Wire MC

31/05/06, Victoria Park, Sydney.
Wire MC, Tony Mitchell, Nick Keys.

Summary:

"What really grabbed my attention was N.W.A saying 'Fuck the Police!', you know that was something, when that song came out, when hip-hop was starting to be heard – even though people didn't want to listen to it – groups like N.W.A were saying things that we wanted to say but were afraid to say because of the past history between our people and police. We were stolen by the policeman, we were taken away by the policeman, we were rounded up and impounded by the policeman. So we were sort of conditioned to not rebel against that in such a public way, like screaming out 'Fuck the Police!'"

A fascinating discussion with the articulate, pugnacious and vibrant Wire MC. In the interview, Wire uses the lens of hip-hop to zoom in on Indigenous cultural practices, history and colonisation, identity and community and avoiding being a reconciliation poster boy – all from a relentlessly contemporary view-point.

About:

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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.

W: Wire MC
TM: Tony Mitchell
NK:: Nick Keys

TM: One of the things I wrote about Aboriginal hip-hop was I called it the 'New Corroboree', and that was a quote from you...

W: It's actually 'Modern Day Corroboree'. It's still the same corroboree, still singing and dancing and telling the same stories about the immediate environment. So it's not a new corroboree, it's just a modern day corroboree. It's still an old art form – for want of a better term – it's more than an art form, the corroboree.

TM: Right, fair enough. I've heard your track that has that in the title?

W: It's a lyric in the track, yeah, a vehicle for it. I can kick an a cappella for you if you want?

TM: OK!

W: Maybe a bit later on.

TM: Yeah, let's get warmed up a bit. Something else you've described yourself as is an 'Abo-digital' rapper, what's the background to that?

W: Well 'Abo-digital' has an ambiguous meaning because of the word digital. I'm Abo-digital because I'm a 21st century Aboriginal, I'm down with laptops and mobile phones and home entertainment. But digital also means your hands and your fingers. I'm still putting my fingers in the dirt; I'm still using my hands to create things. So that's the ambiguity.

TM: OK, right, but on the other hand you also use the guitar a lot, and one of the things that Mark [Munkimuk] was saying is distinctive about Aboriginal hip-hop, is that a lot of people still do use the guitar. And he was saying that it comes from the country music influence, is that true in your case?

W: I wouldn't say it comes from country music... Before we go any further: Aboriginal hip-hop, Aboriginal country music, Aboriginal rock, you know, you take away Aboriginal and you've still got hip-hop, country and rock 'n' roll. You know what I'm saying.

TM: Sure. But what I mean is Aboriginal performers who work in hip-hop.

W: Yeah, yeah, sure. The guitar is sort of like our contemporary traditional instrument, you know. For me personally, it's not influenced by country music, it's influenced by reggae music; Bob Marley and The Wailers, Peter Tosh, influenced by Jimi Hendrix, influenced by blues, you know, bit of Living Colour, bit of rock 'n' roll. Sure, I grew up around country music, and a lot of my uncles are playing country music guitar, but for me personally it's not why I incorporate guitar, it's because I'm a guitarist.

TM: OK, what got you into hip-hop in the first place?

W: Man!! What really grabbed my attention was N.W.A saying 'Fuck the police!', you know that was something, when that song came out, when hip-hop was starting to be heard – even though people didn't want to listen to it – groups like N.W.A were saying things that we wanted to say but were afraid to say because of the past history between our people and police. We were stolen by the policeman, we were taken away by the policeman, we were rounded up and impounded by the policeman. So we were sort of conditioned to not rebel against that in such a public way, like screaming out 'Fuck the police!' So that attracted me to it because they were saying things that we couldn't say,

but we wanted to say. On the other hand, the elders in the community were afraid of this young black angry voice from the ghettos of America because, like I said, we were used to this socially conditioned attitude where we were submissive all the time. So all of a sudden we were getting the courage and the conviction to say, 'Yeah, you're right: Fuck the police! Fuck the government, fuck all the inequalities and injustices'. And fair enough, the elder community were, not so much afraid of the voice, but wary of it. Because we are still finding our voice in today's society, we are still trying to find the right outlet to say what we need to say. So that was one of the biggest attractions, but also because it is essentially a song and dance art form. I can't subscribe to calling hip-hop a culture because you can't raise your children on hip-hop. On one hand you have conscious MCs like Mos Def and then on the extreme of that you've got guys like 50 Cent, who are promoting drugs and sex. So it's not a culture, it's not something you can raise your children on. Sure, it's a movement, it's an art form, it's a collection of ideas, but it's not a culture. The reason I was attracted to it was the song and dance aspect to it, because the culture I come from, the Dreamtime, we always expressed our stories, our beliefs, our fears, our superstitions through song and dance. So being an Abo-digital in the 21st century, it was a natural evolution for me to move into hip-hop and continue the corroboree, but with the modern day aspect.

TM: And of course, there is also a storytelling aspect to hip-hop which fits very nicely with Aboriginal culture. And from what I understand, the elders are much more positive about hip-hop these days, they actually see it as positive thing for young Aboriginal kids to get into, because it's a way of expressing their stories and actually getting back in touch with their own culture.

W: And more immediately, beyond that, it's a form of education. There is also literacy skills involved if you want to rap or write. It's also a form of education for yourself, self-knowledge.

TM: Yes, and that's something that you've been involved in quite heavily isn't it, running workshops with Morganics around the country, teaching kids the skills, how to rap, that kind of thing?

W: Yeah, but when I do workshops, be they in the inner city or out remote places, I go to them not to teach skills but to share skills. I believe hip-hop allows us to express these skills that we are born with; everybody can talk, everybody can dance, it's just that hip-hop helps you to define your words and your rhythm. I don't hip-hop to advance hip-hop, I don't MC to advance hip-hop. MC for me means 'My Cousin'. And that's what it is for me, so when I am doing workshops it's more about letting these people know that we have the capabilities and the right to express ourselves. I go to a lot of Indigenous communities and what I find is the shame factor, and that shame factor that has been holding us back. That's a harness that we've put on ourselves – well, we didn't put it on – but we are happy to walk around with it. So I try to help these kids find within themselves the capacity to express these feelings without being ashamed of it. One of the things I try to share with them is that there is a huge difference between being ashamed and being embarrassed.

TM: That was one thing that came out of Grant's film [Grant Saunders film *B.L.A.C.K* on Wire], or maybe it was you talking about it, the shame factor in relation to breakdancing, that the first Aboriginal people who got into breakdancing in the early 80s, it was a kind of no-shame thing as well, out in the open, express yourself, and as I understand, combining it with Aboriginal forms of dance. Have you been into breakdancing at all?

W: Yeah, yeah, I used to break, still do every once in a while, don't do much training. I used to break a lot, I used to represent for the primary school I went to, we used to go and battle other primary schools, we'd rock up to Blue Light discos, you know, there would be the other guys over there with their matching tracksuits and matching shoes, and we'd have all these second hand clothes and shoes...

TM: Was this in Nambucca Heads?

W: This is in Nambucca Heads, around Blue Light disco time, so a good while ago. But yeah, breaking was good because it allowed you to show off, and in Australian society, showing off is pretty much frowned upon, you know, the tall poppy syndrome. And in Aboriginal society – not that I'm a scholar or anything – we are first and foremost a communal society. And hip-hop is about community, but it's also about the individual, and their place in the community. So, to come from a place where your identity is within the whole of a community and to go to a place like hip-hop you find your personal identity, there is a little bit of a struggle there, because you want to be out there. As a performer you want people to take notice of you. Um, I don't really know where I'm going with that one, but...

NK:: I know what you mean; it's a complicated relationship in hip-hop of the individual to the community.

W: Exactly.

NK:: Because a lot of what MCs say and do is about projecting yourself towards the centre, towards the spotlight, 'Put the spotlight on', and that's particularly true for mainstream Australian hip-hop, if you want to call it that, there is a focus on the individual. But then again, the whole thing that underlies hip-hop in Australia is the community, is the networks, because there has been no major label support at all. So, it is interesting to think about how the ego of the MC versus the...

W: ...versus the egalitarian of community.

NK:: Yes.

TM: 'Representing'.

NK:: Yeah, and the two don't necessarily sit so comfortably together.

TM: But one of the things that has been consistently overlooked in Australia is the number of Aboriginal people who have been involved from the very beginning, I think.

W: One of the things that has been overlooked in Australia is Aboriginal people, full stop.

TM: I was surprised to learn in Grant's film that there were people like Leapee who were among the original breakdancers and then Munkimuk told me about how his crew was going in Redfern in the early 80s, and it was something you never heard about at the time. On the other hand, you had people like Sound Unlimited being the originator of Australian hip-hop, and breaking in Burwood, all that kind of stuff. But from what I can gather now, there were Aboriginal people who were into it right from the beginning.

W: Yeah, well, one of the things I find when I do workshops; I'll get to somewhere like Yirrikala (up in the top end, the Northern Territory, right up in the Gulf of Carpentaria) and some of the people wonder if anyone has going to [have] heard of hip-hop. And you go there and these kids are doing breakdance moves from the 80s, they are so old school. I ain't taking hip-hop to places it ain't. Hip-hop is taking me to places it already is. I come from a small country town – where as opposed to people who were in an urban situation when hip-hop was first coming up, I'm sure there was a few places you could go to help develop your skills and your self – but where I come from we only had the one tape, that was shared around between five or six of us boys in the break crew. There we no record stores, there were no venues for hip-hop, let alone any sort of live music. So I find when I go to remote communities, because of that early influence from groups like N.W.A and Arrested Development, and through breakdance movies like *Breakdance* and *Beat Street*. So hip-hop is already

out there, it just hasn't had the chance to catch up with where it is at right now. I'm sure there is someone who is the first person to pick up a mic and bust a rhyme in this country, that person is out there, but as for the first originators of hip-hop in Australia, that's a tough call, I don't know how you make it.

NK:: It's contested history.

TM: And different people make different claims.

W: And that all depends on your criteria for origination. So just because you live in the city and some-one saw you perform, or were you like some little black boy in a rural community breaking in your room and no one was watching, back in the early 80s. But that's a different question.

NK:: Yeah, and of course when you are talking about the criteria of original, then we have to say that the cultural form has travelled overseas via communication lines which people have then responded to. Mistery from Brethren was talking about the history of Australian guys starting to rap in Australian accents, and the guys that gave them the idea were UK guys. The Oz guys were already rapping by this time, but they were in American accents, and then they heard the London Posse with Rodney P and those guys and they went 'Oh! hang on' and then they all suddenly clicked.

W: Yeah, 'Now we get it.'

NK:: So you can't say that in Australia there is an originator of the Aussie accent, you have to say that it was cross-cultural engagement.

W: Yeah, that is an interesting point. But as for that whole Aussie accent thing, man, I have a stuggle going on with that one personally. Firstly, I don't talk ocker. I talk how I'm talkin'. I don't say 'G'day'. I don't say 'G'day mate'. I say, 'How you going, brother'. That's what I say. As for this push for a more ocker MC, I find that a bit too tokenistic in one sense, like some of them seem to force it...

TM: Oh totally, it can be very exaggerated and overdone.

W: But on a more personal outlook, it's like 'Wait a minute. Hip-hop comes from a black background. I live in a country where it was a penal system before it was a colony, and we were told – or forced – to assimilate'. And this is just a personal thing, but I find now through hip-hop, having white boys come up to me and saying 'You know, maybe you should rap a bit more Aussie'. And I'm like 'What! Are you trying to colonise me again dude? Stop it. Stop it.'

TM: And with the beer-hop kind of stuff, it's just reinforcing ocker stereotypes which is the last thing we need.

W: Yeah, and Local Knowledge did a good beer contrast on their track. How does it go: 'Lift you drinks up in the air, and spill them everywhere'. It's all about partying and that...

TM: But it's also a statement about alcoholism.

W: Yeah, I think it's Joel who raps the verse and the verse is from the perspective of a foetus in the mother's womb and she is drinking alcohol. That I find is the difference between Aboriginal hip-hop and white Australian hip-hop. We have a deep innate sense of community obligation, we are born with it, and that's why you don't hear black MCs – I can say all of the ones I've come across – using words like 'bitches', they won't diss women. I'm sure I've done it myself when I'm hanging out with my boys and it's just us, we'll get dirty and all that sort of shit, but that's just personal sexuality coming out, it's not 'Every woman is a bitch'. Because my mum isn't a bitch, my grandma isn't a bitch, and the mother the land ain't a bitch. You know what I'm saying, that's a big dividing line.

TM: What I wanted to ask you also was what African-American MCs have you met that have been important to you?

W: Chuck D. Yeah, Chuck D. I met him at Koori Radio. This was at the same time that 50 Cent was in town doing his show. And so Koori Radio called me up and said 'Oh man, we've got Chuck D here so you should come in a have a yak', and I went in and I was really inspired by how diplomatic he was in the public forum, because he was doing an interview on the radio and the interviewer goes: 'So, 50 Cent is in town, are you gonna go see his show?' And Chuck D goes, 'Oh I might go down and check it out, I wish 50 Cent good luck in his business venture' – which I thought 'Very smart, very smart' – 'But I also hope that he doesn't forget to come down to places like community radio such as Koori radio'. So he put it out there in a diplomatic way to the public forum, but a week later I went a checked out his website *Rap Station* and he was fully grilling the man. So in the public forum his was very diplomatic but in his own space he was 'Look man, this is how it really is. I went and seen his concert and there is 50 Cent with a venue packed out with white boys going *put another cap in a nigga'*. That's an interesting outlook. Man! But that's the commercialisation of anything really, if it's commercial then it's going to make lots of money.

TM: Have you had much contact with Michael Franti at all?

W: I've had the chance a couple of times but it's just never happened.

TM: Because he seems like someone who makes a point of seeking out people in the Aboriginal community and hanging out and doing gigs and spoken word stuff. I know Mark [Munkimuk] said he had been a big influence on him.

W: Well, his music has been a big influence on me, but I've just never met him.

TM: Because he is another one who incorporates guitar in his music. So, at a certain point you came down to Sydney and you studied at the Eora Centre, is that right?

W: Yeah.

TM: Were you doing hip-hop stuff then?

W: Previous to coming to Sydney – like I said, first and foremost I'm a musician, I play guitar, bass piano, know a bit of music theory – I started a crew up at home, up at Bowraville and the group was called *Barrung Buljurr Girrawa*, which in Gumbainggir is *Barrung*, 'Bowra', *Buljurr* 'Rhythm' and *Girrawa* 'Mob', so Bowra Rhythm Mob.

TM: Where you rapping in language?

W: Yeah... ah, no, no, we weren't rapping in language, unless you consider English to be language.

TM: Yeah, it's language isn't it?

W: There are Indigenous words that I might use in some of my raps, but I don't speak the language or practice the language, so I don't want to make any tokenistic gestures towards my Gumbainggir heritage through that. I'll use more modern day slang that we use up home, I'll take that and put that in the raps, and if I do that then up home they go 'Oh, yeah, we know what he's talking about.' But if I say something in language a lot of people up home don't really know language so it's like 'What's he saying and why is he saying that?'

TM: So you still see yourself as representing that community?

W: Yeah, definitely, I'm first and foremost a Bowra boy. I still don't consider myself a city boy and I've

been here six years. This is just a long holiday, until I get to the next destination.

TM: I think the last time I saw you perform was for the ICE thing, when you went to London with Maya and Trey. And that must have been a strong experience, meeting up with UK MCs and going to... what was it? The Ocean?

W: Yeah, The Ocean, in at Hackney. It's a great space that. Yeah, that was pretty much to go over and see how they set up community access centres for creating music. Obviously ICE have got that sorted, so yeah, that was quite a good experience. What I found over there was like – of course when I'm over there I'm outwardly black Australian – and I had a lot of people coming up to me and 'Oh man, we really like what you are saying and what you doing, we are sorry we don't know any of that'. And there was a lot of apology coming from London, and I was like 'Oh, that's great and thank you, but don't sweat it too much because a lot of people at home don't know this, so don't beat yourself up'. There was a lot of that empathy, they were really feeling what I was representing as a modern day blackfella.

NK:: But you're right about people at home not knowing about it. What we've observed in the last couple of months when we've interviewed Local Knowledge and Munkimuk and been to the Klub Koori gig at the Manning Bar, is that there is still a massive gap between the white Australia or mainstream hip-hop scene and the Indigenous hip-hop stuff. The Indigenous stuff seems confined a lot to the local communities, which would back up what you saying about people being community orientated, but that Klub Koori gig and the Local Knowledge supports for The Herd is the first I've seen of crossover between the two groups, and people are starting to take notice. And they really need to in my opinion, Australian hip-hop needs to be invigorated with what the Indigenous side of things has to offer.

W: Yeah, I find Australian hip-hop is too preoccupied with getting mainstream support. For myself personally, I don't give a fuck about mainstream support because I come from a place where the mainstream has never supported me anyway. And I like I said, I don't do this to advance hip-hop, I do it to advance my self as a human and as an Aboriginal, advance the awareness of my culture, especially on a contemporary tip. As for the black and white sides of hip-hop coming together through someone like The Herd and Local Knowledge, it's a great thing, but I can also see it being flipped, in the sense that 'Oh look, we've got a black hip-hop crew and a white hip-hop crew getting together. It's all fine'.

NK:: Yeah, I hear you, token reconciliation.

W: And on that point, when I first started working with Morganics, doing shows and doing workshops, the very first thing we became aware of is 'Hey, you know people could easily put us up as reconciliation poster boys, let's not be that'. We don't work together because he sees me as an Aboriginal and I see him as a Caucasian. We work together because we have a similar belief and a similar outlook, direction and aim. And they are the things we want to be recognised for, not as some poster boys for reconciliation.

TM: And that was addressed in *Stereotype* wasn't it, about being reconciliation poster boys, so you started dissing each other and sending each other up.

W: Yeah. I suppose it's good in one sense that people can see black and white Australian through me and Morgan working together, but I just hope they don't see it as a reconciliation process.

NK:: Totally, it's a corrupt term, reconciliation, it's totally bastardised.

TM: It doesn't have much meaning anymore.

W: No, it's just....

NK:: But nonetheless, I'd like to throw out the possibility of – and maybe you disagree – using hip-hop as some sort of meeting ground, where the complexity of race relations and history and contemporary society can be engaged. I understand what you are saying about how easy it is for it to be flipped inside out and made useless, but would you say that hip-hop is still a movement that could possibly foster better race relations?

W: Oh man, hip-hop is totally the vehicle for that. The only thing we have to be aware of that we don't get all this political jargon stuck onto it, and then it becomes a political movement, as opposed to a people movement, about bettering yourself and your people.

TM: I think that's something that The Herd are aware of very much, because they do a lot of political stuff but they distance themselves from being co-opted into different political causes.

W: Exactly, exactly.

NK:: Because that is death knell for you in many ways, being typecast as political.

W: Well I get typecast as being a political a lot, because I'm out there being black and singing about land rights and trachoma in the outback and all these other things. But it's not political, it's personal, these are things I live through and deal with and see and recognise. First and foremost it's my lyrical healing.

NK:: Urthboy made an interesting point when he was talking to one of the street press magazines about the time of the release of *The Sun Never Sets*, and he was in a way working at distancing themselves from being typecast as political, and he said 'You know, there is something inherently political about telling your personal stories,' and he used examples from their new tracks about towns that are getting bypassed by big freeways, and in telling the story of that town of course there is a political dimension to that story, because there is always a political dimension to the personal. But the problem seems to arise when you use that word 'political', it works like some kind of noose or box, but if you look at it from that personal-political angle then it opens out.

W: Well you can understand people seeing and finding politics within lyrics, and I guess that's why we say those things, to make people aware about issues....

TM: I wanted to ask you also about the Croc festivals, because you've done a fair bit of work with them, and kids around the country. Again, is that about sharing skills and tutoring kids?

W: Yeah, Croc Fest was a different experience, as opposed to going into a community and spending two weeks there, and living with the community and hanging out with the kids. Croc Fest is like 40 minutes of sausage factory introduction to workshopping. Last time Morgan and I did it we were contracted by NMA, the National Museum of Australia, and we were doing like six workshops a day, 40 minutes each; within those 40 minutes the NMA would give a presentation on the museum and so we'd have like 30-35 minutes to give them a brief history lesson on hip-hop, where it came from, what are the elements, who were some of the founders. And then after that we give them a quick beatbox lesson, brainstorm with them, write a little eight-bar rap, record it, and then send them over to shoot a clip. So it was pretty intense, it was a really fast turnaround. You'd be there helping kids to express things and represent things and then all of a sudden it's 'OK, see you later, you got to go now', and then they'd be going off to the army reserve workshop. It was those sort of battles that I was having with myself.

TM: That's very strange.

W: I was like 'What's this gig all about?' There were a lot of different things going on.

TM: And obviously the kids would have responded much better to the hip-hop workshop than the army reserves stuff and the museum.

W: I hope so, I hope so. But also – I forget where we were, I think it might have been Port Augusta – we were doing these workshops, and we were talking to these kids about what they were going to rhyme about, 'What's the track going to be about?' And we suggested that we do a track about the elements, and not the elements of hip-hop but the elements of life, and so we ask 'What's the elements of life?' and this one kid yells out 'Money, power and politics'. And me and Morganics looked at each other and went 'OK, that's it, we'll run with that'. And this one kids got up – man, these are primary school kids, right – and he goes like 'Can we say Johnny Howard, bring the troops back', and a light just went off in my head. When I was in primary school, I didn't even know who the prime minister was, let alone what he was. Now these kids are socially aware of what is happening in the political domain that to give them a tool like hip-hop to try and forge that is a really great thing to be a part of. It was like 'Wow!', and I'm sure they couldn't have said that in the Army Reserve workshops, 'Bring the troops back!' 'What did you say?' *[makes the motion and sound of a gun being fired at the recalcitrant child.]*

TM: That's great.

W: So the Croc Fest workshops were very interesting in their own right. But I prefer to hang out with a community for at least a week. Have the kids take you down the river, take to you all the little spots they like to hang out, and you get to know them – you can go a little deeper then.

TM: As in the case of the Wilcannia mob. How are they going now?

W: Well I just got back from Wilcannia a fortnight ago, we went back out there to do some workshops and write some more tracks with them. We got a track out of some young girls, probably from the ages of six through to ten. They did a little track called 'Koori Angels' and it's just about being there for family, one of the lyrics I can remember is 'My uncle he drinks too much, but I'm a Koori Angel I'll bring him good luck'. So those sort of things. And then Buddy Blair came along, who was an original member of the Wilcannia Mob, or the Baganji Boys, Baganji being the people out there. And he came along and did like a solo track and he was just paying homage to Rhythm River Beatbox and to the other groups that was involved. As for the other boys, they were in town, but I think they felt a little bit of pressure, like if they came to the workshop then they would have to do something – so that was understandable. Remember these were young boys when we recorded the Rhythm River track, we were just sitting in the lounge room of the house we were staying in, and we were just doing it because it could be done, we had the means. And the next minute its getting national air play on triple j, and then they are playing at Homebake and then they are number 51 on the triple j Top 100. You know, behind Jurassic 5 and in front of Jamiroquai, I remember that. So that was a good thing to provide a moment for them, but now a lot of people say 'So, where are the Baganji boys, are they still together, are they still doing things?' These are young black boys who live in an outback community where there is no employment, the only form of employment is CDEP which is basically working for the dole. It's very expensive to live there, they have other concerns. Hopefully they are still finding out for themselves that hip-hop can be a vehicle to help them through it.

TM: I guess a lot of people think they are famous, and it must be hard to live up to that.

W: Yeah, yeah. And personally, if that was the case, I wouldn't want to be one of those boys, you know, I would just go 'I don't need that pressure, I'm a young kid trying to find my place within myself, and then I'll find my place in the world'.

TM: Yeah, because it was a bit of a novelty song really wasn't? I mean that was the way it got processed through radio airplay and the mainstream.

W: Yeah, for sure. It was good for what it did, to help raise the flag, but there are also other tracks – like there is a track out of the block here in Redfern, called 'The Block' – talking about junkies on the Block. But of course, it ain't gonna get triple j airplay. Because that ain't no picture postcard perfect representation of what it is to be Aboriginal. It's the harsh realities of what it is to be Aboriginal today. On the pro-side of the 'Downriver' track, at least it got to represent happiness, at least it got to represent good times...

TM: Which is important.

W: And so that was all received in a positive media light, whereas something like 'The Block' track – sure people might have received it and taken it for what it is, but – there is so many chances there for people to run with the negative, 'Oh, why is this kids talking about junkies on the Block?' Well, it's because they are there everyday. So there are pros and cons to both them things.

TM: Yeah, that's something that Abie from Local Knowledge said to us also, particularly when they perform, they like to keep the positive side going, keep the party rap going, because the negative side...

NK:: ...Yeah, Warwick [Wok] was talking about how a kid comes home from school to all of the domestic problems in the house, and they go and lock themself in their room, and so they don't want to hear about it all over again from Local Knowledge, they want something that can get the positive rhythms happening.

W: Exactly, and on that point of the social problem that we have as Aboriginal people. They are things I feel I want to address, that I need to address – but when I do, I always have to make sure that it has a positive outcome within it. When I'm rapping about something like – and this is always been an issue – when I'm rapping about trachoma in the outback, it's not to be a downer and it's not to go like 'Look, this is fucked! End of story'. I want to bring the 'Well, what's fucked about this?' to the discussion and 'How can we fix it?' And 'What are we doing to fix it?'

TM: That's the educational side of it too, isn't it? And it's really important to do that with hip-hop also.

W: Yeah, and for me personally, I can't write about these things in some sort of jovial manner, but I guess that's the difference between artists, each has their own tact but they both want to finish the race.

TM: Well, there are things that are hard to joke about.

W: Yeah, guys like Local Knowledge are doing such a great job of representing in a positive light and keeping it up, and that's their agenda, so power to them – I can find nothing bad to say about what they are doing, you know?

NK:: For sure, and Joel works in the health faculty of the Newcastle Uni, so in many ways the crew is an extension of his work.

W: And I'm sure having worked in that situation that Joel works in, the last thing you want to do is go home and write creatively about that all over again, and what's so screwed about it and how it brings you down. Of course he'll want to put a positive spin on it, it's probably his healing, it's probably how he deals with it.

TM: One thing I wanted to ask you was if you've had much experience with kids where English isn't their first language?

W: Yes, that's always been a fun struggle. Another place I've been in the Gulf of Carpentaria, Numbulwar, we were up there working for two weeks and a lot of the kids up there speak Nunggbuju, that's one of the languages. There are two other languages I can't remember the name of and then they speak a Creole that none of the elders can understand. And a lot of these kids don't read or write, so that becomes a language barrier, but if they are speaking these languages everyday then we ask them if they want to incorporate that into their raps, and most of them already do anyway, it's such an obvious question, but we like to ask it just for our sake. But when we come across kids who don't know how to spell we say 'Don't worry about it now, just write it how you hear it, because it's all about what you are saying, not how you are writing it'.

TM: Right, because I was talking to Bex [Lez Beckett] the other day and he was saying that sometime he uses rapping to teach them English, that rapping can actually become a sort of medium for teaching. Have you had experience like that?

W: It definitely can be a medium for it, but I pretty much go the other way. I feel there is plenty of room to learn how to speak English – go to the shop and ask the shopkeeper for something – but I'm on the other angle. If someone is speaking language then I want them to share language through hip-hop, instead of teaching English through hip-hop.

TM: Sure, and it's really great to hear Aboriginal language in hip-hop because most people in Australia have absolutely no idea how many languages there are, and how they are dying out.

W: Well, I see Black Australia like I do Europe. Europe is a Christian place, but it's not a Catholic place, it's not a Protestant place – but they all come under the same banner of God. But within that they all have their own different dialects, languages, customs and traditions. Same as Black Australia. Like right now, I'm international, I'm in another man's land, the nation of Gadigal, I come from the nation of Gumbainggir. I also try to bring that awareness through hip-hop, there are so many different shades of Aboriginal.

TM: I also wanted to ask you about some workshops you were doing with Morgan in Redfern, quite a long time ago now, and I was just wondering whether what you did in Redfern was any different to what you do in rural Australia?

W: I don't think there really is that much difference between conducting a hip-hop workshop in Redfern and conducting one in Wilcannia, Yirikala or anything. Because I feel like these are pretty much the same places.

TM: So there is not much difference between urban and rural?

W: Not that I find personally. Being a country boy living an urban life style. You go to the Block and it still feels like a small town mission.

TM: Right OK, because I thought maybe the urban Indigenous kids might know more about hip-hop and be a bit more savvy...

W: Oh yeah, in that regard, urban kids are more with it – for want of a better term – and you'll get all these city influences coming into the workshop. But then you go to an outback community and they continue the physical practice of culture. I guess therein lies a difference, because you go to places where they are still immersed in culture, it's still happening all around them, there are still corroborees, there are still song men doing songs, people still go hunting to live. Those are the geographical difference.

TM: But that must effect what they produce?

W: Yeah, exactly. In a city workshop you might have a young black kid talking about how he has been disposed of his culture and wondering what it would be like to be initiated, or at least go hunting. Whereas in outback communities they will be talking about those things because they do it. So that is the major difference, but still it's all one and the same thing, just two different aspects to it. One is talking about the lack of, and the other is talking about what's left. One tells what we don't have, they other what we do. But they are still just different perspectives on the same things, you meet kids trying to find their place in society while trying to honour and respect where they come from.

TM: So will hip-hop ever become part of Aboriginal culture?

W: Hip-hop is a part of Aboriginal culture, I think it always has been.

TM: OK, in the sense that it is easily incorporated into Aboriginal culture?

W: Yeah, and the main reason for that is the song and dance that happens in hip-hop. One of the biggest personal achievements for me has been going to communities – or going anyway – and performing. From somewhere like the Block to somewhere like Numbulwar, where its very different but still the same. Having elder aunts come up to me and saying 'We like what you're doing, we are listening to what you are saying and what you are doing is a good thing. We were not to sure if you were gonna be swearing, but we like you'. So that's one of my big achievements, to be accepted by communities as a positive force.

NK:: That's a great achievement.

TM: Yeah, it is. And that's probably a good place to stop, we've taken up enough of your time. Thanks so much.

W: Nah, no worries. I'll kick the a cappella if you want?

TM: That would be great.

W: This is verse three from 'B.L.A.C.K'

Born long ago, creation's keeper

I feel a rhythm in the forest and it's totally bliss,

Words float like a mist through a valley that's thick,

Memories of corroboree, didgeridoo and clapstick,

Melaleuca and the eucalypt to cure the sick,

From a mountain to the ocean flows a river through the forest,

Running naked through the bush like the ancient ones before us,

I can hear the chorus of the corroboree calling me,

Yes I am the fruit of the Murabi tree see,

I often wonder what my name would have been,

Living in the Dreamtime with my ancient tribal kin,

Hunting and gathering, living this way,

Playing tribal rhythms through the night and into day,

But reality cuts, interrupts my fantasy,

As I casually step into the jungle of humanity,

Maintain my sanity while I'm constantly under the scrutiny

Of police and security, they shooting me,

But don't be stupid see, stereotyping is just like executing me.

It's a modern day corroborre, you know how we do,

Shake a leg, lift your head, represent, stay true,

Brother stay black, sister stay beautiful,

Let 'em know that you be Aboriginal and proud,

Right now no shame in here,

Lights out, flash black, I'm bringing flame this year,

The sounds you hear right now is right here and now

And I'm here right now, it's the brand new brown,

Oh pick it up, listen up, what do you know 'cause

Here we come, keep it my, my people we don't stop

Rockin' the roof from the bush to the Block,

Got nothing to lose so I'm claiming the lot,

And in the name of hip-hop I came to get down,

Two steps, sure shot, who came to get down?

Jump around, here we go, bounce on this,

Indigenous flow now you know that

This is for the brothers who like to bounce,

This is for the sister who know the sounds,

This is for my cousins who keep it jumping

This is for my people who keep it coming,

This is something else.