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Buried Country celebrates indigenous music's wayward dreamers

NICOLAS ROTHWELL THE AUSTRALIAN APRIL 11, 2015 12:00AM



Jimmy Little died in 2012, but his legend lives on in Buried Country. Source: News Corp Australia

On the launch night for the first edition of Buried Country, held at Sydney's State Theatre 15 years ago, a glittering cast was in attendance, all the stars of Aboriginal country music: Jimmy Little, Bobby McLeod, Kev Carmody, Auriel Andrew, Roger Knox. They were there to

celebrate their own tradition as much as the work of Clinton Walker, the art school dropout and back-roads chronicler who had made their music his life and tracked down their stories.

Little gave a brief performance: he sang one of his best-known hits from the 1960s, Shadow of the Boomerang. At the closing chord, he threw an imaginary boomerang from the front of the stage out over the audience. Walker can still see him as he stood there, caught in the spotlight: “There was not an eye in the house that didn’t follow that invisible thing as it flew over their heads, traced an arc around the room and returned safely to Jimmy’s hands.”

Everyone went on to the Civic Hotel for the after-party. Charlie Perkins spoke. He told the crowd what they already knew in their blood, that country music was Aboriginal culture, the real thing: listening to country had even helped him to learn English as a child when he was growing up in Alice Springs.

Today, as the second, expanded edition of Buried Country reaches print, few of the 16 musicians whose stories form its backbone are still living, but the book’s true significance is at last becoming clear. Works of contemporary history that emerge from a milieu and define a trend in popular culture are common enough. So are engaged music narratives that begin from the journalistic desire to record, to capture a wave of energy and trace its influence as it flows through the world. Buried Country, though, deals with a different kind of movement: with music that records and seeks to perpetuate an embattled minority’s everyday experiences.

As Walker explains in his detailed genealogy of black country’s evolution and growth, “Aboriginal singers existed in a world untouched by the modern music industry, even as they were influenced by the recordings of others and by the wireless.”

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CAPTION: Jimmy Little - Under the Milky Way Tonight

The musicians were known and loved by their own people, and for many of them, that was fame enough.

The local star of Wilcannia in western NSW, Bill Riley, found his fulfilment close by: “I was dedicated to my work in the bush, and so most of my entertaining was done around the local gymkhanas, rodeos. I never chased up a career in music.” In fact, as Walker explains, “it is quintessential to the Aboriginal music experience — and one reason it didn’t break through sooner to a larger audience — that so much of it was for so long music exclusively of, by and for the Aboriginal community”.

Here is the key to Buried Country: it describes an indigenous culture that was authentic and internal; the music was not an export product. Where dot paintings and Aboriginal dance theatre were initially marketed as prestige creations, for consumption by enlightened outsiders, Aboriginal country was “lowbrow, the work of the underclass, a salve for its own downtrodden people”.

The pioneers of the style knew very well what they were caught up in. Harry Williams, the godfather of Koori country music, born of Wiradjuri blood at Eurambie mission, was quite explicit. The music was redemptive. “Because of Aboriginals’ assimilation into the urban community, much of our

culture — language, corroborees and way of life — has been lost. Country music I believe has taken its place. We can all play it, sing it, enjoy it, sing along with it. I think that's the reason country is so popular with Australia's Aborigines — because they so easily identify with it. It's true-to-life music. Down-to-earth. It's our heritage. Our music.”

Like all explorations down musical byways, Buried Country summons up a gallery of half-forgotten heroes, vanished classics and groups long gone into oblivion: the Kooriers, who played briefly in the early 70s, were “a band that existed in a mist of alcohol and anger, not to mention dope smoke, and still only exist in a haze of failing memory and fleeting sightings”, though Walker has retrieved a lone C-60 cassette's worth of their material, “the ultimate gunslinger ballads”.

Few still remember old favourites such as McLeod's Wayward Dreams, or the majestic last song on the Country Outcasts' breakthrough album, Heartaches COD. This is the territory of black country: lives collapse, careers fail. Lovely Bettie Fisher, a jazz and blues singer on the Sydney circuit in the 60s, had a voice and presence to rival Eartha Kitt, and went on to run the Redfern Black Theatre before dying, aged 35, of a heart attack. Walker's voice turns bleak: “It is a common euphemism. What it really means is that she died of a broken heart, a heart so discouraged and walked-over that it could no longer continue to beat — and this malaise has struck an entire race of people.”

The pattern is clear early in the narrative, with one of the forerunners of Aboriginal country, Herb Laughton, a child of Alice Springs, raised in the Bungalow half-caste institution — a shearer, a road-builder, a poet and romantic, the ultimate lost soul, singing forever of an imagined home.

In his later years, despairing of the world around him, Laughton slashed his wrists in the desert: “They found me just when the sun going down out the side of Hermannsburg.” The doctor in ward one told him his best medicine was to keep writing and singing songs, and he did: the music never left him, but he was always searching: “Take me back, to the old MacDonnell Ranges, and my NT old Alice Springs home.”

For Dougie Young, the “great phantom of Aboriginal country”, life unfolded down different lines. “I'm a bludger, I'm a drunk, I'm a jailbird,” he declared in his only interview. “I live it wild and free,” he sang. Music was release, and alcohol was release, and “If we end up in the cells, Lord have mercy on our souls”.

By strange chance, Young's songs were recorded, and that recording survives and looms large in Walker's narrative: “What an extraordinary document it is. It has the effect of transporting the listener back in time, having that same crackly ambience — that same dusty faraway echo — that 1930s American field recordings of dust bowl balladeers and delta bluesmen have.”

Young had his own river country, out in the dry, flat west of NSW. His great anthem, Where the Crow Flies Backwards, tells the tale of his journeyings: “Where the dear old Darling's flowing, and the trees have lots of shade, you'll find me 'neath the old gum tree, drinking goon and lemonade.”

Knox, a child of Toomelah mission settlement and a musician of early promise, found another kind of epiphany awaiting him. Knox had charisma and an easy, appealing voice. He had quick success on the country circuit. Then, in 1981, while still in his early 30s, the light plane he was flying in with his band came down in flames in open desert near Lake Eyre. He was badly burned but survived. He came back from the edge of death, and returned to Toomelah. There his great-aunt, who knew old ways, treated him with eucalyptus balms and oils. It was a cure for the spirit, as much as the

wounded flesh. “While she was rubbing, she was singing, like chanting, and I think that healed part of my mind,” he said.

Knox found music was serving as a guide for him; he could see his task in life. “I realised I was in search of a particular feel to my music. I wanted to sing songs that linked awe and wonder with something more spiritual, like Woody Guthrie’s lyrics and feelings mixed with the manner of the dreamtime.” More than this, Knox realised he had a special gift to give those who came to hear him: a sense that there was a purpose to our course in life. “It’s all about lifting each other up to reach these heights, to go from there, to continue on. I was inspired and if I can inspire someone, they could do it, and maybe as times goes on, it will be easier for these people, you know, being an Aboriginal person.”

Buried Country is full of such vignettes and life sketches. It is a group portrait as much as the examination of the growth and development of a musical genre. Its pages pulse with stories: the tale of Bob Randall, who wrote the stolen children’s anthem, Brown Skin Baby; the saga of the Pitt family and the deep north blues; the on-and-off career of Kevin Gunn, exponent of the Kimberley’s desert surf sound; the romance of Ruby Hunter and Archie Roach, who proved anew to their audiences that love conquered all.

But the book is more than a mere history. Much like the filmed record of the Buena Vista Social Club, which brought new life to the near-forgotten Havana music scene, Buried Country has worked its influence on today’s performance landscape. One of the country singers Walker singles out for special admiration in his pages is Vic Simms, who came from La Perouse and was an early member of Col Joye’s Bandstand troupe. Simms had a penchant, when young, for drinking binges, and ended up in the 70s in Bathurst jail. There, through a bizarre chain of circumstances, he recorded a disc for RCA, *The Loner* — everything had to be done in a single take. “The best albums transport you to a completely other world,” writes Walker: “*The Loner* takes you inside black Australia.”

Simms was still playing, just, in minor venues, when *Buried Country* first appeared. He is back on stage today, and on the up, and remembers the details of his journey down the decades well: “It’s just been a way of life with us because we have that memory, you know, the dirt floors, the tin shacks, and we might make a million dollars tomorrow but it’ll never change our attitudes, everything comes from the heart.”

In 2013, long after *The Loner* was first recorded, it was remade, at the impetus of a young Brisbane musician, Luke Peacock, with Simms once more at the microphone. Peacock’s group, the Painted Ladies, has gone out on the road, performing: old songs and new, clean and clear, the words as sharp as ever. The tradition Walker wanted to preserve in his book is very much alive: the younger acts such as Carmody who figured as the hopes of the future in a brief chapter in the first edition are now established stars.

There is a lesson lurking here. Whatever is true and deeply founded in a culture will endure: the synthetic, the modish and the artificially promoted will fade away.

Although Walker’s stance throughout his portrait of the modern musical frontier is low key, it is plain that he regards the country tradition as genuine, indigenous in the deep sense of the word, and much that Australia considers as Aboriginal art or culture as the equivalent of work displayed in a tourist shop.

In an afterword devoted to the recent rise in the popularity of Aboriginal music, he sets out his position:

Arty Australia likes Aboriginal dance and theatre because it offers an exotic new twist on an old highbrow tradition that it can understand. It likes Aboriginal world music because it's apparently authentic. The whole world loves Aboriginal painting for a similar reason. But then, liberal-arty Australia puts career curators on the covers of weekend newspaper supplements ahead of the struggling artists themselves, and it fears and loathes Aboriginal country music because it fears and loathes country music and popular music in general — because it's lowbrow, the work of the underclass.

Must this divide be absolute or can some rapprochement be effected between work that represents Aboriginal people to the wider Australia and work that speaks to Aboriginal people themselves? Can the streams flow together? Appreciating an art or cultural form requires, in its way, as much tact and intuition as making art or song, and it may be that the time for close listening is now at hand.

A brief foreword sets the scene for Buried Country, and lingers long beyond its end. It is by Paul Kelly, the singer-songwriter whose life has been devoted to joining the two cultures up. "The music was, and is, always there," he begins, "around the campfires, in the school halls and the sideshow tents ... The music is a river. Songwriters and singers, like the river, simply pick things up and pass them on. Some get known locally, some further afield, but everything comes from somewhere. The local feeds the general and the many make the one."

Walker is himself a traveller in that stream, just like the musicians, afloat on song.

Buried Country: The Story of Aboriginal Country Music

Revised and updated edition

By Clinton Walker, Foreword by Paul Kelly

Verse Chorus Press, 368pp, \$45

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A Pair of Ragged Claws returns next week.

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