

Music be the food of protest: Indigenous Australian music as a form of protest

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Abstract:

Music has always been an integral part of culture. Anthropologists have pointed out that music is one of the “universal constants” that all cultures have in common. Music, throughout history, has proven to be a tool for protest, outshining cultural and geo-political boundaries. Artists fetter the emotive power of melodies and lyrics to articulate resistance, challenge social stereotypes and advocate for change. Whether in form of folk or hip-hop music can act as a universal language which can mobilize communities and promote collective consciousness. Music has served several times as a catalyst for social and political movements, empowering individuals to voice protest. The proposed paper seeks to portray how indigenous Australian music has become a powerful tool of protest time and again, voicing resistance against historical injustices. Rooted in cultural traditions, these songs convey powerful messages of struggle against racial, class and gender discriminations imposed on the aboriginals for centuries. At the same time, these songs speak of their ongoing struggle for land rights. The songs are often testaments of their struggle against colonial oppression. From ancient didgeridoo performances to contemporary genres like hip-hop, the artists use their music as a powerful weapon to amplify indigenous voices, challenge societal norms and generate social awareness. This paper seeks to explore the multifaceted role of indigenous Australian music in articulating identity and protest against oppression.

Keywords: *Australian music, Indigenous, Collective consciousness, Identity, Protest*

Music, with its enchanting melodies and rhythmic cadences, has been an integral part of human civilization from time immemorial. From the primal beats of ancient drums to the complexities of contemporary compositions, the evolution of music mirrors the journey of humanity itself. This article embarks on a historical odyssey, tracing the roots of music through the ages, unraveling its cultural significance and celebrating the perennial threads that connect us through melodies.

Even before the advent of written history, our ancestors discovered the primal temptation of rhythm and sound. The beating of drums, the chanting of voices and the resonance of rudimentary instruments formed the primitive expression of music. Religious rituals, rooted in the mysteries of life and nature, laid the foundation of folk music.

As human societies evolved, so did the sophistication of musical instruments and compositions. The ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Chinese civilization each contributed to unique musical tradition. Whether in the form of haunting melodies of Greek lyres or the intricate pentatonic scales of Chinese instruments, music became intertwined with religious ceremonies, storytelling and celebrations of people.

The medieval age witnessed the fusion of diverse music influences. Georgian chants echoed through European cathedrals, while troubadours and minstrels brought sagas of chivalry to life through songs. The advent of musical notation brought the scope for the preservation and transmission of complex compositions, shaping the musical landscape of the time.

The renaissance era ushered in an explosion of creativity in music. Composers like Josquin des Prez and Claudio Monteverdi experimented with polyphony and vocal expression. The Baroque period, led by stalwarts like Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel, introduced ornate compositions, operas and the flourishing of instrumental music.

The classical era, epitomized by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven, emphasized clarity, harmony and formal structures.

The romantic period embraced emotional intensity and individuality, with composers like Franz Schubert and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky crafting symphonies and operas that spoke to the human soul.

The 20th century witnessed unprecedented innovation in music. Jazz emerged as a revolutionary genre, synthesizing diverse influences and challenging traditional norms. The birth of Blues, Rock and electronic music transformed the global musical landscape. Legends like Miles Davis, the Beatles and electronic harbingers pushed boundaries, reflecting the dynamic nature of contemporary society.

In the 21st century, music stands out as a global discourse, transcending borders and genres. The digital era facilitates the exchange of different musical tradition, creating a rich fabric of global music. Hip-hop, pop and electronic genres dominate the airwaves, while artists experiment with fusion, creating unique amalgamations of cultural influences.

Music has always been a powerful medium for expressing emotion, conveying messages and inculcating change. Throughout the history, music has rendered the universal language to voice dissent, challenge authority and ignite social movements. The roots of music as a tool of protest can be traced back through the annals of history. From folk songs addressing social inequalities to spirituals expressing the struggles of the oppressed, music has served as a vehicle for marginalized communities to voice their grievances and aspirations. The Civil Rights Movements in the United States, for instance, found a powerful anthem in songs like “We shall Overcome”, fostering solidarity and inspiring perseverance.

Music becomes a significant tool for protest when it channels dissent and challenges the status quo. Artists often use their lyrics to question power, advocating for people’s rights and confront political injustices. Genres like punk, rap and folk have been very effective in expressing discontent and rebellion against authority, reflecting the vibe of social unrest.

One of the unique strengths of music as a form of protest is its ability to amplify the voices of the subaltern, who cannot speak. Artists can bring attention to social injustice through lyrics resonating shared experience, fostering empathy and understanding. This amplification extends beyond geopolitical boundaries, uniting people across the globe in solidarity against injustice. Certain artists have become iconic figures in the realm of musical protest, using their songs to champion social causes. Bob Dylan's songs like "The Times they are A-changing", "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall", "Talkin' World War III Blues" have become universal songs for protest. *Bella ciao* (Italian pronunciation: ['bella 'tʃa:ɔ]; "Goodbye beautiful"), an Italian protest folk song from the late 19th century, originally sung by the *mondina* workers in protest against the harsh working conditions in the paddy fields of Northern Italy, has become a song of protest for people across the globe. Salil Choudhury created his first song for people in 1945. He wrote a number of songs in the context of Tebhaga movement. He called these songs "the mass songs of Consciousness and Awakening" His song

হেই সামালো হেই সামালো
হেই সামালো ধান হো, কাস্টেটা দাও শান হো
জান কবুল আর মান কবুল
আর দেব না আর দেব না
রক্তে বোনা ধান মোদের প্রাণ হো...

became a universal one for working people across the globe.

The anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa found a strong support in the songs of musicians like Miria Makeba, Hugh Masekela et al.

The indigenous Australian music serves as a powerful tool for protest and cultural resurgence. For centuries, the diverse Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islander communities have harnessed the rhythmic beats, traditional instruments and lyrical narratives to their music to articulate grievances, amplify their voices and challenge the historical injustices faced by Australia's First Nations people.

Indigenous Australian music has a deep connection to cultural identity and resistance against colonization. From the sounds of didgeridoo to the rhythmic beats of clapsticks, traditional instruments have been used in ceremonies and storytelling to preserve cultural heritage. With the arrival of European colonizers, these musical traditions became a vehicle for expressing resistance against dispossession, violence and cultural erasure.

The concept of “Songlines” plays a pivotal role in indigenous Australian music. These are intricate musical maps that traverse the landscape, preserving folktales, cultural knowledge and connections to the land. Songlines not only serve as a form of cultural protest against the impact of colonization but also reinforce a sense of identity, belonging and continuity.

In more recent times, Indigenous Australian music has embraced contemporary music genres to address ongoing social issues and advocate for justice. Artists like Archie Roach, Kev Carmody and Christine Anu have crafted powerful protest songs that delve deep into the historical trauma of the Stolen Generations, land right struggles and systematic inequalities faced by Indigenous communities.

Hip-Hop, with its powerful blend of rhythm and politically conscious lyrics, has become a dynamic platform for indigenous Australian activism. Artists like Briggs, Baker Boy and A.B. Original use hip-hop to speak out against racism, gender discrimination and class inequalities and the enduring effects of colonial policies. The music has become a call to action, challenging listeners to confront uncomfortable truths about Australia’s past and present.

Warumpi Band’s *Blackfella/Whitefella* (1985)

Indigenous issues, probably starting with the land rights movement and the establishment of the Tent Embassy in 1972, are arguably the most prominent topics in the story of Australia’s dissenting rock culture. The shift from fairly saccharine lullabies like Jimmy Little’s 1963 chart-topper *Royal Telephone* or Lionel Rose’s tokenistic *I Thank You* (1970) — both of which songs rather underplayed

the activism of the singers themselves — rode on the back of a gaggle of more out-spoken indigenous acts like Coloured Stone, Us Mob and No Fixed Address. Out of this fertile red earth came my first suggestion, the Warumpi Band's *Blackfella/Whitefella*. Coming out of the Papunya region in Arnhem Land, birthplace of Australia's most recognised visual art movement, the Warumpis tacked onto a feeling for country few could match. Many in the big cities down south were cottoning on to just what kind of magic existed within the shores of their country and driven by co-founder Neil Murray, the band's only non-indigenous member, and enigmatic vocalist, the late George Burarrwanga, *Blackfella/Whitefella* (1985) became a bouncy, dusty, back-of-a-flatbed anthem for fusion, both artistic and political. Picked up Midnight Oil's Powderworks label, the Warumpis co-headlined with them on the ground-breaking Blackfella/Whitefella tour of outback Australia in 1986.

Many white Australians were first musically introduced to black Australia's story through fellow whites. In rock music, the best known song of this genre is my second candidate, Goanna's *Solid Rock* (1982).

Yothu Yindi's *Treaty* (1991), Cold Chisel's *Khe Sahn* (1978), Archie Roach's *They Took The Children Away* (1990) are some of the most famous Australian protest songs.

Indigenous Australian music serves as a vehicle to amplify marginalized voices. Through festivals like the Yabun festival and platforms like the National Indigenous Music Awards, emerging artists find spaces to contribute to a broader discourse about Indigenous rights and recognitions.

Indigenous Australian music also plays a pivotal role in cultural resurgence and healing. Artists engage in collaborative projects that blend traditional music with contemporary songs, fostering a sense of pride and resilience within indigenous communities. These initiatives contribute to the revitalization of language, custom and social practices that have endured social challenges.

Indigenous Australian music, with its root embedded in cultural tradition, has evolved into a potent tool of protest

and resilience. From the traditional sounds that resisted colonization to contemporary genres challenging power hegemony. The music of Australia's First Nation people echoes a story of survival, strength and cultural pride. As indigenous voices continue to rise through the chords and beats of their music, they carry a powerful message, a call for justice, recognition, and a renewed commitment to the rich cultural heritage that defines Australia.

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