

# Introduction

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The idea of Australia is still exotic to many residents of the northern hemisphere. For its part, Australian popular music has become 'exoticised' recently by the arrival of Yothu Yindi and Aboriginal musical forms. But the primary history of popular music activity in Australia and New Zealand has been derivative of the great American forms – from dance hall to country and swing to rock and roll, punk to new age.

This alliance of histories should surprise nobody with an eye for history. Like the USA, Australian white settlement began as a British colony. There, the similarity ends. Here, writing in the antipodes, we are, as that old-fashioned term suggests, 'wrong footed'. And it is this sense of difference that reinforces that sense of the discovery of the exotic that is paraded in popular music from this region.

This sense of difference now encompasses the Asian region. *It* is now the new frontier of musical activity, according to the multi-national record companies (who gladly add the Latin and South American regions to their lists). Asia is also the regional cousin to Australia and New Zealand, developing a dependency on the methods and forms that have been effectively tested in Australian popular music, or more accurately, in the Australian market (the market and popular music can usefully be separated to expose indigenous forms and imported music).

While it is unwise to suggest that Australia is about to musically colonise Asia, it is necessary to draw attention to the nature of the relationship. I do this primarily because it is often startling when travelling in the northern hemisphere to discover the remarkable ignorance First World citizens have about 'the south'. The relationship is best described by the centre-periphery analogy, where those in the centre of economic activity fail to recognise that the political economy of their own lives has a direct impact on those in the dependent-periphery.

This model applies to popular music. In the Australian context, at least until the late 1980s, there was a sense in which almost the only indigenous popular music was that derived from known forms developed and exported from the centre. The exceptions were naturally generated musical effects like the yodel and the gum leaf – which can generate a tune. The Aboriginal clapping sticks and didgeridoo were unimported exceptions that survived with Aboriginal culture.

There were, of course, songs of revolt and pronouncements of national difference – from Nellie Melba and Henry Lawson through to Men at Work and Midnight Oil. But the colony always seemed to express its experiences by celebrating the nuances in form and the boldness of expression, rather than in initiating new, substantive musical forms. Yothu Yindu's song 'Treaty' announced a change from this predictability of the known form. As Wallis and Malm have suggested, the

'transculturation' of contemporary digital media has facilitated a hybrid of Australian-American pop that surprised almost every listener.

To insiders, Yothu Yindi was prefigured in several events and developments that flickered on the horizon in the decade before 1990. Of these, two historical moments were especially significant:

- 1) The development of Aboriginal controlled and operated radio stations which linked with recording studios to produce music for Aboriginal people – in some cases the music was recorded digitally outdoors. The Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) was the first of what is now several Aboriginal media organisations, which have blossomed, spurred on by the success of Yothu Yindi and with the support of Australian government policies and funding.
- 2) Midnight Oil's remarkable international appeal to humanism in their 1987 song 'Beds are Burning', from the album *Diesel and Dust*. In this song, the political and cultural interests of Aboriginal people were mediated by white rock star liberals with dramatic impact. As a result, the public and the mass media began to listen for new Aboriginal voices.

As Yothu Yindi and Midnight Oil took their music from a celebratory national audience to the international market-place, the sound and resonance of Aboriginal music was a new sensation. Consequently, it sold and sold well. The real change though was that this was music going *from* Australia to the world. Interestingly, the music's appeal was in its 'exoticisation' of Australia. Perhaps the fact remains that the only voices to be heard and recognised from the periphery will be the exotic ones.

The important point from the Yothu Yindi experience was that the popular recognition this band received marked a shift – the colonised were no longer merely in a dependent relationship with the centre of the world. To put it more militantly, the periphery was fighting back. But Yothu Yindi was the exception. It is such exceptions that make popular music studies the challenge it is. Working backwards from the moment of popular music's recognition of the Aboriginal exotic in Yothu Yindi, the history of Australian popular music has been that Australia *in general* was something of an exception.

Popular music here was lively, as a pub scene and a healthy, even flourishing Californian lifestyle complemented the leisure culture. Australian musicians worked hard and played well because of the ample opportunities to perform every night of the week. Sales of recordings in Australia in the past decade have been in the top ten nations, proving how strong demand for recorded music and leisure entertainment is. That more than 80 per cent of those sales is of 'foreign' or imported music, cannot go unmentioned.

But from the earliest days of white settlement until the 1980s, musicians and bands played the same music as that heard in New York, London and Berlin. Many rock bands achieved heady success within Australia and were encouraged to go and 'conquer the world'. Sometimes, weeks, months or years later they would return, older, wiser and poorer. It was a story with a long history in popular music in Australia.

INXS, Midnight Oil, AC/DC all made it big in the big smoke. Dozens of others tried and disappeared in a puff from a different smoke machine. The Saints – perhaps again the relative success of the exotic – made a few ripples in England during the punk era of the late 1970s, as did The Birthday Party in the early 1980s. At this point, a substantial rupture from overseas musical forms and

assumptions occurred. It stands as a significant moment in Australian popular music. The Seekers came and went in the 1960s, along with The Easybeats. The pattern was set. The cry could have been: Go west! Everywhere was better than Australia. The quest for international recognition was the real measure of achievement.

Strangely, the major record companies fully flourished in Australia by the mid-1970s. Although their place in the development of Australian music is unknown and remains to be researched and written, they were at the forefront of promoting the need to succeed 'overseas'. What we only now realise is that such injunctions were driven by economic priorities. By taking a ready-made record overseas, the chances of making money and paying off the record company for investing in the recording were increased. A decade and more ago, the argument was that Australians could prove that they were as good as those in the northern hemisphere.

The Australian invention of the Fairlight computer had little immediate impact on this situation. But looking back on it, the 1980s invention of electronic and digital sound brought not only the technology that made postmodernity an everyday possibility, it also helped popular music achieve full global mobility. It should not be surprising that out of disadvantage, borne out of 'the tyranny of distance', Australian engineers should create the Fairlight, a machine that can sample, cut and paste any sound! We could have the world and its best right here, right now. Would it be pushing the logic to extremes to suggest that this digital landmark opened the doors to government policy? The answer has to be equivocal. There is no evidence that any one event or invention stimulated government music policy.

And yet in the mid-1980s, the Australian government began to take a keen interest in Australian music. On one hand the government promoted music as the means to earning export dollars. This meant that the similarity of Australian popular music to music from elsewhere in the world, could allow Australian music to be offered as a fresh, yet known substitute for popular music already in existence in the global economy. Like the feature film *Crocodile Dundee*, the form was recognisable, while the content had its own Aussie (antipodean) charm.

On the other hand the Federal Australian Labor Party Government which was elected to power in 1983, wanted to provide public access to popular music as a policy objective. In particular, it was keen to provide opportunities for young people to develop popular music performance skills, or if they chose, to learn instruments normally associated with popular music. This challenged the hegemony of a music education system that had previously relied on the corpus of great works from Europe's classical music repertoire.

The policy development did not occur in an international vacuum. Other countries were also developing national music cultures in a policy context. European countries such as The Netherlands, France and Spain began to promote popular music as a useful adjunct to social democracy. (Canada had another agenda.) Australia was on a similar trajectory.

Popular music also served to advance the interests of national identity. However, a remarkable irony flowed out of this development – while Australian national music interests were promoted, it was also necessary to focus those interests together with the industrial concerns of the music business. This classic, yet necessary compromise provides an ongoing struggle about the place of Australian

music in the global multi-national entertainment system and generates useful questions for cultural theory in general and popular music research in particular.

For example, does the requirement to achieve global success, as part of government economic policy, compromise the cultural purpose of popular music? A range of answers can be proposed to such a question, but this is not the place to elaborate on them. Suffice to say, government policy has an important place in the political economy of contemporary Australian music. Government policy, as revealed (or, as is often the case, not revealed) in copyright issues is another element of the equation. The conjunction of government policy with the proliferation of educational programmes aimed at teaching musical knowledge and performance skills has already been commented on, yet needs to be emphasised.

Since 1990, a small group of new researchers and writers have arrived on the Australian popular music scene. This follows the formation of the Australian branch of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM) in 1984. This issue of *Popular Music* suggests something of the range of interests being pursued by researchers in Australia. As with other special issues of this journal, this is by no means a definitive collection of material. Readers can refer to the bibliography for references to specialised texts.