

# **An Interview with Damian Wright: Flamenco and the discourse of World Music in Contemporary Australia**

## **About the author**

Brent Keogh is a musician and academic, specialising in the areas of popular music studies and ethnomusicology. His doctoral studies examined the discourse of World Music in Australia. He has published in the areas of arts policy, musical sustainability, music ecology, and music festivals. He currently teaches at Macquarie University and UTS in the areas of Popular Music, International Communications, and Media Studies. He also plays and performs on the *oud*, and has studied for a number of years with *oud* virtuoso and ARIA award winner Joseph Tawadros.

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## **Abstract**

In this Riff article, Brent Keogh speaks to Sydney based flamenco guitarist and ARIA award nominee, Damian Wright. The interview discusses Wright's experiences and perspectives on World Music in Australia. Where much of the academic discourse on World Music focuses on broader theorisation and systemic critiques, the following interview presents experiences and insights from a musician contributing to, and working in, the complex discursive space of World Music in Australia. In doing so, Wright's perspectives contribute to broader discussions concerning the politics of otherness, musical patronage, and cultural diversity in Australian music.

**Key Words: World Music; Flamenco; Australian Music Industries; Popular Music**

## **Introduction**

Damian Wright is an Australian born musician from Newcastle, who has studied flamenco guitar extensively in Spain. He is the bandleader of 'Bandaluzia,' a flamenco fusion group that has won 'Pick of the Festival' at the Sydney Fringe Festival and performed at the Sydney Opera House Concert Hall as part of the TEDX 2014. He also plays with the jazz-fusion group the 'Translators.' He was nominated for the ARIA award (Australian Recording Industry Award) for Best World Music album in 2013 for his collaboration with Bobby Singh and Adrian McNeil, 'Improvisations' (2013). In this paper, I present an interview I conducted in 2012 with flamenco guitarist Damian Wright, as part of a broader project analysing the discourse of World Music in contemporary Australia. While Wright is frequently programmed at World Music, folk and even jazz festivals across the country, the interview speaks more specifically to the local experiences of World Music in Sydney. His personal insights on World Music are relevant

to the broader Australian and international contexts, especially as he discusses some of his strategies for navigating the networks of the World Music industries in Australia.

World Music is admittedly, a contentious term, and a complete account of the scholarly debates concerning its discursive formation, its effects, its connection to colonial histories and global capital, are beyond the scope of this study (see for example Mitchell 1993; Erlman 1996; Taylor 1997; Van Der Lee 1998; Feld 2000; Frith 2000; Brennan 2001; Connell and Gibson 2004; Murphy 2007; Scott-Maxwell 2008). It is important to note however that while World Music has a discursive history beyond Australian borders, World Music in Australia draws on a number of antecedent discourses and conditions, including those of local and international music industries, colonial histories, migration and the academic disciplines of ethnomusicology and popular music (see for example Kartomi 1984: 3; Scott-Maxwell 1997, 32; Smith 2005; Whiteoak 2005; 2008; 2010; Elder 2010; Holdsworth 2010; Jordan 2010).

While there is disagreement as to the significance and meanings associated with the term, there are a number of themes that are regularly associated with World Music which have relevance to the interview conducted with Wright. The first theme is where World Music is constructed to signify sonic otherness. This sonic otherness has a long history (see Bohlman 2002: xi), but is most visible in the inter-cultural sonic contact prevalent in the contemporary transnational music industries (Hernandez 1998: 120). This contact produces significant anxieties, especially in regards to perceptions of authenticity, often viewed as the corollary to 'authentic' musical practice (see Smith 2005: 160).

The interview presents an ambivalent attitude to hybridity/fusion in World Music. World Music is often implicated in tensions between the market desires for fusion music as opposed to what is perceived as traditional music. Aubert (2007) has stated succinctly that:

World music is hybridization elevated to dogma: to be admitted into the circle, musicians must promptly accept the rules of this game of succumbing openly to the intercultural dictate (Aubert 2007: 55).

The theme of hybridity in the discourse of World Music is not only an admission of the various cultural flows that contribute to the different traditions associated with World and popular musics; in the discourse of World Music, hybridity is overtly performed and displayed due to market pressures (see Hutnyk 1998). Hybridity allows the musician to display their submission to a certain brand of 'we are the world' multiculturalism, which amplifies the celebratory aspects of World Music but downplays its anxieties (see Feld 2000: 151). Hybridity also becomes a means by which musicians can demonstrate their musical 'innovation' in a political economy that values novelty, but is uprooted from more locally bounded, cultural and economic networks.

Several other themes are worth mentioning as they pertain to this interview. The interview presents Wright's perspectives regarding discussions of sustainability, and the fear of the loss of sonic and cultural diversity due to threats from major record labels and mass culture (see Grainger 1915; Titon 2009; Schippers 2015). An intriguing aspect of this musician's insights into World Music in Australia is the importance of the visual/theatrical elements of performance, which contributes to audience reception and further patronage. Wright also provides insightful commentary on the problems associated with evaluating and funding diverse forms of music in the relatively small World Music market in Australia. These themes are addressed and explored in the interview with Wright, which presents first-person experiences and perspectives on the discourse of World Music, and its effects, in contemporary Australian music.

### **The interview**

**BK:** *What does World Music mean to you?*

**DW:** For me, World Music is something that was created by a music industry, by shops and producers, marketing people... throwing a whole bunch of [music] into one category that is easily identifiable. When I was a kid I remember seeing World Music in a shop and thinking, wow, is that a genre? And then I just realised, no hang on, its something that [is] seen from a Western perspective. You generally don't see Blues or something like that in a World Music section. I mean maybe you do in some cases, but I generally see Blues under its own label. The problem is...that World Music, as much as I think its very Western, and its very us and them, us and the "ethnics," I mean what are you going to do? Put an Azerbaijani section in a HMV store? It doesn't surprise me [that a term such as World Music exists], and I would be surprised if it was any other way as far as that marketing thing goes.

**BK:** *There seems to be significant overlap between the terms World Music and Multicultural Arts. Does World Music allow you certain freedoms as an artist, for example, does it help you access performance spaces?*

**DW:** There has been a few organisations that have attempted to support this kind of thing, [for example] Café Carnivale. As a primarily flamenco guitarist they were hugely supportive of me for over seven years or more. So when there is an organisation like that that try and encompass all different cultures then obviously it is a good thing and they have to be as balanced as possible, which is sometimes the argument I guess with some World Music artists I've spoken to. It's funny, I'm even saying this term myself and I don't even like it! But you know what I mean, it's a hard thing to describe, cause when you think about these kinds of things, multicultural, or World Music as far as genre of

music, in some of these countries they have four or five times the population of Australia and we're putting them into a little thing, into that little section!

**BK:** *As a flamenco player, how have you sustained a music career in Australia?*

**DW:** I studied in Spain for almost five years and I was going back and forwards to Spain. I always thought that it would be great to survive off music and when I came back to Australia, I remember that I was like confronted with a lot of scepticism [from] colleagues. It was amazing how much people were complaining about there not being any gigs and just generally the situation being really shit. The funny thing was I honestly just thought, ok fair enough, if that is the case, I'm just going to ask around and see if there's any gigs available and within a couple of weeks I had a few gigs a week! And I was playing in places, just started by playing the Spanish quarter and then getting a little bit more serious with getting an ensemble together...I wouldn't say its been easy at all, definitely financially it hasn't been easy as you can imagine, but as far as getting gigs goes, sometimes I say this to my students as well – get out there and ask! Obviously you have to have something to show, you have to play well, but I kind of found that cynicism...to be a little bit of artist laziness.

**BK:** *So there is work if you chase it?*

**DW:** There is work, but I can only say that from my perspective. Say you've got an incredible player from Namibia on an obscure instrument. You might be the best in Namibia and you've come out here...that will be a lot more difficult to get gigs than it would be for the flamenco guitar. So I think there's lots of different levels of that, you know?

**BK:** *So Australian audiences are quite receptive of flamenco?*

**DW:** Yes, I think one of the things about flamenco that is lucky as far as getting an audience, is that its got the visual as well as the musical side of it, [it has] got the dancing, so basically, it becomes like a show. [For example] with jazz groups, it's all equally amazing to me, but it is a lot more, I hate using the word self-indulgent, but it is not necessarily music that is going to connect with everyone. Flamenco has an ability to connect with the laymen. And it can be almost superficial things that can connect – they love the look of the dancer's dress...A lot of music doesn't have that, it is just you using your ears, because some podgy guy up there who is 65, [who has] got no hair playing incredibly well, wailing by world standards, but people kind of [don't connect]. Apart from the sound, there is not much else. So there are all those different levels at play. But definitely flamenco, we are a little bit lucky in that sense that it is a show, that our audiences are often full of musicians, people in the know, and then people who are just like "oh flamenco, sweet! I went to Spain once back in '62." Whereas I can't imagine that sort of happening at a contemporary jazz gig.

**BK:** *Do you find there's more work for fusion styles of music than traditional music in Australia?*

**DW:** Sometimes, one of the things I have found is that certain World Music artists, and I'm not quite sure why this is, but I've played with musicians...[There is one musician who] plays really well...he thinks that by doing a funk version and having funk guitars and drums and bass over those kinds of melodies done fairly badly in the sense of funk and rock – [he thinks] that is going to get to an audience and no one wants to hear the traditional stuff. Whereas I think in a way, if you present that traditional stuff really well and in the right way with the right backing, you are going to get more of an audience that way. You might not get the regular gig every Friday night at the Persian social club, but you could probably get a gig at the Angel Place recital hall. Sometimes it is the putting the food on the table thing as well. Some of these cultures too, like some of these Arabic cultures with long musical heritage, I get the idea that [music has] always been an occupation - the occupation is passed down. So what you do is you play your instrument, you get really good at it, but the prime thing is you get good in order to make money, as an occupation like a teacher...so they don't necessarily have that same artistic, self-indulgent - and I mean that as a compliment in a way - side to the artist. They are like let's just do what makes money. And I have seen that with some African guys and Arabic guys. When I've actually got them to do something on one of my projects, I've been like wow! These guys are amazing at what they do. And they go, "come and see my gig" and I go along and I go, man! You're trying to do a mixture of George Clinton, Munir Bashir and some sort of Billboard topping, chart. And you hear all those things in there, but they're not fusing, they just sort of like let's just do that with a 4/4 beat or something.

There is still a bit of an issue [at festivals] when it come to perception - they don't know anything about flamenco. I have done gigs where I have been playing Paco de Lucia songs for about 40 mins and then someone comes up to me and goes, "oh, when are you going to play flamenco? We booked you to play flamenco." I'm like, are you serious? I have just been playing Paco de Lucia. And they are like – no no no, flamenco. And the further I have chatted to them, the more I have realised that they are actually thinking [flamenco] is like salsa or something. And its their fault, they have got it completely wrong, and they are accusing me of not playing flamenco.

**BK:** *So you just have to play rumbas for the next half hour!*

**DW:** Exactly! So one thing I've come up with when I have looked at a few venues and festivals, [and they have said] we are not having flamenco this year - I have looked in the past [programs] what they have had as flamenco and its been really amateur, Spanish school, little ethnic kids. They don't really knowing anything about it, they are not really interested in flamenco, but just cause their grandparents were Spanish they have kind of

felt they had to [do it]. So they put on a show that is terrible and the organisers have that in their minds. And that is [a small part as to] why it can be difficult to get gigs.

With some forms of World Music, one of the problems in Australia is how do you adjudicate, how do you say what is good? Just say there is a guy who plays *saz* or something and he is saying he is the best in the world – how do we know? We don't know, I couldn't judge. There are so many times – I think I even said to Joseph (Tawadros) many years ago, some *oud* player that I thought was cool, and he goes, oh no, he is terrible! He just copies everyone. And so I think when it comes to booking things for say even Café Carnivale, there is often things that get booked in, where you are like, are you serious?! Man, that guy is terrible. This is something that I'm realising as I get older, that it's a difficult thing – how do you get a board of people who decide what is good about a culture you have no idea about?

**BK:** *There are organisations like the Australia Council, when they are evaluating grants, they have a peer-review panel and they try to get somebody that knows something about the art form to assess different applications, but we are such a small population and its hard to make those decisions with any kind of authority.*

**DW:** You know one of the other things I was thinking too, with something like Café Carnivale, if you have an administering sort of peer-reviewed body - who says who goes into a scenario like that, because Australia is such a small place, it would be like doing the witch-hunt on your neighbour. And that is one of the problems too. Say you are in the US, you are in New York and you are doing jazz - a peer[review] thing would sort of work, because in a way it's justified, there are so many people that are much better than other people, and that is just the way that it is. But here, when there is only like three flamenco players or something and one of them gets a gig and one of them doesn't, the other guy is like what the fuck?! Cause I know you're on that board.

**BK:** *What role if any, have bodies like the Australia Council served you in any way?*

**DW:** A lot. The Australia Council gave me a grant to go and study in Spain for three months, so that was amazing.

**BK:** *Was it an artist in residence grant?*

**DW:** [It was a] skills development grant. Musica Viva have been great for us, once again with Café Carnivale that was seven years of two or three gigs a year, and then Musica Viva countrywide touring. They have sent us around the country playing in different rural scenarios generally, but put up in really nice hotels and paid really well and everything looked after. Then [there are some] organisations that are starting to look outside the box, like SIMA. I've done half a dozen gigs there for flamenco inspired music.

**BK:** *Looking at improvisation more holistically, across genres?*

**DW:** Yes. I understand they have got an audience which is very jazz related, you know, but when you call yourself “Sydney Improvised Music Association,” there is a hell of a lot of prejudice there. [There are] so many cultures that improvise like you wouldn’t believe!

**BK:** *So do you have a manager?*

**DW:** We definitely need one! So let us know if anyone comes up! There’s the odd agent, who will now and then book us for something, or whatever, but a lot of it is just done through me.

**BK:** *Is there an established “multicultural”/World touring circuit in Australia?*

**DW:** Yes... [There is] the Belingen Global carnivale, Woodford Folk festival, a few festivals down in Victoria. But there is not much at local levels that is not just local ethnic community gatherings. There are the big festivals that are very difficult to get into obviously, cause it's a competition, but in the middle of that, now that we don’t have things like Café Carnivale or anything that is like that, I would say that in Sydney, I don’t think there is actually anything...nothing anymore. You have to get a gig at private places like Camelot and the Red Rattler.

**BK:** *And Venue 505...*

**DW:** Yeah, that’s your only option, and once again, all those places are changing in the sense that they’re getting much more strict getting punters, and fair enough, it's a business. They haven’t said this to us, but I know some of my friends [who have been told] “listen, if you don’t get a certain amount of people through the door, you owe us \$800.” That is the deal you know. You imagine a guy who is trying to get a gig to get some money together and then he has a bill of \$800. So these people are going, well, we can’t do that gig anymore, and its unfortunate, because at the end of the day, you almost need organisations that are ok with losing a little bit of money. Which is always a problem. If you’re going to support something, I don’t know, it’s hard, I’m not an entrepreneur, I just think it would be really hard to make something popular. With the Café Carnivale thing, I don’t know why that folded, was it Government cutting back or something? I don’t know.

**BK:** *There is an official report into why that happened but it hasn’t been made public yet. On another issue, lots of musicians and academics have shown concern regarding the sustainability of more traditional music disciplines in a globalised world. What challenges, if any, do you think flamenco music faces on a global scale? What challenges does flamenco music face in Australia?*

**DW:** One of the major challenges flamenco faces is that Spain is not the same country that it used to be, Spain used to be almost a third world country. People were singing a certain way, playing a certain way, it was rough, sung from a situation of the fact that they were dirt poor, and the Gypsies at one time in Spain were slaves, you know? So they were singing about their situation. And so those kind of lyrics and stuff, they sound almost ridiculous, you've got a guy with his Reeboks, and his hat backwards, driving his father's Volkswagon...the only way that you could get that happening again would be to send Spain under.

**BK:** *Which may well happen!*

**DW:** Which may well happen! Yeah! When people say you have to keep things traditional, I think that is incredibly important, and luckily, at least in flamenco's case, there have been a lot of people, especially people from the outside who have gone and recorded a lot of these singers 100 years ago and documented a lot of these songs, they call them *cantes* in flamenco. And also [if] you go to some towns in Spain, they are flamenco towns, and the tradition is not dying at all - [there are] kids at four years of age singing like old people with two teeth! They have got that sort of real, rough edge, and that's incredibly important still to them. [However], I actually personally believe, that if flamenco was still played the way it was before Paco [de Lucia], I wouldn't be a flamenco guitarist. I think I would play some elements of flamenco, but I would never have gotten into it as deep as I did if it wasn't for the fact that flamenco started looking outside itself with harmony and rhythm. Because flamenco was the harmonic equivalent of punk music - like three or four chords all the time. And the idea was that you don't really create anything new, you just do variations on 200 year-old melodies. All you do is vary them, and if you do anything too far from that, who are you? You are so arrogant! And now it is more like flamenco is an art form, and I'm talking about the guitar specifically, you know, the guitar is something now that, as long as you have the traditional base and you understand those traditions, it is sort of open to interpretation, and the only criticism now is that people either like it or they don't. But you won't be type cast as a heretic - there have been too many heretics! They have become like a small majority.

**BK:** *Are there any particular challenges for flamenco music in Australia?*

**DW:** Challenges as far as an audience is concerned? One of the things with flamenco guitar, it might be similar to the *oud* is there is no instant gratification with flamenco guitar. For some people there is, "I was able to play a flamenco chord," dom7b9 chord, thinking wow I could play that chord all day! But in order to do things like just holding time, *rasgueado*, that stuff takes years, and new students it takes them six months of practice everyday just to hold down and get the marking of time, cause its such an unnatural thing



to do. It is always going to be a specific type of person that is going to want to pursue or be crazy enough to want to learn flamenco guitar. Its not like Blues you know?

**BK:** *As flamenco takes a lot longer to learn.*

**DW:** Yes.

**BK:** *Do you feel like less people have that disposition?*

**DW:** Nowadays you mean?

**BK:** *In terms of the students you have.*

**DW:** I have got a few students who are getting really heavily into it now. But yes, it's few and far between. I had students for years, I even had students who I just stopped teaching because it was just really frustrating. I don't know if it is the next generation coming through, but there were guys who hadn't learnt any of the techniques, then all of a sudden I see they have got a website saying they are a prodigy of the flamenco guitar or something. And I have actually had a few students who have had about three months of classes and then they are on the scene you know? With terrible technique, no understanding of the tradition, sort of imagine Nirvana doing flamenco, you know? And I like these people as people, but there does tend to be a trend, and maybe there always has been a trend towards that. My ears don't allow me to do stuff like that. If I am performing, I want to make sure that things are right. And I love playing things that are steeped in tradition, when I'm playing something, referencing stuff, and when there's someone from Spain or whatever, and they are the only kind of people that notice that. I wonder if its got to do with things being so easily accessible, that it makes people complacent, I don't know...we have to fight for it a bit more...

**BK:** *I guess there are always negatives and positives – it is pretty amazing that you can go on to youtube, type in Sabicas and there is footage of him playing.*

**DW:** Yes, amazing! Yes, I can't really think of any negative to that, that's amazing. Yes, I don't know if that's the right example, but there just seems to be a bit of complacency. I'm surprised there are not more young guys going "I want to go to Spain!" and play the guitar, obviously coming from my perspective because I love it so much. I remember when I was 17, living in Newcastle, getting the train down twice a week for classes, saving, working two jobs packing shelves in the supermarket to get money to go and live in Spain. I don't know about the *oud*, but with the flamenco guitar, if you don't have [drive] it is really difficult to achieve anything on it, because it is so intense, because it requires so much of you.

**BK:** *Yeah, you just step into this thing and it is a lifelong pursuit, you need a couple of lifetimes in order to get to a point where you'd be happy.*

**DW:** I don't know about you, but I'm starting to get to a point where I'm getting more comfortable with the fact that it is something you never master, you are always going to be "well, lets fix this up" when you're 80. In a way I think that is amazing, because I have got this thing now forever. Before it was almost overwhelming, disconcerting, the mountain is just so high.

[End of transcript]

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