



Identity Through Sound and Image: This is Australia?

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Abstract

Beginning with the example of GANGgajang's song *The Sounds of Then*, this discussion explores whether or not there is such a thing as an Australian sound in popular or rock music. Of particular concern are the actions of transnational corporations, the Internet and governments in the creation or subversion of such a notion. Sometimes national or transnational groups appropriate regional or local identities in order to 'infiltrate' a society. Such groups are often concerned with misappropriation of 'the local' in order to acquire a particular hegemonic position. Rather than resisting the forces of global capital, so-called 'local' sites may indigenise aspects of Imperialist cultures. However, ignoring the reality of contemporary global organisations is folly. Not only that, but 'local' cultural forms will always survive so long as there are those that wish to have a 'voice' of their own. And, in the case of rock music, is the national point of origin really all that much of an issue?

Key terms: popular music, rock music, resistance, appropriation, transnational culture, globalisation, local.

Introduction

I recall the first time I heard GANGgajang's *Sounds of Then* (Callaghan 1985) in 1985. This song was born out of the writer's remembrances of his teenage years living in Bundaberg, Queensland, and, at the time, I was immediately struck by the songwriter's capacity to capture, in just a few lines of verse, a feeling and a vision associated with my own childhood visits to the Bundaberg region. As Mark Callaghan sang about watching lightning crack over canefields and of breathing in humidity (see Appendix), I could almost feel myself beginning to perspire in remembrance of the summer and winter holidays my family spent at Bargarra and Elliot Heads as well as in Bundaberg itself. In my mind's eye I could picture driving through fields of towering cane; I could recall the often-lengthy roadside stops during harvest time as cane-carrying trains wove in and out of the canefields. I could even smell the sickly sweet odor of burning cane and recall my mother's distress as yet another load of washing took on a blackened hue as Bundaberg's own annual version of Vesuvius dumped its silky soft dark ashes all over the 'fruit' of her labours.

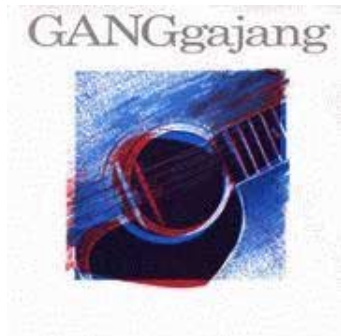
These were the feelings that affected me after listening to this song with its refrain of "This is Australia". To develop this notion further, it could be said that music brings audiences into an affective space more directly than any other medium. Music creates moods that can be attached to people's experiences. It has become, in the words of Lawrence Grossberg, "the most powerful affective agency in human life" (1992: 153). And although only a moderate hit, *Sounds of Then* attracted generous airplay, possibly because of the affective power of the song's lyrics. This fact alone seemed to attract the Coca-Cola corporation in 1988, the year of Australia's bicentennial celebrations, to adopt the song for use in both its Canadian and Australian promotions (Bailey 1999). In 1996 the song was taken up again by WIN Television as part of its "This is Australia" campaign.

At this point, I wish to state the general aim of this paper: to discuss the notions of cultural appropriation or cultural indigenisation in relation to notions of resistance to national and global capital interests. Of initial concern is how regional or 'local' identity, in particular that associated with Australian music, can be transformed through various media, including television. Indeed, it is through televisual discourse that the meaning of *Sounds of Then* fully moved beyond the regional or local. The song was used to construct a national identity in order to sell not just a consumable item in the first instance, but the whole ideological package of a particular television network. WIN Television's self promotional vignette draws on intertextual links with this popular song as well as images loosely linked to the song's lyrics. It is designed in fact not unlike a music video clip, linking it again intertextually with another genre: that of film.

On its own, GANGgajang's song *Sounds of Then*, contains references to the singer's vision of a part of Australia, in this case, regional Queensland. The song is a narrative about growing up and is filled with images that are predominantly rural, drawing on the myth of seeing Australians as rural types. WIN Television draws on the images suggested by the song's lyrics and expands upon them.

With a scrolling technique, the film-ette proceeds to parade a series of personalities associated with programs regularly seen on WIN Television. They are predominantly presenters from the network's top rating shows, although some actors are also present. None of the personalities is seen hard at work. Most are partaking in leisure activities against a backdrop of images not only linked to the lyrics of the song, but to other images that are aimed at reinforcing the song's chorus that "this is Australia". There are images of beaches and coastal regions, desert and farm life, as well as images of suburbia. Familiar Australian icons appear throughout the visual text: the Hills Hoist clothesline, a suburban home, Sydney Harbour and a family farm are just a few. The entire short promotional film is framed within opening and closing shots of sun, dirt roads and water that not only indicate that Australia is a large island, but also that WIN Television goes everywhere, every day.

What is created then is an imagined picture of what it is to be Australian, a sort of quasi-community (King & Rowse 1990: 40). The multifarious images of bush, beach and country as well as the ideological myths of a 'lucky country' that are represented (people at leisure, assumed ownership of land and property), create images of Australianness that interpellate a belief in the viewer that 'this' (these images, people, activities and therefore Win Television) is Australian and therefore so is the viewer. There is a problem however. In the Win Television mini-narrative there are no



Aboriginal peoples, 'Asian' peoples or any other ethnic groups represented. The hegemonic view that WIN depicts through some twenty-eight variations of this particular film-clip is that Australia is a big, wide-open country populated by fun loving, white, Anglo-Celts. One wonders if such homogeneous, monocultural images fit in with what Mark Callaghan meant when he wrote the words, "this is Australia".

For me, the example of GANGgajang and WIN Television's appropriation of its song *Sounds of Then* raises a wider concern: the idea that there may or may not be something termed "an Australian sound" in popular, or to be more precise, rock music. Apart from direct lyrical references as in *Sounds of Then*, just how difficult is it to associate popular music with a specific geographical identity?

There are analysts who believe Australian rock music did not have an original voice until the 1974 release of Skyhooks' seminal debut album 'Living in the 70s' (Breen 1996: 151; Walker 1998: 3). Despite extensive commercial radio bans on most of its tracks, this album, filled with songs containing specifically Australian (particularly Melburnian) imagery, became the first Australian album to sell over 250 000 copies (Breen 1996: 151). It would be over ten years before Jimmy Barnes's 'Working Class Man' (ironically, with a title track written about the mid-western United States) would better it. Following the success of Skyhooks, the Australian pub rock scene flourished, establishing the dominant sound of Australian rock as loud and played well 'live' (Breen 1996: 151; Australian Broadcasting Tribunal 1986: 40).

However, defining exactly what is an Australian sound is not easy. The 1986 Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT: 6) report into Australian music on radio found that while some forms of music might be easier to recognise as having an Australian sound because of particular lyrical content or style (such as bush music, folk), it was difficult to define an Australian sound in all genres of music. Acknowledging that early Australian rock music was highly derivative of American or British acts, the ABT report recognised the problem in defining an Australian rock music sound in particular. It produced the results of a survey which asked participants to identify some popular Australian rock artists. In the case of INXS, 94% of participants recognised their music but only 57% of those knew that they were Australian (ABT 1986: 2, 51). The ABT decided to define Australian music as that performed and created by Australians. Australians, in somewhat simplistic terms, were defined as people either born or living in Australia or those people who were Australian citizens (ABT 1986: 2, 39).

The ABT (1986: 5) stated in a somewhat simplistic fashion that Australian music was important to Australian culture because it gave recognition to Australia as a nation with a distinctive Australian voice. However, by the 1995 Contemporary Music Summit in Canberra, the problem of defining an Australian sound still remained. Participants noted Guldberg's 1987 evaluation of the music industry and stated that the multicultural nature of Australian society plus the masculine nature of the industry, contributed to the problem of having an homogenised musical identity (Guldberg 1987: 11; Jonker 1995: 8). Participants did acknowledge however that an Australian style had evolved over the past 30-40 years. In other words, the summit concluded that music written and performed by Australians in Australia must reflect the culture it originated from (Jonker 1995: 8).

In a series of interviews published in a 1998 special edition of *Rolling Stone* magazine titled *25 Years of Australian Rock*, the majority of older musicians questioned about the history of Australian rock music believed that there was an Australian rock sound, particularly during the 1970s and early 1980s. This sound was determined by Australian audiences who professed a love of hard-edged rhythmic sounds and "no nonsense rock and roll" (Blake 1998a: 88-90). Younger artists on the other hand,

believed that there was no distinctive Australian sound amongst newer bands and artists because of overseas influences (Clarke 1998: 108). However, a common theme throughout the entire set of interviews was that all thirty interviewees believed that it was more important to consider the artist and their music as selling points, not the national point of origin.

According to Graeme Turner (1994: 136), one of the major problems when considering notions of identity and music is that rock music itself is a hybridised cultural form that is highly globalised and controlled through dominant industrial and economic considerations. Arif Dirlik (1996: 28) holds a similar view to Turner's, stating that transnational corporations, such as record companies and American fast-food and soft-drink manufacturers, are responsible for the global penetration of local societies by the economy and culture of capital. This in turn leads to an inevitable global homogenisation of culture, something that could be argued has happened to all rock music. At the same time, Dirlik uses the term 'local' to highlight sites of resistance to global capital, stating that:

It would seem by the early nineties that local movements, or movements to save and reconstruct local societies, have emerged as the primary (if not the only) expressions of resistance to [global] domination Local movements have emerged as a pervasive phenomenon of the contemporary world (Dirlik 1996: 22).

Arjun Appadurai (1990: 295) argues that the 'local' indigenises aspects of global commodification. However, for him, the 'local' is not a site of resistance so much as a site of ongoing cultural appropriation. Indeed, this argument is persuasive when observing the world of popular music. Artists from all over the globe use and appropriate sounds and tonalities from different cultures to create 'new' and interesting sounds. Witness Englishman Peter Gabriel's use of Middle Eastern and North African instruments and musicians on many of his albums; the USA's Paul Simon used African instruments and musicians on his hugely successful *Graceland* release. Even more eclectic Western musicians such as New York's Sonic Youth tune their guitars to middle-eastern tunings to arrive at their 'own' sound. In a slightly different sense, Yothu Yindi combines western rock and traditional Aboriginal (Yolngu) music (Yothu Yindi 1998). While Appadurai (1990: 296) does not deny that globalisation is occurring in some form, he goes on to make the point that many nation-states position the notion of global homogenisation as a smoke screen to hide their own hegemonic tendencies.

Nevertheless, the concept of indigenisation does have some limitations. Dirlik (1996) is concerned about the potential loss of 'local' identity through the appropriation of the local by the global in the name of capitalism. Dirlik quotes the phrase 'think globally act locally' as the key ideology of transnational corporations (1996: 34). The above phrase implies that autonomy is taken away from 'locals' as transnational capitalists assimilate aspects of local culture and society in order to capture a market (Dirlik 1996: 34). Think of the example of Coke's use of *Sounds of Then*, in particular its chorus of "This is Australia": a regional image is appropriated to stand for national identity in order to sell the product of a multinational corporation. Such an instance is an example of what Dirlik means when he states that transnational organisations use 'guerrilla marketing' to 'capture' their new markets (1996: 32-34). Basically this means slowly infiltrating a product into a society so that the product becomes more than just a commodity and more like part of a way of life (Dirlik 1996: 33). Corporations like Coca-Cola and McDonalds provide good examples of this particular strategy. To understand how successful they are it is not necessary to study their respective balance sheets. One need only observe their visibility throughout a society in the form of trademarked clothing, sporting sponsorships, popular films and

advertising. Suffice to say however, there is some evidence to suggest that Appadurai is on the right path. In many parts of Asia, the word 'coke' has been appropriated as a metonym for the general classification of 'soft-drink'. In other words, to 'go out for a coke' does not necessarily mean drinking the American product Coca-Cola, but rather any carbonated 'soft-drink'. In the case of GANGgajang, Mark Callaghan (1999) recently stated that he believed he was using Coke to sell his song and not the other way around.

Recognising the latter point, it should be noted that while globalisation works to obscure differences in local and national identities, it also means having access to global markets, an economic necessity for the Australian music industry and its artists (Breen 1996: 159). Having the capacity to export music is important as historically, the 'major' record companies have been unable to fully recoup their investment in local artists in Australia because of the limited size of the market (ABT 1986: 7-9). Accordingly, these 'major' overseas based record companies – Sony, BMG, Warner, Polygram (recently purchased by Universal) and EMI – have often been accused of not being overly concerned with fostering a local industry (Breen 1996: 158-59). Between them, the majors, together with other significant companies, namely the Festival/Mushroom group (owned by News Limited) and the Australian owned Shock Records, accounted for nearly 73% of all licensed music sales in 1995/96, 94% of which were by foreign artists. In fact, Australian artists represented only 15% of all licensed music titles released in Australia during 1995/96. It appears that the multinationals have little incentive to promote Australian artists as their main aim is to market overseas product here (Senate Legal and Constitutional Legislation Committee 1998: 7-8). Nothing much has changed since Jonker (1995: 7) reported that Australian artists only represent about 20-25% of the total annual turnover of the multinationals.

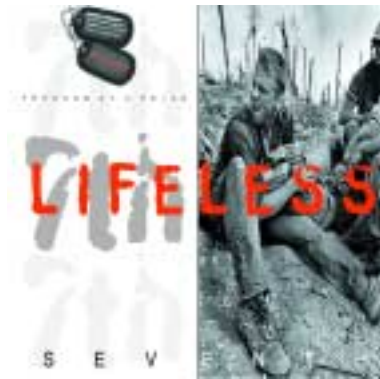
In fact, while the Australian industry as a whole has grown, albeit only slightly in recent years (1% in 1994), there has been a definite decline in Australian music production and sales (*Art For Art's Sake: A Fair Go!* 1996: 22). In a letter to the on-line music industry magazine *IMMEDIA!*, Jim Taig, Managing Director of Studios 301 Pty. Ltd., revealed that fourteen international standard quality recording studios had closed between 1992 and 1998 (Taig 1998). From the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, Australian artists accounted for 35-40% of all music sales in Australia. Today, that figure is down to 16% (Taig 1998; Senate Legal and Constitutional Legislation Committee 1998: 7).

Globalisation has also impacted upon how Australian music is produced. With a minimum of live performances and with a sound that has been described as 'European', Savage Garden sold over 4 million copies around the globe of their debut album during 1997, earning over \$11 million in the process (Shoebridge & Ferguson 1998: 42; Shanahan 1997: 21). In January of 1998, Savage Garden became the first Australian act in ten years to top the American singles chart with *Truly, Madly, Deeply*. In a little under two years, they achieved a level of international success that took INXS ten years of constant touring to reach (Shoebridge 1998: 57; Este 1997: 18). It should be noted that Savage Garden returned to the top of the American Billboard Charts in January 2000 with their song *I Knew I Loved You*. By February 2000 the band's second album "Affirmation", released in late 1999, had sold over 2 million copies in the USA alone (Savage Garden Official Web Page 2000).

There is no doubt that some Australian artists have had significant success overseas. Nevertheless, despite the achievements of acts like AC/DC, INXS and Savage Garden, songs recorded by Australian artists make up less than 6.5% of the 500 internationally most popular songs of all time (Oznet Music Chart 1998). In contrast, since the first

popular music charts began in 1956, 70% of all the biggest selling singles in Australia have had their origins either in the United States or Britain (Oznet Music Chart 2000).

New technologies such as the Internet are also increasingly impacting upon music. Established artists with infrequent output such as GANGgajang (1996) are able to maintain interest in their work both at home in Australia and overseas through establishing their own web pages. The Internet is being used more and more by artists and consumers alike to sell, release or buy music. There have been recent claims that between 30-40% of worldwide Internet music purchases are made by Australian consumers (*IMMEDIA!* 1997). Perhaps of greater significance is that recently, despite concerns over copyright, several Australian artists have endorsed the Internet as a force that can globalise music by giving artists who would normally have trouble finding markets, access to new markets (Blake 1998b: 94; *IMMEDIA!* 1997).



One such artist is the group Seventh. Seventh was formed in 1998 in the south-west New South Wales town of Wagga Wagga. Without a recording contract, the group set about marketing itself by establishing a website upon which it placed samples of its original songs and an e-mail address for interested persons to contact the band direct (Seventh 1999). The band also actively pursued links to other groups' web pages, 'winning' a major endorsement from the popular American heavy metal band Korn. In one three month period in early 1999, the band claimed to have had over 250,000 hits on its website and nearly 700,000

downloads of samples of its music (Chaos Music 1999b). While at the time of writing the group still do not have a recording contract or a major label distribution deal for its recently released CD-EP (only available through Chaos Music [see <http://www.chaosmusic.com.au>], an Australian on-line music store), such is the interest generated through the website and the many links to it via other websites, that the band secured a fifteen-date US university campus 'mini'-tour which took place in November 1999 (Chaos Music 1999b). And all without having ventured beyond the physical locale of a regional Australian town.

Therefore, in the context of this discussion, the decentralised construction of the Internet allows a user (like Seventh or any other artist/s or consumer/s) to be both local and global at the same time. The apparent success of Seventh tends to support Goodell's (1999: 37) assessment of the Internet as "a billion fingered distribution pipeline". However, of greater interest is how the rhizomatic nature of the Internet 'amplifies' the question of identity in relation to a physical space. For instance, is Seventh to be considered an Australian act or a 'virtual', truly global one? As Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 21) have shown, rhizomatic structures have no centres and utilize often-arbitrary linkages to expand. In the decentralised virtual world of the Internet the boundaries between the regional, the national and the global have not only become blurred but also appear to be in a state of continual transmutation. There is no doubt that globalisation has contributed to the homogenisation of popular or rock music.

Through the processes of cultural appropriation or cultural indigenisation one can see how, at a local level, musicians appropriate various qualities of many musical forms from many diverse cultures and societies, contributing to the difficulties in trying to determine national or even regional identity through rock music. Today, with the transnationalisation of capital and the rapid expansion of rhizomatic technologies

such as the Internet, it is becoming increasingly difficult to associate a specific national identity with any particular popular music text or artist. It is also true that transnational corporations are more than capable of adapting and often transforming the local, or the regional in order to create new imaginings of the nation, in order to serve their needs. Marcus Breen (1999: 2) cautions that "localised national cultural interests cannot succeed in the global world, when global issues are the priorities of major international companies".

However, perhaps Breen is being more than just a little pessimistic. As I have shown in the case of popular music, there is room for some type of localised resistance to global capital interests (Seventh) which in itself can include some form or forms of appropriation or indigenisation (Mark Callaghan's seeing Coke as a means of selling his song). At the same time, historically, in the case of contemporary rock music in particular, the search for a pure, or authentic, localised or Australian sound, may indeed lead one back to the sounds of then.

Appendix

Sounds of Then (This is Australia)

Mark Callaghan (1985)

I think I hear the sounds of then, and people talking,

The scenes recalled, by minute movement

And songs they fall from the backing tape

A certain texture, that certain smell

To lie in sweat on familiar sheets

In brick veneer on financed beds

In a room of silent hardiflex

A certain texture, that certain smell

Brings home the heady days

Brings home the nighttime swell

Chorus:

Out on the patio (we'd sit)

And the humidity (we'd breathe)

We'd watch the lightning (crack over cane fields)

Laugh and think: this is Australia

The block is awkward, it faces west

With long diagonal and sloping too

And in the distance through the heat haze

In convoys of silence the cattle graze

A certain texture that certain beat
 Brings forth the nighttime heat
 Repeat chorus
 To lie in sweat on familiar sheets
 In brick veneer on financed beds
 In a room of silent hardiflex
 That certain texture that certain smell
 Brings forth the heady days
 Brings forth the nighttime swell
 Repeat chorus x 2
 This is Australia x 4
 Check it out

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