



THE ROUGH GUIDE to

Australian Aboriginal Music



Unlike most Indigenous music, modern Australian Aboriginal music rarely draws on folk and traditional sources. Certainly there is the occasional use of didjeridu and click sticks, and sometimes there will be some lyrics sung in one of the 700 Indigenous languages which are spread across Australia, but, most commonly, the music will be either Australian country (the impact of the late Australian country singer, Slim Dusty, has been huge and enduring), rock or reggae. In more recent times, folk (particularly for Kev Carmody and Archie Roach), soul, blues, hip-hop and rap have been embraced. Thus a modern Australian Aboriginal song can sound like 1980s rock, mainstream American country or even seem to be cloned from the folk protest music of the 1960s. The reason for this seems to be that Aboriginal culture, being essentially oral, sees the lyrics and what the lyrics convey as the

essential element of any song. Combine this with a range of hugely important contemporary issues – the stolen generations, land rights, black deaths in custody – and the iconic Aboriginal songs of the past two decades have all been lyric-based. Thus Kev Carmody's 'From Little Things Big Things Grow', probably the most important of all the contemporary songs, tells the story of the successful land rights claim by the Indigenous Gurindji people against the British pastoral company, Vestey's, over the huge Wave Hill cattle station in the Northern Territory. Tiddas sang 'Malcolm Brown' about a young Aboriginal boy who was a very questionable 'death in custody' – incarceration and police brutality are enduring problems for Aborigines. And Troy Cassar-Daley, a gifted and mainstream country music act, has included in his repertoire 'Beyond The Dancer', which is about the stolen generations – Aborigines

forcibly taken from their families by governments and NGOs in an attempt to integrate them into mainstream Australian white society.

Of course, traditional music still exists. Everyone who catches a ferry across Sydney Harbour will find didjeridu-playing Aborigines busking on the wharves. There are more serious didjeridu players who have worked with classically trained white musicians seeking new ways to use their ancient instrument, as well as enthusiastic ethnomusicologists and collectors of traditional music who make their way to the northern quarter of the country – where Aboriginal culture remains relatively untouched – to record traditional songs and dances.

This is, hopefully, an accurate and broad snapshot of Australian Indigenous music over the past

twenty years. It is very consciously meant to be accessible. If I had produced a collection of genuinely tribal, traditional singing and playing, it would have sounded very different. It would also have pretended that somehow Australia's Indigenous community were immune from the influences of modern global musical culture. Traditional Aboriginal music, fairly obviously, does not use guitars or electronics. It has the rhythms of the land rather than those of the dancefloor.

ALAN MARALUNG – This track is taken from the album *Bunggridj-Bunggridj: Wangga Songs From Northern Australia*, a genre of didjeridu-accompanied songs, widely performed in northwest Australia and known most commonly as *wangga*. These are individually owned dance songs, performed publicly in both ceremonial and non-ceremonial contexts by Aboriginal peoples

Exploring important issues through music

Australian Aboriginal Music

a sample of the rich diversity,
including country, folk and rock



of northwest Australia. They are usually sung by one or two men accompanying themselves on clap sticks while another performer plays the didjeridu. *Wangga* are received in dreams from spirits, although in some cases singers claim to have composed songs without intervention. Though once renowned as a singer, Maralung is inactive in that field now, due to serious chest illness. Nevertheless, he continues to compose new songs.

GEOFFREY GURRUMUL YUNUPINGU – Blind from birth, Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu is a powerhouse of musical creativity. Geoffrey (or Gudjuk, as he is also called) is from the Gumatj nation, his mother from the Galpu nation – both First Nations peoples from northeast Arnhem Land. A former member of Yothu Yindi, now with Saltwater Band, Gurrumul's solo excursions

highlight his amazing talent as a singer, songwriter and musician. His own band, Saltwater Band, hail from Galiwin'ku on Elcho Island, northeast Arnhem Land, and are a much-loved and most popularly noted Indigenous band, partly because of Gurrumul's influence and guidance. With the release of his first solo album, Geoffrey highlighted the tremendous talent he has to offer Indigenous music in Australia and, indeed, the world.

WAAK WAAK JUNGI – Waak Waak Jungi is an imaginative collaboration and has cross-cultural roots inspiring their sound. They explore the voice of Aboriginal Australia by exchanging musical influences, ranging from Arnhem Land's Ramingining community to Melbourne's Christmas Hills community. The result is a standout blend of style and sound, which

showcases the traditional musical styles from Aboriginal culture, accented with a contemporary edge. Hailing from different regional tribes, frontmen Bobby Bunnungurr and Jimmy Djamunba are both acclaimed songmen and cultural purveyors. Bobby is from the Malibirr tribe and his language is Ganalbingu, while Jimmy is from the Marangu tribe and speaks Djinang. Derived from their two traditional languages, the name 'Waak Waak' (Djinang) and 'Jungi' (Ganalbingu) together means 'Crow Fire'.

TIDDAS – Tiddas is a three-girl folk band made up of Sally Dastey, Amy Saunders and Lou Bennett. They write about identity, family and their country with an exuberance, honesty and sensitivity that has earned them a great deal of acclaim. Renowned for their live performance, Tiddas have been a popular choice for acts such

as Midnight Oil, Paul Kelly, Archie Roach, Ruby Hunter, Weddings Parties Anything, Billy Bragg, Suzanne Vega, Van Morrison, Shane Howard, Bob Geldof, Sweet Honey in the Rock – and many others on the world stage. Touring Malaysia, Canada, Europe and America has increased their popularity and demand for their music. On the home front, Tiddas have contributed much to the development of community music. They have lent their support to a variety of causes by performing at benefit concerts, speaking at youth and women's forums and providing role models to young women.

ARCHIE ROACH – Archie Roach is considered to be a singer and songwriter of remarkable strengths and insights. He is incredibly well versed in the tradition of his ancestors and relays real-life stories as well as traditional stories of

Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu

Archie Roach

Tjupurru

Pigram Brothers



the Dreaming. Having survived a personal history that would have left most artists scarred and defeated, Archie Roach has emerged as an extraordinarily gifted Australian artist with a truly visionary talent. Born at Framlingham Aboriginal mission, located near Warrnambool in southwestern Victoria, Archie was taken from his family at an early age – part of the stolen generation. He spent quite some time in institutions before being fostered by a non-Indigenous family in Melbourne. Archie grew up and left home to find himself and his people. He spent many years on the streets of Melbourne and Adelaide, searching for his identity and his place in the world. Archie met up with Ruby Hunter, his lifelong partner, during this time and together they have made a home for their children and continue to make music together.

TJUPURRU – Tjupurru descends from the Djabera Djabera tribe of the West Australia Kimberleys. He began playing the didjeridu through a vacuum-cleaner pipe in boarding school – the initial stages of his unique musical evolution into a style, self-described as ‘twenty-first-century didjetronica’. Tjupurru plays a unique slide didjeridu called the ‘Didjeribone’ – a cross between a didjeridu and a trombone, as it can slide through different notes and tones. He picks up his sound through a device called the ‘Face Bass’, a seismic sensor implanted inside his mouth. With the addition of sampling and electronic effects, Tjupurru has enabled himself to perform as a one-man band, creating live samples and looping them to create songs and soundscapes that traverse musical genre.

PIGRAM BROTHERS – True to their name, Pigram Brothers are a seven-brother band from the pearling town of Broome, Western Australia. Devotion to their local landscape and culture inspires their music and can be found embedded in their groove-based Indigenous folk-rock sound that captures the lifestyle of the Broome ‘Saltwater Spirit and Country’. Their debut album *Saltwater Country* was recorded in 1996-7 with highly respected singer-songwriter Shane Howard as producer. The collaboration resulted in an infectious mix of earthy harmonies and acoustic stringed instruments bringing to life songs about the group’s saltwater lifestyle and homeland. *Saltwater Country* was voted Best Debut Album at the National Indigenous Music Awards in Sydney 1998. Generally, despite numerous national and international initiations, the Pigrams do limit themselves to one, or sometimes two, mini-tours each year. They prefer to stay at home, be with family, go fishing and stay connected to their country. With their home town of Broome being something of a tourist hot spot (several hundred thousand people from all over the world venture into the town each year), the Pigram Brothers play some of their biggest gigs and get considerable exposure by staying at home.

PUKATJA KUNGKAS – The Uwa (yes) Wiya (no) song was developed in 2005 by Carclew Youth Arts, Indigenous Arts and Culture program and was produced by Hip Hop artist Morganic. Senior Kungka students from the Ernabella community school wrote and perform the song. The song talks about young Anangu sniffing petrol

in their community due to boredom and sadness. It raises awareness of petrol sniffing and how this epidemic continues to affect the lives of young Anangu people living in a nationally recognised community-in-crisis. The Anangu (Aboriginal people) Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands and their small communities cover 130,000 square kilometres of country in far north remote South Australia. Ernabella is situated in the picturesque Musgrave Ranges in the centre of Australia and is approximately 350 kilometres south of Uluru (Ayers Rock).

ALAN DARGIN – The late Alan Dargin will be remembered as the ‘Didjeridu Virtuoso from Wee Waa’, New South Wales. He started to learn the instrument at a young age from his grandfather, whose handed-on didjeridu, made from an extinct species of the bloodwood tree, became Alan’s prized signature instrument. His performance career covered a broad scope, ranging from solo concerts on the streets of Sydney to accompanying symphonies worldwide, including the Vienna Philharmonic and the London Symphony Orchestra. Collaborating with various musical genres and ensembles throughout his career, and with an experimental, limitless approach to his instrument, his style fuses tradition with modernity.

SALTWATER BAND – Northeastern Arnhem Land has produced some of Australia’s most significant Indigenous performers and bands, such as George Rrurrambu (from Warumpi), Yothu Yindi and now the sensational Saltwater Band.

Saltwater have released two albums, *Gapu Damarrung* and *Djarridjarri/Blue Flag*, to great local acclaim, and their music is reggae/ska-infused. Their Indigenous island tunes are well-known across northern Australia and are making great inroads into the broader music market. The band’s two songwriters, Manuel Dhurrkay and Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, have created some of the freshest sounds to come out of northern Australia for some time. Manuel’s catchy pop-song arrangements and Geoffrey’s strongly traditional tunes provide a unique collection that gives the listener an insight into both contemporary and traditional life.

SEAMAN DAN – Seaman Dan was born in 1929 on Thursday Island in the Torres Strait region of tropical far north Queensland. His grandfather was a boat captain from Jamaica and his great-grandmother a chief’s daughter from Great New Caledonia. His music portrays a mixture of blues, hula, slow-jazz and pearling songs, reflecting the many cultures and traditions found in the Torres Strait, and various other places where he lived, including Darwin and Broome in Australia, and Papua New Guinea. Seaman Dan combines the traditions of Australia, America, Africa and Polynesia into a truly unique musical style. Today, in his late seventies, he continues to write songs about life, love and work in tropical Australia, and performs at concerts, festivals, community events and cultural programmes in schools and museums around the country.

THE WILCANNIA MOB – The Wilcannia Mob is a hip-hop musical group comprising five Aboriginal boys from the small, deserted outback town of Wilcannia, New South Wales, where the local Aborigines are the Bakandji, meaning 'People of the River'. The boys were discovered in 2002 during a series of music and theatre workshops for kids in Wilcannia. Featuring the didjeridu, the song 'Down River' is about the simple pleasures of kids living in outback New South Wales and won a Deadly Single Release of the Year award in 2003.

KEV CARMODY – Kev Carmody is half-Irish, half-Aboriginal and is regarded by many as the spokesperson for the Indigenous Australian community through his politically charged Aboriginal folk music. Kev grew up on a cattle station near Goranba, in the Darling Downs area of southwestern Queensland. Both his Irish father

and Murri mother came from powerful oral traditions, which led to his own musical inspirations rooted in this cross-influenced rural, oral tradition. With Paul Kelly, Carmody co-wrote the song 'From Little Things Big Things Grow', which is based on the story of the 1966 Gurindji Strike (Wave Hill Walk-Off), the first claim for traditional Aboriginal land in Australia.

MATTHEW DOYLE & RILEY LEE – 'Wild Honey Dreaming' combines the efforts of two musical masters: Matthew Doyle on the didjeridu and Riley Lee on the Japanese shakuhachi flute. Lee began studying the difficult instrument in 1970 and in 1980 became the first non-Japanese to attain the rank of *Dai Shihan* (Grand Master). Doyle has also been similarly honoured. In 1985, at the age of 15, he was invited to join Australia's Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre. Here he studied

Aboriginal music and dance throughout Australia and was awarded the position of Aboriginal Artist in Residence with the New South Wales Department of School Education.

KUTCHA EDWARDS – Born in Balranald, New South Wales, Kutcha is of the Mutti Mutti culture. At the age of 18 months, Kutcha, along with five other of his siblings, was seized by the authorities and taken to live and grow up in government-controlled institutions. As a teenager he was finally reunited with his family and permitted to live with his mother in Traralgon, Victoria. This marked the beginning of a lifelong commitment to his cultural heritage through strong support and engagement with the Koori community, via Aboriginal-based arts and education. Music became his medium to express local stories. It also became his own songline to reconcile with

his past, by presenting truth and encouraging strength of community and family to his people.

Bruce Elder is a journalist, writer and commentator. He is currently a full-time journalist with the Sydney Morning Herald specialising in travel and popular culture. His other areas of expertise include film, television, and popular music. He has written extensively around Australia and has a passion for Australian history.

This album is dedicated to the memory of Alan Dargin.

Alan Dargin and Michael Atherton

Saltwater Band

Seaman Dan

Kev Carmody

Riley Lee

Kutcha Edwards



- 01 **ALAN MARALUNG** New Song (Part I)
from the album BUNGGRIDJ-BUNGGRIDJ: WANGGA SONGS FROM NORTHERN AUSTRALIA (CDSF40430) [Alan Marulung] pub Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings (p) & (c) 1993 Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings. Licensed from Smithsonian Folkways www.folkways.si.edu
- 02 **GEOFFREY GURRUMUL YUNUPINGU** Djarimirri
from the album GURRUMUL (SFGU080201) [Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu] pub SFM Publishing administered by Sony/ATV Publishing Australia. Licensed from Skinnyfish Music Pty Ltd www.skinnyfishmusic.com.au
- 03 **WAAK WAAK JUNGI** Jumbucco
from the album WAAK WAAK JUNGI [Iarr Bobby Bunnungurr/Peter Mummel] Copyright Control. Licensed from Peter Mummel
- 04 **TIDDAS** Inanay
from the album SING ABOUT LIFE [Saunders/Bennett/Dastey] Copyright Control. Licensed from Tiddas via Jill Shelton
- 05 **ARCHIE ROACH** Jamu Dreaming
from the album JAMU DREAMING (1470967) [Archie Roach] Copyright Control. Licensed from Jill Shelton
- 06 **TJUPURRU** Stompin' Ground
from the album STOMPIN' GROUND (TOP3) [Tjupurru/Adrian Fabila] pub Top Shelf. Licensed from Top Shelf www.topshelf.com.au
- 07 **PIGRAM BROTHERS** Moonlight
from the album UNDER THE MANGO TREE [Pigram Brothers] Copyright Control. Licensed from Pigram Brothers www.pigrambrothers.com.au
- 08 **PUKATJA KUNGKAS** Uwa Wiya
[Pukatja: Initji Windlass, Kukika Edwards, Shanara Miller, Natalie O'Toole/Morganics/Carclew] Copyright Control. Licensed from Carclew Youth Arts www.carclew.com.au
- 09 **ALAN DARGIN** Fantastic Plastic
from the album BLOODWOOD (NS331) [Alan Dargin/Michael Atherton; produced by Michael Atherton] pub Michael Atherton. Licensed from Michael Atherton, MA Productions michael@optusnet.com.au
- 10 **SALTWATER BAND** Djilawurr
from the album DJARRIDJARRI/BLUE FLAG (SFSW040102CD) [Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu] pub SFM Publishing administered by Sony/ATV Publishing Australia. Licensed from Skinnyfish Music Pty Ltd www.skinnyfishmusic.com.au
- 11 **SEAMAN DAN** Old Men & The Sea
from the album ISLAND WAY (TI1001) [Seaman Dan/Karl Neuenfeldt/Kyana-Lili Neuenfeldt] pub Steady Steady Music/Hot Music. Licensed from Steady Strady Music www.seamandan.com.au
- 12 **THE WILCANNIA MOB** Down River
from the album ALL YOU MOB [Buddy Blair/Keith Dutton/Walter Ebsworth/Lendal King/Colin Roy Johnson/ Morganics/Brendan Adams/Daniel Wright/MC Wire] Copyright Control. Licensed from The Wilcannia Mob/Morganics www.morganics.info
- 13 **KEV CARMODY** From Little Things Big Things Grow
from the album MESSAGES [Kev Carmody/Paul Kelly] pub Song Cycles Pty Ltd/Universal Music (p) 1993. Licensed from Kev Carmody www.kevcarmody.com.au
- 14 **MATTHEW DOYLE & RILEY LEE** Wild Honey Dreaming
from the album WILD HONEY DREAMING (NWCD578) [Matthew Doyle] pub New World Music & Media Pty Ltd. Licensed from Riley Lee www.rileylee.net
- 15 **ALAN DARGIN** Hitchhiker's Nightmare
from the album BLOODWOOD (NS331) [Alan Dargin; produced by Michael Atherton] pub Michael Atherton & Alan Dargin, 1991. Licensed from Michael Atherton, MA Productions michael@optusnet.com.au
- 16 **KUTCHA EDWARDS** Is This What We Deserve?
from the album HOPE (SV0578) [Kutcha Edwards] pub Kutcha Edwards. Licensed from Kutcha Edwards www.kutcha-edwards.com
- 17 **ALAN MARALUNG** New Song (Part 2)
from the album BUNGGRIDJ-BUNGGRIDJ: WANGGA SONGS FROM NORTHERN AUSTRALIA (CDSF40430) [Alan Marulung] pub Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings (p) & (c) 1993 Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings. Licensed from Smithsonian Folkways www.folkways.si.edu

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