

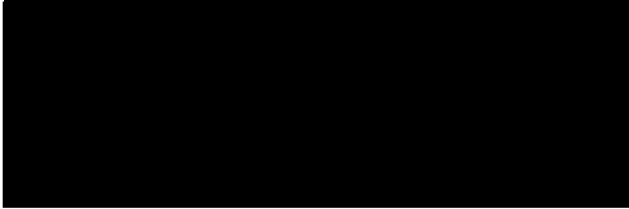
Barry McDonald.

**'You Can Dig All You Like, You'll Never Find Aboriginal Culture There'.
Relational Aspects of the History of the Aboriginal Music of New England, New
South Wales, 1830-1930.**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy, University of New England, Armidale, April 2000

Certification.

I certify that, to the best of my knowledge, all use of the work of others has been acknowledged. I further certify that the subject of this thesis has not already been submitted for any other degree, and is not being currently submitted for any degree.



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I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memories of Catherine Ellis, the guiding light of Aboriginal Australian ethnomusicology, and Leonard de Silva, without whose loving authority this study would never have begun.

Abstract.

This thesis surveys the history of south-eastern Australian indigenous music, especially that of the New England Tablelands of New South Wales, from 1830 to 1930. In the process, it analyses several significant principles, including the indigenous strategy of reciprocal cultural accommodation, and musical tradition. Examination of the musical practice of one Aboriginal family of Armidale contextualises methods by which indigenous composers and performers incorporated European elements into their expression without risking its indigenous integrity. The radically relational character of Aboriginal culture is highlighted in the study, and it is argued that only through the examination of personal relationship, can the essence of indigenous music be correctly perceived.

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Preface.

This thesis has arrived at its present disposition through a reasonably circuitous route. Initial research was conducted into the musical history of the *Gumbaynggirr* group, whose members live mainly on the central-north coast of New South Wales. The bulk of this oral survey produced much interesting historical material, but very little in the way of musical performance. It was not until I met with the Archibald family of Armidale that the more dynamic aspects of *Gumbaynggirr* musical expression were revealed. As much of the material identified as Aboriginal by the Archibalds was sung in English, it became obvious that the parameters within which I had already conducted the major part of the historical survey should perhaps be questioned. The implications of the family's musical practice had two thrusts. The first was that, if Aboriginality inhered within European musical structures, then field surveys like the *Gumbaynggirr* project should not be restricted to the elicitation of musical material predominantly indigenous in form. The second was that, given the stock-standard nature of the European material as performed, it would be highly unlikely that any perception of the Aboriginality of those items could be achieved by musical analysis.

These realisations were incorporated into the methodology of my next field survey of *Gumbaynggirr* music. This occurred in 1998, when Margaret Somerville of the University of New England contracted me to carry out musical interviews with the residents of the *Yarrawarra* community, north of Coffs Harbour. Again, in discussions with musicians there, it became plain that the essence of an indigenous musical experience lay, not in the outward forms of the music performed or described, but in both the social circumstances of its performance, and in the spiritual entities that give it life.

As these findings further contextualised the Archibalds' experience, and as the Armidale evidence promised the best chance of gaining a deepened understanding of south-eastern indigenous musical processes, it was decided that a major study should be focused upon that family's performance practice. Because the Archibalds identified with the New England region, the extensive use of local historical material was considered a necessary adjunct to the *Gumbaynggirr* musical evidence, for the construction of a meaningful analysis. Furthermore, the incorporation of surviving descriptions of the broader south-eastern Australian indigenous music culture was regarded as desirable, in order to add valuable substance to sometimes sketchy local testimony.

The following study has therefore been written in response to three stimuli. Its main purpose is to seek understanding of the development of indigenous music on the New England Tablelands, with particular reference to the experience of the Archibald family. It also serves as a final report for both the *Gumbaynggirr* survey projects. This integration has been considered generally beneficial, chiefly because the significances offered by each study are best perceived within a broader interpretation, where all can productively interrelate.

As it was perceived that the indigenous essence of many of the recorded musical items could not be elicited through formal musical analysis, their evidence is presented without recourse to the usual techniques of melodic transcription. By concentrating on aspects of text and performance context only, the song-evidence contained in the thesis has been standardised, as so much of the historical material was originally described only in general terms, or was recorded as text without reference to musical features. There are other reasons for proceeding without the discussion of technical musical characteristics. As will be argued in chapter five, the

state of knowledge of south-eastern indigenous tonality is so hopelessly confused, that to rationalise from the evidence of western-style transcriptions would be both extremely time-consuming, and would have only limited heuristic value. As the overall argument of this thesis has required the traverse of much virtually untrodden historical ground, a choice had then to be made between proceeding in an historical fashion, or sacrificing historical analysis in favour of the musical. The former was chosen as offering the greater potential for understanding. It should be recorded here that Archibald family members have given me permission to discuss and interpret their musical and historical evidence in this study.