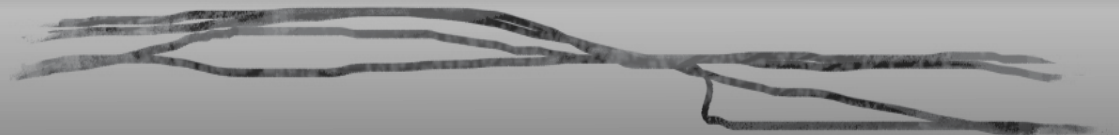
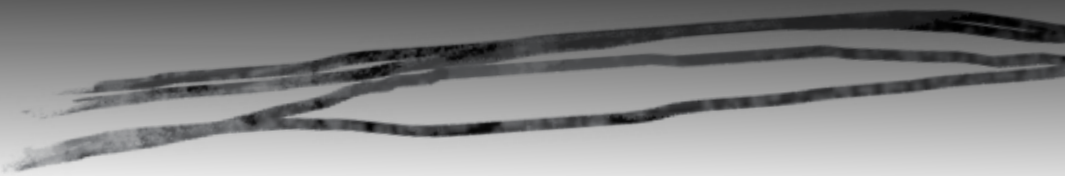




A HIDDEN REPUBLIC OF HOPE

an essay by Tracee Hutchison to accompany
The Black Arm Band's *Hidden Republic*





Look up my people, the dawn is breaking,
the world is waking to a bright new day

So begins Oodgeroo Noonuccal's iconic poem, 'Song of Hope'. Written as part of Oodgeroo's campaign for indigenous suffrage in the 1960s, 'Song of Hope' was a cultural, social and political marker for a generation of indigenous Australians born into an era that denied citizenship and custodial rights over those most basic and precious tenets of identity – land and family. Yet, despite the circumstances of its genesis, 'Song of Hope' is soaring, joyful salve and a testament to resilient survival.

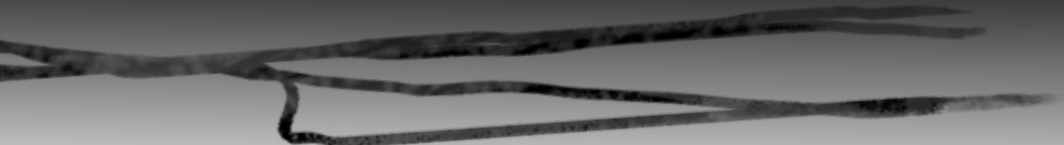
Forty years after it was written there is something of an eerie currency to Oodgeroo's optimistic opus, linking as it does to the formal apology to the Stolen Generations on February 13th 2008. 'Song of Hope' could easily have been written with the same potency this year.

To our father's fathers, the pain and sorrow
To our children's children, the glad tomorrow
– Oodgeroo of the tribe Noonuccal

Despite Oodgeroo's most optimistic imaginings, the idea of a white prime minister standing in the national parliament and saying 'Sorry' to indigenous Australians for past wrongs would have likely been inconceivable. But it must also be said that its current resonance is not without profound sadness. Too many of us – indigenous and non-indigenous Australians – are still waiting for Oodgeroo Noonuccal's 'glad tomorrow'. A time when black and white Australians can truly stand side by side with understanding, compassion and optimism that together we are better.

With 'Sorry' said we are now at one of the most important points in our nation's history to make good its intentions. And hope is the one thing that unites us. Just as Oodgeroo Noonuccal inspired a generation with her hope-filled ode, a generation of Aboriginal musicians are building up a songbook of hope, heart, humour and immense pride – a songbook that is both a cry from the nation's black soul and a celebration of its powerful, resilient spirit.

For these are the songs and songlines of cultural warriors: songmen and women singing up the stories, the songlines, of the nation's length and breadth.



Songlines that resonate deep from mother earth and passed on from generation to generation. Songlines from the Rainbow Python dreaming of Arnhem Land, from Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu who sings as the rainbow child of Wititj, the mother ancestor of his people and his land. To the euphoric Kimberley-infused love of country in Stephen Pigram's homage to Broome and the unshakeable resilience of Ruby Hunter, a proud Ngarrindjerri woman who has been central to the soundtrack of the Stolen Generations with her partner Archie Roach.

Ruby's 'Down City Streets' and Archie's 'Took the Children Away' have become the quintessential musical companion pieces to one of the darkest chapters of Australian history.

Acting white but feeling black,
then one day the children came back.

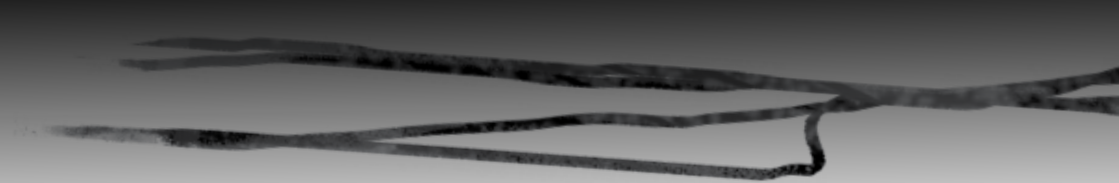
– Archie Roach

It was one line in a song but it summed up the grief of several generations. Yet it was in the singing of those songs – and the sharing of the powerful, deeply personal and painful sentiments they carried – that hearts were healed and others were opened. It changed people. It validated their stories. It gave this sorry chapter in our history a place and a held a mirror to white Australia in the process.

Just as Archie's song 'Lighthouse' shines an illuminating light on the conflicted story of two mothers' love of one son – a black birth-mother and white adoptive-mother – and reveals with heartfelt clarity the ripple-effect impact of this brutal government policy, Shellie Morris' uplifting reminiscence of finding her people, with the full support of her adoptive parents, is a celebration of acceptance – borne-out in the beautiful 'Swept Away'.

These are important songs, culturally, socially and historically. Just as the civil rights songs in the United States galvanised a movement for change, so too do the songs of black Australia resonate with similar momentum.

Through contemporary music the stories of indigenous Australia have travelled far beyond their original songlines as though on a mission. A mission of black pride and white awareness. Addressing decades of ignorance and denial in straight-talking lyrics.



When the nation danced to the re-mixed beat of Yothu Yindi's 'Treaty' in 1992 something powerful was unleashed. If a band from NE Arnhem Land could have a number one hit with a song about a treaty between black and white Australia then surely the reality was possible? More than 15 years later we're still waiting. That is the sobering reality. Are we closer now to true reconciliation than we were in 1992? I'd like to think so. I have to think so. I hope so.

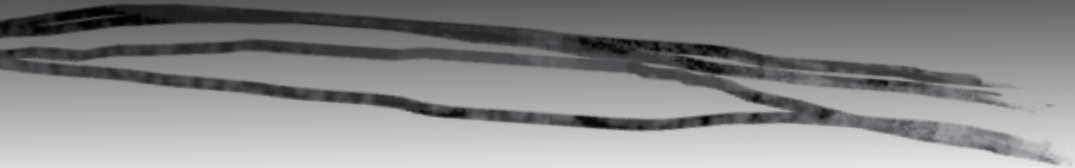
For these are the moments change is built on and Aboriginal music has been a central catalyst to the nation's preparedness to find ways to embrace – and celebrate – Australia's 40,000 year-old indigenous culture. But as we've all seen, these things haven't come easily or quickly.

Over several decades Aboriginal music and musicians have given voice to our nation's black history and its stories. Dating right back to Jimmy Little's first big hit 'Royal Telephone' in 1963, to Lionel Rose's 'I Thank You' in 1969 and the more politically potent 1970s country-rock of Vic Simms' 'Stranger in My Land' and the reggae-infused anthem 'We Have Survived' by No Fixed Address. Each told stories of equal importance and were equally revealing of circumstance.

In so many ways 'We Have Survived' sings as a musical companion piece to Oodgeroo's 'Song of Hope' – no less potent today as it was when a young Bart Willoughby wrote it in the late 1970s. Bart's pioneering musical vision incorporating connection to country and culture into song remains a powerful personal legacy, one that is also evidenced in his tribute to women like Oodgeroo, Ruby Hunter and his own mother in 'Aboriginal Woman' – the women, he calls, "the backbone of our spiritual ways".

This glorious celebration of the importance of women in Aboriginal social and cultural life is also evident in the gorgeous 'Aunty Across the Sea' – a tribute to the much-loved Mills Sisters from Thursday Island by the equally-famed Tiddas sisters from Victoria.

It is one of the great pieces of music folklore that it was Ruby Hunter who gave those Tiddas their name. The sisters: Amy, Lou & Sal – Gunditjmarra, Yorta Yorta and white-girl from the suburbs respectively. And for a while there, for a decade in actual fact, they rode a hell of a wave. They sang their way into the hearts and minds of a new generation of fans who listened first and saw skin colour second.



There was something about those three sisters' voices when they blended that seemed to shout that anything was possible for our country. That we could be who we wanted to be, no matter what our colour, like the wonderful Warumpi Band declared in 'Blackfella/Whitefella' back in the early 1980s:

It doesn't matter what your colour as long as you are true fella.
– Neil Murray/GR Burarrawanga

I have a special place in my heart for the Warumpis. While *No Fixed Address*' *'We Have Survived'* and *Wrong Side of the Road*, the 1981 Cannes Festival Jury prize-winning film the band starred in with *Us Mob*, had given me the first glimpses of a world I barely knew existed, I missed the opportunity to see *No Fixed Address* live.

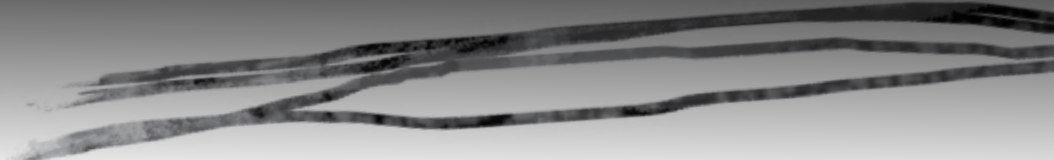
The Warumpis were the band I saw the most when they first hit the road in the early/mid 1980s. Their first single 'Jailangaru Pakarnu' (Out from Jail) in 1983 is acknowledged as one of the first in language – along with Jimmy Chi & Stephen Pigram's Kuckles Band who were recording and performing in language from the late 1970s.

Like lots of city-living whitefellas, I learned a lot about Aboriginal Australia through the songs of those Warumpi songwriters – GR Burarrawanga, Sammy Butcher and Neil Murray. And I am forever indebted to them for it.

I'm equally indebted to people like Bunna Lawrie from Coloured Stone, whose triumphant 'Black Boy' is etched like a moment-in-time piece in my psyche. 1984. *Imparja* records. Orange-labelled 7-inch single played as the opening theme music of Tiga Bayles' legendary black music radio show that followed an Australian music show I presented on 2SER. We cued it up for him every Tuesday night for about two and a half years.

Black boy, black boy, the colour of your skin is your pride and joy,
Black boy, black boy, those names will never hurt you.
– Bunna Lawrie

The song's quiet defiance spoke volumes. To me, it sits alongside Nicky Winmar's jumper-lifting moment with the St. Kilda footy club. Quiet, proud and unshakeable. And profoundly moving. Coloured Stone was the first Aboriginal band to go gold



and the first to win an ARIA, in 1986 for 'Human Love'. Once again the politics of Aboriginal Australia had been wrapped up in an irresistible beat and the result was both inspiring and enlightening. It was groundbreaking stuff.

It's also important to acknowledge that many whitefellas have been vital to what could be called the Struggle but I prefer to call the Journey. Shane Howard and Goanna had the nation dancing to a song about land rights a full decade before Yothu Yindi did and introduced white-Australia to an inherently black-Australian concept by calling their 1982 album Spirit of Place. In retrospect it seems breathtakingly audacious. More likely it was just breathtakingly honest.

There were, of course, many other whitefellas who went on the Journey – Ted Egan's 'Gurindji Blues' recorded by a young member of the Gumatj clan of NE Arnhem Land called Galarrwuy Yuninpingu in 1971. Twenty years later another song about the Gurindji's famed walk-off at Wave Hill would be crafted from a blackfella/whitefella partnership. Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly's 'From Little Things Big Things Grow' is a much-loved and much-covered anthem. Its joyful, optimistic chorus offsets the potency of the story it tells of Vincent Lingiari's campaign for land rights for his people.

Vincent said uh-uh, we're not talking about wages,
We're sitting right here til we get our land.

– Kev Carmody/Paul Kelly

It was a powerful history lesson wrapped up in twelve wonderful verses.

Midnight Oil also played a big part as whitefellas on the Journey. Their 1987 'Diesel and Dust' LP, inspired by the Blackfella/Whitefella tour with the Warumpi Band, was the biggest selling album of the band's career with sales in excess of 2 million copies. In particular the songs 'Beds Are Burning' and 'The Dead Heart', the latter written in 1986 for the traditional owners of Uluru, are among the most significant mainstream observations of the long-buried identity of Aboriginal Australia.

It's also worth remembering that all of this was occurring long before the idea of a reconciliation debate was even vaguely on the national agenda. And, once again, it's worth remembering that many of our cultural warriors who championed equality in their lyrics saw a crest of hope and momentum peak in the 1980s and



early 1990s and watched it fall away again.

To many of us, both black and white, real reconciliation is still a long way off. Kutcha Edwards says as much in his song 'I Have a Dream'. But we have been given another chance to get things right. Another wave of hope is forming. A new generation of Aboriginal singer songwriters – the likes of Dan Sultan, Emma Donovan, Tjimba Possum and others - are singing up the land and its stories and looking to the future.

Once again it is possible to believe that past wounds can be healed. That forgiveness and understanding is achievable. That we can be the kind of country we all want to live in. A country that acknowledges it has a proud black heart and a proud black history. That we can, with open hearts, embrace a meeting of old way and new way, a caring way, to find a way forward for us all.

I've always believed in the power of music as a potent catalyst for social change. I believed it when I first heard Bart Willoughby's voice out front of No Fixed Address, I believed it when Goanna made their proud mainstream statement in 1981, I believed it when I sang my lungs out in tiny pubs watching those Papunya warriors, the Warumpi Band, I believed it when Yothu Yindi arrived in the big smoke from Arnhem Land and Mandawuy told me he was a crocodile man. I believed it in Joe Geia's anthemic 'Yil Lull' and with every listen to Paul Kelly's 'Bicentennial'. And I believe it again now.

Heart of my country, never surrender,
Have to keep your dreaming, gotta keep believing.
– Shane Howard

This is our time. We can walk together in the glad tomorrow. And we can sing from the same songbook. A songbook of hope. The songbook of our black nation. The songbook of our Hidden Republic.

Tracee Hutchison – Melbourne, July 2008

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