

LOCAL NOISE

Indigensing hip-hop: an Australian migrant youth culture

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Summary:

“...far from representing the loss of Australian national identity in the face of global capitalism, Australian hip-hop artists are engaged in the project of attempting to build a multicultural national identity in place of a racist monocultural model that is now gaining strength in Australian national politics.”

- Kurt Iveson.

Published in Melissa Butcher and Mandy Thomas' (eds) *Ingenious: emerging youth cultures in urban Australia*, this essay discusses, from a Sydney perspective, the history of hip-hop's localisation in an Australian context. In particular, the essay looks at ways in which ethnic and migrant youth have used its naturally syncretic form to express a hybrid sense of self and place.

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.

*208 years ago, immigration started on this land, us black
fellas couldn't understand about the invasion of the land
when they tried to eliminate my people but I still don't
discriminate
People have been migrating from all over the world but it's
intimidating, to some that see it as a threat to their
authority, they wanna snub their noses at minorities
all the way from the east coast to the west coast. Aboriginal
people are the hosts
Every single day is a test, ASALAMUALAKUM to the South
West, people that are ignorant to tolerance, eventually will
Suffer the consequences ...
Multicultural Australia damn, takin
A stand all over the land, will these other people ever
Understand,
We gonna have to try and live together man*

- South West Syndicate (BIG Naz and Brotha Black), 'Definition of Danger' 1996

Hip-hop's Multicultural Heritage

It is usually claimed that the 'four elements' of hip-hop (rap or MCing; turntablism or Djing; breakdancing; and graffiti, aerosol art or 'writing') originated in the South Bronx in New York in the early 1970s. Jamaican-American Kool DJ Herc and others began holding street parties with turntables and break dancers, and MCs started rapping over the breakbeats played on the turntables. Kool Herc was effectively recreating the sound systems made famous in his native Jamaica by dub-reggae producers like King Tubby, Lee 'Scratch' Perry, Sir Coxsone and Prince Buster, complete with DJs such as Duke Reid, U Roy, King Stitt, Count Machouki and Yellowman 'toasting' – talking over the instrumental dubplates the DJs played, initiating an early form of rapping (Hebdige 1987, p. 82ff, Toop 1991, p.89).

Breakdancing (or breaking) was derived from the Brazilian capoeira war dance, as well as Puerto Rican and other Latin American dance steps and the Kung Fu moves of Hong Kong stars like Bruce Lee, and a lot of the early break dance crews (also known as b-boys and b-girls) like Rock Steady Crew were predominantly Puerto Rican, as were some of the first New York graffiti artists like Futura 2000. According to early hip-hop protagonists like Africa Bambaataa, there were also quite a few 'white kids' at the early block parties too, as well as European-Americans, Asian-Americans and Filipino Americans. By the early 1990s, as David Toop has noted, 'there were Samoan, Cuban, Mexican, Korean, Haitian, Dominican, Jamaican, Vietnamese, Puerto Rican, Ecuadorian, Chinese, Indian, and British rappers in America ... All of the Utopian metaphors used to describe the multi-racial character of America – from melting pot to gorgeous mosaic – were being outflanked by developments that nobody quite understood' (1991, p.187). This means that hip-hop's origins were multicultural, rather than the expression of a black African-American monoculture from the urban ghettos of the USA which many African-American

commentators claim (for example, Rose 1994, Potter 1995).

This hybrid, multiethnic identity of hip-hop made the process of its adoption, adaptation and appropriation into other parts of the world outside the USA, where hip-hop advocates' claims to an essentially (or essentialist) 'black' identity were not so pressing, a relatively smooth process. Rap and hip-hop have often been further hybridised and combined with local dialects and slang idioms, musical forms and dance moves, especially in Europe, and increasingly in Japan, Korea and other parts of Asia. Rap's multicultural origins are frequently magnified and amplified in other parts of the world. In France, the 'second kingdom' of hip-hop, there is a high proportion of immigrant rappers from West African, North African, Arab and Mediterranean origins based in the banlieues (outer suburbs of Paris and Marseilles). Landmarks in Arab-French hip-hop, for example, include the female rapper Siria Khan dropping a track in 1992 called 'La main di Fatma' on the compilation *Rapattitude 2*, and the Algerian-French rapper Yazid releasing an album in 1996 entitled *Je suis l'Arabe*, which celebrated his Islamic heritage and attacked racism.

Bouziane Daoudi has estimated that there are more than 60 hip-hop groups in Oran, and about 100 in Algiers, 'turning Algeria into the rap leader of Arab nations and probably the entire Muslim world despite a meagre musical output', and linguistically blending French, English and both literary and spoken Arabic, sometimes in the same sentence (2000, p.34-35). In Germany the 1995 hip-hop compilation *Cartel*, featuring predominantly Turkish language rap crews Karaken (who also used samples from Turkish arabesque and Pop Muzik), Da Crime Posse and Erci C., sold more than 300,000 copies in Turkey, but only 20,000 copies in Germany, and signalled the emergence of a Turkish-German migrant rap scene, which became known as 'Oriental Hip-hop' (Elflein 1998, p.262). In Germany there is a significant proportion of Turkish, Croatian and other 'guest worker' migrant rappers, like the group Advanced Chemistry, which features MCs and DJs from Italian, Ethiopian and Turkish immigrant backgrounds. This group's 1992 track 'Fremd im eigenen Land' ('Foreign in my own country') exposed the number of overt racist attacks in Germany at the time and also attacked more implicit forms of racism. In Australia, too, there are rappers and hip-hop artists from Lebanese, Turkish, Pacific Islander, Italian, Chilean and Filipino immigrant backgrounds, as well as Aboriginal artists such as Brotha Black, MCWire, Native Rhyme Syndicate and others. This indigenous and multicultural diasporic 'flow' of rap hip-hop culture suggests it is a form that can be adopted and adapted to express the concerns of ethnic minorities everywhere.

Western Sydney Hip-hop: Up from Underground

There has been a continuing lack of acceptance of hip-hop in Australian mainstream culture, which perceives rap music and breakdancing as belonging to a violent, African-American-based youth subculture, and sees graffiti as a form of vandalism that needs to be eliminated from Australian cities. This phobia about hip-hop parallels manifestations of xenophobia towards non-Anglo migrant and Aboriginal youth, many of whom have embraced hip-hop as a lifestyle with which they can identify as outsider minorities. Unlike the predominantly Anglo 'Oz rock', which by and large continues to espouse the more socially acceptable, normative white Australian macho values of the pub, sports and the backyard barbecue, hip-hop is seen as an outlaw culture that threatens mainstream values. As Ian Shedden noted in a feature article on Australian hip-hop, it has largely existed

only in the margins of youth culture and [is] treated by many local connoisseurs with disdain. A kind of 'if it's not American, it can't be good' mentality, combined with the underground aesthetic of many local practitioners, has kept Aussie hip-hop a well-maintained secret for nearly 20 years (2001, p.R18).

But, he adds, 'That could soon change', citing the popularity of 'The Barbecue Song', which describes a comically nightmarish hip-hop version of this Australian institution, by female MC Thorn and Italian-Australian rapper Mass MC, who in 2000 was invited to Italy for a concert featuring Italian diasporic

rappers from around the world. Shedden also cites the support given to local hip-hop by the ABC's national youth broadcast network Triple J, which started an Australian hip-hop show late on Friday nights in January 2001 and sponsored a national tour by three local hip-hop acts, Fijian-Australian MC Trey, Brisbane-based Shin Ki Row and former Adelaide crew Reference Point. He also indicates the proliferation of local hip-hop crews as featured on compilations such as *Culture of Kings*, produced in Adelaide (which in August 2002 spawned a second, double CD compilation), and a tendency for more recent hip-hop outfits to combine their MCing and DJing skills with live hardcore rock to make their sound more accessible to a wide band of Australian youth.

The success of Melbourne group 1200 Techniques, who signed to the major label Sony Music and released a successful album, *Choose One* and an award-winning video, 'Karma' in 2002, indicates that this more commercialised and syncretised rap formula is reaping its rewards. Other groups who have reaped success using a similar combination of funk, rock and hip-hop include fellow Melburnians The Avalanches, who were very successful in both the UK and Australia in 2001 with their sample-heavy album (courtesy of the brilliant DJ Dexter) *Since I Left You*, and Brisbane-based Resin Dogs. 1200 Techniques consist of two macho, bearded Italian-Australian brothers, DJ Peril and Chemstar, who are prone to wearing Mafioso-style pin-stripe suits and sunglasses, and a third member, Nfamas. They combine hardcore rock, samples and funk with hip-hop. They don't use much Italian language or otherwise draw on their heritage in their raps (one of their tracks is entitled 'Andiamo (Spagetti Outro)' which manages to mis-spell 'spaghetti'). But by combining the turntable skills of DJ Peril with hardcore rap and nu-metal rock they are reaching a wider audience than most Australian hip-hop crews. They also don't refer much to their Australian identity: *Choose One* features only one track with 'Aussie' references, 'Upsidedownunder', with guest American-accented MC Z-No-Zeen, and offers a rather clichéd US and/or European perspective on Australia. Nfamas has described the problematic relation of Australian hip-hop to US hip-hop as follows:

Australian hip-hop is in its adolescent state. It has its parents, which I guess would be New York hip-hop. You have some kids that are really good children to the parents. They do everything straight up Americanised, even down to the accents. Then there are the really rebellious children who are like 'I don't like that Yankee crap', and so you have this broad range of musical forms. I guess we fit in between those forms. We are the half-behaved kids of American hip-hop (cited in Stone 2002, p.11).

The 'adolescent good children' Nfamas refers to in fact go back at least as far as 1988, when the first compilation of Australian hip-hop, *Down Under By Law*, was released by Virgin Records. This album made no impact on the Australian pop music charts and did not sell in any significant quantities, but provided evidence of a fledgling hip-hop scene still predominantly infatuated by the violent, macho posturings of African-American 'gangsta' rap. But it also featured two female components, Sharline, whose 'Hardcore Love' was in the style of US female rappers like Queen Latifah, M.C.Lyte and Yo Yo, and Fly Girl 3, who took their name from a track by Queen Latifah, and 'dissed' macho behaviour. Most of the other groups on the album adopted the trappings of US hip-hop, including, in some cases, its boasting and a bragging, macho attitudes towards women, and a reiteration of gun rhetoric. 'T'(the opening track, by the Westside Posse, who, together with some of the other features artists, represented a strong, emerging multicultural hip-hop scene based in Sydney's Western suburbs, is entitled 'Pull the Trigger', but their use of the term 'westside' seems to owe as much to US hip-hop parlance referring to gang-related activities in California, or the westside of Chicago and other US cities, as it does to Sydney's west.).

Despite some Australian accents, few local cultural references could be heard on *Down Under by Law*, and the American parlance and inflections of US hip-hop models were adopted by most of the groups, who ended up sounding like 'poor relations' of their US counterparts. Minimal production facilities also gave the album a rather amateurish feel, but it did represent an emerging scene capable of developing distinctive local tendencies with further encouragement. This encouragement was not provided, as Virgin quickly distanced itself from the project, and most of the groups subsequently disbanded.

Down Under by Law has been described by Sydney hip-hop luminary Blaze, who is of Finnish extraction, as ‘very poor’ and ‘a tub of lard’, although he claims ‘Pull the Trigger’ was ‘the closest to what we wanted’. Blaze also notes that the first ‘true hip-hop’ release in Australia was also in 1988 by Just Us, a duo consisting of Maltese-Australian DJ Case and Mentor, who released an independently-pressed single entitled ‘Combined Talent/My Destiny’, which Blaze states was ‘very indicative of the western suburbs in Sydney at that time.’¹ Including Just Us’s debut and their follow-up single ‘Stinging in the Rain’ in the early 1990s in his defining ‘fifteen moments in Sydney hip-hop’, noted Sydney hip-hop radio DJ, producer and promoter Mark Pollard commented: ‘Just Us and their affiliates were rough, rugged and raw, and pushed an individual Australian identity through their music’. (2002, p.124)

After spending two years in Malta, Case reformed Just Us and later the Funnelweb Crew, a loose hip-hop collective based in the outer western suburbs of Sydney. The singularity of Australian speech patterns, social practices and cultural forms of expression, along with the wide variety of ethnic origins – from Chinese to Pacific Islander, Lebanese, South American, Greek and Italian – of many young Australians attracted to hip-hop culture is still unmistakable. And since the social realities of life in the urban ghettos of the USA are vastly different from the relative comfort and affluence of Australia, the fetishised American artefacts of hip-hop culture tend to take on a strong imaginary quality.

Ian Maxwell has noted that the two rap albums by Australian artists that had any noticeable impact on the local music scene in the mid-1990s both contain references to Australian hip-hop’s ‘underground’ status in their titles. Sound Unlimited’s *A Postcard from the Edge of the Under-side* was released by Columbia/Sony in 1992 – for ten years the only Australian rap album to feature on a major recording label – and Def Wish Cast’s *Knights of the Underground Table*, was released on the group’s own independent Random Records in 1993.² It is also no coincidence that both groups also originated in Sydney’s western suburbs, an area traditionally regarded as working class, underprivileged and crime-ridden, with a large proportion of immigrant inhabitants, and deprived of many of the social and cultural amenities enjoyed by the inner and northern suburbs of the city. As Diane Powell has stated in *Out West*, her book about the Australian mass media’s ‘demonisation’ of Sydney’s western Suburbs, the area is comparable to a ghetto:

Ghettos do not exist in discourse about Australian cities. Yet most Australian cities contain areas that are segregated along class, economic, cultural and ethnic lines. Ghetto is not an appropriate word for these low density suburban, rather than high density inner-urban, areas. However, in Australian culture, to live in some suburbs is to suffer an equivalent stigma to that borne by people living in the ghettos of Europe or America (1994, p. xiv).

The western suburbs are generally perceived as the geographical roots of hip-hop culture in Sydney, partly due to the strong concentration there of non-Anglo migrant Australian communities from Greek, Italian, Lebanese, Chinese and Vietnamese backgrounds. Youth were attracted by the racially oppositional features of African-American hip-hop and adopted its signs and forms as markers of their own otherness. Crime, violence and drug dealing attributed to ‘ethnic’ gangs has fuelled mass media stories about ghetto-styled street wars and migrant criminal gang subcultures linked to hip-hop, which are often highly exaggerated. In their song ‘Tales from the Westside’, Sound Unlimited reconstructs a sometimes violent history of the Sydney hip-hop scene in the Western Suburbs, locating its origins in the suburb of Burwood in 1983.

Let’s get back I’ll start at Burwood park hip-hop breakin’ after dark many crews would join the fray travel from east to west upon the train some to break some to inflict pain.

This breakdance scene, initially influenced by Malcolm McLaren’s video *Buffalo Gals*, echoes similar ‘myths of origin’ of hip-hop scenes in a number of countries throughout the world.

After Sound Unlimited visited the USA and saw some of its ghettos first-hand, the group realised they could never emulate the conditions of African-American hip-hop artists, and that it was foolish to try. They set about creating a multicultural Australian form of hip-hop that also acknowledged the importance of

Aboriginal reconciliation. Sound Unlimited comprised two rappers of Chilean and Filipino extraction, Rosano 'El Assassin' Martinez and his sister, Tina Martinez (T-Na), along with Kode Blue, an Anglo-Australian, and Vlad DJ BTL, of Russian extraction. Initially called Sound Unlimited Posse, adopting the Jamaican term for a collective or community that a number of US hip-hop groups had used (and which had in turn been adopted from the cowboy 'posses' of US Western films), they later mutated into a more commercial pop-funk outfit called Renegade Funktrain after collaborating with the US-based Antunes brothers, associated with the pop group New Kids on the Block. This meant their credibility dropped to an all-time low in the Sydney hip-hop scene, where 'keepin' it real' and authentic street credibility are at a premium.

In the early 1990s a number of other rappers built on the mythology of the 'Westside' as the source of Sydney hip-hop, including Bankstown residents 046, whose name is based on their post code, and whose debut album *L.I.F.E.* was produced by prominent Sydney DJ Vame. Another group who ironically celebrated their Anglo-Australian 'westie' origins, the White Boys, released an album called Westside. It portrayed the 'gangsta' posturings of a hoodlum living up to his stereotypical reputation in 'Another Westside Story', which has as its refrain 'You can run but you can't hide from the Westside'. The album also included 'The Last Train Home' (Westside Intro), an American-accented dramatisation of a paranoid train trip to Mount Druitt on the North Sydney train line, but the group was nonetheless considered 'wack' (gauche) by most of the (by now predominantly inner city) hardcore Sydney hip-hop scene. The more satirical Fathom sample the line 'There's a feeling I get when I look to the West' from Led Zeppelin's 'Stairway to Heaven' to locate their geographical origins on their track 'Westerly Winds' on their 1998 album, *The Beats from 20,000 Fathoms*.

Miguel D'Souza, a prominent advocate of Australian hip-hop until 1998 in weekly street paper *3D* and his 2SER radio program *The Mothership Connection*, has claimed that Paul Fenech's 1998 hip-hop documentary *Basic Equipment* managed to 'document what has happened to hip-hop culture in the West, and re-emphasise the point that resistance still is at the core of Western suburbs hip-hop'. D'Souza also argued that Sydney hip-hop had become gentrified in the mid-1990s and moved away from its Western suburbs origins to an inner-city base:

Hip-hop has made the move from being a culture and underground movement that expressed Western Suburbs' youth's resistance to the negative attitudes to them, their culture, their suburbs and their lives through the adoption of a culture and music so fundamentally opposed to good, middle class values. It has moved to being a culture adopted by hip university students, those with a background in the performance arts, the academy and, most of all, the inner city. It isn't hip-hop any more. (D'Souza 1998, p.2)

The most prominent focal points of this inner-city base are the Next Level record shop in Liverpool Street (formerly the Lounge Room in Pitt St.), Slingshot Concepts in Surry Hills, and the 2SER radio program *The Mothership Connection* in Broadway. Local rap releases were regularly reviewed in the column 'Funky Wizdom' written by D'Souza in *3D*, until 1998, and then by former UTS student Duncan McDuie in *Revolver* magazine until 2002, when he left to work with asylum seekers.

But this does not mean that Westside hip-hop has disappeared. Events like 'Hip-hop for Palestine', held by members of Sydney's Lebanese community in Granville (May 1998) featured a fiery performance by the Lebanese and Aboriginal rappers South West Syndicate and graffiti by Ser Reck, formerly of Def Wish Cast. Proof of a strong and resilient Western Sydney-based hip-hop culture can be seen in the involvement of three MCs, Trey, Maya Jupiter and Wire, in a western Sydney-based project funded by the Australia Council and the NSW Ministry for the Arts. The three MCs travelled to London to perform and participate in community music programs, and to set up SWITCH with Parramatta City Council, a project that aims to build a multimedia and digital arts centre in western Sydney for local artists.

Trey is the leading female MC in Australia. Her debut CD, *Daily Affirmations*, was released in 2000 on the

Mother Tongues label, set up by a Sydney-based collective of women hip-hop artists (Epaminondas 1999). Her track 'Feline Forces', about the influence of both US and Australian women MCs on her music, was one of only three English-language tracks on Universal Music and Hip-O's 2000 compilation *The Best of International Hip-hop*. High profile (and resolutely Anglophonic) *New York Village Voice* rock critic Robert Christgau commented: 'when Fijian-Australian Trey comes on, it's not her modest boast that'll perk you up, or even her dulcet female tones, it's her English per se' (Christgau 2002).

Maya Jupiter is of mixed Turkish and Mexican descent, and her debut release was the 'oestrogen-injected' track 'Never Say Never' on the 2000 all-female hip-hop compilation *First Words*. Maya's rhymes are backed by mariachi music and the energy and vibrancy of her hip movements and smooth-flowing raps in performance are a direct expression of her mixed background. MC Wire is Aboriginal, and raps about the plight of being an urban blackfella. All three have been involved in working with underprivileged youth in Western Sydney, and run workshops that include teaching rapping, freestyling and breakdancing, and generally raise the profile of hip-hop as a positive expression of youth culture in the community.

Another non-Anglo Western Sydney hip-hop artist who is similarly active in the community in western Sydney is Khaled Sabsabi, also known as Peacefender, an Arab-Australian community outreach worker in Liverpool who runs hip-hop workshops and is also an MC. In 2000 he co-ordinated the 2168 NESB Community Outreach Hip-hop Project with disadvantaged young people in the Green Valley area of western Sydney, and he performed at the Sydney Opera House as part of the Carnivale Global Sound Series in 2001. Influenced by the militant pre-hip-hop African-American rap group The Last Poets, Sabsabi describes his lyrics as dealing with 'political things happening here in western Sydney, say, based in the media hype about the young Arabic people here. We're not all gangsters, you know, like the media make out' (Crowshaw 2001).

Also Arab-Australian is Sleek the Elite, a flamboyant and witty rapper and freestyler from a Lebanese background, who raps about Australian racism, political life, capitalism, sexual encounters, solidarity with Aborigines and his Lebanese-Australian background. After releasing his debut album *Sleekism*, the 1997, he went on to star in SBS's popular 'wog' comedy show *Fat Pizza*, directed by and starring Paul Fenech, which takes 'wog' comedy to new extremes of gross bad taste and political incorrectness. Fenech had earlier directed *Basic Equipment*, in which Sleek stated:

I could relate to the same sort of oppression [as African-American hip-hoppers], like being called a wog at school, being the minority, being the underdog, having to come up all the time, having to fight ... just on a smaller level, fighting for your rights every day ... When I rap, I talk about being a wog, having wog parents, growing up, the shit we go through in Sydney, the coppers, the racism, the government, the partying, the good, the bad, the partying, everything ... (Fenech 1998)

Although it's unfortunate that Sleek makes references to 'ho's' – one positive aspect of Australian hip-hop is that much of it is free of the misogynist and homophobic posturings of US gangsta rap – the track 'Child of the Cedar' on *Sleekism* includes references to Sleek's own Lebanese background and Aboriginal land rights, and adds Middle Eastern musical inflections to the hip-hop beats, mixed by DJ Soup.

Hip-hop, Opera and Foreign Languages

Hip-hop's appeal to Australian youth of culturally diverse backgrounds as a vehicle for expressing their otherness within Australian culture has also been manifested in the use of languages other than English, particularly Spanish. It is arguable that the more 'musical' Romance languages such as Italian, Spanish and French are much more suitable languages than English for the dense, multiple rhymes and 'flows' of rap. In strictly musicological terms, rap could be traced back to recitativo in 17th-century Italian opera, the spoken word parts of opera which were recited over a musical background, and which often involved arguments or debates between characters in the opera. A 1998 album called *The Rhapsody Overture* combines

predominantly Italian operatic arias with raps by African-American MCs like L.L.Cool J, Onyx, Redman, and the results are not as disjunctive and discordant as might be supposed. It also provided the inspiration for a chart-topping song, 'Laikas' (Time), in Lithuania, a cross-generation collaboration between rapper Lukas and the famous opera singer Virgilijus Noreika, which they performed live to more than 10,000 people on New Year's Eve in 1998 (Lull 2000). One local attempt to combine rap and operatic overtones high culture was 'Hip-hopera', an Australia Council-funded community project run in 1996 by Death Defying Theatre with young NESB people in the western Suburbs of Sydney. This managed to unearth a number of new teenage and pre-teen rap posses, as well as two more durable posses, MetaBass'n'Breath and most notably South West Syndicate, whose work was showcased on an album entitled Danger. The result was then toured around schools and community centres in Sydney's Western Suburbs.

Spanish has crept into a number of examples of Sydney hip-hop. Maya Jupiter drops Spanish phrases into her raps, and Brethren's 1996 self-titled mini-album includes a track in Spanish, based on the Chilean saying 'pass me your spoon and I'll return it full', meaning 'I'll tell you about my experiences'. This track, which received some airplay on Triple J, contains the line 'Que passa Gough Whitlam, Ciao Pinochet', which sums up the experience of migrating from Chile to Australia. (Brethren also incorporated some Spanish rap in their 1998 single 'Slingshot', included on *Homebrewz 2*). A more recent example is the collective Ila Familia, who were formed in 1998 after freestyling on stage at the Uruguayan Festival in Sydney, and who also run the Latin community TV show *Romperemos* on Channel 31. Influenced by the Paris-based Cuban hip-hop crew Orishas, they describe their sound as 'predominantly Latino hip-hop with many different styles of Latin music such as salsa, son, samba and candombe (so far) fused with different types of hip-hop and r&b ... Our inspiration comes from our proud heritage both as Hispanics and as Australians (Anon. 2002, p.72).

The development of Spanish language hip-hop is a long story, but it was probably generated by Los Angeles-based Chicano rapper Kid Frost, who began rapping in Calo, a form of Spanglish used by Latino prisoners in the USA. In 1990 he released the epoch-making album *Hispanic Causing Panic*, featuring two tracks in Spanish, 'Yo Estuvo' and the hit single 'La Raza' (The Race). Frost later jammed with Italian rappers in Rome, encouraging them to start rapping in their own language and dialects, and he provided a model for Calo, a Brazilian rapper who raps in Portuguese, and who learned his skills from listening to Kid Frost's albums over and over again.

The eight-piece Sydney crew MetaBass'n'Breath, who included two Jewish-American rappers, Baba and Elf Transporter and Austrian-born DJ Nick Toth, who produced beats that incorporated traditional music from Australia, Asia and South America. They also included actor, MC and breakdancer Morganics, who has done extensive workshops with disadvantaged Aboriginal youth in Darwin and Alice Springs – featured in the 2000 ABC documentary *Desert Rap* – as well as in Wilcannia, Redfern and rural New South Wales. In 2002 Morganics received a special commendation in the NSW Parliament Law and Justice Awards for his hip-hop and performance workshops in rural and regional NSW. MetaBass released a notable album of world music-inflected hip-hop, *Seek*, in 1997, that included two tracks in Spanish – evidence that Sydney rappers were looking at global rap influences rather than exclusively US ones. One of their tracks, 'Dialogue', as Iveson has indicated, addresses multiculturalism and the 'connections and common ground between cultures and people. They emphasise that these connections require the acceptance of diversity on more than a surface level' (Iveson 1997, p.47). MetaBass's tours of the USA in 1997 and 1998 with their highly-charged, energetic and distinctive public performances earned them a write-up in *Billboard* in 1999 in the first-ever acknowledgment of Australian hip-hop in that US music industry bible. Their manager Trent Roden stated 'Our energy is Australian, but the sound is international ... We've always kept an eye on the global market (Eliezer 1999, p.46).' They gained another mention in US hip-hop history when one of their albums was featured among a pile of cassette tapes on the container insert of the CD *The Private Press* (2002) by acclaimed US artist DJ Shadow.

Indigenising Hip-hop in Australia

There is also strong evidence of a Pacific Island diaspora in Australian hip-hop in the debut album by Koolism, a hip-hop duo from Canberra, which includes a track called 'Juss a Brown Fellow'. In it, Tongan rapper Hau maps out the diaspora of what he refers to as 'Australasian rap', following a rhetorical track from Australia to Aotearoa-New Zealand and through the Pacific Islands of Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Tokelau and New Caledonia. An important conjunction of Australasian Pacific Islander hip-hop took place at 'Sons of Samoa', held at Bondi Beach, Australia Day, 2001. This event was headlined by award-winning Auckland-based Samoan rapper King Kapisi and included Trey and Koolism. Later releases by Koolism feature snippets of Tongan language and homage to Hau's Tongan family. Trey expresses similar affinities with Pacific Island culture, notably in a documentary film by Carla Drago entitled *Island Style*, about how four Maori and Pacific Island young people fuse aspects of hip-hop culture with elements of their own indigenous culture.

In *Basic Equipment*, Trey talks about how she is able to relate the four elements of hip-hop to her own Fijian heritage: DJing is like the alali drum in traditional Fijian music; graffiti is like cave painting; MCing is like her grandfather's public speaking around the kava bowl; and breakdancing is like traditional Fijian dances. This indicates the way hip-hop can be indigenised and integrated into Polynesian culture, a feature which the Maori elements of hip-hoppers in Aotearoa-New Zealand like Upper Hutt Posse and Dam Native demonstrate through their use of haka dances, karanga (call to ancestors), patere (abusive) chants and other musical elements of Maori culture.

This affirmation of indigenous cultures in Australian hip-hop is sometimes combined with an attack on racism in mainstream Anglo-Australian culture. One track on Trey's self-titled tape, called 'One Nation Party' is dedicated to Pauline Hanson, and in *Basic Equipment* she challenges Hanson to come and witness the multicultural crowds at Australian hip-hop gigs and even to do some rapping. As Iveson has noted:

far from representing the loss of Australian national identity in the face of global capitalism, Australian hip-hop artists are engaged in the project of attempting to build a multicultural national identity in place of a racist monocultural model that is now gaining strength in Australian national politics (1997, p.47).

Another important example of anti-racism is the multicultural group Et-nik Tribe's 1998 EP *Romancing the Racist*. The cover design has a semi-naked woman wearing a Ku Klux Klan hood. Featuring Mass MC, Torcha and Khalil, Et-nik Tribe express their alienation from Anglo-Australian culture, and exhort young people from non-Anglo backgrounds to 'hold your culture like a badge'. They also state the importance of hip-hop in their lives: it is like a 'father', and an important way of expressing other cultures. The refrain of the title track suggests 'Pauline Hanson may need some romancin'. The 'rainbow hip-hop' of the Melbourne-based group Curse ov Dialect is another expression of non-Anglo-identity, featuring input from Japanese, Latino, Aboriginal and Maori MCs.

As D'Souza and Iveson have noted, hip-hop in Australia, as in Germany and elsewhere, represents a 'credible alternative' espoused by youth of non-Anglo background to the 'whiteness' of pre-existing Australian youth cultures and the racism experienced by migrants. In this context, 'Realness ... is defined by the ability to manipulate elements of hip-hop in an expression of place. American accents are jettisoned for Australian, talk of ghettos is replaced with talk of the suburbs' (1999, p.60).

Iveson concludes that hip-hop has provided an important vernacular musical idiom for indigenous Australians and youth of non-Anglo ethnic backgrounds to express their identities:

Young people in this position have been forced to seek out the materials to develop a culture that is relevant to their cross-cultural experiences. In hip-hop, some found a culture which has the means to fight back against the experience of racism, by addressing the segregation and victimisation experienced by people of colour. Rap talks about racism, and other elements of the culture like graffiti and hip-hop style provide the means to make space in

segregated Australian cities for cultural production. The appeal of hip-hop to ethnic and indigenous young people in Australia lies significantly in its valuing of that which isn't white in a white racist society (1997, p.47).

In the process of adopting, adapting and re-appropriating the four elements of hip-hop into a distinctively Australian subcultural artistic and musical form, Australian hip-hoppers have succeeded in redefining Australian identity as a polyglot, multi-ethnic phenomenon that is at the forefront of new expressions of the complex and diverse realities of contemporary Australian life. The fact that Australian hip-hop has proliferated and multiplied despite being largely ignored by the mainstream Australian music industry (at least until recently) is evidence of the strength of this subculture, and its importance in defining and expressing aspects of indigenous and non-Anglo young people's lives ignored or discriminated against by the mass media and Australian mainstream culture.

Footnotes

¹ Blaze (1994) also chronicles a number of other important (and extremely rare) early Australian hip-hop releases by Melbourne-based Park Bench Royals (*One Time Live/I hate Hi-nrg*, 1989), Adelaide-based AKA Brothers (*Coming Out Large/Poetry in Motion/Tall Poppy Syndrome*, 1989), and Melbourne-based Rize & Tarkee (*Let Yourself Be Yourself/Called to Add Mind* 1990) who later become Mama's Funkstikools, and were featured on a global rap compilation, *Planet Rap*, released by US label Tommy Boy in 1993. Adelaide -based Finger Lickin' Good (later Fuglemen) released a 6 track EP, *Illegitimate Sons of the Bastard Funk*, featuring MC Quro and DJ Groove Terminator, in 1993, and a Melbourne compilation by Organised Rhyme Productions featured tracks by Rising not Running, Doo Dayz, and Brudas United as One. The Sydney group Illegal Substance released *Off da back of Da Truck* album in 1994, and Fonke Nomaads and the Urban Poets (later Easybass) were featured on a jazz compilation, *Undertones*. Blaze's own group Noble Savages produced an eight-track cassette album in 1994, and Capital Punishment a six-track tape, produced by DJ Vame. Melbourne woman rapper MC Que produced a six-track tape in 1995. Since 1999, Australian hip-hop groups and recordings have proliferated, and have become almost impossible to quantify. *The Oz Cella*, a CD Rom released in 2001 by Draino, an Melbourne-Adelaide-based rapper, chronicled more than 370 discographies, 90 officially released recordings, and 100 profiles of rap and hip-hop groups and artists in Australia.

² For further accounts of the Anglo-Australian hip-hop crew Def Wish Cast (who reformed in 2002) and Sound Unlimited, see Maxwell, I. 1994a, 'Def Wish cast 'Down Under Comin' Upper': Rapping the westside', Unpublished Paper, International Association for the Study of Popular Music, Southern Cross University, Lismore; — 1994b, 'True to the music: authenticity, articulation and authorship in Sydney hip-hop culture', *Social Semiotics* 4, pp. 117–37; — 1997a, 'Hip-hop aesthetics and the will to culture', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 8, pp. 50–70; — 1997b, 'On the flow – dancefloor grooves, rapping 'freestylee' and the real thing', *Perfect Beat* 3, pp. 15–27; Maxwell, I. & Bambrick, N. 1994c, 'Discourses of culture and nationalism in Sydney hip-hop', *Perfect Beat* 2, 1 July; and Maxwell, I. 2001, 'Sydney stylee: hip-hop down under Comin' up' in *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-hop outside the USA*, ed. T. Mitchell, Wesleyan University Press, Hanover, and Maxwell, I. 2003 (forthcoming) "*Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes*": *Hip-hop Down Under Comin' Upper*, Wesleyan University Press, Hanover.

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