

LOCAL NOISE

The Rappers are Revolting:

Mixing Folk, Hip-hop and Politics.

by Tony Mitchell. Published in *The Age*, 1 August 2006.

Summary:

Australians all let us recoil, for we have no idea

We go to war for wealth and oil, our home is girt by fear

Our land abounds in growing rifts, dividing rich and poor

In histories page, this is the age, of fair justice ignored

- TZU, 'Recoil'.

This piece was written in response to an article in *The Age* which argued that there were no protest songs in contemporary Australian culture. The rebuttal was subsequently published in *The Age* on August 1, 2006, and discusses the political content in a number of Australian hip-hop groups, including The Herd, TZU and Morganics.

About:

Local Noise is an ARC-funded research project from the University of Technology, Sydney. Its focus is on Australian hip-hop, and the localisation of hip-hop in different cultural, societal and educational contexts.

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The long and tricky relationship between popular music and politics has been getting a lot of media attention recently, at least in relation to the USA. There has been so much ballyhoo about the Dixie Chicks' Bush-bashing you'd think they'd become global political pundits. It's not as if there's much in the way of political reflection in their music, but the massive coverage they've been getting would seem to indicate that if you're a mainstream US music star, you're given more vox pop gravitas and credibility than politicians, intellectuals and journalists put together. Even Neil Young, who hardly counts as mainstream, has just devoted an entire album, *Living With War*, to impeaching the president and expressing his disaffection with the War in Iraq. Not one of his strongest musically by any stretch of the imagination, but the sentiment is deeply felt and it has been so widely reviewed in the press that it's as if he is filling a huge vacuum in political protest music. It's about time that some acknowledgment was made of the long tradition of political protest in Australian music, which has been particularly prominent in local hip-hop.

'Where are the Australian singers spitting rage?' asks Julia Baird in a piece entitled 'Right-on Song' (Good Weekend 10 June 2006). She even calls on the normally astute Bernard Zuel to opine that 'very few ... Australian folk and bush songs have been about taking it to the government'. Excuse me? For a start, I'd suggest checking out Warren Fahey's book *The Balls of Bob Menzies: Australian Political Songs 1900-1980*, which contains the lyrics to more than 300 homegrown political folk songs since Federation, including 'Pig Iron Bob', 'Poor Wee Billy McMahon', 'Malcolm Where's Your Trousers?' 'Liberal Challenge to Gorton' and 'Hawke is My Shepherd'. As Fahey writes in his introduction, 'It is interesting to surmise why politicians offer such wonderful material for the songwriter. Broadcasts from Parliament House are full of intrigue, namecalling and verbal action that would do a soap opera proud'.

No doubt someone is writing a satirical song about Tony Abbott and his 'snivelling grubs' as I write. These songs may not be performed or recorded by singers as globally prominent as Bruce Springsteen, but they are part of a popular local folk song tradition that runs very deep, and we owe a great deal to Warren Fahey for archiving and recording so much of it. (And he has penned quite a few political songs of his own.) Then there's Fahey's more recent book, *Ratbags and Rebel Rousers: A Century of Political Protest Song and Satire*, which has a forward by Eric Bogle, who of course wrote what is probably Australia's most famous political song, 'The Band Played Waltzing Matilda', about the slaughter in Gallipoli, which was later recorded by no less a folk legend than Ireland's the Pogues. *Ratbags and Rebel Rousers* contains songs such as 'John Howard's Face is Deepest Red' ('He cringes 'neath the liberal's frown/And hauls his flaunted Standard down'). Then there's 'Little Bobby Hawke Loved that Rascal Bond', 'Santamaria', to the tune of 'Waltzing Matilda' ('Once A learned doctor squatted down in Canberra'), 'Our Prime Minister' ('Which art in Canberra. Curtin be thy name' – but you can update it easily enough). Or how about another 'Waltzing Matilda' parody: 'Once the Government of Australia' – 'With the bosses did unite/Froze the funds of all the unions/ That stood for freedom's right' – sound familiar? It was written in 1949 by Sally Bowen, the wife of a NSW South Coast miner.

A lot of these songs, of course, are written to well-known tunes so they can be sung in public in demonstrations, but as in the UK and the USA, they come from a long working class vernacular tradition of lampooning politicians. SMH cartoonist Somerville wrote this, to the tune of Sinatra's 'My Way': 'I've penned a Wik that's fooled, I've traveled each and every sly way, And more is always less, I dud it my way.' Macquarie University academic Mark Gregory has a website entitled *Union Songs*, which lists the words to over 400 such songs, many of them Australian. Monash musicologist Graeme Smith recently published *Singing Australian: A History of Folk and Country Music*, which ranges from the political songs of early 19th century English and Irish immigrant workers to more recent political songs by Aboriginal group Tiddas (now Stiff Gins), taking in Weddings, Parties, Anything, who have performed and recorded with British militant jongleur Billy Bragg, the 1960s folk revival, and Aboriginal country music, which often has a justifiable political axe to grind, along the way. Smith's book may be somewhat Melbourne-centric, but it didn't deserve the merciless slagging-off it got in a pint-sized review in the SMH by Bruce Elder a few months ago. And I haven't even mentioned the daddy of all Australian political folk songs yet, 'I Was Only

19', by John Schumann of Redgum, which recently had a hip-hop re-versioning by militant Sydney hip-hop group The Herd, with a powerful video set in the Vietnam war which was premiered on the ABC's *Rage* just before Anzac Day, with musical contribution by Schumann, and a moving Triple J program interviewing the children of Vietnam Vets among other people.

It's not just folk songs and parody pop songs that launch themselves into the political arena. *Rock Against Howard* is a double CD by Australian rock and hip-hop artists which came out on the Shock label in 2004, compiled by Lindsay McDougall from Frenzal Rhomb, and including tracks by a diverse bunch including Something for Kate, David Bridie, Even, Resin Dogs, Youth Group, TISM, Frenzal Rhomb and The Herd. Not exactly household names, maybe, and I don't recall seeing it being reviewed in the Fairfax Press, but it also included 'I'm Sorry!' by Little Johnny, an absurdist mish-mash of samples from the Prime Minister's speeches, recorded a few years ago by Little Johnny, also known as Pauline Pantsdown, who was responsible for some controversial musical lampoons of Pauline Hanson. Other titles include David Bridie's 'Nation (of the Heartless Kind)', TISM's 'The Phillip Ruddock Blues', The Herd's 'Honest J', The Drugs' 'I Was A Teenage Voter', and 'Johnny Howard is a Filthy Slut' by Toekeo. The project included a national tour called 'Rock Against Howard the Musical' featuring Frenzal Rhomb and The Herd, with all proceeds to the Refugee Action Coalition. How cool is that?

Another politically-oriented music compilation is *UnAustralian*, a 3 CD set released in 2003 by the Red Hot Green Black collective, a non-profit organization which funds environmental and Indigenous groups from the sales of its CDs. *UnAustralian* features Aboriginal artists such as Jimmy Little, Nokturnal, Stiff Gins, Saltwater Band, Kutcha Edwards and Native Rhyme Syndicate, blues and folk artists like the John Butler trio, who like Xavier Rudd tends to espouse an ecological, environmental perspective in his music. The Herd crop up here again, along with other politically oppositional groups like the Propaganda Klann. Again, I can't recall reading a review of it anywhere in the tabloids but it's definitely out there.

And now that the Hilltop Hoods have become the first Australian hip-hop group to go straight to number one in the ARIA charts – to the great embarrassment of ARIA, who didn't even have a link to the Hoods' Melbourne-based independent label Obese, it has become impossible to ignore Australian hip-hop any more. Although 'Man all these polities in power are cowards so it's only fair/ That I hate John Howard like I hate Tony Blair' is about as sophisticated as they get, Oz hip-hop, of course, turns out to have quite a number of militant, politically-minded participants embedded in its 15 year, largely 'underground' history. And it is no surprise that political rock groups like Midnight Oil, as well as Australian bush ballads and political folk songs have been a strong influence on some of these MCs, like Sydney crew the Herd, who caused a minor scandal in 2003 with their track '77%'. This referred to the number of Australians who supported Howard over Tampa and the children overboard incident. Typically, the scandal wasn't so much about the subject matter of the track as about the group's use of the 'f' and 'c' words in the chorus, and their 'dissing' of talkback radio hosts, who of course bagged them mercilessly in return, with Zemanek slamming the ABC for supporting the group, giving them lots of free publicity in the process:

Wake up. This country needs a f---ing shake-up

Wake up. These c---s need a shake up

Talkback? Squawking hacks – won't relax

Until Jonesy, Zemanek and Laws are all axed.

77 per cent of Aussies are racist

And if you're here, I'll say it to your faces.

Rich, redneck pricks still hold all the aces.

Even Triple J radio had a half-hour talkback on the track's language, and the SMH Guide devoted a whole feature to it without bothering to look beyond the language issue. '77%' came with an animated video about John Howard and the war in Iraq, with live sequences of the group performing the chorus with the offending words bleeped out. The Herd also made a video for another track, 'Burn Down the Parliament', which might have got them into trouble with the Sedition laws today. As one of their main MCs Ozi Batla – and how's that for a name? – told me:

I think I might have had some kind of funny belief that the music could change people's opinions, but I'm starting to feel that it can't really. So basically we'll just express ourselves and when people tell me that they used to listen to 'Burn Down the Parliament' every morning before they went out to do their actions on this toxic waste dump up in the Gold Coast ... and Monkey Mark and Izzy, who are Combat Wombat, two of the most incredible people I know, playing 77% at a Desert Doof and having people going crazy. That's really important to me'.

The Herd are part of the Elephant Traks collective, who release CDs and organize tours and concerts with other hip-hop groups including the aforementioned Melburnians Combat Wombat – a bunch of ecologically-minded activists who spend a lot of time performing and DJing at mining sites like Jabiluka and running hip-hop workshops with Aboriginal and disadvantaged kids – as well as TZU, Curse ov Dialect and the Newcastle-based Aboriginal trio Local Knowledge, now sadly defunct. TZU have a witty and amusing take on the national anthem in their track 'Recoil' on their recent album *Smiling At Strangers*:

Australians all let us recoil, for we have no idea

We go to war for wealth and oil, our home is girt by fear

Our land abounds in growing rifts, dividing rich and poor

In histories page, this is the age, of fair justice ignored

And some Oz hip-hop fans have a degree of political awareness that might come as a surprise. The Elephant Traks website has had forum discussions of issues such as the Cronulla riots, West Papuan asylum seekers, the Koran, Labor party pre-selection, VSU, indigenous community abuse allegations in the Northern Territory, Gerard Henderson, Paul Sheehan, Piers Ackerman and Miranda Devine. The Herd's national tours have had titles like 'Coalition of the Illin' and 'Rogue States', and their cohorts Combat Wombat have also 'dissed' talkback hosts as well as engaging with national politics, while Curse ov Dialect embody a living multiculturalism. Curse's surreal 'rainbow hip-hop' samples ethnic folk music from around the world, and MCs Raceless, Vulk Makedonski, August 2 (the date of World Anglo-India Day), Atarungi and DJ Pasobionic represent Maltese, Macedonian, Indian, Maori, and Burmese cultural backgrounds. Raceless is likely to dress up and declaim as Captain Cook, complete with periwig, while Vulk is usually kitted out in traditional Macedonian costume and performs dance steps to match, August 2 might don a grass skirt and bare chest, and Atarungi (whose name means 'witchdoctor' in Maori) might costume himself as a tree or be completely swathed in a shroud. DJ Pasobionic, with his Adidas track suit, who also doubles duties with TZU, is the only conventional hip-hop figure in sight. Curse's track 'All Cultures' celebrates Australia's cultural diversity with music to match, while Joelistics, the Eurasian-Australian MC from TZU, attacks colonialism and demands an apology to Aborigines, and 'Multicultural Markets' celebrates global bazaars from China to Arabia. Here's a sample:

Australia's history is no mystery

An alien nation built on British colonization

And genocide demonstrations, conquest, war

Terra Nullius insults the indigenous

Aboriginal people who weren't treated as equals

Their stolen generations aided forced assimilation

Apart from expressing a political perspective, Curse ov Dialect are taking hip-hop into outer musical reaches where a distinctively Australian multivocal eccentricity is re-making the genre in a highly original way. Also operating on the multicultural tip is Sleek the Elite, the former *Pizza* star whose tracks 'Child of the Cedar' parts 1 and 2 were important identity markers for Lebanese-Australian youth long before the Cronulla Riots. Mexican-Australian femcee Maya Jupiter, host of Triple J's *Hip-hop Show*, spearheads a line of women MCs who arguably combine feminism and multiculturalism, including Fijian-Australian MC Trey, Perth-based guttermouth Layla, Melbourne hip-hop cabaret act Sista She, Chilean-Australian MC Que and Italian-Australian A-Love.

One of the key figures in defining an Australian political hip-hop identity is Morganics (aka Morgan Lewis), a former actor prone to wearing an Akubra hat, who played roles in *Neighbours* and *A Country Practice* before emerging as a prominent hip-hop figure during the 1995 Urban Theatre Projects production *Hip-hopera*, which brought together a number of young Western Sydney performers from different ethnic backgrounds. Morganics has worked all over Australia as a facilitator on community educational hip-hop projects with disadvantaged young people, teaching beatboxing, breakdancing and MCing, often in tandem with Aboriginal artists Wire MC or Brotha Black. His album *All You Mob*, released in 2001, was a collection of tracks made with mostly Aboriginal young people from Darwin to Wilcannia, Redfern, and a host of other places. It produced the surprise novelty hit 'Down River' by the pre-teen Wilcannia Mob, which got extensive airplay on Triple J, and led to a performance by the boys to 30,000 people at the Homebake rock festival. While tracks like 'The Block', produced with Aboriginal schoolboys from Fort Street in Sydney, packed a greater punch than 'Up River', it at least brought some much-deserved mainstream recognition for Morganics' work. In 2002 he was awarded a special justice commendation by the New South Wales government for his work with disadvantaged youth, and he continues to work as a facilitator on urban and rural youth hip-hop projects throughout the country. He has performed theatre shows in the Sydney Opera House studio, recently started producing and working with hip-hop groups in Africa and Brazil, and is the leading figure in the strongly positive, educational aspects of Australian hip-hop, which are usually ignored by the likes of Peter Costello, who blamed it for what he referred to as the 'moral decline' of Australian youth. Of course Costello is only referring to the US 'bling bling' hip-hop which dominates mainstream airwaves in Australia as well as the US.

Hip-hop is first and foremost a lifestyle, and Australian participants express the politics of everyday life, as local hip-hop commentator Nick Keys put it:

'It's about the politics of the everyday, the micropolitics of people's everyday lives. And this movement – made by people who are intensely interested in political change – highlights the shift of the political discourse in society, not the abandonment or inherent lack of political activism. The political organisation of Elephant Traks is fundamentally much more radical politically than a group or person (say like a Bono type) signed to a major label and doing a sort of guilt purging 'protest song'. I think there is a real case to mount for the politics of process, networks and self-made organisations (which are always mostly underground) over the kind of representational of a political message writ large, which can always be absorbed back into the spectacle of consumer capitalism with its message leached of power.'

Melbourne MC Pegz, a prominent member of the Obese stable along with his DJ Plutonic Lab, demonstrates that Oz hip hop can be both witty and astute in its politics of everyday life. 'Chechen Gorilla' from his album *Axis*, goes like this :

Who's got this shit blocked, reppin' St.Kilda

Step in the milk bar, dressed as Chechen Gorilla

Nobody move! I taught my dog TZU's sick balls

Give me a chocolate Big M and a pie with sauce.

Kid I'm twice as raw, I listen to Funkoars ...

When I'm drunk sing Jimmy Barnes or play the guitar

I take a bath while you preach about keepin' it raw

I'm from Melbourne not the f---in' streets of New York

I never been to Jamaica, Queens or the Bronx

But I seen a lot of shit so believe what you want

I'd rather watch SBS than MTV

I'd rather read Stealth mag than HHC

Plutonic Lab beats smash up the city

Pegz rips the text like Agatha Christie

Another MC who embodies this politics of the everyday is Reason. By day Reason is Mr. Schulman, a dedicated history and science teacher at Mount Scopus Memorial College in Melbourne, where apart from teaching Australian history he also organises hip-hop jams by peers such as the Hilltop Hoods, runs graffiti workshops and DJs school carnivals. Now in his early 30s, Reason is a veteran of the 'second wave' of the Melbourne hip-hop scene which he has been involved in since the mid 1980s, and in the 1990s he was involved in the Push, an educational program which took workshops on hip-hop and contemporary urban street cultures to young people in outer regions in lower socio-economic regions of Victoria. He is also the DJ of *Hittin' Switches*, the longest running community radio program featuring Australian hip-hop, which has been operating on radio PBS for over 15 years. His tracks challenge the listener to think about a scattershot range of issues such as his accent, Ozhiphop.com, Obese Records, peace in the Middle East, Mabo, the Bali bomb blast, giving up a seat on the train for the elderly, vegetarianism, Australian sport, the great outdoors, 'red rattlers and suburban battlers', crime and Oz hip-hop pioneers Def Wish Cast. His track 'Out on the Patio' is a witty Melbourne-based palimpsest of rock group Gangajang's iconic 1985 Queensland hit 'Sounds of Then (This is Australia)' which also offers observations on Howard's Australia; he also includes Midnight Oil among his major influences. His latest EP *Life's a Lesson* is a series of reflections on global politics, the environment and his experiences as a schoolteacher. As he has said

'Hip-hop is a medium which in Australia is very predetermined by one's beliefs, stance on issues and personal views. I have always ensured that every word that I utter on a track is truly representative of where I am at in everyday life. Egos and persona seem to dictate a small proportion of the scene these days and it is encouraging to see the other 90% being representative of themselves. My interest in such topics as the environment, politics and reconciliation come from a number of years studying at university and involve living out these concepts in everyday activities. Being a proactive member in society, whether in the hip-hop scene or everyday life, is important to me.'

I don't think you'll find many US hip-hoppers, or mainstream rock stars for that matter, capable of being as eloquent as that.