Book Review


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At the centre of this book—the 13th volume of University of Melbourne’s Australasian Music Research series—stands the research dialogue between indigenous and non-indigenous ethnomusicologists and musicians in Australia. It is the first publication of its kind, presenting various case studies from across Australia, including Torres Strait Islands, Tiwi Islands, New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. By covering music, musicians and performances of several indigenous groups, it is representative for the ongoing intercultural exchange between different indigenous and non-indigenous groups in Australia. In addition, the book demands continuous communication between those involved in intercultural exchanges. Consequently, most of the chapters are co-authored, which is an enriching, but also complicated and still unusual practice for ethnomusico logical publications.

The first highlight is a poem by the indigenous artist Lexine Solomon in the foreword (x). Chapter 1 contains the editor’s general introduction and comments on the pioneering work of putting the volume together. The term “Contact Zone” is essential to the publication and is introduced for the first time in Chapter 2 by Margaret Somerville (“Creative Collaborations in the Contact Zone”). It also features in Chapter 6, “Collaborative Music Research at the Contact Zone in Cherbourg, an Aboriginal Community in Queensland”, co-authored by the editor Katelyn Barney and Monique Proud. A definition by Mary Louise Pratt is drawn on, with contact zones referring to “the social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (85–86).
In Chapter 7, “Two Decades in the Contact Zone: A Critical Assessment of Process and Productivity in Koori Music Research”, written by Robin Ryan and Uncle Herb Patten, the focus is the gumleaf—a traditional instrument played by Gunai-Kurnai (Koori) musicians in southern Australia. The illustrations in the chapter, of the authors during a gumleaf session (98) and of a Forest Red Gum tree from Herb Patten’s garden (109), assist the reader’s understanding of the instrument’s roots. The long musical collaboration of the two authors, a relationship of more than twenty years, is representative of many such collaborations presented in this volume.

Other highlights include Karl Neuenfeldt’s case study in Chapter 3, “Collaboration, Provenance and Copyright/‘Ownership’: Navigating Challenges in the Production of Torres Strait Islander CD/DVD Projects in Australia”, which shows how researchers and performers can act as “culture brokers” together. In Chapter 5, “Remembrances and Relationships: Rethinking Collaboration in Ethnomusicology as Ethical and Decolonising Practice”, Elizabeth Mackinlay and Gordon Chalmers reflect on their collaboration in Burrulula, an Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory. Chapter 10, “Singing the Winds of Change: Ethnomusicology and the Generation of New Collaborative Contexts for the Teaching of Warlpiri Knowledge across Generations and Cultures”, written by Aaron Corn and Wantarri Jampijinpa Patrick, is particularly useful in that it deals with the curriculum of an undergraduate course on Indigenous music at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra. The text is completed by illustrations of the aboriginal “Warlpiri kinship” system (154, 157) and a map of Australia is also provided (148). As many readers would be unfamiliar with locations of the indigenous groups mentioned in the book it would have been beneficial for the book to have included a detailed map in the opening pages which could then be referred back to as the reader progresses through the chapters.

The writing collaboration between Payi Linda Ford, Linda Barwick and Allan Marett is another example of the strength of this book’s approach. Their chapter, “Mirrwana and Wurrkama: Applying an Indigenous Knowledge Framework to Collaborative Research on Ceremonies”, outlines the indigenous ceremonies associated with the death of Ford’s mother. Again, various illustrations (55–59) help to transmit to the reader the atmosphere of the singing and dancing performances that form part of the ceremonies under discussion. The eleven chapters are followed by a section of notes on the contributors and an alphabetical index, which are both useful for orientation.

An important lesson from this book is that trust is needed to build strong relations in the context of such a collaborative project. Trust is crucial, because—according to the editor—personal relationships were the key to the successful collaborations displayed in the book. Primarily, the value of
the publication lies in the effort of showing to the reader that collaborative research between indigenous and non-indigenous researchers and musicians is possible and should be intensified—not only in Australia—in order to move towards an ethnomusicology of decolonization. Importantly, although the book contributes to the ongoing dialogue between indigenous and non-indigenous people in Australia, the editor also mentions that collaborations aren’t always easy to manage: “There may well be still unspoken aspects of collaboration that the authors have chosen not to share” (5). But overall, this book presents some very successful examples of collaboration in the field of ethnomusicology and is therefore entirely relevant for researchers of world popular music and particularly those with an interest in indigenous musics.