
Reviews

Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places: Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Australia*
Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004
ISBN 0 86840 622 8. 262 pp., discog., refs, ind.

Reviewed by Liz Reed

The slightly overblown back cover claim of the publishers, that this is the 'first comprehensive book on contemporary Aboriginal music in Australia,' is effectively responded to by the authors' acknowledgement of previous texts, noting, however, that there have been only two which specifically cover their topic.¹ One of these, *Our Place, Our Music*, was written just prior to the 1988 Bicentenary in which Indigenous voices were raised in a range of musical and other political contestations of the white nation's celebrations, but was published in the year following the Bicentenary, and remains a significant text. This is not only because it responded to the need to capture the exciting and diverse developments in Indigenous music, but also because, in the words of its editor, it was produced as a 'part of the process of giving back to Aboriginal people the recognition that is their due.'² *Our Place, Our Music*, which included conversations between Indigenous musicians, located in their 'place' and its significance for the themes they sang about and their links with country, also engaged with questions of cross-cultural collaboration, and ongoing issues of racism encountered by groups that were unmistakably Aboriginal. There was a helpful discography and list of record companies and Indigenous media outlets and other useful advice, and the book ended on the optimistic note that although funds were needed in order to develop the full potential of the varied forms of Aboriginal music and performance, there was a determination to proceed nonetheless, because 'The scene is really exciting, and only in its infancy.'³

¹Marcus Breen, ed., *Our Place, Our Music* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1989); Clinton Walker, *Buried Country: The Story of Aboriginal Country Music* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 2000).

²Breen, *Our Place*, xii.

³Breen, *Our Place*, 144.

Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson, both of whom have published extensively in this area, have made a timely contribution with *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places*, which combines their respective interests in Aboriginal music, cultural history and geographies of place identities, as is captured in the title of the book. Like its predecessor, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places* clearly develops the intimate links between sounds, performance and place, and in the process provides a 'lens through which aspects of Aboriginal cultural politics can be viewed,' as well as extending their analysis beyond discussing music as texts, in order to explore how it is produced in social, political and economic contexts (p. 16). Indicative of theoretical and self-reflexive developments that have taken place within non-Indigenous academic and other writings in the decade or so since the publication of *Our Place, Our Music*, Dunbar-Hall and Gibson's commitment is to a post-colonial methodology based upon their recognition of their own subject positions as privileged non-Indigenous academics, and their acknowledgement of 'Aboriginal ways of seeing country and telling history' (p. 16). Thus, there is a determination, which is successfully achieved throughout *Deadly Sounds*, to avoid appropriating the authorial voice on behalf of Aboriginal musicians, underpinned by their analysis of the ways in which writing is inherently political. The authors' exploration of the fluid boundaries between them as researchers and the musicians and musical texts that constitute the book, makes for a fascinating and insightful basis from which they exhort readers to become more involved in taking Aboriginal music seriously, and for their deconstruction of the false and ultimately insulting binary constructs 'traditional' (that is authentic) and 'contemporary' (that is diluted or inauthentic) cultures and identities. This is a strand that runs throughout the book, as the authors remain focussed on their desire to produce a text that is decolonising, and it is here that their major contribution to the field is most obvious. Whilst earlier texts such as Breen's implied such a commitment, Dunbar-Hall and Gibson have articulated and developed a text that can be termed 'decolonising' because of its self-awareness and acknowledgement of the limits upon their ability to transcend their white race privilege as they provide space for Aboriginal music(ians) to speak.

By organising the book's chapters around themes relating, for example, to place and identity; Aboriginality and transnational culture—hip-hop and R&B; cultural tourism; sites as songs, famously associated with Warumpi Band; the sound of the 'Top End'; place and post-colonialism; reclaiming country; and the ways that music and regionalism map the Kimberley, the authors have been able to achieve their aims of privileging the voices of musicians and their self-representation within their respective sites of cultural and musical production. Thus, the intimate relationship between identities, languages, and place, as well as the political dimensions of their self-expression, are effectively highlighted and readers are assisted in their journey of discovery by the provision of 'suggested listening' lists with each chapter. I remained rather curious about the book's cover, however. This was a visually stunning photograph, courtesy of the Bangarra Dance Theatre, of the blackened naked torso of dancer Patrick Thaiday. It is never clear whether the authors or the publisher chose the cover image; if it was the former, it would have been helpful had there been a brief discussion of their reasons for selecting this, given that the image plays with the questions of identity, authenticity, Aboriginality, and its binary constructions, and the links between music and performance such as in dance performed by Bangarra. Perhaps it was felt that the cover image and the content spoke for themselves, and to a degree they did, but whereas the extensive

selection of photographs throughout the text had extremely thoughtful captions, this could have been extended to the cover itself.

Dealing as this book does, with questions of speaking positions and non-Aboriginal constructions of Aboriginal identities, which is probably one of the most consistent and hardy European mania since colonisation when (as the authors note) 'Aboriginality' came into being, there is also a focus on particular issues such as racism. This is examined in a range of dynamic ways, from its covert operation within the recording industry, where Kev Carmody cites instances of inbuilt censorship of company executives behind the selection of songs to be released, to the more overt pressures imposed on Aboriginal performers, to conform to Western expectations of 'traditional' sounds and indeed physical appearance (p. 64). But as the authors amply illustrate, both from a theoretical perspective as well as from the inclusion of interviews with Indigenous performers, such experiences of socially constructed Aboriginality create a space within which the music is used as resistance, as a way of depicting continuities of identity and connection to country, kinship and laws. At the same time, other identities, such as gender, are also intersected and woven into musical expressions and cultural reformations.

An important dimension of this book is its discussion of the naming of rock groups as a part of the process of reclaiming and re-mapping country, replacing the imposed European names with Indigenous ones. In the process the identities of such places are also rewritten, indicative of the powerful force for cultural articulation and resistance that rock music has played historically. The injection of transnational 'black culture' (as the authors somewhat problematically term it), into contemporary Aboriginal hip-hop and R&B is another significant tool for expressing self-determination in its widest sense. The authors provide an historical analysis of the links between Aboriginal and 'black Americans' since around the time of the Second World War and show how the appropriation of these contemporary transnational sounds and musical forms are not only strategically designed on the part of Aboriginal performers, but are also a part of a worldwide interaction with an increasingly globalising culture. As they discuss, hip-hop has become a feature of everyday Aboriginal life across the country (p. 122) and has provided one of the best ways of communicating with other young people. This was exemplified also by their acknowledgement that hip-hop has also been enthusiastically embraced by non-Indigenous young people, including those who identify with non-Anglo 'ethnic' identities, and they consider the possibilities this offers for a blurring or transcending of ethnicity and 'forming a common youth culture' (p. 123). This is compelling reading, but also occasionally slightly frustrating, as there is a tendency throughout the book, to miss the opportunity to make links between the various chapters dealing with their more or less discrete subject matter. Thus, an amused quotation from 'Brisbane's Number 1 Murri Country radio station,' Tiga Bayles, about the popularity of country music with non-Indigenous audiences, and the tendency of many to dismiss this genre as mainly for conservative white Australians, whereas in reality it is a kind of Trojan horse that enters their homes via the radio, might have been linked to the ways in which hip-hop has the same (if not greater) potential to blow apart Anglo supremacy. Similarly, the attractiveness of hip-hop as a means of 'story telling' might have been explored more closely in relation to the other genres, locations, continuities and innovations, which are explored in this book.

These are minor quibbles, though, as the book as a whole succeeds in its aims laid out in the introduction, perhaps the most important of which are the exploration of music as 'a

representation or expression of Aboriginality,' and the authors' post-colonial sensibilities discussed above. It not only fills the gap left since Marcus Breen's *Our Place, Our Music*, but also vividly illustrates the validity of his excitement about the 'scene' as it was developing at the end of the 1980s. *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places* is, among other things, a rebuff to conservative white Australians who may like to think that they have 'won' the battle to reclaim control of 'their' space since the Mabo decision. The voices of those interviewed and quoted in this book, as well as the voices conveyed in the diverse musical styles and locations discussed, are inspirational in their articulation of identities, cultural geographies, self-determination, continuing resistance, and their strength to feel able to appropriate new globalised sounds such as hip-hop and make it their own. All these affirm the continuing strength and resilience of Indigenous peoples across Australia. The relationships between the authors of this book and the Indigenous musicians with whom they collaborated also powerfully suggest the possibilities of cross-cultural engagements.

Dieter Borchmeyer, *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner*
 translated by Daphne Ellis
 Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003
 ISBN 0 691 11497 8. x + 391 pp.

Review by Warren Bebbington

Wagner, says Dieter Borchmeyer boldly, is 'the most controversial artist in the entire history of culture,' one whose works and personality provoke, even a century later, disagreements of a depth that still militate against his works ever becoming classics. One never speaks of 'Shakespeareans' or 'Mozartians' the way one speaks of Wagnerians. Faced with Wagner, he says, even otherwise serious scholars 'take leave of their senses ... and start to rant.' To be sure, these comments all ring true of a significant part of the Wagner literature; they are untrue of the book they preface, however. Borchmeyer confesses that his own work is fuelled by a passion for Wagner, but this book will not be consigned to the more irrational end of the Wagnerian spectrum: it is sober, thought provoking and refreshingly original.

Author of one of the few systematic accounts of Wagner's aesthetic theory (a study revised and published in English as *Richard Wagner: Theory and Theatre*, 1991), Borchmeyer first explored many of the ideas developed here in the engaging essays that he has contributed over a twenty-five year period as annotator to the expansive Bayreuth Festival program books. His principal interest is in Wagner's output as a librettist and Wagner's place in the world of letters, rather than as a musician. In Part I of his study, he sets forth studies of the texts not just of the mature and familiar Wagner music dramas, but also of the early works before *Rienzi*, and even the unfinished texts and those he never set to music: *Die hohe Braut*, *Männerlist grösser als Frauenlist*, *Die Sarazeni*, *Jesus von Nazareth*, and *Friedrich I*.

His fresh insights are many, and he finds hitherto unrecognised cultural and historical cross-references in all Wagner's stage works. In *Die Hochzeit*'s idea of a knight healed by a woman's love, Borchmeyer finds pre-echoes of *Tristan und Isolde* and the influence of the