

ABORIGINAL SOUL

THE MUSIC OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA

Indigenous Australia has always had soul. This is the oldest living culture on earth, after all; a culture where music is as vital to being as kinship, community and country. For the original inhabitants of this wide brown land music can convey everything from ancestral history and Aboriginal cosmology to a sense of place and self. And while a lot of this music is performed in private and public ceremonies characterised by body paint, clap sticks and (Yidaki) didgeridoos - stereotypes beloved of tourist boards from Canberra to Kakadu - Indigenous Australia has another, more contemporary face.

Here is rock, jazz and reggae; balladry, vocal harmony and spoken word. Songs in English and local languages (more than 200 are still alive) backed by a range of traditional and whitefella instrumentation. Songs inspired by a blend of the sacred (Aboriginal people talk of 'country' as they would a real person) and the profane (western influences) as well as by pain and joy - in keeping with soul music conventions. Songs from Aboriginal owned Arnhem Land. Tropical Top End Darwin. Sprawling inner-city Melbourne. All are but a mere taster of what the music of Indigenous Australia has to offer. All, however, have soul.

The award-winning Saltwater Band are an institution at home on Galiwin'ku (Elcho Island) off the Northern Territory's East Arnhem Land coast. Djilawurr, their smooth reggae-rock tribute to local fauna, is led by the unmistakable voice of Gurumul, an artist approaching world domination; on the melodious Gopuru their lilting beats are underpinned by clapsticks, chants and finally the didj, which ties it all together.

Known as 'the garage band who never had a garage', Narbalek Band of central Arnhem Land have spent years honing their craft: Little Journey to Manmoyi - electro twinkles, pastoral choruses, CB-style distortions - is a song about coming home. With its beautiful harmonies and near-perfect pacing, Mawah is crooning, swooning, finger clicking slice of, well, Indigenous soul.

The laid-back bush poetry of actor/musician Tom Lewis (Arnhem Land-born star of cult film The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith and the recent Nick Cave-scripted Proposition) finds its voice in the swirling, accusatory Sunshine After Rain. The late great George Rurrumbu, once the charismatic Yolgnu frontman of seminal 1980s outfit Warumpi Band, lives on in the sweet, guitar-led Dron Wangu. On Legend the stark, Johnny Cash-like tones of Mark A Hunter recall a time when Darwin was known everywhere as The Buffalo Country.

The celestial harmonies and Indigenous roots pop of Maginburru Bininj come courtesy of Wildflower, a five-girl group hailing from the solar-powered outstation of Mamadawerre way out in the Northern Territory bush (rained in during the wet season, they have to charter planes to get anywhere.) One of a well-known family of musicians, country music star and Top End legend June Mills sings of solitude and stoicism in the frankly gorgeous I'll Be The One.

Darwin-based Shellie Morris is both a sometime member of super group 'The Black Arm Band - billed as 'part Aboriginal soul revue, part civil rights statement,' by the London Evening Standard - and a respected solo artist; her five octave range renders the anthemic Swept Away, a song inspired by her reunion with her birth family, both hopeful and gloriously unforgettable.

Here, too, are songs from other Black Arm Band members, other national treasures. With a voice that may well come from the centre of the earth, South Australia's legendary Ruby Hunter tells of her teenage homelessness in the heart-wrenching Down City Streets; her equally renowned husband Archie Roach - one of Australia's 'stolen generation' of children forcibly taken from their families before 1969 - turns his powerful voice to a tale of injustice and strength, Liyarn Ngarn (or 'Coming Together of the Spirit' in the Yawaru language of the West Kimberley region in Australia's far north-west).

Singer songwriter Peter Rotumah croons along the dusty lanes and windswept grasslands of his mother's country of Gunditj-mara in Western Victoria in the Remembrance. Melbourne-based heartthrob Dan Sultan - a blues, rock 'n soul boy arguably closer to the spirit of James Brown and Otis Redding than suggested by his moniker, the black Elvis - gives his all on the fanging, twanging, horn-heavy Your Love Is Like a Song. It's a track that demands, and gets, an emotion-charged response.

As, indeed, do all the tracks. Delivered with emotion, carried by pride and defiance, this is music that is challenging stereotypes, pushing at boundaries and reaffirming connections to stories, the land - and the Indigenous soul.

Jane Cornwell