MURUNDAK

The Black Arm Band

From Little Things Big Things Grow
A Compendium of Contemporary Indigenous Music
by Sian Prior

During the past decade, there's been no escaping the phrase 'the black armband view of history'. First used by Australian historian Professor Geoffrey Blainey in his 1993 Sir John Latham Memorial Lecture, it has since become a handy rhetorical weapon for those who wish to dispute the history of injustices perpetrated by white Australia against its Indigenous inhabitants.
The meaning of the phrase has expanded over the years, as it has penetrated deeper within the public discourse. Originally used to describe the attitude of particular historians, the expression now conjures up images of a race of people interred in the past, immobilised by self-pity and – with the active support of their whitefella friends – obsessed with 'shaming and blaming'.

But as a description of how current generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (and their whitefella friends) have responded to centuries of injustice, it is simply inaccurate; and for evidence of this we need look no further than the outpouring of Indigenous popular music over the past three decades. From the driving country-pop of Vic Simms' 'Stranger in My Land' (1973) to Yothu Yindi's international dance hit, 'Treaty' (1991); from the bitter-sweet female harmonies of Tiddas' 'Anthem' (1996) to the urban hip-hop of Local Knowledge's 'Blackfellas' (2005), songs have been vehicles for the expression of both anger and pride, political protest and profound optimism. Many of these songs have been the result of respectful collaborations between black and white artists: authentic examples of reconciliation in action.

As Gunditjmara singer–songwriter Richard Frankland has said, "Our songs tell stories of real things, real people and real situations". The subject matter of these songs has been as varied as the individual experiences of their creators, but certain themes have recurred over the years.

Resisting Oppression
There have been songs celebrating Indigenous resistance to oppression, such as Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly's 'From Little Things Big Things Grow' (1991), about the struggle of the Gurindji people for their traditional lands at Wattie Creek. The same story was originally told in Ted Egan's 'Gurindji Blues', recorded back in 1971 by a young member of the Gumatj clan of the Yolngu people, Galarrwuy Yunupingu (later named Indigenous Australian of the Year).

Murri singer–songwriter Joe Geia's 1988 song 'Kwanji' celebrates "a hard-fighting man… Forces can't seem to put [Kwanji] down". Paul Kelly's 'Pigeon/Jundamurra' tells the story of an Aboriginal resistance leader whose name is "spreading all across the valleys…like a burning flame" (1989), and in 'Cannot Buy My Soul', Kev Carmody reminds us that when it comes to freedom fighters of any race or creed, "you may take our life and liberty, but you can never buy our soul" (1991).

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The Land
Many songs have been written that reaffirm Indigenous Australians' connections to place. Some are overtly political, mirroring contemporary struggles for land rights. In 1989, Alice Springs band Amunda recorded a song called '1788' which poses the question, "When will he get back his lands from the white man's hands?" The Sunrize Band from Arnhem Land spelt it out loud and clear in their song 'Land Rights': "So let's stand up for our land rights 'cause it's part of the Dreamtime" (1990).

Several songs written during the late 1970s, including 'Bran Nue Dae' by Broome musicians Jimmy Chi and Michael Manolis, became strongly associated with the dispute over land rights on the Noonkanbah Station in the south Kimberley, between the traditional owners and an oil-mining corporation. That song later became the title of Chi's first nationally acclaimed musical which, along with his second major theatrical work, *Corrugation Road*, is considered a major artistic landmark in contemporary Aboriginal arts.

Other songs have had a gentler message, celebrating the power and the beauty of the land, for example 'Uncle Willie' (1988), in which Joe Geia eulogises the "mountains and streams" that are "part of our dreams". Two years later Bart Willoughby's band Mixed Relations recorded a song called 'Our Mother' which describes how the land "cared for us with love and affection, she made us strong". Blekbela Mujik's 'Kakadu' describes how Kakadu's world-famous escarpment "stands up like a beauty in the blazing sunlit sky", and in 'Nitmiluk' – the Jawoyn-language place name for Katherine Gorge – the band celebrated the return of that place to its traditional owners: "You're the father of this land; break the chains and help to set me free" (1990).

Yothu Yindi is just one of a number of Aboriginal bands who celebrated the ground-breaking 1992 Mabo decision by the High Court of Australia (overturning the doctrine of '*terra nullius*') in song. "Terra nullius is dead and gone... We were right, that we were here, they were wrong, that we weren't here." ('Mabo', 1994) A decade later, Ngarrindjeri singer–songwriter Ruby Hunter performed her original songs in the concert *Kura Tungar* (*Songs from the River*) with the Australian Art Orchestra, reaffirming an ongoing connection to her traditional lands along the Murray River. The Pigram Brothers from Broome, whose standing in Western Australia's Indigenous musical circles has long been something akin to 'royalty', have individually and collectively been creating songs about their land for three decades. Stephen Pigram wrote the lyrics for the song 'My Land' (recorded on their 2001 album, *Jirr*) which describes the pleasures of hunting and gathering in saltwater country: "My land…by the waterside…feeding on the rising tide…high above the mangrove down Burgoogoon, hunting for my family".

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White and black together

Alongside these artists there have been a number of non-Indigenous songwriters whose work has responded to the Aboriginal politics of land, including Paul Kelly, already mentioned. In 1982, Shane Howard's band Goanna released 'Solid Rock', which became a hugely successful mainstream rock anthem. 'Solid Rock' re-tells the story of European invasion, commenting on its impact upon the traditional Indigenous way of life: "They were standin' on the shore one day, saw the white sails in the sun; wasn't long before they felt the sting, white man, white law, white gun. Don't tell me that it's justified, 'cause somewhere, someone lied…genocide." In addition to his prolific songwriting output, Shane Howard has also worked as a producer, recording many albums by important Indigenous artists over the past two decades.

One of the founders of the Warumpi Band, Neil Murray, is another non-Indigenous musician who has written prolifically about Aboriginal relationships with the land. In an interview for *Rhythms* magazine in 2000, Murray said, "My entire creative output has been a quest for meaning in this country… People always say that something in my sound…evokes a sense of place". His most famous song, 'My Island Home', became a hit for Torres Strait Islands singer Christine Anu, and an unofficial anthem of the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

Language

In the introduction to their book *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places* (2004) authors Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson write that "music is used to sing the past into the present and the future". This is nowhere more evident than in the use of traditional languages, both in the names of Indigenous bands, and in the lyrics of their songs.

Until the 1980s very few Aboriginal pop musicians had sung in language. Country singer Isaac Yama was a pioneer, performing his original songs in Pitjantjatjara in the 1960s and 1970s. When singer–songwriter Vic Simms recorded 'Stranger in my Land' in Long Bay Jail back in 1973, he sang: "The black Australian has his pride, his culture and his Dreamtime". But the fact that this song, and all the others on his debut album *The Loner*, were written entirely in English, could be seen as evidence of the stifling of that culture.

Ten years later, though, things were beginning to change. Languages that had been forbidden in many missions and schools in the first half of the 20th century would find new expression and new audiences, with the songs of artists like Joe Geia and bands such as Blekbela Mujik, Tiddas, Yothu Yindi and Warumpi Band. According to Neil Murray, the Warumpi Band's debut single, 'Jailangaru Pakarnu' ('Out from Jail', 1983) was the first rock song to be released entirely in an Aboriginal language (Luritja). 'Warumpi' is another name for 'Papunya', the central Australian Aboriginal community from which the band emerged in the early 1980s.

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Back in the late 1970s, though, Jimmy Chi was writing and recording songs with his band Kuckles (featuring Stephen Pigram) which employed Aboriginal language lyrics, including the mini-album 'Milliya Rumurra' (1979). Their song 'Nyul Nyul Girl' was one of the first to substantially employ Aboriginal lyrics, and one of the first contemporary love songs in Aboriginal language.

'Yothu Yindi' means 'mother and child', and according to lead singer Manduwuy Yunupingu, the band used the traditional music, instruments and languages of the Gumatj and Rirratjingu clans of north-eastern Arnhem Land specifically to "create impact for our culture". Yothu Yindi, Blekbela Mujik, Joe Geia, No Fixed Address, Mixed Relations, Kev Carmody, Coloured Stone and the Sunrize Band have all incorporated didjeridu into their song arrangements in recent decades, and many Indigenous bands have also used clap sticks. When a re-mix of Yothu Yindi's song 'Treaty' became a world-wide dance hit in 1992, it ensured that the music, the instruments, the language and the politics of the band members reached an international audience. More recently, urban Indigenous rapper Munki Mark has been using his grandmother's language, Jarwwadjali – the language of the Grampians in western Victoria – and Arrernte, spoken in Alice Springs. The title track on Indigenous hip-hop band Local Knowledge's 2005 EP 'Blackfellas' also includes some rapping in language.

Anger and Optimism
If Indigenous popular music can be seen as an antidote to the image of pathos and paralysis evoked by the phrase 'the black armband view of history', that is not to suggest that all Indigenous songwriters have 'eliminated the negative' in order to 'accentuate the positive'. Archie Roach's 1990 song 'Took the Children Away' is a poetic but unflinching account of former Australian governments' policy of forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their families. Twenty-five years earlier, Bob Randall had written a haunting song on the same subject called 'Brown Skin Baby', a song described by music writer Clinton Walker as "the flower in a corner of the dustbin of history".

The first album from Indigenous musician and activist Bobby McLeod, 'Culture Up Front', wasn't released until 1988, but over a decade earlier, he had been 'telling it like it was' for many Aboriginal Australians, in live performances of his song, 'Sick of Being Treated Like a Low Down Mangy Dog'. Many of the songs of Murri musician Kev Carmody are inflected with a deep and righteous anger at social injustice. At the same time, they are informed by a sophisticated critical understanding of Australian – and international – political relations. In 'Strange People', he sings: "Technology enslaves, the media blinds; our money in the bank supports environmental crimes; strange, strange people inhabit this earth" (recorded 1995)

Alongside the anger, though, there is an equally deep well of optimism in the lyrical output of Kev Carmody, nowhere more evident than in the song he co-wrote with Paul Kelly, 'From Little Things Big Things Grow': "This is the story of something much more, how power and privilege cannot move a people, who know where they stand, and they stand in their law".

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Perhaps it is in the words of Joe Geia's bicentennial lament 'Yil Lull' (1988) that we can find the quintessential mix of grief and hope, acknowledgement of the past and optimism for the future that has characterised Indigenous popular music in recent decades:

"I sing for the red and the blood that was shed…and I'm singing for the gold and the new year, young and old…now I'm singing just for you…".

The further reading listed below will amply reward anyone interested in further exploring the work of the artists – and institutions – who have been the 'spear tips' of the contemporary Indigenous music movement: places like CASM, for instance (the Adelaide-based Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music), which was a potent incubator for a number of influential Aboriginal artists during the late 1970s and early 1980s; or CAAMA (the Alice Springs-based Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association), which first recorded and broadcast many significant Indigenous musicians; artists like Bart Willoughby of No Fixed Address and Buna Lawrie of Coloured Stone (creators of the enduringly popular song 'Black Boy'), whose bands toured the country exhaustively in the early 1980s 'on the smell of an oily rag'; renegade singer–songwriter Bobby McLeod, whose music got him 'off the grog' and gave voice to his political activism; and former Indigenous Australian of the Year Kutcha Edwards, whose talents as a musician and respected community leader are inextricably intertwined.

Tonight's concert is a tribute to all of these ground-breaking artists, and a celebration of their lasting musical legacy. But it has another important function: to begin the reclamation (or perhaps subversion) of a highly divisive little phrase.

We hope you enjoy The Black Arm Band's view of history.

Further reading

Meanjin, 'Blak Times', Vol. 65, No. 1 (2005)

Singing Australian: A History of Folk and Country Music, Graeme Smith (Pluto Press Australia, 2005)

Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places, Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson (UNSW Press, 2004)

Buried Country: The Story of Aboriginal Country Music, Clinton Walker (Pluto Press Australia, 2000)

The Didjeridu: From Arnhem Land to Internet, Karl Neuenfeldt (Indiana University Press, 1997)

Popular Music and Local Identity: Rock, Pop and Rap in Europe and Oceania, Tony Mitchell (Leicester University Press, 1996)

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