Barry McDonald.

'You Can Dig All You Like, You'll Never Find Aboriginal Culture There'.

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.
Acknowledgements.

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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.
Table of Contents.

Chapter 1. Theoretical Approaches to the Study of the Indigenous Musical Cultures of South-eastern Australia

Section One. Introduction. 1

Section Two. Nineteenth-Century White Attitudes and the Doomed Race Theory. 6

Section Three. Research Into South-east Australian Indigenous Music. 15

Section Four. Research As Relationship. 25

Section Five. The Structuration Theory of Anthony Giddens.
   a). The Relevance of Structuration Theory. 28
   b). A Summary of Structurationism. 32

Section Six. Conclusion. 41


Section One. The South-eastern Region.
   a). Introduction. 46
   b). Issues Regarding Regional Identity. 46

Section Two. Instruments, Song and dance.
   a). Introduction. 50
   b). Musical Instruments. 52
   c). The Corroboree. 57
   d). Types of Indigenous Song. 62
   e). Song Creation. 69
   f). Musical Education. 73
Section Three. Formal Analysis.

a). Texts. 76

b). The Relationship of Song and Dance. 78

c). Music. 79

d). Comparison Between the South-east and Other Australian Regions. 85

Section Four. The Context of Musical Meaning.

a). Introduction. 86

b). The Aesthetics of Sound. 88

c). The Language of Sound. 89

d). Melodic and Rhythm Languages. 92

e). Gestural and Visual Languages. 93

Section Five. Conclusion. 97


Section One. The Doomed Race Theory and New England.

a). Introduction. 99

b). The Doomed Race Theory in Practice. 100

Section Two. Contact Relations. 113

Section Three. New England Aboriginal Populations of the Nineteenth Century. 125

Section Four. Land Matters. 129

Section Five. Aboriginal Participation in the White Economy. 135

Section Six. Conclusion. 146

Section One. Introduction. 148

Section Two. Pre-contact Songs. 149

Section Three. Songs of Innovation. 151

Section Four. Songs of Frontier Contact. 156

Section Five. Jump Up Whitefeller. 162

Section Six. Conclusion. 183

Chapter Five. Responses of South-eastern Aboriginal Musicians to the European Cultural Innovation.

Section One. Introduction. 186

Section Two. Methodological Problems in Determining South-eastern Tonality. 189

Section Three. Paradigms of Cultural Loss. 196

Section Four. Relationship between Aboriginal and European musical forms.


   a). Indigenous-style Songs Composed as Commentaries on European Phenomena. 201

   b). Songs Comprising Lingo Texts and European Tunes. 205

   c). Songs Comprising Indigenous Tunes and Macaronic Texts. 208


II. Aboriginal People Utilising Indigenous Elements in Performing Music That is Predominantly European in Style. 211
Ill. Aboriginal People Performing Entirely European-style Indigenous Compositions

With Particularly Aboriginal Meanings.

Section Five. Aboriginal Participation in European Music and Dance.

I. Aboriginal People Playing European Instrumental Music.

II. Aboriginal People Dancing European Forms.

a). Social Dancing.

b). Step-dancing.

III. Aboriginal People Singing European Compositions in the European Style.

Section Six. Relationship Between Aboriginal and European Performance Contexts.


b). The Square Dance Song.

c). The Parallel Existence of Aboriginal and European Performance.

Section Seven. Conclusion.

Chapter Six. The Musical World of Frank Archibald.

Section One. Introduction.

Section Two. The Life of Frank Archibald.

Section Three. The Archibald Family’s Repertoire.

a). General Features.

b). Songs learned From Their Parents by the Archibald Family.

c). Local Aboriginal Compositions in European Form.

d). European Songs Modified to Express Aspects of Aboriginality.
Section Three. The Aboriginality of European-composed Songs.

a). Unmodified European Songs Expressing a Fundamental Aboriginality. 256

b). The Spiritual Nature of the Archibald Family’s Music. 262

Section Four. The Archibalds’ Music as Evidence for Accommodation.

a). The Investment of Meaning as a Marker of Aboriginality. 263

b). Frank Archibald’s Training in Accommodation Techniques. 266

c). The Relational Core of Aboriginal Culture. 271

Section Five. A Shared Symbolic History Through Captain Thunderbolt. 274

Section Six. Conclusion. 280

Chapter Seven. The Nature of Musical Tradition.

Section One. Introduction. 286

Section Two. Tradition in the Literature. 287

Section Three. The Musical Experience of Jim Lowe. 293

Section Four. Tradition as personal relationship. 299

Section Five. In defence of tradition. 307

Section Six. Conclusion. 315

Chapter Eight. Conclusion. 318

References

A. Bibliographic Resources. 322

B. Interview-based Resources. 368

C. Pictorial Resources. 375
List of Plates

Plate 1. Australian Tune.


Plate 5. Red Rock Bush Band.


Plate 7. Frank Archibald.

Plate 8. King Robert and Queen Emily.


Plate 10. Maisie Kelly

Plate 11. Hazel Vale.
**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.