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IDENTITY, LANGUAGE AND COLLABORATION IN INDIGENOUS MUSIC

Clint Bracknell

Introduction: What is 'Indigenous Australian music'?

I begin this chapter by arguing against any sort of prescriptive definitions for Indigenous Australian music. I will then illustrate change in public discourse on Indigenous music by examining the Australian Recording Industry Association (ARIA) awards for Best Indigenous Release (1987–1998) and for Best World Music Album (1999–2016). The chapter then proceeds to highlight two increasingly common features of the work of Indigenous musical artists: reference to one's specific Indigenous cultural identity (e.g. Noongar, Bundjalung, Yorta Yorta) in popular music performance, and writing and performing popular music in Indigenous languages. The chapter concludes by illustrating how frequently Indigenous artists collaborate with non-Indigenous artists in the production and performance of popular music. These practices serve as examples of Indigenous agency: position-taking within the cultural field of popular music.

'Indigenous music' is not a musical genre

The Australia Council for the Arts' *Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Music* refers to Indigenous music as being

‘created primarily by Indigenous Australian people, or based on the cultural property of Indigenous Australian people’ (Quiggin 2007, p. 4). Expanding on this statement, it seems Indigenous music may be distinguished according to both:

- Its inclusion of musical or lyrical content derived from Indigenous people, and
- The Indigenous status of the artists involved in its production.

I use the term ‘artist’ to refer to singers and musicians who write (or co-write), record and perform original music – and the term ‘Indigenous artist’ to refer to those artists who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people as defined by the Australian government’s current working definition:

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he [or she] lives (Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 1981, p. 8).

The binary construction of Indigenous/non-Indigenous is a key feature of institutional and media discourse in Australia, and it remains pertinent because the ongoing experience of colonisation remains an undeniable common thread linking the hundreds of linguistically and culturally diverse Indigenous peoples of Australia. The colonisation of Australia and ensuing government policies of assimilation continue to endanger pre-colonial Aboriginal singing practices, with approximately 98 per cent of these musical traditions presently considered lost (Corn 2012, p. 240). According to Castles, some Aboriginal musicians at the University of Adelaide’s Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music (CASM) in the 1970s were ‘brought up to despise tribal music or anything it implied, to distance themselves

from the past and move into the assimilated future' (Castles 1992, p. 29). More recently, communities and music researchers have worked together to support the revitalisation and maintenance of local musical idioms often strongly tied to endangered Aboriginal languages (Bracknell 2015; Bendrups, Barney & Grant 2013; Walsh 2007).

Nonetheless, 'Indigenous Australian music' is not a genre. Either alongside or in the absence of older musical traditions, many Indigenous musicians have adapted popular music genres such as folk, country and rock to suit their own agenda (Stubington 2007). Country music has been popular in Aboriginal communities across Australia since it first arrived via the touring shows of the 1930s (Smith & Brett 1998) and Aboriginal performers Richard Walley, Ernie Dingo and Joe Geia have said that Aboriginal people 'feel closer to cowboys than they do to city people' (Kartomi 1988, p. 21). Many of the songs written by Indigenous people in the early 20th century, collected by Indigenous artist Jessie Lloyd for the Mission Songs Project, draw heavily on country music conventions (Lloyd 2017). Walker proposes that country music's focus on storytelling, its portability by virtue of its instrumentation and the somewhat intangible sense of loss permeating much of the genre – perhaps arising from its steady rhythms and crying vocal and instrumental timbres – are key to its continued popularity amongst Aboriginal people (Walker 2000, p.14). Indigenous country artists like Jimmy Little, Col Hardy and Auriel Andrew also became popular with non-Indigenous audiences in the 1960s and 1970s and various writers identify the signature guitar-heavy sound of country music as one of the most common stylistic elements found in Aboriginal popular music (Breen 1989; Castles 1992; Dunbar-Hall & Gibson & 2000).

Still, Indigenous popular music performance in Australia is constantly changing (Dunbar-Hall & Gibson, 2004), and it is often studied in a context of cultural resistance and survival. Stubington and Dunbar-Hall examine the global success of Yothu Yindi, a cross-cultural rock group from the Northern Territory (Stubington & Dunbar-Hall 1994); Barney and Solomon explore resilience in

the songs of female Indigenous popular music singers (Barney & Solomon 2011); and Minestrelli investigates the politics and culture of Indigenous hip hop (Minestrelli, 2017). Popular music provides artists with a wide range of options for creative expression, but as Straw explains:

While it is apparent that a global pop music culture now exists as a repertory of resources for any given musician, the criteria by which those resources are deemed appropriate to a given conjuncture are nevertheless worked out in an ongoing and complex elaboration and redefinition of values. (Straw 1991, p. 250).

Indigenous artists participating in the cultural field of popular music consistently make creative decisions based on particular experiences, aims and values – no doubt impacted to some degree by their Indigeneity.

Connolly and Krueger include ‘rock and roll, pop, rap, bebop, jazz, blues and many other genres’ – such as financially viable classical music – in their definition of popular music (Connolly & Krueger 2006, p. 669). As Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists frequently make music within the established conventions of these ubiquitous music styles, it is counterintuitive to cast ‘Indigenous music’ as a separate genre. For example, the music of Indigenous hip hop artist Adam Briggs has more in common with seminal USA hip hop artist Ice Cube’s work than the songs of Indigenous country star Troy Cassar-Daley. At the same time, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands music practices originating prior to the influence of popular music could be grouped under the umbrella of ‘Indigenous music’, it is reductive and misleading to lump together the broad and diverse range of regionally distinctive Aboriginal vocal music styles – some featuring percussion and, far more rarely, the didgeridoo – and music of the Torres Straits, which is more closely related to Melanesian music.

While Indigenous Australian music is not a genre, most non-Indigenous audiences would expect musical elements such as descending melodies in an inscrutable language, clap sticks and didgeridoo – an instrument originating only in the north of the continent (Moyle 1981) – to be on the sonic menu when they encounter an Indigenous artist. As Vellutini notes:

The didgeridoo is so widely recognised as a symbol of Aboriginal music that it has become metonymic and its use tends to elide the fact that Indigenous people may play other instruments, depending on the region of their birth and on the social occasion of their performance. (Vellutini 2003, p. 132)

The tag of ‘Indigenous music’ is reliant on outsider-perceived notions of authenticity and also pigeonholes Indigenous artists as exotic. Indigenous singer/songwriter Archie Roach explains:

People always talk about me as an Aboriginal singer/songwriter. I say well, ‘I’m a singer/songwriter who just happens to be Aboriginal’. You know? Sure I write about the experience of the first nations’ experience, first peoples’ experience, but you know, like any songwriter I just want to write a good song and hope somebody likes it. Write a deadly song and make a lot of money! No! [Laughs]. (In Roach & Pilkington 2016)

While acknowledging that his experience as an Indigenous person informs his song writing, Roach clearly wants a broad audience to enjoy his music on its own terms. Furthermore, Russel Guy, the manager of Indigenous rock act Coloured Stone has expressed concerns that journalism focusing specifically on Aboriginal music serves to ‘ghettoise’ Indigenous artists (quoted in Castles 1992, p. 33). Still, soul and country singer Emma Donovan is staunch in affirming her status as an Indigenous artist:

Any music produced by black Indigenous artists is black or Indigenous no matter what the sound, okay? [It is] simple, get over it. I'm a blackfulla [and] I produce and write black music. [I am] sick of hearing the odd comments, 'Their music doesn't sound very Indigenous or black' ... [I am] over what anyone or festival is after, my music is black and that's it. We are black and that's it. We don't have to justify our sound for no one. It is what it is. (Donovan, pers. comm., 30 August 2017)

Castles suggests that Indigenous musicians participating in a music industry that fails to recognise the diversity of Indigenous creative work 'must steer a course between the cliffs of essentialisation on one side and assimilation on the other' (Castles 1992, p. 32). The 'Indigenous music' tag is a double-edged sword; it can attract an audience but also may impose creative constraints required to consistently meet that audience's expectations.

Castles argues that, unlike hip hop in the USA or reggae in Jamaica, Indigenous music 'has not coalesced into a single identifiable style. So Aboriginality is detected as a non-specific force which flows through and shapes eclectic contemporary blends' (Castles 1992, p. 30). However, detection is reliant on the detective and using 'Indigenous' or 'Aboriginal' as an adjective to describe music – i.e. 'Gee, that music sounds really *Indigenous*' – relies on audiences, industries and institutions agreeing just what that adjective means. In light of this, Dodson explains that trying to fix definitions of Indigenous culture can be dangerous:

I cannot stand here, even as an Aboriginal person, and say what Aboriginality is. To do so would be a violation of the right to self-determination and the right of peoples to establish their own identity. It would also be to fall into the trap of allowing Aboriginality to be another fixed category. And more than enough 'fixing' has already occurred. (Dodson 1994, p. 10)

Simply the best... Indigenous

The ARIA awards – celebrating ‘all that is great and popular in local music’ (ARIA 2017) – featured an award for Best Indigenous Release from its inaugural year of 1987 until 1998. Artists, record companies, music distributors and manufacturers with ARIA membership could nominate albums or other releases (singles, EPs) for the award. Over the twelve years of the award for Best Indigenous Release, only 63 per cent of nominated releases – 38 of a possible 60 – featured Indigenous artists. Most of these 38 releases involved collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, the most prominent being the multicultural Australian groups Warumpi Band, Yothu Yindi and Tiddas. One of those 38 nominated releases was a large compilation album ‘Australia All Over Maccas No 4’ (1991), which included a single track performed by Indigenous country act Harry and Wilga Williams and the Country Outcasts.

Table 4.1 ARIA Award for Best Indigenous Release, 1987–1998. Nominees featuring Indigenous artists are in bold.

Year	Winner	Nominees			
1987	Coloured Stone	Dave De Hugard	Sirocco	Three Chord Wonders	John Williamson
1988	Gondwanaland	Australia all Over [compilation]	Flying Emus	Midnight Oil	Warumpi Band
1989	Weddings Parties Anything	Dave Steel	Flying Emus	Midnight Oil	Kev Carmody
1990	Weddings Parties Anything	Gondwanaland	Coloured Stone	Scrap Metal	Yothu Yindi

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Year	Winner	Nominees			
1991	Archie Roach	Coloured Stone	From The Bush	Australia All Over [compilation featuring Harry and Wilga Williams and The Country Outcasts]	Wild Pumpkins At Midnight
1992	Yothu Yindi	Archie Roach	Kev Carmody	Shane Howard	Not Drowning, Waving feat. Telek
1993	Yothu Yindi	Kev Carmody	Tiddas	Coloured Stone	Gondwanaland
1994	Tiddas	Kev Carmody	Archie Roach	Yothu Yindi	Not Drowning, Waving
1995	Christine Anu	Kev Carmody	Tiddas	Ruby Hunter	Yothu Yindi and Neil Finn
1996	Christine Anu	Kev Carmody	Blekbala Mujik	The Warumpi Band	Our Home Our Land [compilation]
1997	Archie Roach	Yothu Yindi	Tiddas	The Warumpi Band	Telek
1998	Archie Roach	Singers For The Red Black and Gold	Bart Willoughby	John Williamson and Warren H. Williams	Gondwana

Of the 22 other nominations, two featured artists from Papua New Guinea, which became independent from Australia in 1975. Innovative non-Indigenous didgeridoo player Charlie MacMahon's group Gondwanaland received the award once in 1988 and was nominated an additional three times. The hit Midnight Oil album 'Diesel and Dust' was also nominated in 1988. This song attempted to convey Indigenous concerns to a non-Indigenous audience, even employing the literary technique of the unreliable narrator in *The Dead Heart*, singing from an assumed Indigenous perspective.

'Diesel and Dust' had Charlie MacMahon playing the didgeridoo and also featured the sound of the bullroarer, which drew some criticism from Aboriginal people in central Australia as constituting inappropriate use of a ceremonial instrument (Vellutini 2003, p. 132). Five years after the nomination, Midnight Oil manager Gary Morris would encourage Indigenous critics to overlook another cultural *faux pas*, suggesting that they 'stop shooting themselves in the foot and let a band like Midnight Oil voice its appeal to white Australia on behalf of black Australia' (in Darby 1993, p. 1).

Obviously, not all ARIA members nominating releases for this category believed that Indigenous music necessarily had to be performed by Indigenous people. Even considering Langton's acknowledgment of the 'naïve belief that Aboriginal people will make "better" representations of us [Aboriginal people], simply because being Aboriginal gives "greater" understanding' (Langton 1993, p. 27), it seems incongruous to suggest that music made by a non-Indigenous artist is somehow more Indigenous than that made by an Indigenous artist. Perhaps nominators were not seeking music made by Indigenous artists, but rather releases that embodied a somehow 'truly Australian' sound. An argument could be made that the most uniquely Australian cultural products are usually dependant on some kind of relationship with Indigenous culture, especially in popular music. Apart from the Australian accent, the presence of Indigenous instrumentation, languages and themes can mark Australian popular music as regional distinctive.

Coloured Stone won the award in its inaugural year, but all other nominees in that year were non-Indigenous and did not draw heavily on Indigenous culture. The nominees – country artists John Williamson and Three Chord Wonders, folk artist Dave De Hugard and polyethnic fusion act Sirocco – could be seen to represent a range of idealised visions of a distinctive Australian musical identity. Australian folk and country both draw on the paradigm of national identity crystallised in Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend* (1958) and claim to descend from the Australian bush ballad, plus John

Williamson sings in an Australian accent (Smith & Brett, 1998). State-sponsored multiculturalism was in full effect in the 1980s and Sirocco, featuring a melange of disparate 'ethnic' instrumentation, embodied the notion 'that out of cultural difference exciting new cultural forms will emerge' (Smith & Brett 1998, p. 10). Rather than being an award for recordings of music performed by Indigenous artists, Best Indigenous Release initially seemed to be a category dedicated to Australia's identity crisis, a mixed bag of outback tales, cross-cultural experiments and the ever-present spectre of a colonised people.

Still, not all non-Indigenous artists were happy with being in contention for Best Indigenous Release. Melbourne folk-rock band Weddings Parties Anything won the award in 1989 and 1990 but singer Mick Thomas stated that 'it was complete nonsense from start to finish ... We won the award twice and never bothered collecting it' (quoted in Jinman 2010, p. 52). Thomas' initial non-acceptance of the award coincided subsequently with the gradually increasing nomination of Indigenous artists in the category (see Table 5.1). With time, Best Indigenous Release became a less ambiguous category; it clearly had to involve music made by Indigenous artists. All nominations in 1995 and 1996 featured Indigenous artists and the only non-Indigenous artists nominated thereafter were Telek from Papua New Guinea in 1997 and Gondwana (formerly Gondwanaland) in 1998 – two acts operating in their own very particular Indigenous/non-Indigenous grey areas.

The ARIA award for Best Indigenous Release was abandoned in 1999, amid the emergence of the Deadly Awards (1995–2013) for Indigenous people in music, arts, sport and community work. The National Indigenous Music Awards (2009–2017) also arrived to celebrate the achievements of Indigenous artists. Both have explicitly disallowed the nomination of non-Indigenous artists. Although the ARIA award for Best Indigenous Release remains a curious episode in the annals of Australian music, a panel of Indigenous artists discussing reconciliation through music at the inaugural 2008 Song Summit

Sydney advocated the return of the category (Braithwaite 2008). Perhaps unaware of the award's multi-ethnic history, Indigenous hip hop artist Shannon Narrun Williams [Brothablack] stated, 'in recognition of the Indigenous communities as much as the Indigenous artists, it would be a great thing to have an Indigenous ARIA ... We are a part of Australian society but we are not reflected within mainstream music' (quoted in Braithwaite 2008). Still, Indigenous artists such as Jimmy Little, Christine Anu, Troy Cassar-Daley and most prominently, Jessica Mauboy, have all received multiple nominations for other ARIA awards including Best Country Album, Best Adult Contemporary Album and Best Female Artist.

Additionally, Indigenous artists have received almost a fifth of the nominations in the Best World Music Album category (1995–2018) since its inception (see Table 5.2). In reference to the world music genre, Connell and Gibson explain:

[T]he existence of world music as a distinct category attests to the commercial necessity to retain and selectively promote ethnic and geographical differences, strategically imbue them with authenticity and market the outcome. (Connell & Gibson 2004, p. 359)

While the Indigenous artists nominated for Best World Music Album are geographically Australian, it is their ethnic difference from non-Indigenous Australians that casts their work as world music. While multiple award winner Gurrumul sings in Aboriginal languages from the Northern Territory, his music is perhaps best described as adult contemporary. His non-Indigenous collaborator Michael Hohnen lamented, 'It's a shame when you sing in an Australian language that you get labelled "ethnic"' (quoted in Delaney 2015). Even more tellingly, while they certainly possess their own distinctive vocal styles, Best World Music Album nominees Archie Roach and the Pigram Brothers play folk rock and mostly sing in English.

Table 4.2 Indigenous artists nominated for the ARIA Award for Best World Music Album 1999–2016.

Year	Indigenous Artists Nominated	Year	Indigenous Artists Nominated
1999	Lajamanu Teenage Band	2000	Tim Gibuma and the Storm
2002	Narbalek, Saltwater Band	2004	Seaman Dan (winner)
2005	Bobby McLeoud	2006	The Pigram Brothers, Seaman Dan
2008	Archie Roach, Gurrumul (winner)	2009	Seaman Dan (winner)
2010	Archie Roach	2011	Saltwater Band, Gurrumul (winner)
2012	Warren H. Williams and the Warumungu Songmen	2013	Shellie Morris and The Borroloola Songwomen
2014	William Barton	2015	Christine Anu, Gurrumul (winner)
2016	Seaman Dan, Gawurra	2017	None
2018	Gurrumul (winner)		

World music is the bin in the record store that would otherwise be labelled ‘other’ and according to David Byrne functions as a ‘distancing mechanism that too often allows for exploitation and racism’ (Byrne 1999). Bluntly, as world music the work of Indigenous artists can conveniently be held at arm’s length, ‘safe, exotic and somewhere else’ (Hayward 1993, p. 33), with no requirement that listeners engage with it as inherently local material of direct political and cultural relevance to their own lives. The notion that Indigenous music must be inherently different from non-Indigenous music in Australia could be explained by Castles’ observation of the ‘imperative’ that Indigenous people ‘must “have” this “thing” called culture’ even though ‘[a]morphous whites do fine without it’ (Castles 1992, p. 35). According to Castles, members of the dominant culture are free from having to ‘stand for’ anything, while Indigenous people always stand for something. If being an Indigenous person is an act

of resistance to colonisation, perhaps all Aboriginal music may be characterised as political.

Who are you? Difference as political statement

In Australian public discourse, ‘Indigenous’ is a category that embraces all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. ‘Aboriginal’ also embraces all Indigenous cultural groups other than Torres Strait Islander people. However, Michael Dodson pointed out a limitation of such all-embracing categories when he observed: ‘this does not mean that we experience our Aboriginality only as a relation to non-Aboriginality’ (Dodson 1994, p. 9). Indeed, as a Noongar – an Aboriginal person from the south-west of Western Australia – my own understanding of my place in the community and Country is derived through specific Noongar-centric kin relationships, roles and responsibilities (Bracknell 2015). Indigenous artists increasingly emphasise their specific regional Indigenous identity, and this contributes to refuting the myth of Indigenous homogeneity.

The self-introductions Indigenous artists provide in interviews about their music demonstrate the common parlance among Indigenous people to provide specific geographic and cultural background information. Archie Roach states, ‘My mother is from southwest Victoria, Gunditjmarra peoples – my father is a Bundjalung man, from Northern Rivers, New South Wales’ (quoted in Roach & Pilkington, 2016); Christine Anu refers to herself as a ‘proud Kalaw Kawaw Ya, Kalaw Lagaw Ya woman from the Torres Strait’ (Anu 2016); and Ursula Yovich states, ‘I’m from Northwest Arnhem Land, placed near the Blyth River. My people are the Brada’ (Yovich 2016). This practice also extends to performance, as exemplified in Jimmy Little’s introduction to a live performance:

My mother’s land on the Murray River. West of Albury,
south of Echuca in New South Wales is my community, my

mother's land. My father's land is south coast New South Wales near Bermagui, not far from Bega, the other side of Merimbula. But, my home and my stage is Australia which is your home and that's where I'll always be, in your hearts, in your home singing country music. [sings] I was born on the banks of the Murray. Yorta Yorta is my mother's tribal land. (Quoted in OPELEB 2011)

Indigenous hip hop artists Local Knowledge even list a variety of localised terms of Indigenous identification from all corners of Australia in the chorus of their track *Blackfellas* (2005):

All the Murries [Queensland], all the Kooris
[New South Wales]
All the Goories [Victoria], can you hear me?
All the Noongars [Western Australia], all the Nungas
[South Australia]
All the Bama [Queensland], can you hear us?
All the Wongi [Western Australia], all the Yamatjis
[Western Australia]
All the Murridis [Queensland], can you handle these?
To the Torres Strait, and the Palawa [Tasmania]
To the Anangu [Northern Territory], to the Yolngu
[Northern Territory].

Receiving high rotation on national youth radio station Triple J, the track functioned to bluntly educate non-Indigenous audiences about the reality of Indigenous cultural diversity. Popular music provides one of the few public arenas in which Indigenous people can regularly articulate specific Indigenous cultural affiliations and refute the dominant discourse of Indigenous homogeneity in Australia.

Even when the artist does not locate him- or herself as a member of a specific Indigenous cultural group and even when the performer makes no explicit political statement, the Indigenous performer will inform public perceptions of Indigeneity simply by virtue of their

Indigenous status. Although Indigenous artist such as Jimmy Little were performing on Australian television in the 1960s, Guy suggests that the sheer diversity of Indigenous representation across a variety of popular music genres today is having even more of an impact in shifting restrictive dominant cultural paradigms of Indigeneity (Guy 2015). Just by performing new popular music for large and receptive audiences, Indigenous people prove their continued existence. Guy argues that the recent music of Aboriginal performers Jessica Mauboy, Dan Sultan, Thelma Plum and The Medics – operating across the genres of R&B, pop and rock – functions to contest ‘lingering notions of terra nullius and the noble savage’ by virtue of being non-essentialist and able to ‘speak from an individualist standpoint, as well as a collective Indigenous and non-Indigenous one’ (Guy 2015, p. 17) – and deny attempts to classify Indigenous culture as homogenous or static. Furthermore, as Marcus Breen has noted of Indigenous music in the 1980s, the use of popular music conventions and instrumentation:

... no longer allowed the cultural and anthropological indulgences of the exotic desert people and their tribal musics to be filed somewhere in the background of the European experience of Australia. There was no strange language or instrumentation to isolate the black person’s experience from that of the European. (Breen 1992, pp. 160–161)

This means that Indigenous artists can present their performance as implicitly political and educative. Reflecting on his apparent responsibility as an Indigenous artist to inform non-Indigenous Australia about Indigenous concerns, Dan Sultan recently stated:

It’s not up to me to educate a bunch of adults. I mean, if they listen to me when I’m talking to them, great, but whatever. It’s all there for them. Everyone’s got one of these [a smart phone] they can look it up. (Quoted in Fennell 2017)

Various characterisations of Mauboy as a ‘vamped-up R&B sexpot’ (Gibbs 2012), Sultan as a ‘classic rock star’ (Zuel 2010), Plum as a ‘sweet-toned folk singer-songwriter’ (Galvin 2012), and The Medics as purveyors of more edgy ‘atmospheric rock’ (Galvin 2012) then serve as reflections of ‘the multiple Aboriginalities and diverse identities that constitute a modern Indigenous existence’ (Guy 2015, p. 16).

You speak my language?

Affirming regional cultural affiliations in popular music performance serves to illustrate cultural diversity to non-Indigenous listeners and can simultaneously signal particular relationships with Indigenous listeners as kin, or neighbours. Songs emphasising local Indigenous affiliations and lexicon, such as Wongatha/Noongar group Yabu Band’s *I Love Noongar Music* (2009), conspicuously assert regional Indigenous identity:

I love Noongar music
 I’m *djoorabiny cruel* for this *moorditj* song
 Yes and I know that you waited so long
 For this *nooni* band with this *hungry* sound

‘Djoorabiny cruel’ is a Noongar/Aboriginal English phrase indicating a state of excitement; ‘Moorditj’ is a Noongar adjective meaning hard, strong, or – more commonly in recent times – excellent; ‘Nooni’ is a superlative, and in its Aboriginal English context ‘hungry’ is used as an adjective to describe something people are ravenous for. Hartman and Henderson explain that ‘using words that are distinctive to your social group is a powerful way of expressing your membership of the group both with other members of the group and with outsiders’ (Hartman & Henderson 1994, p. 5). As is the case with much Indigenous broadcasting, the lyrical semantics in *I Love Noongar Music* constitute an ‘intimate address’ for those who are part of the cultural group, while simultaneously

defining and distancing a 'listening, non-Indigenous other' (Fisher 2013, p. 398).

Warumpi Band's song *Jailanguru Pakarnu (Out from Jail)* (1983) is sung completely in Luritja – a language from Papunya, Northern Territory – and acknowledged as the first single in an Indigenous language to be commercially released in Australia. Other Indigenous artists highlight the importance of the track in encouraging Indigenous cultural revitalisation (in McGregor 2013). While criticised for being de-politicised on account of removing the English lyrics (Hayward 1993), Yothu Yindi's *Treaty (The Filthy Lucre Remix)* reached number 11 on the ARIA singles charts in 1992, being the first single performed almost completely in an Indigenous language (Gumatj of Arnhem Land, Northern Territory) to do so and remains a staple of DJ sets in the Australian dance music scene (Paul Mac, pers. comm., 14 September 2017). While the lyrics are unintelligible to non-speakers of Luritja or Gumatj, the titles of these songs let listeners know that they deal respectively with two pertinent political topics: Indigenous incarceration and land rights. Rather than engage Australia in direct conversation in English, the message implicit in the esoteric lyrics is one of Indigenous cultural continuity, difference and diversity.

While Indigenous languages can assist in manifesting the ethnic difference required to compete in the world music market, the recent trend towards increased use and variety of Indigenous languages in popular music also reflects the growing use of music as a means to encourage language revitalisation (Bracknell 2015, 2016). Over fifty examples of music videos for commercially released singles featuring Indigenous languages are currently available online via YouTube, most of which have been produced over the past decade. Examples of songs featuring critically endangered Indigenous languages include Emma Donovan's *Ngarraanga* (2009) and Stiff Gins' *Yandool* (2011). Birrugan Dunn-Velasco, who sings in both English and Gumbaynggirr as a member of Indigenous metal group Dispossessed, states:

It is important to sing in our old ways, to revive what many have lost, our culture I believe is intrinsic to our healing as a people. We're just trying to express ourselves in a different way through death metal. (Quoted in Marlow 2016).

Furthermore, in 2017 non-Indigenous rock band The Preatures collaborated with Indigenous artist and language teacher Jacinta Tobin to write a song featuring Dharug, an endangered language of Sydney, New South Wales, and subsequently engaged in fundraising for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies to publish Indigenous language resources (Harmon 2017). While such pointed Indigenous language advocacy on the part of a well-known non-Indigenous rock group is unprecedented, cross-cultural collaborations are characteristic of the Indigenous music landscape.

A gift to steal

The Australia Council's *Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Music* recognises many instances in which Indigenous music 'has developed as part of a collaborative process, created with non-Indigenous people' (Quiggin 2007, p. 4). Indeed, many of the most prominent acts considered purveyors of Indigenous music are in fact the result of Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaboration. Warumpi Band described themselves in the *National Times* as 'not black people playing white music but a group of musicians who have synthesised the best of two cultures into one musical form' (quoted in Breen 1989, p. 60). Conversely, Hayward notes that:

The agencies involved in promoting Yothu Yindi have continually asserted the minimally compromised and mediated nature of Yothu Yindi's Aboriginality through the representations they allow. Minimal attention is accorded to the white members of the band, they are carefully

‘backgrounded’ to the point of near invisibility in videos and interviews. (Hayward 1993, p. 37)

Press about more recent Indigenous artists including Jessica Mauboy, Dan Sultan and Thelma Plum also foreground their Indigeneity as a point of difference in the crowded Australian music scene while placing reduced emphasis on the cross-cultural, collaborative nature of the music-making process.

Indigenous/non-Indigenous musical collaboration reflects the reality of artistic practice in Australia. Collaboration may arise organically or as part of a more considered process, as Indigenous artist Lou Bennett reveals:

In my first years of being a musician, I think the collaborations that I had with other people were very organic and – oh, we’re around a camp fire at a party, everyone’s gone, ‘Let’s just sit and play’... Now I skip forward 30 years and I look at the way that I collaborate with people now and it’s more thought through, there’s more structure, it’s, ‘I want to work with this person because I really like the music that they do’. I might see them on YouTube, I might go to a show of theirs, they might even be suggested by someone else, and make that connection and start to collaborate with them. (Bennett 2016)

Similarly, Indigenous hip hop artist Adam Briggs states that he works with both ‘friends, people who I get along with’ and people ‘that I admire and have a certain gift that I’m trying to steal [Laughs]’ (Briggs 2016). While collaborations may be spontaneous or deliberate, positive interpersonal relationships seem to be at the core of effective musical partnerships.

Indigenous artist Ursula Yovich tends to choose her own collaborators and reveals that ‘a lot of it has to do with whether they see me as an equal’ (Yovich 2016). Christine Anu explains that collaborators need to develop ‘a real security and a real trust’ (Anu

2016), her non-Indigenous producer David Bridie disclosing that he ‘could not begin’ to produce the work of Indigenous artists ‘without this feeling of trust’ because he ‘would be too afraid of making a bad mistake, musically and culturally’ (quoted in Barney 2014, p. 6). The mutual respect between non-Indigenous producer and guitarist Craig Pilkington and his long-time collaborator Archie Roach is clear, Pilkington describing working with Roach as ‘an incredible honour’ and stating:

Archie can tell a story and express a sentiment so eloquently and beautifully, but without it being verbose or complicated and the simplicity of Archie’s expression is just mind-blowing.... I learn a lot, and it’s very enriching, spiritually. (Quoted in Roach & Pilkington 2016).

Equitable partnerships seem to be characteristic of effective Indigenous/non-Indigenous music making.

Cross-cultural collaborations also reflect the realities of creative practice and multiculturalism in Australia, including the multi-level cultural diversity of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Reflecting on the contributors to his track *The Children Came Back* (2015), Adam Briggs states:

There’s Gurrumul from Elcho, Yolngu, there’s the B2M guys doing harmonies on it, who are Tiwi, and there’s Dwayne Everettsmith singing on it, his family is from Gippsland and he grew up in Tassie. We performed it on Triple J with Trials, who’s a Nunga from Adelaide. There’s five different nations on the one track, making the one song, which is what the whole song was about.... I definitely tried to make it real inclusive of heaps of different blackfellas from all around the country. We even had a Filipino and a white lad in it. It’s pretty indicative of multicultural Australia. (Briggs 2016)

Briggs explains how deliberate collaboration can be essential in realising his creative agenda, stating that:

It's about creating a piece of work for myself and having other artists involved, to realise the vision that I have in my head, to bring that to fruition. You know what I mean? From the outside, looking in, there are no other reasons that we're in there, except that we like each other and we like making music together, and that can be symbolic. Sometimes, when you're aware of that, you can use it in the track or in the art, but I've always found that kind to be a little bit cheese-ball. I just want to make good songs, I don't want to preach all the time. (Briggs 2016)

Regardless of the political impact of Indigenous artists in the cultural field of Australian music, they are united in the overarching goal of making music that reaches and resonates with an audience. Archie Roach explains:

What I'm about is harmony, peace, and for people to get a better understanding of our first peoples in this country, and what they've been through, and that it's not just the first peoples' experience or story, it's Australia's story. And that's what I symbolise myself, as a person, and hopefully through my music. But yeah, if anything, it would be that. But lately, I've just been seeing it as making good music, yeah. (Quoted in Roach & Pilkington 2016)

While assigning music to the category 'Indigenous music' may be justified simply by pointing to the Indigeneity of the artists involved, Indigenous artists' work in popular music is characterised by Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaboration and the representation of Indigenous cultural diversity.

Conclusion

The binary Indigenous/non-Indigenous has come to inform the way that Australians produce and consume culture, and so the category 'Indigenous music' is persistent. However, it seems to have no fixed meaning. It is subject to a constantly shifting public discourse based on the continuing ideological struggle between institutional control and Indigenous self-determination. In this chapter, I have expanded on the idea that music can construct and mediate understandings of Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture in Australia by examining how Indigenous artists employ identification, language and collaboration to challenge and re-frame notions of Indigeneity. Australian institutions have struggled to consistently define Indigenous people and music. At the same time, Indigenous artists are predominantly interested in participating in the music industry on their own terms.

Indigenous agency exerted within the cultural field of music challenges a variety of colonial myths about Indigenous people. The common practice among Indigenous artists to highlight their regional affiliations in live performances directly addresses the misconception of a homogenous Indigenous culture. Concurrently, this practice and the use of specific local Indigenous vocabulary in song powerfully links artists to their ancestors and own community while informing specific socio-cultural relationships with other Indigenous audiences across the continent. The increasing presence and variety of Indigenous languages in popular music similarly functions to highlight Indigenous linguistic diversity, and it challenges dominant colonial discourses of cultural loss and assimilation. While the use of languages defies the myth of a monolingual, English-speaking Australia, it simultaneously attracts and distances certain listeners on the basis of comprehension/non-comprehension. Furthermore, while non-Indigenous composers of Western art music have borrowed and coopted Indigenous motifs, instruments and musicians in the hope of evoking a more distinct Australian musical flavour, many Indigenous artists have actively initiated collaborations with non-Indigenous

artists, underpinned by strong interpersonal relationships, to enrich their own music careers and – to paraphrase Archie Roach – just make good music.

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