

[E S S A Y]

THE NEW CORROBOREE

ABORIGINAL HIP HOP IS ACQUIRING ITS OWN DISTINCTIVE STYLE, TONY MITCHELL FINDS, AND CAN HAVE DISTINCT ADVANTAGES, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL, FOR ITS PRACTITIONERS AND AUDIENCES

'HERE we go—here's a bit of a history lesson for ya.' We're backstage at the Manning Bar at Sydney University with Munki Mark, Aboriginal MC, former member of mixed-race Sydney hip hop collective South West Syndicate. He is waiting to do his sound check for Klub Koori, Sydney's first Indigenous hip hop showcase, billed as 'contemporary musical storytelling from an Indigenous perspective'. It's being presented by Koori Radio and the Gadigal Information Service Aboriginal Corporation, and MC'd by stand-up comic and hip hop fellow traveller Sean Choolburra. Following Mark on the bill will be Ebony Williams, Sydney 'femcee' and Indigenous Music Officer for the Music Managers Forum; Mark's former SWS cohort Brotha Black; and Murri MC and producer Lez Beckett, winner of a 2005 Deadly Award for most promising new talent, with his new crew Cypher Duem. Headliners are Newcastle-based Local Knowledge, the Aboriginal hip hop buzz group of the moment and winners of the 2005 Deadly Award and 2004 MusicOz award.

'It all started in Redfern about twenty-three years ago,' continues Mark, a fair-skinned Koori, now thirty-eight, his bespectacled, bleached-blond appearance giving him an unconventionally pedagogical air:

A few of the boys were into breakdancing. I wasn't really into it—I was just hanging around a bit there. My mum lives in Bankstown, and a few of us Koori fellas out there would come into Redfern and see what was going on. Breakdancing was a big thing, so finally I started getting into it. And then it went on to graffiti, and we had a bit of a crew in Redfern called Black Connection. Then we moved on into a music sort of thing and we started doing rhyming. So yeah, that's how it all started.'

Mark's story suggests the Indigenous hip hop scene, often invisible and inaudible in the many debates and oral histories that have been rehearsed in the music street press and numerous website forums about the origins of Australian hip hop, may have got started ahead of other scenes. In any case, he was soon approached by youth workers and invited to teach hip hop skills to disadvantaged kids, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal: 'I've been running workshops with kids for a long time, up through the desert in the Northern Territory, out in western New South Wales, up through Queensland, in South Australia and WA. And me being someone who also raps in Indigenous languages, it's really good for the kids in the desert to see that you don't have to be a *yo yo*—an American as I call them—rapping in an American accent. Even if you don't speak English as your first language you can rap in your native tongue.'



MUNKI MARK

COURTESY OF ELISSAR MUKHTAR

Rap and hip hop are still perceived as primarily African-American musical forms, and their mainstream media manifestations of violent posturing, machismo, misogyny, ostentatious wealth (bling bling), pimping and brutalism are widely disseminated around the world in music videos and on commercial radio stations. These provide fuel for politicians and pundits alike to blame these forms of music for almost anything from the recent demonstrations by Arab and North African youth in France to the youths rioting in Cronulla in December 2005.² Peter Costello even blamed hip hop for what he referred to in a speech at the Hillsong Church in 2004 as the 'moral decline' of Australian youth. But Aboriginal hip hop, and the many other forms of what might be called 'native' Australian hip hop that have been simmering underground over the past two decades, demonstrate that the four elements of hip hop—graffiti, breaking, DJ-ing and MC-ing—can often be positive, educational forces that provide important vehicles of self-expression for disenfranchised and disadvantaged young people from all ethnic backgrounds.

In Mark's case, as with some Maori and Samoan MCs in New Zealand, it has also been a means of retrieving and giving public voice to Indigenous languages. Mark has rapped in his grandmother's language, Jardwadjali, the language of the Grampians in western Victoria, as well as in Arrernte, spoken in Alice Springs (SWS's track 'What a place' has lyrics in Arrernte), and picked up bits of Wiradjuri, Gamilaraay and Uliraay—a more western version of Gamilaraay, out Lightning Ridge way. Also a few other desert languages from the Northern Territory area.' Some of these may be included on his forthcoming EP *Ten Years too Late*—a title that speaks to how few of the growing number of Aboriginal hip hop artists around the country have had their work released on CD, apart from hard-to-find compilations and self-produced EPs.

In 1999 Mark and Brotha Black participated in Desert Rap, a three-week workshop with Aboriginal kids in Alice Springs that was set up by Triple J's Top End correspondent Tony Collins and made into a documentary film with that title, broadcast on the ABC in 2000. This featured, among other highlights, a raw and vibrant performance from Swanz, an all-female crew, in a track called 'Brown skinned black woman'. One thing the project facilitators insisted on was no American accents; kids were encouraged to find their own voice, their own accent, their own language. This led to a number of other similar workshops, including Hip Hop Up Top in 2001, which Collins also set up, working with kids in Darwin and Arnhem Land. Sometimes Mark found himself working with kids for whom

English is like their fifth language, so I try to get them to do it in lingo. There's a whole bunch of kids out there who are rapping in lingo, which you've got to love. Some of the elders get me into the communities because they don't like the way the kids are going with the American hip hop. I go in and show them: 'Nah, this is the way we do it. This is Aboriginal hip hop, we're not living in LA or New York.'

In their all too brief section on Aboriginal hip hop in *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places: Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Australia* (2004), Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson suggest that the 'black transnationalism' of African-American hip hop, especially those few artists who sought to make connections with Aboriginal communities when they toured Australia, was a decisive factor in the development of Aboriginal hip hop. They quote Lez Beckett:

... before Australian and Aboriginal hip hop really took off, we [Aboriginal youth] all followed what the Americans did. It really influenced me because it was a black face on television, and when you are a young fella growing up in Cunnamulla in central Queensland, it is a pride thing to see another blackfella in a position of power. (p. 123)

African-American hip hop artists who have influenced Mark include 'old school' crews and MCs such as Run DMC, the Sugar Hill Gang and Grandmaster Flash, along with Public Enemy, Ice T and Fu Schnickens, 'the first guys into speed rapping'. But he reserves a special place for Michael Franti of Spearhead and the Disposable Heroes of HipHoprisy, a fairly regular visitor to Redfern over the past decade, 'for showing me you could do instrumental music and rap all in the same minute on stage'. Like Franti, Mark sometimes plays acoustic guitar when he raps, and he points out that a number of other Aboriginal MCs such as Lez Beckett; Brotha Black; the Sydney-based 'abodigital' rapper MC Wire, aka Will Jarratt, a Gumbayngirri descendant from Bowraville; and political femcee Jakalene Extreme (also known as Shazza on the SBS comedy *Pizza*) do likewise:

More of the Aboriginal hip hop artists are into playing their instruments, especially didj. Remember, with Aboriginal culture, our aunties and uncles have been raised on country music, which is heavily influenced by people like [African American country singer] Charley Pride. All of us have grown up listening to that sort of stuff, from the elders. Country music is still a big thing, you've got Uncle Roger Knox and Troy Cassar-Daly out there doing their thing. So we like to pick up a guitar, and it's good to be able to see Warren H. Williams out in Alice Springs and be able to strum a few things with him, sit around the campfire and have a bit of a jam, sing 'Midnight Special' and a few of his songs. We throw a couple of raps in the middle of it!

This suggests that the country music embraced by Aboriginal people over the past half-century may be even more influential on some Aboriginal hip hop artists than their African-American counterparts.

South West Syndicate, an extended family of a crew that included Lebanese Australian MCs, as well as Pacific Islander, Croatian, German and Anglo members at various times, formed in 1992, and played a major part in Hip Hopera, a western Sydney community hip hop project directed by Morganics and Urban Theatre Projects in 1995. Hip Hopera was a watershed for Sydney hip hop, and SWS subsequently won a Deadly Award in 2003. They were also involved in *A Place of Peace*, a three-week hip hop project filmed by Penny Nutt for the ABC's Indigenous Unit in 2001, which was held at the Settlement Neighbourhood Centre in Redfern, funded by the NSW Department of Education and Training and included as facilitators Morganics, Lez Beckett, Fijian Australian MC Trey and others.

After SWS broke up, Mark began working with the NSW Education Department, and he has participated in the Indij Readers project, which has produced

educational books by NSW Aboriginal role models and elders such as Anthony Mundine, Michael O'Loughlin, Adam Goodes and Cath Farrarwell. Mark published *Raps 4 Little Fullas*, which comes

with a CD as well, so they can pop a CD in and read along, to help the kids who are illiterate to learn the words. That's a bit of a hit in the communities and I did colourful graff stuff in all the books—I think some of the kids look at the pictures more than anything else! I do a little song in the Gamilaraay language, but then I've written the English translation on the other side of the page ...

He claims that every time he shows up at a school, the attendance rate usually shoots up to nearly 100 per cent:

I try to teach them to stay in school and while I'm there we're writing raps, and I'm showing them things to do with maths, artwork, dance, all of those things.

His workshops in Bogabilla led to the formation of a pre-teen hip hop group called the Bogabilla Thrillers, who have fifteen members and have performed numerous gigs in southern Queensland and northern New South Wales.

Mainly for me it's being able to see smiles on kids' faces, and not just the kids, smiles on the faces of the elders, smiles on parents. We try to go toward a corroboree and that sort of thing. Aboriginal language was never a written language; it's always been an oral and visual language, stories being passed down through rituals, corroborees, song and dance. Hip hop fits in quite well with that, which is lucky for me, I'd say! Aboriginal hip hop is out there and all the communities know about it ... The elders know that Aboriginal hip hop exists and are keen to get these people into their communities to show the kids that they can get their own people doing it.

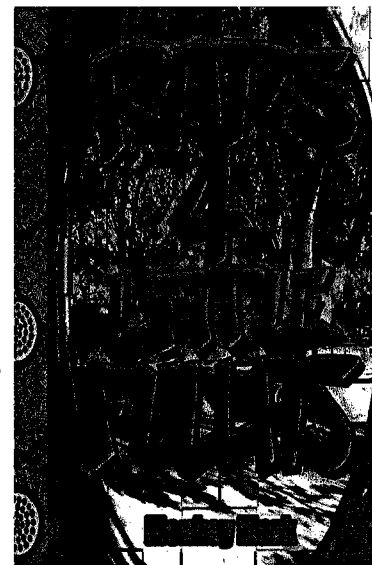
A couple of hours later Mark is onstage, doing his own idiosyncratic version of the moonwalk, microphone in his right hand, left hand gesticulating furiously, pumping out a freewheeling track called 'Walking in the sunshine', which makes references to refugees and Prime Minister John Howard's toadying to President Bush. At one point Mark describes himself as 'the brother who looks like a gubba', and he finishes his set with a bout of breakdancing, culminating in a body arch, to appreciative applause from a crowd that has a majority of Kooris. The DJ console is draped in red, black and yellow, Koori Radio's logo is prominent, and so is a banner that reads 'Live 'N' Deadly'.

Lez Beckett is heralded by two didjeridu players and traditional dancers in bodypaint, tracing the movements of kangaroos, demonstrating the adaptability

of hip hop into traditional Aboriginal storytelling and dance. Lez performs tracks from his recent EP, *We Were Soldiers*, and there is more dancing now, but the act everyone is waiting for is Local Knowledge. As their MC Joel Weintraub told Australian Music Online in an interview on 12 December 2005, Local Knowledge is primarily 'about getting young blackfella mob back into their culture and teaching our history through music'. Their track 'Blackfellas', for which they completed a video in Redfern last October, has been on high rotation on Triple J, and is the feature track of their debut EP, which they have been selling at gigs. The EP has already gone into a second pressing. It starts with a shout out to all the Aboriginal groups throughout Australia: Kooris, Murris, Nyonga and so on.

Brothers Abie and Wok Wright both have a background in rugby league and traditional Aboriginal dance. As Wok says:

Me and Abie laugh about it a lot because we try and structure our shows like we used to structure our corroboree shows. We'd start out with a bang, with a spectacular dance, and then we'd slow it down in tempo, then we'd do a strong dance, a slow one, and then we'd go into something leftfield—a hitch hiker's story on a didjeridu.



COVER OF RAPS 4 LITTLE
FULLAS

Tonight they begin with a fire-making ceremony, they leap onto the stage, jumping up and down, left arms whirling in unison, right hands gripping their mikes, goading the audience into action: 'Are you ready to rumble? We'll shake the world!' They perform 'Rumble' and 'Murri flows', with a bit of didj accompaniment, and hit their peak in a triumphant version of 'Blackfellas', which has everyone up on the dance floor. They're playing down the educational side of their repertoire tonight—health promotion songs about alcoholism and sexually transmitted diseases, for example—in favour of the less confrontational and more feelgood tracks. 'A lot of our early stuff', Wok explains,

was just rapping about straight-up, hardcore issues, about the stolen generation, about being hassled by cops, all that sort of stuff. We just wanted to make the



LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

kids know that there is still a lot of work to be done, and we can't lose them to drugs and alcohol, just to tell them they do have a role to play.

But he now acknowledges his growing taste for

the more commercial stuff ... the feelgood stuff, just because I don't like reminding the kids of how when they get home from school, there is no food, dad's hitting mum, mum's hitting dad, so they go into their room and put music on, they don't want to hear anyone singing about that. They want to go on a journey with their music. So that's one thing we do, the easy going feel, but we have a bit of a go at everything.

Joel adds:

In our communities storytelling, music, dance, creative arts are the only form of communication, it's the way we've passed on our knowledge, and that's one of the big reasons hip hop is huge in Aboriginal communities. There isn't one Aboriginal kid who doesn't like hip hop because it's that oral communication that we've been used to over thousands and thousands of years. And you can also dance to it, which is a bonus!³

Local Knowledge's recent success is drawing attention to the increasing number of younger Aboriginal hip hop practitioners, especially in Brisbane, who are using this form to explore their own identity and to get in touch with traditional aspects of their culture. Indigenous Intrudaz, a trio out of Glenala State High, were nominated for a 2005 MusicOz award in hip hop, and their track 'Clap your hands', about growing up on the wrong side of the tracks in Brisbane, was a finalist in Triple J's Unearthed competition. MC Murriz, a teenage trio, released an EP, *Ain't no Suckers*, in 2004, which expressed pride in their Aboriginal heritage as well as in Brisbane, and brought them radio airplay, particularly for their track '2Black 2Strong'. They have performed at Brisbane's Stylin' Up festival, which has been something of a showcase for more recent Aboriginal hip hop, including groups such as MIZ, a female duo; and MC Dizzy, aka Charmaine Doolan, a Townsville-born Murri now based in Brisbane. The Rockhampton-based Torres Strait Islander crew Stray Dogs have also celebrated their heritage with a track called 'Saltwater people'.

But the senior exponents of Brisbane Aboriginal hip hop are undoubtedly Native Rhyme Syndicate, who formed in 1994, and were nominated for two Deadly Awards in 1998, as well as being the first Australian hip hop group to receive a National Music Award in the same year. Native Rhyme's main MC, Cameron 'C-Roc' Callope, is from the Gkuthaarn language group in the Gulf of Carpentaria, and was appointed an elder for the work he has done in educating Aboriginal youth through hip hop.

In Melbourne, Little G, also known as the Wogarigine, owing to her mixed Greek and Aboriginal background (her real name is Georgina Christanthopoulos), illustrates the crossover between Aboriginal and multicultural hip hop that also occurs in Perth crew Dowynsyde, whose members come from Aboriginal, Middle Eastern, South American and other backgrounds.⁴ Little G has written and performed tracks about Aboriginal deaths in custody as well as the Yorta Yorta people. She was one of the figures in MC Que and Colleen Hughson's 2004 film *All the Ladies*, which profiled six Australian women MCs, most of whom come from mixed heritage, and she sometimes performs with Melbourne multicultural groups

Curse of Dialect and TZU. Nonetheless, she feels doubly marginalised from much of the Melbourne hip hop scene owing to her identification with her Aboriginal heritage, and her association with 'conscious' or 'felafel' rap. As she explained in an interview in the film:

You get the ockers, the wogs, the felafel rappers which is us, you know, on the outside, the bloody hippies. I don't ever think I'll be accepted by everyone, because I'm Indigenous, and they're all gonna always compare me with overseas.

Hip hop's connections with traditional Aboriginal culture are perhaps best expressed by MC Wire, who performs a track called 'It's a modern day corroboree' and who told Moses Iten in 2003:

This is my lyrical healing. I can't go and get scarred any more and I can't become a traditional man. I'm a modern day blackfella, this is still Dreamtime for me. Hip hop is the new clapsticks, hip hop is the new corroboree'.⁵

As an educational format, a vehicle to express anger and pride in one's heritage, a way of binding communities together through dance and performance, a declamatory form of storytelling set to music, hip hop's affinities with traditional Aboriginal cultural forms make it an ideal means for youth to get in touch with their tribal identity and cultural background and articulate their place in today's world. At the same time as hip hop has been globalised, it has also been indigenised and incorporated into local languages and cultural forms. This makes it ideal for appropriation into the world's oldest living form of traditional culture.

NOTES

1. Munki Mark interviewed by Tony Mitchell, Nick Keys and Alastair Pennycook, 4 November 2005.
2. See, for example, Andrew Stevenson and Edmund Tavros, 'Years of rejection erupted in open rebellion', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17–18 December 2005.
3. Local Knowledge interviewed by Tony Mitchell and Nick Keys, Manning Bar, Sydney University, 12 August 2005.
4. For further details see George Stavrios, 'Identity and Appropriation in Aboriginal Australian Hip Hop', BA Honours thesis, Department of English with Cultural Studies, University of Melbourne, 2003.
5. Moses Iten, 'All you mob, get into this', *Juice*, April 2003, pp. 78–81.

AN END TO FORGETTING?

LISA SLATER REPORTS FROM THE GARMA FESTIVAL OF TRADITIONAL CULTURE, 2005

'Yo, turn around and look at Yolngu people, we are here.'

—Gulumbal Yunupingu, Garma Festival, 8 August 2005

FLYING is an unsettling experience. Not because I'm afraid of the plane falling from the sky, but because it is both solitary and uncomfortably communal. I'm not sure if I'm alone or in company. We're suspended in space and time, removed from everyday life, floating high above a hypnotising landscape; abstract individuals destined for the same place. The world below, made strange by the perspective, is full of the promise of exciting encounters, yet too unfamiliar, provoking anxiety. It's always a relief to land, be back on terra firma, but it was so peaceful in the air. While I'm up there, what's down below is memory or a cloudy future.

The women seated in front of me are also going to Garma Festival of Traditional Culture: a five-day event celebrating Yolngu culture in north-east Arnhem Land. I'm too distracted by the view to eavesdrop effectively on their conversation. They sound like they are in the know: regular Garma attendees. Maybe they are meeting up for the first time since last year's festival. They're talking politics:



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