

# Performing Country

## ***Landscapes of Indigenous Performance: Music, Song and Dance of the Torres Strait and Arnhem Land***

Edited by Fiona Magowan & Karl Neuenfeldt

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### **Reviewed by Samantha Faulkner**

First published in 2005, *Landscapes of Indigenous Performance* is an eclectic mix of chapters on Northern Australia's Indigenous music, song and dance. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers have been included. The contributors are mostly academics who have worked and studied in their respective fields.

The editors Fiona Magowan and Karl Neuenfeldt are well known in relation to the Yolngu and Torres Strait circles. Magowan is a lecturer in Anthropology at Queens University Belfast and continues to research Yolngu music and dance in northeast Arnhem Land. Neuenfeldt is Associate Professor in Contemporary Communication at Central Queensland University. He is active as a music researcher, musician and producer. Karl is probably best known for his work with Henry 'Seaman' Dan, a Torres Strait Islander jazz and blues performer.

The book consists of nine chapters which, overall, give equal weight to Torres Strait and Arnhem Land material. The chapters on the Torres Strait focus on a variety of cultural themes and practices, including the popular nursery song, *Taba Naba*; the music of the Torres Strait; Mabo, music and culture; and the development of the musical culture of Thursday Island from 1900-45.

### **Torres Strait Chapters**

The first chapter, *From Navajo to Taba Naba: Unravelling the Travels and Metamorphosis of a Popular Torres Strait Islander Song*, is interesting and controversial. Here, Nakata and Neuenfeldt chart how a 1903 song from the United States of America may have evolved into the Torres Strait song *Taba Naba*.

This is followed by a contribution from Eddie Koiki Mabo on the *Music of the Torres Strait*. The Mabo family assisted with the chapter, drawn from an article in *Black Voices*, 1984. This adds a personal touch and encourages a stronger feeling of intimacy between the reader, the man and the music.

In chapter four, 'Mabo, Music and Culture', Noel Loos provides a background to Eddie Koiki Mabo's life and examines how music was important to Mabo,

both in a cultural sense and in terms of the role it played in his personal life. This is a lovely, written tribute and flows neatly from the preceding chapter.

Steve Mullins and Neuenfeldt's 'Grand Concerts, Anzac Days and Evening Entertainments' takes the reader on a journey to the music culture on Thursday Island from 1900-45. This is an informative and well written piece and the research is extensive. The photos of past ancestors and the unearthing of familiar names, in this chapter, prompted some reminiscing on my mother's part. This chapter also plays on the reader's emotion, especially when it references how Islanders spontaneously sang the 'Old T I' song when World War Two boats departed and returned with evacuees. 'Music helped mark their return just as it had helped mark their departure' (115-16).

## Arnhem Land Chapters

The Arnhem Land chapters focus on several different themes: an ethnography of Yolngu musical performance in mainstream contexts; an exploration of Yolngu motion, ritual and cosmology in the Yirrkala Film Project; a Rally at Ramingining; the importance of opening up spaces for performing, teaching and learning Aboriginal performance traditions; and the interplay between metrical and real time in a Central Arnhem Land clan song series.

Chapter Two, titled 'Home among the Gum Trees', looks at the community of Gapuwiyak when in 1996 the community education centre won the *Burke's Backyard* competition for the program's theme song. Peter Toner refers to the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin to identify and better understand two dialogues: one amongst Yolngu performers and the other between Yolngu performers and a non-Yolngu audience.

With 'Dancing into Film', Fiona Magowan takes us to view films as 'a landscape where the numinous is in a continual dialectic with the phenomenal, as movement is both visible and invisible – seen in spatial patterns and body movements and concealed in song texts, rhythms and musical dynamics, each shaping the spiritual force of ritual' (58). She examines two films, *In memory of Mawalan* and *Djungguwan Ceremony at Gurka'wuy*.

Chapter Six, 'A Rally at Raminging' is an interesting and rarely considered area of Christianity in an Aboriginal community. Here, Ingrid Slotte describes a Rally held over a weekend in November 1990, and the preparations prior to, and during the Rally. It is both sensitive and touching in parts and it shows how the broader Aboriginal community adapted elements from English worship into its own spiritual belief system. However, each Aboriginal community—through their own dialect, language and dance interpretations—would place their own distinctive signature on their celebration.

Elizabeth Mackinlay, in 'Making the Journey In', looks at how elders from the Yanyuwa community in Borroloola incorporate their performance and knowledge

into the University of Queensland Indigenous studies. The way in which Mackinlay establishes her position with the reader is pivotal to her unfolding narrative and poses questions on power relations, risks and ethics. She also considers the relationship of cross-cultural engagement.

In 'Musical Times', Greg Anderson analyses a Central Arnhem Land clan song series called Murlarra. He examines nine musical types as well as their clapstick patterns, and the distribution of patterns, metres, tempos and metricality.

*Landscapes of Indigenous Performance* contributes to the current knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts, culture and history. It is both accessible and scholarly and it brings together new information on Torres Strait and northern-Australian Aboriginal performance. There is something for everyone in the book. It is a timely, interesting and informative publication.

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