

## Section B: Review

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### Educational Perspectives on Indigenous Country Music: Review Article of Clinton Walker's *Buried Country: The Story of Aboriginal Country Music* (Annandale, NSW: Pluto Press, 2000) and associated multimedia resources

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Songs are not divided from contemporary Aboriginal life; they just bleed out of it as a creative response to more than two centuries of powerlessness. *Buried Country* is a multimedia resource on Aboriginal 'country' music, an essential resource for educational and public libraries. The product of a half decade of research, it includes a book (divided into four equal parts, with a useful bibliography and discography), a 75 minute long film/video (produced with director Andy Nehl for Film Australia/SBS), and a twin CD set containing 'the best' songs from the film soundtrack (Larrikin D46509). The accompanying website (<http://buriedcountry.com>) contains detailed teaching notes, discussion topics, song lyrics, and a glossary of terms based on those in the *NSW Aboriginal Studies Syllabus*.

#### The Book

*Buried Country* is a story about storytelling, a documentation of a musical genre, and a history of a struggle for justice. Critics collectively ranked the book as an unprecedented coup — a hitherto *secret history* which Walker ingeniously uncovered as a major discovery in the wake of country music's resurrected credibility. 'I hit on this story that was so rich, so amazing, and yet had never been touched on', says Walker himself of the origins of the project, although he notes in Chapter Four, for example, that Jeremy Beckett

had recorded Dougie Young — 'the great lost phantom of Aboriginal country' — back in the 1960s. Quite appropriately, the book's source list includes Beckett (1958, 1965), Ellis (1985), Gummow (1987), Sullivan (1988), Breen (1989) and Dunbar-Hall (1999). Smith (2000: 4) was quick to comment that the expressive power which country music holds for Indigenous Australians finds resonance in many parts of the world.

*Buried Country* follows the groundwork laid by several scholars mentioned in its bibliography and should more correctly be touted as the natural sequel to *Our Place Our Music* (Ed. Marcus Breen) — the first book published on Australian Aboriginal popular music. Breen (1989) found contemporary Aboriginal music to be dynamic and changeable, yet maintaining the essential values of Aboriginal life. Amongst numerous local Aboriginalities, an enormous variety of form, style and presentation was found to characterise its musical production.

Walker is an astute observer and interpreter of popular roots culture who brings to life the artistry and passion behind the tunes and words through the medium of rock journalism. As Smith (2000: 5) advises:

*Buried Country* is not a scholarly text, but a significant part of its interest stems precisely from this. The voice of rock journalism through which the music is interpreted and presented is

itself part of a construction of music and the creation of its meaning.

Walker's text spans a period of six decades from the period between the wars through to the early 1990s. Methodologically speaking, oral interviews are a fugitive source. But apart from the occasional factual error — and given that the tradition barely impinged the fringes of critical discourse before the 1980s — Walker's biographical sketches are an overdue antidote to non-Aboriginal ignorance of the Indigenous tradition. The reader is drawn in like a moth to the light as he illuminates the link between country music and the prevailing concept of Aboriginal identity.

An in-depth study of *Buried Country* inevitably entails familiarisation with the cross-cultural tensions that existed between the carriers of country music in twentieth century Australian society. Walker reveals the largely ignored 'in-between' musical spaces and worlds in which Indigenous music-making actually happens. His broadbrush presentations of the hardships and prejudice faced by uprooted families are offset with humorous and entertaining anecdotes about buffalo shooters, family parties, gumleaf players, and tent boxers — a clever, palatable way of redressing ignorance of the Indigenous minstrel's radius of creativity in the public imagination.

The book is presented in an accessible coffee-table format, lavishly illustrated with rare photos and memorabilia. It sports a star-studded line-up of recognised artists as well as previously unsung masters of the genre such as Queensland yodeller Bill Bargo (possibly Australia's first Aboriginal hillbilly singer). Most importantly, Walker has pieced together the story of the Williams brothers and the *Country Outcasts*, whose far-reaching pioneering influence on other Aboriginal entertainers cannot be overstated. Roger Knox may be the 'Black Elvis' or 'King of Koori Country', and Herb Laughton 'one of its grandfathers', but Harry Williams has long been revered as its 'godfather' and Wilga as its 'first lady'.

## The Documentary Film

The film *Buried Country* premiered at the Sydney Film Festival on June 11 2000. Historical footage narrated by Murri singer-songwriter Kev Carmody provides evidence for country's lively pre-electric presence and the wealth of musical talent which graced fringe settlements.

Light-hearted moments abound. Slim Dusty yodels his way around farflung Aboriginal communities, boxer Lionel Rose sings the charismatic *Jackson's Track* (1972) to homely images of chooks and children blustering about his old Gippsland fringe settlement, and the Brown Brothers of Cape Barren Island, Tasmania evoke the joy of jitterbugging to spoons and fiddles in the home-cooked instrumentals of *Black and White Cat* (c. 1976). Here 'country' can be easily understood capturing the Aboriginal popular imagination in the face of their increasing powerlessness as a group. It is no exaggeration to say that the stories behind the songs are just as riveting as the music itself.

Entrenched racism appears at the margins of the book's narrative, but the film's images speak a thousand words about the difficult assimilation process. Incarcerated country-rock vocalist Vic Simms — Australia's first prisoner to record and release a record while still serving a sentence, and possibly the first to sing his way out of jail — estimates that 50-60% of the repertoire is politically motivated. Ted Egan's *Gurindji Blues* (first recorded by Galarrwuy Yunupingu's in 1971) was the first Land Rights song, whilst Bob Randall's *Brown Skin Baby* (1983; written c. 1964 and previously recorded by the ABC in 1970 and Auriel Andrew in 1979) was the first recorded song of the Stolen Generation. The other most celebrated song of the Stolen Generation is Archie Roach's *Took the Children Away* (1990). 'Country' alleviated Roach's tenuous situation as he grew up unaware of his history, language and dance (Ryan, 1992: 55).

Current Aboriginal c'n'w star, Troy Cassar-Daly, testifies on screen that 'Harry and Wilga are the

reason I'm doin' this now', whilst veteran Jimmy Little defers to Troy because he 'shows that we are in tune, in step, in rhythm and rhyme with the people'. The peacefulness in Jimmy's heart projects him as an artist able to withstand the rejection of being 'uncool' between his successes.

## The Twin CDs

Since most of the rawly produced songs on the CD compilation were not mainstream hits, they sound refreshingly undated. The CD sleeve provides succinct commentary on most tracks, yet none for others. Out of 43 tracks, only seven feature women, most notably matriarch of Aboriginal female divas Georgia Lee (born Dulcie Pitt) singing *Downunder Blues* (1962), and sweetheart of Aboriginal c'n'w, Auriel Andrew, singing *Truck Driving Woman* (1970). Disc 2, Track 9 features Roger Knox singing *Koorie Rose* (1983) the great black country love song written by whitefella Merv Lowry. Influential Central Desert singer Isaac Yama and Pitjantjatjara Country Band is missing from the compilation as his musical output was still under the prohibitive respect of customary Aboriginal law following his death.

*Royal Telephone* (1963) — the first track and the only overt gospel song included on the CD — recalls a repertoire of American-influenced guitar accompanied country gospel songs known in south-eastern Australia, for instance, as 'Koorie Country Gospel'. The repertoire is always sung in the same fashion because it has been accepted as part of the cultural heritage. Christian themes reworked into 'country' impinged on the community life of Aboriginal Australians throughout much of the twentieth century, functioning as a compensatory expressive medium for obsolescent Indigenous musical repertoires (based on Ryan, 1999, 2001).

During the 1990s I researched and recorded some covers and original country music gems by crooners Ian 'Moonie' Atkinson, James 'Goorie' Dungay, Herb Patten, and Gnarnayarrahe

'Stoney' Waitairie. Like Walker, I discerned the richness of a history fast disappearing for want of record. I wholeheartedly endorse his finding that the philosophy, performance protocols and storytelling form of Aboriginal country music were dually influenced by missionisation and the secular entertainment industry. Aboriginal musicians shared a large part of country music's roots such as minstrelsy, gospel and bush bands.

'Given that most Aborigines still live outside Australia's major cities, country music was about all they ever heard', writes Walker on the CD sleeve, but Aborigines have arguably been exposed to all sorts of music since the nineteenth century. Motivated by wireless (the 'royal telephone'), records, and touring artists, they soaked up c'n'w and other musical styles like sponges and enthusiastically fashioned them into vehicles of immense personal value and community functionality. There were mockers among them as well as mimickers since, as Walker so eloquently points out, few have been concerned with appeasing European sensibilities:

There's a certain modesty and disingenuousness about the sonic structure. There's no attempt to hide anything. It's very bald. Very straightforward. No artifice. And it's not crowded by commercial desperation (Walker in Sheddon, 2000: 17).

Such was *Jackie-Jackie*, the first significant Aboriginal political song and best-known transitional cultural song in eastern Australian vernacular literature. *Jackie-Jackie* dates back to at least 1930 although it was not commercially recorded until 1981, by Harry Williams (*Buried Country*, Disc 1, track 17). As 'the first gentle stroke of cultural payback', this country standard sports 'more owners than an old Holden' writes Walker (p. 64), drawing a rather long bow by including it in his section on the *Jabbi-Jabbi* ('giving lip') songs of north-west Western Australia. Much had already been written about *Jackie-Jackie*, but Walker neither enters the debate about its provenance and lingo nor includes specific references to the song in his bibliography.

Harry Williams' protégé, Herb Patten, who hails from Orbost, Victoria (not Cumberagunga, NSW

according to Walker, p. 169), describes *Jackie-Jackie* as a 'comedian tribal song', a 'universal song' or a 'private national anthem' — the Aboriginal equivalent of the *haka* (see Patten and Ryan, in press). In Herb's view, the label 'folk song' (Walker, p. 64) is quite inadequate because the chorus lingo is traditionally tied up with the history, language and culture of Aboriginal people. Unfortunately the tragic legacy of human relations expressed through the verse themes of lost love, unemployment and land dispossession remain with us today.

### Maximising the kit as an education resource

In addition to the website, documentary viewing notes for teaching and learning were published in 2000 by Kirkbright, a lawyer and learning consultant for Wagan Aboriginal Music productions. *Buried Country's* associated subject areas are listed as: Aboriginal Studies, Australian History, Cultural Studies, English, Health and Human Development, Human Society and Environment Studies, Media Studies, and last but not least — Music Studies. Teachers are encouraged to set the historical context for the emergence of country music, discussing such issues as the decimation of Indigenous tribal musics in Australia, the political events and protests of the 1960s and 70s, and the legal fiction of *terra nullius* overturned in the Mabo decision. The value of presenting political issues through the medium of music should be underlined, although not all Aboriginal country songs revolve around politics. As Smith (2000: 5) notes, the great majority of the repertoire is not in local languages, and to the casual ear it displays no obvious Aboriginal musical stylistic features.

What matters is that the *sound* of 'country' evokes special cultural and communal meanings: 'country' generally denotes the land to which an Aborigine belongs and his/her place of Dreaming. But interestingly enough, the teaching notes point out that *Ngurrumbang* not only means 'country' but 'home', 'bird's nest' or 'animal hide' in the

NSW Wiradjuri language, suggesting possible Indigenous variance in the cultural perception/reception of the genre's nametag. Whether we adopt a holistic view of 'country' or merely conceptualise it as the naturalisation of an American tradition, there is no doubt that the genre serves as a powerful site for creative and sustaining Indigenous responses to contact history.

At least three periods or lectures are needed to view the video and listen to excerpts from the CDs. An essay, review or listening project can be set on the multimedia kit, and the glossary of relevant terms quizzed. Teachers and students can download selected songs from the website and study their lyrics. The website suggests that relationship between Aboriginal people and country music can be compared and contrasted with that between Afro-Americans and jazz and blues, but we shouldn't forget that the relationship can also be compared to that between the Native Americans and country music.

The website question 'Comment on whether the film is convincing in the proposition that Australia has *buried* Aboriginal country music' is a provocative one, implying as it does that a corpse (in this case a musical tradition) has been covered with earth or concealed from sight. Indigenous students will undoubtedly project livelier insights and answers to this question than non-Aboriginal students. As Sullivan (1988: 64-65) so aptly pointed out, a musical continuum has been manifest from pre-contact times until the present. The Aboriginal traditions paralleled the non-Aboriginal traditions in many ways, but possessed their own creative thrust [whether ignored by the mainstream or not!].

Teachers should stress, however, how talented Aboriginal singers and musicians have been denied access to a wide audience because of racism (for instance, Col Hardy won a Golden Guitar Award at the inaugural Tamworth Country Music Festival, but twenty years lapsed before another Indigenous 'country' performer — Troy Cassar-Daly — won a Golden Guitar). With respect to the increased acceptance of

contemporary popular Aboriginal music in recent times, students can be directed to look at the categories under which country and rock genres are represented in music stores: for example, is Aboriginal 'country' included with 'country' or under 'Indigenous'? Students could be asked to compile the names of other contemporary Aboriginal singers and bands who have made a national and international name for themselves over the last decade.

Although the clan affiliations of some artists are given in the book, it is disappointing that others are merely said to have 'Aboriginal background' (perhaps their exact ancestry is unestablished?). Where tribal/language group names *are* included, it is a shame that their spelling is not standardised in accordance with the now commonly used Map of Aboriginal Australia and the accompanying orthography used in the *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* (Ed. Horton, 1994). This map could still be utilised, with students pinpointing the 'country' of the main artists represented. The Yorta Yorta should have been named as Jimmy Little's maternal ancestry from the outset, especially since the autobiographical song *Yorta Yorta Man* is described in the CD cover notes as 'one of the most gorgeous cuts in the whole Aboriginal country canon'. The spelling of 'Uwen' (Jimmy Little Senior's language group from the NSW south coast, see pp. 23 and 25) should be taught as 'Yuin'.

Some archival footage of a 1930s gumleaf band is superficially documented in the film, but teachers are welcome to use the following description based on Ryan (1999: 137, 140-142):

As part of the picturesque mode which operated to whitewash continuing forms of Aboriginal dispossession in the 1930s, film entrepreneurs used Aboriginal gumleaf bands in 'talkies', paving the way for their exploitative recruitment at the beginning of the Second World War. Ken Hall's 1933 nationalistic feature film 'The Squatter's Daughter' focussed on the attempts of father-and-son villains to cheat their way into ownership of a wealthy grazing property. Premiered on 29 September 1933 at the Civic Theatre, Haymarket

(Sydney), it grossed over £25,000 and was released through MGM in the UK under the title 'Down Under'. An elderly grazier hires a traditionally garbed Aboriginal gumleaf band to perform at a party, patronisingly introducing this self-contained unit of musical theatre as 'a surprise in the form of a real live gumleaf band'. The music is expertly played in parts but sandwiched between sophisticated society dance band items as mock-savage representation. Pre-arranged like a stiff vase of flowers before the shoot of the party scene, the eight leaf bandsmen look so ill at ease about representing a supposedly vanishing race that the camera zooms onto the rhythmical tapping of someone's big toe.

This gimmicky use of a gumleaf band was reformulated in the opening scene of the celebrated Australian Western *Rangle River* (1936), released at Hoyts Plaza Theatre, Sydney by Columbia Pictures in December 1936. It opened in the UK early in 1937, and was issued in the USA under the title *Men with Whips* in 1939. Framed by a canopy of trees, five Aboriginal males play European folk tunes on leaves from riverside suckers. Suddenly, they all scatter with fright as the tough property overseer Dick Drake cracks his whip at them in a threatening manner. Was this depiction of 'noble savage' leafists in Western clothing included to evoke a certain ambience or to promote White suprematism? The leafists remain nameless in the credits and sources do not detail their remuneration.

From the tertiary research angle, a welter of regional-specific material waits to be unearthed, and Indigenous students possess privileged access to oral history. Aficionados interested in amplifying the history of Aboriginal 'country' could mine *Country Music Capital News* and *The Koori Mail* as well as archival *Dawn* and *New Dawn* magazines. Indigenous participation at Tamworth remains under-researched with regard to the impact of non-Aboriginal interests and expectations on country music as a point of fit between the two societies. It would be interesting, for example, to ascertain whether Indigenous women have been short-shrifted at Tamworth due to racism and sexism. The performance behaviour of Aboriginal performers, including vocal/guitaristic mannerisms and 'country' costuming, could also be explored.

## Conclusion

Apart from its general educational worth, *Buried Country* makes a positive contribution to cross-cultural dialogue in Popular Music Studies and the contemporary debate on Reconciliation. Much to Walker's credit, Aboriginal country music has finally found *kudos* in the annals of contemporary popular music. The multimedia kit confirms that Aboriginal 'country' is a minority musical tradition comprising a unique canon of songs vigorously circulating vastly separated communities whilst simultaneously influencing the national development of Australian country music. Teachers can expect a high level of student interest in this worthy resource on Indigenous societies and political experience in Australia. The fact that Walker conceptualised 'country' as 'buried' rather than 'living' is a sad reflection on how the White psyche has neglectfully 'buried' the entire Aboriginal history. □

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## Filmography

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Robin Ryan wrote the first Master's thesis on urban Aboriginal music, and her PhD (*A Spiritual Sound, A Lonely Sound*) documents the Aboriginal gumleaf music tradition in Australia. As a teacher, Robin has proactively promoted Koori educators in the secondary and tertiary sphere. She is also a published songwriter, musician, music critic, and specialist adviser to *Currency Companion to Music and Dance in Australia* (forthcoming).

