity and change in Indigenous Australian population mobility," in *Population Mobility and Indigenous Peoples in Australasia and North America*, ed. John Taylor and Martin Bell (London: Routledge, 2004), 33.

²⁹ Lynette Russell, *Savage Imaginings: Historical and Contemporary Constructions of Australian Aboriginalities* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2001) 15.

³⁰ Barry Morris, *Protest, land rights, and riots: postcolonial struggles in Australia in the 1980s* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2013) 13.

³¹ Bain Attwood, *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights: A Documentary History* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 21-22.

³² Gary Foley, "A Reflection on the first thirty days of the Embassy," in *The Aboriginal Tent Embassy: Sovereignty, Black Power, Land Rights and the State*, ed. Gary Foley, Andrew Schaap, and Edwina Howell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014) 31.

activists demanded recognition as a group of peoples who possessed unique rights based on their distinct connection to land.³³

In 1972 Gough Whitlam brought the Australian Labor Party to government for the first time in 23 years. It was also around this time that fighting for land rights had become a key political strategy in Indigenous Australian activism.³⁴ Eventually, the Fraser Coalition Government handed back land to Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory with the 1976 *Land Rights Act*.³⁵ Fraser trusted Indigenous Australian peoples with self-management and financial independence, while Aboriginal people saw that obtaining autonomy over their own lives was crucial to reasserting identity.³⁶

To bolster claims about Indigenous people's special connection to land, and thus stimulate the process of cultural renewal, activists highlighted the unique history of Aboriginal Australia, which led to a broader effervescence of Indigenous Australian art.³⁷ Theatre, literature, poetry, fashion, painting, and non-fiction brought the historical and contemporary experience of Indigenous Australians to the national stage.³⁸ Most famously, Sally Morgan published her best-selling memoir *My Place* (1987), which recounted the discovery of her Aboriginal heritage.³⁹ Indeed, in 1981, the same year No Fixed Address began recording music, the historian Henry Reynolds released a landmark history of Indigenous Australian dispossession and frontier conflict—*The Other Side of the Frontier*.⁴⁰ Activists—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous—were supporting a reassertion of Aboriginal identity by highlighting the experiences of Indigenous Australians.

Existing *musical* styles, with their pastoral images, seemed to lack relevance for the new generation of urban Aboriginal Australians who had moved into cities. Some of this generation had been influenced by the culture of the missions as a 1958 report on traditional music in Wilcannia stated that the children were distancing themselves from customary music forms:

³³ Attwood, *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights*, 21-22; Billy Griffiths, *Deep Time Dreaming: Uncovering Ancient Australia* (Carlton: Black Inc., 2018), 5.

³⁴ Breen, "Desert Dreams," 158.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Attwood, *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights*, 23.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Bongiorno, *The Eighties*, 248-252.

³⁹ Sally Morgan, *My Place* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre, 1983).

⁴⁰ Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European invasion of Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999).

"the younger people don't like to hear [traditional music]...they giggle and say it makes them feel 'shamed'...'we're white folks now', they say."⁴¹ Young people felt that they needed a voice that was urban, but also relevant for a period of cultural renewal; one that drew on a range of influences relevant to their lives and charted the course between essentialism and assimilation.

No Fixed Address used music as an instrument of activism by establishing a new musical style that could operate as this voice. Stimulated by the black-celebration and resistance messages promoted by the 1979 Bob Marley & The Wailers tour, four Aboriginal men—Bart Willoughby, Leslie Freeman, Ricky Harrison, and John Miller—established their formative reggae rock band.⁴² Another member to join the band was the multi-instrumentalist Veronica Rankine. Though Indigenous Australian women have made many important contributions to music and literature throughout history, Rankine was one of the few women who featured in popular Aboriginal music during the 1980s.

Along with another Adelaide Indigenous band—Us Mob—No Fixed Address first recorded music for a film they wrote and starred in: *Wrong Side of the Road*. Released in 1981, the film follows the bands throughout various performances, showcasing the prejudice and racism they encounter along the way.⁴³ One song written for the film by No Fixed Address, *We Have Survived*, eventually acquired anthemic status among Indigenous Australians. This song represents the emergence of a musical style designed to provide a voice for the new generation of Aboriginal people. In fact, No Fixed Address were part of this generation themselves. Willoughby and Miller were members of the Stolen Generation—taken from their parents from Anangu communities in Central Australia and forcibly transported to Adelaide through state institutions.⁴⁴ Freeman and Rankine were both from Ngarrindjeri Country in South Australia, and moved to Adelaide seeking educational opportunities.⁴⁵ Willoughby, Miller, and Freeman were all cousins. Harrison, from the Gunaikurnai community in Morwell, Victoria, was related to Freeman through marriage and recruited to the band. All of the band members agreed on the

⁴¹ Cited in Marcus Breen, *Our Place, Our Music* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1989), 14.

⁴² Dunbar-Hall and Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places*, 47.

⁴³ *Wrong Side of the Road*. Directed by Ned Lander, 1981, DVD.

⁴⁴ Donald Robertson, "No Fixed Address: young, black and proud," *Roadrunner Magazine*, 1 August, 1980. Online: <https://roadrunnertwice.com.au/2015/03/no-fixed-address-young-black-and-proud/>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

name No Fixed Address because none of them had a permanent home address when they formed.

In *We Have Survived*, the band offer an anthem of cultural survival and continuity:

You can't change the rhythm of my soul,
you can't tell me just what to do.
You can't break my bones by putting me down,
or taking the things that belong to me.

We have survived the white man's world
and the horror and the torment of it all.
We have survived the white man's world
and you know you can't change that.⁴⁶

By speaking as a city-based band, No Fixed Address made clear that survival from colonisation and urban dwelling are not mutually exclusive. In presenting this story, the band shone a light on the contemporary experience of all Aboriginal Australians: illuminating the "horror" and "torment" of history that persists in the present. Indeed, the video clip of *We Have Survived* shows the police violently shutting down a gig and arresting a band member without justification. Years after the initial release of *We Have Survived*, Bart Willoughby reflected that "the song is about us who have survived singing to our spirits, to the one's who didn't survive. The one's who had no justice, no say, no recognition, but we recognise you and we salute you."⁴⁷ Clearly, *We Have Survived* gave a voice to those without one. But, by emphasising survival, the song celebrated an ancient, lived tradition that began long before 1788; one worthy of special recognition. Being the first recorded Aboriginal reggae rock song, this had direct relevance for a new urban generation reasserting their Aboriginal identity. And as *Wrong Side of the Road* shows, Aboriginal danced with pride and joy when they saw No Fixed Address perform.

No Fixed Address engineered a revolutionary transnational sound by blending musical genres. As Jon Piccini highlights, transnational solidarity became an increasingly important aspect of

⁴⁶ No Fixed Address, *We Have Survived*. Black Australia Records, 1981, CD.

⁴⁷ Cited in Justin McManus, "'We were the first': How No Fixed Address made white Australia listen," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 January, 2017. Online: <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/we-were-the-first-how-no-fixed-address-made-white-australia-listen-20170113-gtqqym.html>.

Indigenous Australian activism in the couple of decades leading up to the 1980s, allowing activists to tap into the global process of decolonisation and make claims as part of a more powerful collective.⁴⁸ Reggae emerged from Jamaica in the 1960s, being used by artists to foster international black solidarity.⁴⁹ Indeed, in an interview with music critic Molly Meldrum during his 1979 Australian tour, Marley described reggae as a "road to consciousness" that could bring about a "revolution of the mind" by conveying "the reality that has been hidden."⁵⁰ This was considered subversive. In 1979, *60 Minutes* in Australia labelled reggae as "rebel music" born in the "poverty and filth of the slums of Kingston, Jamaica" that was "the sound of revolution."⁵¹ By blending reggae and rock, with the latter owing much to African American music produced in the early-twentieth century, No Fixed Address gestured towards a subversive international black power movement.

Still, bands like No Fixed Address did not divorce themselves from the traditions of their ancestors. The incorporation of the didgeridoo in *We Have Survived* shows that city-based Indigenous Australians were directly linked to the traditional musical expressions that colonisers sought to destroy. Lynnette Russell identifies that challenging perceptions of urban Indigenous peoples as "inauthentic" was vital to the cultural renewal of the period.⁵² In doing so, the band redesigned the messages of social protest that had long been present in Aboriginal music for a new generation of Indigenous peoples. Through *We Have Survived*, No Fixed Address thus engineered a revolutionary sound by blending musical forms—musical instrumentation became a potent form of activism.

It is important to recognise that it was no coincidence No Fixed Address emerged from Adelaide. The city is situated nearby several Aboriginal communities. Symptomatically, the increasing movement of youth towards urban centres resulted in Adelaide developing a significant and diverse Aboriginal population.⁵³ The Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music—where the band was formed—was established at the University of Adelaide to provide opportunities for these young people by putting them back in touch with traditional music

⁴⁸ Piccini, 2016, 156-166.

⁴⁹ Anita Waters, *Race, Class, and Political Symbols: Rastafari and Reggae in Jamaican Politics* (London: New Brunswick, 1999) 290-291.

⁵⁰ Bob Marley, "Interview with Molly Meldrum," *Countdown*, 1979. Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgYPpURvyQI>.

⁵¹ *60 Minutes*, "The Rastafarians," 1979, online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YTNj9Zrcsc>.

⁵² Russell, *Savage Imaginings*, 15.

⁵³ Breen, "Desert Dreams," 160.

forms.⁵⁴ Indeed, Adelaide was a vibrant meeting place where different Aboriginal nations could share creative energies. A consequence of this dynamic energy were large music concerts across the state, such as the National Aboriginal Day gig in Taperoo, South Australia, which gave No Fixed Address their first major impetus in 1980. The cultural milieu of Adelaide, with its dynamic pan-Aboriginal community, helped propel No Fixed Address towards success.

But the "lean pickings" of the Adelaide music scene and limited interest from record companies still prevented Indigenous Australian music from breaching mainstream consciousness.⁵⁵ Even though community radio had a role in popularising this new musical expression, mainstream society remained obsessed with the Top Forty format.⁵⁶ *We Have Survived* did not appear on any music charts. Certainly, the song, and the movie it accompanied, would have exposed some non-Indigenous people to Aboriginal political issues for the first time—particularly those in the urban middle class. For instance, in 1982 *Wrong Side of the Road* screened at the Electric Shadows Cinema in Canberra. As the *Canberra Times* explained, the film, which won the Jury Prize at the Australian Film Institute the year prior, educated "even those of us who spend a lifetime without ever meeting an Aboriginal" about "a major rift in Australian society."⁵⁷ Yet, in spite of this impact, the song did not challenge prevailing social structures *en masse*. Access to a more mainstream audience was needed to achieve further goals.

No Fixed Address did not have a major commercial breakthrough. Nevertheless, the band continued to break ground. In 1982, the band's second album, *From My Eyes*, was launched by Prime Minister Bob Hawke, and they became the first Aboriginal band to appear on *Countdown* and tour overseas. Later on in the decade, Willoughby performed with his cousin's band Coloured Stone, formed his own group called Mixed Relations, and eventually joined Yothu Yindi. And perhaps most importantly, the band produced a style that helped facilitate the emergence of important Aboriginal bands such as Us Mob, Coloured Stone, Raw Deal, and Scrap Heap. Above all, No Fixed Address helped establish a musical style that could be used to highlight the unique political claims open to Aboriginal peoples, encouraging participation in the broader political process of cultural renewal. A musical tradition born on the streets of

⁵⁴ Castles, "Aboriginal Rock Music," 14-15.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Breen, "Desert Dreams," 162.

⁵⁷ "Aboriginal view across the rift," *The Canberra Times*, 12 March, 1982.

Adelaide—in the mire of injustice and racism—finally gave a voice to those who had been stifled for too long.

The Carinda Hotel, outback New South Wales. It is March 1983, and a bunch of blokes, perched on bar stools with schooners in hand, suddenly jolt upright with shock. Someone behind them has started singing, disrupting familiar pub chatter. "Put on your red shoes and dance the blues", the singer exclaims. At once, the entire pub turns around to catch a glimpse of the mystery performer. Standing before them, next to a bare-foot double-bass player, is a wiry man with platinum-blond hair, wearing white gloves and flares. But the patrons are quickly distracted by movement in their peripheral vision. Glancing across the room, the townspeople see, for the first time, through the haze of cigarette smoke, an Aboriginal couple dancing together in a pub. Men begin heckling, while others leap from their seats to mimic the dancers. Amid all of the mockery, Carinda was experiencing a profound moment. The white-dominated pub had been infiltrated by a young Aboriginal couple and misfit musicians. And it was all being caught on camera.

Unknown to the patrons of The Carinda Hotel on that afternoon in March 1983, the outlandish singer was international pop icon David Bowie. At the pinnacle of his superstardom, Bowie had travelled to Carinda—with two students from the Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre in Sydney—to film a music video for his forthcoming song, *Let's Dance*. While documenting the Australian landscapes that mesmerised Bowie, the music video also drew attention to the everyday injustices facing Indigenous Australians. In the video, footage flashes of Indigenous peoples scrubbing roads and sidewalks on their knees, pulling heavy machinery, and, indeed, being degraded simply for dancing in a pub. Peaking at Number 2 on the Australian Album Charts—and sitting at Number 24 overall for 1983, ahead of *Africa* by Toto—the music video was broadcast nationwide; shining a light on another kind of Australian experience. Though virtually unexplored by historians, this music video played an important role in dramatising the political claims of Indigenous activists. But it also piqued interest in music *itself* as a form of activism, showcasing its ability to connect mainstream audiences with new ideas. It was clear that the platform established by No Fixed Address could be built upon, and numerous bands would do so. The most significant developments were made by Warumpi Band, who brought the new musical style from Adelaide well into the mainstream.

The Warumpi Band members originated in the Aboriginal settlement of Papunya in the Central Desert Region of the Northern Territory.⁵⁸ Papunya began as a reserve built by the Australian Government in the 1970s, which brought together more than 1000 people from several different language groups, presenting an opportunity for unique exchanges of ritual knowledge and experience.⁵⁹ Throughout the 1970s, a distinct artistic style developed in the region, called Papunya Tula, that attracted international attention and became central to the cultural renewal of the period. Indeed, Papunya became a meeting place where Indigenous peoples could share creative energies—particularly within Geoffrey Banden’s art school.⁶⁰ Importantly, Papunya also housed an intermittent non-Indigenous population, who travelled to the region for work.⁶¹ An opportunity was presented for the broader cultural effervescence to be spread amongst non-Indigenous peoples.

Formed not long after No Fixed Address pioneered their revolutionary style, Warumpi Band retained the political edge of their predecessors and continued to draw on transnational influences by playing reggae rock. Indeed, the band represented the vibrant and diverse nature of Papunya. Sammy Butcher, a Luritja-speaking man who returned to the region after attending boarding school in Alice Springs, would take up the guitar and recruit his brother, Gordon Butcher, to perform the drums. Neil Murray, a white man the group met while working on a Papunya outstation, joined the group on rhythm guitar and backing vocals, and also played a significant role in song writing. George Burarrwanga, a Gumatj man who came to Papunya from Elcho Island to learn Aboriginal languages, completed the line-up by taking up the roles of lead singer, co-songwriter, and didgeridoo player. He would eventually become known for being a charismatic frontman who regularly donned slim-fitting black jeans painted with Aboriginal flags.⁶² The band name reflected the dynamism of the Papunya region too. Warumpi Hill is a Dreaming site near Papunya, where ancestors from across the Western Desert gathered.⁶³

Warumpi Band focused their style more than No Fixed Address, portraying specifically *Aboriginal* experiences in their music. In 1983, Warumpi released their first song—*Jailanguru*

⁵⁸ Andrew McMillian, *Strict Rules* (Sydney: Hachette, 2017), 3.

⁵⁹ Vivien Johnson, *Once Upon a Time in Papunya* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2010), 3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid* 4.

⁶¹ Dunbar-Hall and Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places*, 137.

⁶² Ottosson, *Making Aboriginal Men and Music*, 47.

⁶³ Johnson, *Papunya*, 2.

Pakarnu (Out from Jail).⁶⁴ Addressing issues of Aboriginal youth incarceration, this track also became the first rock song to incorporate an Aboriginal language (Luritja).⁶⁵ Their music was used as political commentary for audiences who could only speak traditional languages. The band subsequently became very popular in remote Aboriginal communities and they began charting new touring networks in the Northern Territory and the Kimberley.⁶⁶ Warumpi began incorporating country music sounds in their songs too. This bolstered their appeal with older Aboriginal people, and those living in remote areas, who were more familiar with this style. But it also meant that older musical traditions—once having been deployed to erase Aboriginal culture—were put to the purposes of cultural preservation.⁶⁷ Above all, then, Warumpi Band slightly realigned the trajectory of No Fixed Address' musical activism to spread political messages to a wider Aboriginal audience.

Warumpi Band's style also represented a concerted attempt to bring new musical expressions to non-Indigenous audiences. The band described themselves to the *National Times* as "a group of musicians who have synthesised the best of two cultures into one musical form."⁶⁸ It is symbolic that the Papunya group included Neil Murray in the band, the white man they had met while working at an outstation. This approach of reaching out is encapsulated in their 1984 hit song *Blackfella / Whitefella*, which encouraged cooperation between different groups to fight racism. They offered a bridge to connect white and black audiences by declaring that in fighting racism "it doesn't what matter what your colour, as long as you a true fella" because "we need more brothers if we're to make it, we need more sisters if we're to save it."⁶⁹ Warumpi Band embedded emotions of love and hope into *Blackfella / Whitefella*, orienting contemporary Aboriginal musical styles towards the future and further attracting mainstream attention. But this shift remained rooted in political objectives. Music was a device used to help encourage white solidarity with the Indigenous Australian cultural revival.

Warumpi Band also used music as an instrument of activism by forging relationships with white artists. In 1986 Warumpi took Midnight Oil, the most politically-influential band in the

⁶⁴ Warumpi Band, *Jailanguru Pakarnu (Single)*, CAAMA. 1983. CD.

⁶⁵ Dunbar-Hall and Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places*, 47-48.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Wells, "Jazz Swing Gumleaf."

⁶⁸ In Breen, *Our Place, Our Music*, 60.

⁶⁹ Warumpi Band, *Big Name No Blankets (Album)*, Powderworks. 1985. CD.

country, on a tour throughout Central Australia.⁷⁰ Unfortunately, the Oils had not yet overtly forayed into Indigenous Australian political issues and the tour, billed as the *Blackfella-Whitefella Tour*, proved tumultuous. Some performances flopped and Midnight Oil struggled to engage certain remote communities. The concert at Docker River evoked the following response: "There's little connection or applause...before they've even struck the first chord everyone gets up and leaves."⁷¹ But on the other hand, at Yuendumu, "Everybody's on their feet, adults, kids, blacks, and whites dancing all over the shop."⁷² The tour was a simulacrum for the challenging task of reconciliation.

And yet, the tour marks an important moment in Aboriginal political activism. It decisively shifted Midnight Oil's style. *Diesel and Dust* (1987), the Midnight Oil album inspired by the tour, reached Number 1 on every national chart.⁷³ The album reflected an increasing commitment to Aboriginal politics, especially land rights. These messages were imbued in several songs on the album such as *Beds Are Burning* and *The Dead Heart*, the latter being written for a film about the 1985 handover of Uluru.⁷⁴ Young Australian fans were directly exposed to the complex and violent history of colonisation, as well as its enduring consequences. The international tour following the album release also exposed international audiences to these political topics.⁷⁵ In 1989 Midnight Oil consolidated their commitment to Indigenous music by appearing on the *Building Bridges* album that featured white and black artists.⁷⁶ Reaching Number 47 on the Australian Album Charts, it represented a long overdue embrace of contemporary Aboriginal music by a mainstream audience.⁷⁷

So, the *Blackfella Whitefella Tour* shifted the way Midnight Oil approached Indigenous issues. By reconfiguring the musical approach of *No Fixed Address* and engaging with white artists through song making, Warumpi Band used music as an instrument of activism to spread political messages to a broader mainstream audience. Just as Bowie's music brought Indigenous

⁷⁰ Simon Steggle, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained: Midnight Oil and the politics of rock," in *From Pop to Punk to Postmodernism: Popular Music and Australian Culture from the 1960s to the 1990s*, ed. Philip Hayward (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992), 142-145.

⁷¹ McMillan, *Strict Rules*, 54-55.

⁷² *Ibid* 78.

⁷³ Steggle, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained," 142-145.

⁷⁴ Bongiorno, *The Eighties*, 250; Midnight Oil, *Diesel and Dust*, Columbia Records. 1987. CD.

⁷⁵ Steggle, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained," 142-145.

⁷⁶ Multiple Artists, *Building Bridges* CBS Music. 1989. CD.

⁷⁷ Lawe Davies, "Aboriginal Rock Music: Space and Place," in *Rock and Popular Music: Politics, Policies, Institutions*, edited by Tony Bennett, Simon Firth, Lawrence Grossberg, John Shepherd, and Graeme Turner (London: Routledge, 1992), 261.

Australians into a white-dominated establishment built upon Aboriginal Country, Warumpi Band helped carry an Indigenous Australian cultural renewal into mainstream white society. The necessary groundwork was prepared for Indigenous Australian music to have a prodigious influence over mainstream society.

One Aboriginal band that joined Midnight Oil on an international tour was Yothu Yindi. This band would facilitate another important development in musical activism towards the end of the 1980s. Yothu Yindi used their music in a concerted attempt to disseminate their ideas as widely as possible in commercial settings. Comprising members from Yolngu communities in North West Arnhem Land, these musicians have an important history behind them. In 1963 the Australian government annexed land from the Yirrkala peoples—a Yolngu community—for mining purposes. Yolngu peoples famously presented Bark Tree Petitions to protest the decision.⁷⁸ Galarrwuy Yunupingu was a leading figure in this protest and other land rights activities. His brother, Mandawuy Yunupingu, would become the lead spokesperson and singer for Yothu Yindi.⁷⁹ It was widely known that the group was associated with prominent Aboriginal activist circles.⁸⁰

The rise of Yothu Yindi occurred immediately after the turbulent Bicentenary celebrations of 26 January 1988. The historian Frank Bongiorno highlights that on this day contending understandings of the nation's past came into conflict and were either upheld or discarded.⁸¹ During the official commemorations, a counter-rally of 40,000 marched through the streets of Sydney, bearing the slogan that "White Australia Has A Black History."⁸² The political divisions around Indigenous issues had been drawn. It was opportune time for Yothu Yindi to widely disseminate political messages.

Yothu Yindi used music as an instrument by promoting protest agendas within this context. The band retained the syncretic musical styles of their predecessors by blending traditional

⁷⁸ Philip Hayward and Karl Nueunfeldt, "Yothu Yindi: Context and Significance," in *Sound Alliances: Indigenous Peoples, Cultural Politics and Popular Music in the Pacific*, edited by Philip Hayward (London: Cassell, 1993) 177.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Hayward and Nueunfeldt, "Yothu Yindi," 177.

⁸¹ Bongiorno, *The Eighties*, 241-247.

⁸² Ibid.

Yolngu instrumentation with electrified guitars. Indeed, the band would often start their performances with five band members moving onto the stage in *nanga* (loincloth), chanting in Yolngu languages while establishing a beat with *bilma* (clapsticks) and *yidaki* (didgeridoo). After the audience was thoroughly engaged, another five members would storm the stage in jeans and tee-shirts, blasting electric guitars, drums, and keyboards.⁸³ Even the band name has deep roots in Yolngu culture. The principle of *yothu-yindi* (child-mother) is central to the Yolngu peoples, marking the relationship of difference out of which a good society develops.⁸⁴

The group's debut album, *Homeland Movement*, released in 1989, showed a strong awareness of the post-Bicentenary political climate. For instance, the album includes a song called *Luku-Wanawu Manikay (1788)*, which presents an Indigenous Australian perspective on the invasion of Australia.⁸⁵ The title of the album itself is also significant. The Homeland Movement was one of the critical manifestations of cultural renewal in this era.⁸⁶ In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Indigenous peoples were often moved onto church missions or outstations after being dispossessed of their lands—these were the Stolen Generations. From the beginning of the 1970s onwards, Indigenous peoples restored and emphasised their *special* connection to Country, with small families and communities returning to traditional lands.⁸⁷ The lead song the album, *Homeland Movement*, refers to the relationships between land ownership and cultural revival:

Back in the 1970s there was a movement on the land
Yolngu people moved back to their promised land
Power to the people, power to the land
Power for cultural revival, power for survival⁸⁸

Re-establishing connection with the land was identified as an important method of cultural survival. But just as Warumpi Band incorporated country sounds, Yothu Yindi also gestured to earlier music traditions in this song. By using the biblical image of the "promised land",

⁸³ Matthew Ricketson, "Signs of a Treaty," *Time*, 28 October, 1991, 68-69.

⁸⁴ Samuel Curkpatrick, "Yothu Yindi and the Yolngu culture: dreaming of a brighter day," *The Conversation*, 4 June, 2013. Online: <https://theconversation.com/yothu-yindi-and-the-yolngu-culture-dreaming-of-a-brighter-day-14904>.

⁸⁵ Yothu Yindi, *Homeland Movement*, Mushroom Records, 1989, CD.

⁸⁶ Dunbar-Hall, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places*, 252.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Yothu Yindi, "Homeland Movement," 1989.

traditional Christian music was repurposed to promote survival. Indeed, since the 1970s, Yolngu peoples have utilised Christian worship music to express their relationship to Country.⁸⁹ Yothu Yindi adapted and continued that tradition.

The band did not ascend to international prominence until their next album, *Tribal Voices*, was released in 1991.⁹⁰ Due to an increasing awareness of Indigenous issues after 1988, white artists—who had been engaged by previous Aboriginal bands—were especially keen to become involved in Indigenous Australian protest movements.⁹¹ The activist connections of Yothu Yindi meant that numerous influential artists wanted to help create *Tribal Voices*. These included Peter Garrett (of Midnight Oil) and Paul Kelly, two of the most eminent Australian artists of the time.⁹² Given the 1989 commercial success of *Building Bridges*, record companies were also willing to devote significant resources to Aboriginal music. White artists had certainly been long connected with Indigenous issues, but this engagement could now occur within highly-commercialised settings.

Garrett and Kelly devoted significant attention to writing *Treaty* alongside Yothu Yindi. This song was produced for the purpose of securing radio airplay and drawing attention to the need for a treaty between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians; a promise that Bob Hawke had failed to honour.⁹³ After an electronic remix of the song was released, it became an international dance-floor hit, entering the Australian singles charts in July and peaking at Number 11, spending 30 weeks in the Top 100.⁹⁴ Thousands upon thousands heard that "land was never given up...the land was never bought and sold...treaty now."⁹⁵ Music was being used to make widespread political claims to an international audience. In 1991 *Time* magazine published a write up of the band, concluding to a global readership that the band was "leading the way in bridging the gap between black and white."⁹⁶

It is important to consider the visual dimensions of Yothu Yindi's musical works. The album covers and brochures included replicas of original Aboriginal paintings. During this period,

⁸⁹ Rademaker, *Found In Translation*, 170.

⁹⁰ Yothu Yindi, *Tribal Voices*, Mushroom Records, 1991, CD.

⁹¹ Castles, "Aboriginal Rock Music," 24.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Bongiorno, *The Eighties*, 250.

⁹⁴ Hayward and Nueunfeldt, "Yothu Yindi," 175.

⁹⁵ Yothu Yindi, *Tribal Voices*, Mushroom Records, 1991, CD.

⁹⁶ Ricketson, "Signs of a Treaty," 68-69.

Aboriginal art became desired across the world.⁹⁷ Including these artistic styles made the messages of Yothu Yindi more commercially desirable but also allowed the band to make powerful claims about cultural survival and continuity. For instance, on one later album, *Birkuta—Wild Honey*, the album artwork was created by Yunupingu's mother, Makurrngu Yunupingu, who belonged to a community that was nearly destroyed by colonial massacres in the nineteenth century—the Galpu clan.⁹⁸ By including her artwork, the band celebrated her survival.

Yothu Yindi's commercial success levelled out after the release of *Tribal Voice*. Their subsequent albums, *Freedom*, *Birgutta*, *One Blood*, and *Garma*, failed to match their 1991 successes.⁹⁹ In 1992, however, Yunupingu was named Australian of the Year and continued work as a vocal spokesperson for Indigenous Australian issues. Music helped elevate the young artist into a greater position of influence. Nevertheless, Yothu Yindi eventually lost some control of their messages as they entered highly-commercialised spaces. For instance, in a review of *Treaty*, one white author thought the song reflected "a great sadness ... the tone is mournful, unsettling, a lament for the buried country."¹⁰⁰ However, Yunupingu himself publicly expressed that the song intended to capture how Aboriginal land is alive and dynamic; but that it needs to return to Indigenous peoples.¹⁰¹ As Yothu Yindi's messages moved away from their origins, they were sometimes interpreted in ways the band had not intended. Still, the band used music as an instrument of activism by developing a strong commercial demand for Indigenous Australian protest music. Voices that were once stifled became amplified. The world could now hear about a culture that was living, dynamic, and vibrant.

Over the course of the 1980s, inspiration from a Bob Marley concert was developed into an innovative musical style that elevated the contemporary and historical experience of Indigenous Australians into the national and international consciousness. It became an instrument of activism by bolstering a broader process of cultural renewal. No Fixed Address

⁹⁷ Bongiorno, *The Eighties*, 248-250.

⁹⁸ Karl Nueunfeldt, "Yothu Yindi: Agendas and Aspirations," in *Sound Alliances: Indigenous Peoples, Cultural Politics and Popular Music in the Pacific*, edited by Philip Hayward (London: Cassell, 1993) 204.

⁹⁹ Hayward and Nueunfeldt, "Yothu Yindi," 176.

¹⁰⁰ Castles, "Aboriginal Rock," 21.

¹⁰¹ Nueunfeldt, "Yothu Yindi: Agendas and Aspirations," 199.

helped construct the foundations of this cultural renewal by pioneering a revolutionary musical style. By reconfiguring this style, Warumpi Band encouraged non-Indigenous solidarity with Indigenous Australian cultural and political revival. Using the tools created by these previous bands, Yothu Yindi spread ideas about cultural renewal and land rights to a mass global audience. Politics and music became intertwined, as Aboriginal bands built on the innovations of their predecessors and added their own. No Fixed Address, Warumpi Band, and Yothu Yindi were the latest in a long line of Aboriginal artists who adapted and blended musical genres for their own purposes.

Most importantly, these musical advances revealed the dynamic texture of Indigenous Australia to a wider audience than ever before. As these artists took centre stage, so too did important political issues. In the end, examining the sounds of the past reminds us that, if we listen carefully, the anthems of change may just be all around us. By returning to music that has come before, the activists of today are reminded that, with the power of song behind them, change might not be so far away.

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