

***Songs from the Stations: Wajarra as Sung by
Ronnie Wavehill Wirrpnga, Topsy Dodd Ngarnjal
and Dandy Danbayarri at Kalkaringi***

by Myfany Turpin and Felicity Meakins,
with photographs by Brenda Croft

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This interdisciplinary work provides a comprehensive and detailed study of five public song series sung for entertainment by the Gurindji people of Aboriginal songs from Wave Hill (Kalkaringi), Northern Territory. It is part of the series Indigenous Music of Australia, edited by Linda Barwick, that analyses the repertoire of traditional and traditionally oriented songs, such as the work of Yothu Yindi, that are sung in Australian Aboriginal languages. This is the first book within that series to examine songs with desert origins, as the others concentrate on music from the Top End of the Northern Territory. A website, open.sydneyuniversitypress.com.au/songs-stations.html, is available with audio recordings of all of the songs that are presented for analysis in the book. The intention of the authors is to help people to learn the songs by listening to the recordings and matching each verse to the rhythmic patterns and to the melodies shown by the notations. Because the melodies of each song set are roughly the same, only few notations are shown; unfortunately there are none for Freedom Day, which historically will be of special interest to the reader. That song set celebrates the seven-year strike by the Gurindji people against the international food company Vestey's for wages and improvement in living conditions that is popularly known as the Wave Hill walk-off. The strike action, led by Vincent Lingiari, hastened the movement towards land rights in the Northern Territory (pp. 7–10).

Throughout the book, Gurindji people's voices are heard through historical accounts and reminiscences. First of all, the singer Ronnie Wavehill gives a detailed account of the place of *wajarra* singing within the context of Gurindji ceremonial and social life, citing his own memories of how he learned the songs. The bilingual format of his narrative, which must have taken very painstaking work, is useful both for Gurindji people and for English-speaking readers; however, a recording of it would have been of special interest to the Gurindji listener.

Next, the reader will enjoy the personal observations by Gurindji people found within the analytical commentaries after most verses of the five *wajarra* song sets. These include comments about references to sites, dance steps, bush foods, historical references, and elaborations on the meanings of some of the song words. For example, on page 126, Ronnie Wavehill comments upon family connections and dance procedures of verse 4 of the Mintiwarra song set, 'Makurila':

warlpi-warlpila reminds him of his uncle, whose name was *Wayitpiyarri* (Hector Jangari). Ronnie Wavehill remembers that during this song, all of the women get up and go a long way away and let the men dance. They are only allowed to hear from a distance.

On pages 164–65, several people commented upon verse 1, 'Warriwankankanya' of the Laka song set:

At Balgo, Patrick knew this song and he recounted hearing an aged white stockman in Alice Springs sing it when he and Marie visited Alice Springs in the 1990s ... Patrick jokingly said that the white stockman stole a blackfella song and Marie humourously retorted that Patrick stole the stockman's Slim Dusty. Jimmy Tchooga remembered this song from Gordon Downs Station. At Bililuna, Jack and Marie Gordon said that men and women danced to this song with their hand behind their backs.

A creative comparison is made about artistic practice. On page 24, the authors discuss the point that although Aboriginal people may sing songs with words that they cannot understand, they appreciate the musical features along with the historical and contextual associations. They compare this practice to appreciation of abstract art, which is valued for its visual qualities rather than its intrinsic meaning.

The analyses, both linguistic and musical, are detailed and comprehensive. With this in mind, some statements need a bit more elaboration if they are to keep up the analytical standard of the rest of the book. For example, on page 4, the authors say that the same song is performed to different melodies in different performances. Does this refer to the text only? May the melody differ during the same performance? Also, it would be helpful to give an example or two about the point made on page 1 of the Introduction where the authors state that 'songs may originate locally but they also travel, where they are picked up by different people and sung with a local touch'. Conceptually the point may seem clear, but it would be good to have

some data showing comparisons. A final point may be made about the section, 'Abbreviations, terms and conventions'. Most concepts are covered, but a definition of 'small song' at the beginning under musical organisation (p. xxxvii) would be logical. The concepts of 'song', 'verse' and 'small song' are, indeed, discussed next to the table; however, these could be discussed earlier in order to clarify their meanings.

A few editorial errors have slipped through, such as misspellings of Pintupi in footnote 11 on page 34, and the second paragraph on page 102 that refers to six song sets where there are five shown in Figure 2.2. Some of the references at the end of the book are not consistent in form, such as on page 208 with the 1987 entry on Merlan's chapter in the book, *Songs of Aboriginal Australia*, indicating MC Ross as one of the editors, however, the Sutton chapter in the same volume shows the name as M Clunies Ross. Also, the order of authors' names should be changed for several other references. These are only minor errors within a comprehensive bibliography that is impressive in its scope and of great use to researchers.

Overall, the depth of the analyses and attention to detail make this work an important contribution to the fields of history, linguistics and ethnomusicology. The general reader will see how all aspects of Gurindji culture intertwine, resulting in a most sophisticated world view. Ethnomusicologists, especially, will learn from the careful method used in musical analysis. The book shows a positive and joyful side of the Gurindji people of Kalkaringi through song and celebration of their culture.

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