

LOCAL NOISE

Sounds From Our Town: Tasmanian Hip-Hop

by Tony Mitchell, published in Music Forum

Summary:

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On a trip to Tasmania in April 2007, Tony Mitchell went foraging through fragments of the Tasmanian music scene in search of the underground traces of Hobart hip-hop. This piece - published as a feature in Music Forum - is a result of a foraging which included an interview with Hobart-based producer Crytearia (this interview can be viewed at: <http://www.localnoise.net.au/site-directory/interviews/crytearia-interview/>).

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Crytearia.

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.

In Search of Tasmanian Music: from Tatar to the Bass Strait

Music emanating from Tasmania has generally been pretty much off the radar in terms of mainstream or even underground success or acknowledgment in Australia. A scroll through the bands and artists listed on the TasMusic website (<http://www.tasmusic.com.au/about.php3?sID=41>) yields few if any familiar names with the surprise exception of the world music award-winning Kazan Tatar singer Zulya Kamalova and her band the Children of the Underground, whom few would associate with Tasmania given the distinctively Russian and Tatar orientation of her music. As Aline Scott-Maxwell has commented, 'her blond, eastern European appearance and striking looks, the expressivity, flexibility and distinctive timbral quality of her voice, described in reviews variously as pure and rich, the often melancholy themes of her lyrics and the languid style of her songs, and their remarkably diverse backings are her trademarks. But her world music success is as much to do with her ethnic Tatar identity as it is with these other things'. But Zulya's Hobartian bassist, mandalaika player and arranger Andrew Tanner is a key component of the Children of the Underground, as well as being involved in the 'gypsy Latin swing' of Rektango, a Hobart-based world music outfit featuring Yugoslav vocalist and percussionist Tania Bosak, who play Bulgarian, Russian and Latin dance music featuring sax, flute and accordion, and whose members frequently play at a regular Friday night outdoor gig in Salamanca Square. There are also regular pub-based jazz groups and while I was in Hobart last December I witnessed a pretty good blues-rock pub band of guys mostly in their 50s, belting out early Rolling Stones covers and other blues standards - there was even a harmonica player in the audience who kept joining in with them, even though he wasn't part of the band. There's clearly no shortage of music in Tasmania, it's just that most of it doesn't get heard on the mainland.

Of course there are numerous Tasmanian-born musicians now based on the mainland or outside Australia. Country singer and prolific recording artist Audrey Auld Mezera is originally from Hobart and has had a long association with Bill Chambers in NSW, but now lives in California, where she runs her own label Reckless Records, specialising in 'music with the dirt left on'. On her live album with US guitarist Nina Gerber *In the House*, her song 'Mountain Home' makes reference to growing up in Fern Tree, on the slopes of Mt. Wellington in the south west of Hobart, commonly referred to rather ominously as 'the mountain', although there are other mountains on the island. The slopes of Mt. Wellington can be cold and treacherous as well as spectacular, and the moonrock terrain of its farther side was named Transylvania in the 19th century, and has been described by Edward Colless as 'the legendary domain of genetic throwbacks and demonic, cannibalistic clans in settlements falling into dereliction, run on welfare and living on the gun'. These badlanders were portrayed as an inbred, innocent but lethal tribe in Louis Nowra's 1985 play *The Golden Age*.

Another folk-oriented music group from Hobart who had made some impact in the late 1980s was Aria-award-winning Wild Pumpkins at Midnight, featuring Nick Larkins, Michael Turner and Debra Lamskey, who produced a number of politically provocative songs such as 'Nuclear Picnic' and 'Apathetic' before going through a number of changes in lineup, relocating to Amsterdam and touring Europe extensively throughout the 1990s. But dredging up other familiar musical names associated with the Apple Isle is a difficult task. The TasMusic site includes an all-female rock group called the Jane Does, who seem to sum up the anonymity most Tasmanian recording and performing artists register on the mainland. The 'A to Z of Original Tasmanian Music' featured in the local bimonthly music magazine Sauce drew a similar blank beyond vague recognition of names half-remembered on posters and flyers pasted around Hobart - an indie rock group called the Muddy Turds are a particularly lurid example - as a Sydneysider I'd heard of none of the artists listed there. Similarly, flicking through a rack of local indie bands' and recording artists' CDs in Tommy Gun records in central Hobart drew another blank.

Like other peripheral music localities such as Dunedin, Perth or Geelong, one perhaps expects Tasmania

to have a thriving local (as opposed to national) music scene which represents and expresses a strong sense of the resonances of suburban isolation and remote landscape, conveying what Sara Cohen has called 'the sensuous production of place and maps of meaning'. One example of this is Melbourne-based jazz singer Judy Jacques' 2003 Australian Jazz Award-winning album *Making Wings*, which was written on Flinders Island and is partly based on early 20th century recordings by Tasmanian Aboriginal singer Fannie Cochrane Smith, who made the first sound recordings in Australia in Sandy Bay in Hobart in 1899. The album uses location sounds such as bird songs and nature effects in exploring Jacques' ancestral past in the Bass Strait Islands, and the cover is richly illustrated with grotesque black and white etchings of birds by artist Doug Hails. The opening song 'Heart of the Island' traces Flinders Island's songlines: 'I'm hearing a song through the heart of the island/not like a word/a sound/like the call of a traveller /feeling the dark night ... through moon on the sea/or something too old now/too rarely opened/a song to be found on the galloping wind/through the old birds returning/ with memory of a people'/. There are various songs based on birds and bird calls, and one is drawn from a letter by Matthew Flinders to Ann Chapelle. The album has been described by John Whiteoak as displaying an 'adventurousness ... which includes improvisations based, impressionistically, around ghostly Tasmanian indigenous songs recorded 100 years ago on wax cylinders'.

Jacques' album evokes a rich sense of Tasmanian gothic, in terms of an often eerie, weird or grotesque sense of animism in the landscape. As Jim Davidson has described, much of Tasmania conveys 'the low-keyed gothic of the grotesque... Excess apples are carved, drowned in vinegar, plasticated and sold as Applefolk; tree ferns are mutilated to make anthropomorphic figures'. Tasmanian soundscapes match the bleakness of the landscape in places like Port Arthur, with its melding of the stone relics of the memorial to the victims of Martin Bryant's shooting spree with memories of brutal convict deaths from the 19th century, or the Copping Colonial Convict exhibition and the stuffed mole figures of Mole Hill, now in a Launceston theme park. Roger Scholes' film *The Tale of Ruby Rose* also resonates with Tasmanian gothic, expressing in Colless' words 'a fascination with abnormality expressed through "oddity" and intensity: awesome landscape and the harsh or even occult extremities of human nature'.

But according to Kieran O'Brien of the acoustic five-piece group Waiter, Tasmania is not all desolation, dereliction and dark spaces, but has its bright side for musicians: 'The fresh air, wild wilderness and chilled back vibe make Tasmania a great place to live. There's plenty of quality musicians floating around and you can be at band rehearsal in under twenty minutes; meaning that no one is usually more than two hours late. There's a lot of diversity in the Tasmanian music scene, and you can often be surprised by quality bands that seem to randomly emerge from the depths of obscurity'. These random emergences often take place at a number of regular local music festivals, such as the Amplified Music Festival, now in its third year, run by Arts Tasmania, held in both Launceston and Hobart, which showcases a plethora of local musicians in all genres from classical to hip-hop and includes a 'global battle of the bands' as well as music industry workshops. The Falls Festival, held at Marion Bay over three days at the end of December, features popular Australian recording artists alongside local groups and musicians, as does the annual Gone South festival in Launceston. The Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra and Chamber Players have a long history, there is a Conservatorium of Music in Hobart, and venues such as the Republic Bar, the Loft, the Brisbane Hotel and the Uni Bar attract national and occasionally international rock and pop acts. Nonetheless Tasmania's remoteness still renders it very peripheral in terms of its national impact, with many local musicians moving to Melbourne or beyond in order to make a mark.

Tracking Hobart Hip-Hop

In keeping with the Do-It-Yourself ethos of Australian hip-hop, which until recently was also largely off the radar in terms of Australian Music Industry coverage, small but lively urban hip-hop scenes have sprung up around both Hobart - the 'South Side' - and Launceston - the 'North Side'. The Tasflow

website (www.tasflow.com), run by Launceston-based MC Mynse, aka, producer, promoter and music writer for *Sauce*, Ryan Farrington of the Altrueistic crew, celebrated its first anniversary on August 31 with a Birthday Bash at the Brisbane Hotel in Hobart. This featured a number of Tasmania's principal hip-hop luminaries: Mynse himself, EPC, mdusu&damesa, Oratoric and Paddles and the Tasmaniaks supporting Darwin-based Mc Dan the Underdog. By September Tasflow had had over 13,000 postings, and it incorporates a radio station which plays mainly Tasmanian hip-hop, a photo gallery, discussion forum, a buy sell and trade section and links to the myspace sites of most Tasmanian hip-hop artists. The central hub of the Hobart scene is Ruffcut Records, an upstairs shop for clothes as well as CDs and vinyl in Elizabeth Street Mall in the city centre, where producer/event promoter Jason aka DJ Grotesque of hip-hop 'supergroup' Heads of State and S.L.U.T. productions has held sway since August 2001. Ruffcut has one of the best collections of Australian hip-hop CDs I've seen anywhere, and a reasonable selection of vinyl. Grotesque runs a weekly hip-hop event and radio program on the student-run Edge Radio 99.3 FM, while Mynse organises the Homebrew event, which has moved around venues such as the Mint, the Trout and the Loft. Both Mynse and Oxyde have studios in Launceston where other hip-hop practitioners such as Axcent and Projekt sometimes congregate.

Heads of State include MC mdusu and DJ damesa, whose 2006 album *Sounds from Our Town* features a spectacular photo of Hobart harbour and CBD, reproduced on front, back and inside covers as well as on the CD itself, and contains a key track 'True South Side', with its downbeat jazz guitar riff, drums and sax breaks, and a chorus which goes 'we're hijacking this ride/ bringing you the flavours which you haven't yet tried/ and now we can't be denied/ if you're talking hip-hop Hobart is the true South Side'. Mdusu goes on to proclaim the duo's grounding in record collecting: 'we're South Side warriors/ isolation breeds leaders not followers/we demolish the shit and make our names eponymous/our knowledge isn't stuff you can learn in colleges/but rather in foraging in record bins to borrow shit'. The album's instrumental title track begins with atmospheric city sounds and segues into a gently melodic jazz guitar and drums, which somehow manage to evoke the Hobart cityscape and port of the CD cover. A hidden track follows, relating a caricatured ocker anecdote about a bashing in the city mall. Elsewhere mdusu boasts he is the 'Mouth for the South': 'who's always there to represent, who's down with MC elements, who makes the beats for all the rappers, and who's in here to make it happen'. Generally his style is relatively mellow and anecdotal, while dameza maintains a pleasant, loping, low-key jazz-scratch beat. It's an album which deserves to be heard outside the confines of Tasmania, and an important representation of place in the spirit of hip-hop everywhere.

Oratoric and Paddles have so far released an EP *Most Days* (2006) with three vocal tracks and five very impressively dark-sounding instrumentals. The title track is about the downbeat flow of everyday life in Hobart - 'Most days you'll see me catching the bus' - and the role of hip-hop in ensuring 'tension's relieved'. The title of the melancholic 'A Dark Wind' comes from a spooky sample describing a driverless car on fire and mass suicides in the sewers first used by Montreal-based Israeli minimalist avant-rock collective Godspeed You Black Emperor! and ruminates on the gloomier, suicidal side of Australian school and political life and the dilemma of being 'out of sight like the Loch Ness monster'. 'The Selfish Lowlife' is a more upbeat evocation of life below the poverty line and the depressing aspects of life in 'Tasmania, [where] it's cold in the winter'. The CD cover shows Oratoric and Paddles sitting on a bench on a beach dressed in hoodies - Oratoric holds a microphone, Paddles holds a cheap portable battery record player and a pile of records sits between them. It is a 'Paraletic Poets Production' and the liner notes conclude 'Please support us. Burn this shit' - the epitome of DIY.

Low-key production and sometimes monotonous instrumental beats such as a cheap casio feature on Mynse's debut EP, the unfortunately named *The Mynstral Cycle*, with its down-beat word play drawing in a few unnecessary expletives along the way. On 'Spend a Little Time' Mynstral admits 'I'm just getting started like first season Sopranos/got the crowd goin' nuts, like I'm handing out pistachios/and from those facts, I'm simply just a stubborn man/shotgunnin' cans comparing notes with mates like Rumn and/I

find my peace in choppin' beats until I've got bloody hands/and by the end of this release you'll see my cunning plan'. Well, not exactly, but Mynse has an unforced style of delivery which incorporates some sometimes cheesy-sounding background vocal and brass effects in what he describes as 'light headed' hip-hop. The EP was mastered by beats producer Ren Rizzolo, also known as Crytearia, who has produced a couple of his own albums and brings a cosmopolitan approach to Hobart hip-hop. Of Italian extraction, Rizzolo is majoring in French at the University of Tasmania, and fifty percent of what he listens to is Italian hip-hop, especially the output of Vibra Records in Verona. Ren has family in Bassano di Grappa in the Veneto region, and was an exchange student for ten months in Mantova, so in a sense he is rediscovering his Italian background through hip-hop. 'There's a producer/ DJ called DJ Shocca from Verona, and he put out an album that was sort of basically all his beats and different groups and MCs around Italy. And that inspired me heaps ... I hadn't heard anything quite that good come out of Italy'. The album is called *60 HZ*, and after Ren ordered the vinyl version off the Vibra website, it was delivered in a pizza box.

Ren's first encounters with hip-hop mirrors that of many other hip-hop artists in other parts of Australia; after getting into the Beastie Boys through his older brothers in grade six, he hooked up with an MC called Caddy in grade seven who was into A Tribe called Quest, started rapping and then moved to producing beats. He acquired a record player and started collecting second hand records which he bought for 50 cents from the Tip Shop in South Hobart and the Resource Centre in Hobart's city centre, which has scavenging rights from the city dump and sells all manner of wondrous recycled detritus such as old sepia post-cards, abandoned diaries, moulding matchboxes and dysfunctional radios. Starting off with Disney records and anything that was 'quirky and different', Ren gradually became more discriminating: 'over time you grow that taste for stuff to sample, you can sort of look at a record and say "that's going to be crap"'. He acquired the computer program Acid and 'started from scratch' looping samples: 'I didn't have anyone telling me how to do anything, I just eventually worked it out after listening to some recorded hip-hop and just with continuous messing around with sounds and stuff, I got the hang of it'. He moved on from Acid in 2004, after self-producing his first album *Create* in 2003, but never managed to record anything with Caddy, who is now part of a crew called Secluded Minds, whom Ren sent some beats earlier this year. In August Crytearia and his current MC Tempest did a gig with Secluded Minds at the Art factory in Hobart.

One of the problems with the emerging hip-hop scene in Tasmania is clearly its isolation and lack of mentors; as Ren recalls a 'temporary little breakdancing scene' emerged at the university gym in 2001 when some Japanese exchange students started training up some of the locals, but it died out when they went back to Japan. Morganics' public lecture-performance 'Hip-hop is my passport' in the University of Tasmania Senses of Place series in April 2006, which stated 'Hip-hop is a global phenomenon that gives voice and a sense of place to people around the globe from Rio De Janeiro to Manchester, Tokyo, New York, outback Australia and Hobart' is still talked about. There are a couple of graffiti enclaves in Hobart, one in the car park next to the cathedral, the other in an alleyway behind Sportsgirl in the City centre, with both walls displaying a lot of wit and writing wisdom reminiscent of the huge stencil graffiti scene in Melbourne. There are also a few stencil graffiti around Salamanca square, which used to be the scene of underage hip-hop gigs in 2002, because as Rizzolo says, 'most of the people that were making hip-hop then were under age... And then this one time this bogan guy decided to chuck a brick through the toilet, and after that, no venue anywhere would book hip-hop.' The current scene has managed to overcome this circumspection from publicans and venue managers and now hip-hop gigs are held fairly regularly, often with local groups and artist supporting touring Australian groups such as the Obese label Block Party in August 2007, Music versus Physics, whom Ren and Tempest supported in 2006, Macromantics and Astronomy Class. Crytearia and Tempest supported Curse ov Dialect at the Republic bar earlier this year, courtesy of now Melbourne-based Uber Lingua DJ and SBS radio DJ Moses Iten, who lived in Hobart for a number of years in the early 2000s and helped to foster a hip-hop scene. But like Iten and Hobart hip-hoppers 3to2, who formed at Burnie College in 2000 and later got into the top 20 of Triple J's Tasmanian Unearthed project, moving to Melbourne often becomes a necessity in terms of finding more infrastruc-

ture, more work, and a bigger scene, although 3 to 2 still regularly return to perform in Tasmania, playing the Falls festival in 2006.

Crytearia accepts the fact that he will probably inevitably move to Melbourne, but for the moment he's quite happy to be based in Hobart and do his beat production work on the internet: "There's a lot of individuality, and people wanting to be slightly different from the next person ... and a lot of that expression of people wanting to get away ... Everyone's always been pretty independent, as far as anything in Hobart goes. I like it here. I like the fact that I'm from Hobart and Tasmania, but I'm not going to put on a track and say "Hobart, Hobart, Hobart", that kind of thing. I feel that it's a universal music, so I don't want it to be pigeonholed. I want someone to listen to it and say "Hey, this is great instrumental hip-hop", I don't want them to say "Oh, this is Hobart hip-hop". The cover of Ren's most recent CD, *Landscapes*, which has already been released a single with the same title, is a photomontage with Mt. Wellington in the centre of a number of other mountainous landscapes from Peru and elsewhere. 'I guess I'm interested in exploring my heritage and that sort of thing. There is a bunch of Italian things happening on this CD, some samples of when I was in Italy that I recorded of my friends – a lot of the inspiration is from being there. There's a track "Brick Walls" that has drums I recorded – my host brother is a drummer – practising under a church.'

Ren also got a lot of inspiration from Melbourne hip-hop scene. Reason played a track on Triple J from Create – which he now virtually disowns as apprentice stuff – and feels an affinity with 'the Melbourne underground scene – Jase and Prowla and Brad Strut and those guys I was really inspired by, as well as stuff like Bias B. and Brothers Stoney. And definitely production-wise, people like Plutonic Lab. There are so many great artists here. Pasobionic – I really like his beats'. But he has little time for overt expressions of Australian identity in local hip-hop: 'I probably used to be one of the people saying "No, you can't rap in an American accent". I still don't like hearing an Australian putting on an American accent, like Weapon X. But on the other hand, when I hear people like the Lyrical Commission dudes just put on the Australian accent that pisses me off more, almost, than an American accent. That just sounds terrible. I'd prefer just a natural accent, that's all you need. A lot of whatever I hear coming out lately, it's all just a bit repetitious, it's all like beer and barbecue rap. And I think that's kind of passed on ten odd years ago, but people are still doing it because they think that's what's going to get them played on radio or whatever'.

The instrumental hip-hop of Crytearia, Paddles and others aside, there seems to be a good deal of white Anglo male celebration of Cascade drinking in the Hobart hip-hop scene, and few if any female MCs in sight. Nonetheless most Tasmanian MCs I've heard manage to avoid stereotypical ockerisms and overtly masculine behaviour and are producing beats and rhymes which deserve more attention. One distinctively different MC is Creator, aka Alfred Cauker, a Somalian-born body builder whose track 'Music in French' appeared on the 2003 SBS Radio compilation *Sonic Allsorts*, a collection of tracks by Australian artists in languages other than English, which I reviewed in the January 2005 issue of *Music Forum*. I didn't manage to track down Creator, but I did meet up with film clip producer James Newitt, who directed the video clip of the same song, renamed 'Je t'aime', which features Cauker dancing, doing breakdance moves and walking jauntily around the streets of central Hobart, rapping in French with rhymes addressed to a 'mademoiselle'. It's an oddly 'exotic' take on Hobart hip-hop which suggests that as with artists like Zulya and Rektango, there may be significant elements of world music in the Tasmanian music scene.