

# LOCAL NOISE

## **Aboriginal Hip-hop: a modern day corroboree**

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by Tony Mitchell

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### **Summary:**

*This is my lyrical healing I can't go and get scarred any more and I can't become a traditional man. I'm a modern day blackfella, this is still Dreamtime for me. Hip-hop is the new clapsticks, hip-hop is the new corroboree.*

- Wire MC.

This paper was given at the Hip-hop meets Academia conference in Chemnitz, Germany, in August 2006 <[http://www.tu-chemnitz.de/phil/medkom/hiphop/en\\_abs\\_mitchell.php](http://www.tu-chemnitz.de/phil/medkom/hiphop/en_abs_mitchell.php)>. It is a longer and more developed version of the essay published in *Meanjin's* 'Blak Times' issue in 2006, and draws on all the Local Noise research and interviews with indigenous hip-hop artists.

### **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.

## Aboriginal Hip-hop: a modern day corroboree

“Here we go - here’s a bit of a history lesson for ya”. We’re backstage at the Manning Bar at Sydney University in November 2005 with Munki Mark, Aboriginal MC, former member of hip-hop collective South West Syndicate. He is waiting to do his sound check for Klub Koori, Sydney’s first indigenous hip-hop showcase, billed as ‘contemporary musical storytelling from an indigenous perspective’. It’s being presented by Koori Radio and the Gadigal Information Service Aboriginal Corporation, and MC’d by stand-up comic and hip-hop fellow traveller Sean Choolburra. Following Mark on the bill will be Ebony Williams, Sydney femcee and Indigenous Music Officer for the Music Managers Forum, Mark’s former SWS cohort BrothaBlack – who later gives him props as ‘the architect of Aboriginal hip-hop’ – and Murri MC and producer Lez Beckett, winner of a 2005 Deadly Award for most promising new talent, with his new crew Cypher Duem. Headliners are the Aboriginal hip-hop buzz group of the moment, Newcastle-based 2005 Deadly Award and 2004 MusicOz award winners, Local Knowledge.

“It all started in Redfern about 23 years ago”, continues Mark, now 38, a fair-skinned Koori – an issue he addresses in his track ‘Shades of Grey’, about being white outside and black inside – his bespectacled, bleached blond appearance giving him something of an unconventional pedagogical air.

*“A few of the boys were into breakdancing. I wasn’t really into it – I was just hanging around a bit there. My mum lives in Bankstown, and a few of us Koori fellas out there would come into Redfern and see what was going on. Breakdancing was a big thing, so finally I started getting into it. And then it went on to graffiti, and we had a bit of a crew in Redfern called Black Connection. Then we moved on into a music sort of thing and we started doing rhyming. So yeah, that’s how it all started.”*

Most of the myths of origin for Sydney hip-hop begin in Burwood Park in 1983, with breakdancing crews like the Westside Posse, later Sound Unlimited, representing a multicultural gathering of the faithful, as they put it in their track ‘Tales from the Westside’: ‘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.’<sup>1</sup> Morganics, Australia’s most ubiquitous MC, beat boxer and breaker, who has been a mentor and producer to many fledgling Aboriginal hip-hop artists all around the country over the past eight years, started breaking in Circular Quay in 1984, later linking up with Lebanese-Australian MC Sleek the Elite on Oxford Street. Mark’s history suggests the indigenous hip-hop scene, often invisible and inaudible in the many debates and oral histories which have taken place over the years in the mainstream media, the music street press and numerous website forums about Australian hip-hop, may have got started well before that. In any case, he was soon approached by youth workers and invited to teach hip-hop skills to disadvantaged kids, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, and has never looked back: “I’ve been running workshops with kids for a long time, up through the desert in the Northern Territory, out in western New South Wales, up through Queensland, in South Australia and WA. And me being someone who also raps in indigenous languages, it’s really good for the kids in the desert to see that you don’t have to be a ‘yo yo’ – an American as I call them – rapping in an American accent. Even if you don’t speak English as your first language you can rap in your native tongue.”

Rap and hip-hop are still perceived as primarily African-American musical forms, and the mainstream manifestations of violent posturing, machismo, misogyny, ostentatious wealth (bling bling), pimping and brutality which are widely disseminated around the world in music videos and on commercial radio stations provide fuel for politicians and pundits alike to blame it for almost anything from the Lebanese-Australian youths rioting in Cronulla in December to the recent demonstrations by Arab and North African youth in France.<sup>2</sup> Peter Costello even blamed it for what he referred to in a speech to the Hillsong Church in 2004 as the ‘moral decline’ of Australian youth. But Aboriginal hip-hop, and the many other forms of what might be called native Australian hip-hop which have been simmering underground over the past two decades demonstrate that the four elements of hip-hop – graffiti, breaking, DJing and

MCing – are often positive, even educational forces which provide important voices and a vehicles of self-expression for disenfranchised and disadvantaged young people from all ethnic backgrounds. In Mark's case, as for some Maori and Samoan MCs in Aotearoa/New Zealand, it has also been a means of retrieving and giving public voice to indigenous languages. Mark has rapped in his grandmother's language, Jardwadjali, the language of the Grampians in Western Victoria, as well as in Arrernte, spoken in Alice Springs (SWS's track 'What A Place' has lyrics in Arrernte), and picked up bits of Wiradjuri, Gamilaraay and Uliraay – “a more western version of Gamilaraay, out Lightning Ridge Way. Also a few other desert languages from the Northern Territory Area.” Some of these languages may be included on his forthcoming EP *Ten Years Too Late* – a title which speaks to how few of the growing number of Aboriginal hip-hop artists around the country have had their work released on CD, apart from hard-to-find compilations and self-produced EPs.

In 1999 Mark and Brotha Black joined forces with Morganics in Desert Rap, a three-week workshop with Aboriginal kids in Alice Springs which was set up by Triple J's Top End correspondent Tony Collins and made into a documentary film broadcast on the ABC, featuring, among other things, a brilliant performance from Swanz, an all-female crew, in a track called 'Brown Skinned Black Woman'.<sup>3</sup> One thing the facilitators insisted on was no American accents; kids were encouraged to find their own voice, their own accent, their own language. This led to a number of other similar 'desert rap'-styled workshops, including Hip-hop Up Top in 2001, which Collins also set up, working with kids in Darwin and Arnhem Land, and sometimes Mark found himself working with kids for whom “English is like their fifth language, so I try to get them to do it in lingo. There's a whole bunch of kids out there who are rapping in lingo, which you've got to love. Some of the elders get me into the communities because they don't like the way the kids are going with the American hip-hop. I go in and show them: 'Nah, this is the way we do it. This is Aboriginal hip-hop, we're not living in LA or New York'”. He illustrates the ludicrousness of Australian MCs rapping in US accents, but also the all-pervasiveness of US hip-hop in Australian music media: “Once I was with Ice T and his crew when they were over here and there was this [local] guy rapping in an American accent and they thought he was taking the piss – they wanted to have a fight with the bloke. We were like 'Nah, it's just that the only thing he's ever heard is American rap, so they rap like Americans'. Yeah, it was a situation to defuse.” He has been defusing similar situations ever since in his quest to get young Aboriginal performers to express their own accent, their own culture and their own language.

In their all too brief section on Aboriginal hip-hop in *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places: Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Australia*, which deals mainly with Morganics' work with young Aboriginal performers, Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson suggest that the 'black transnationalism' of African-American hip-hop, especially those few artists who sought to make connections with Aboriginal communities when they toured Australia,

*was a decisive factor in the development of Aboriginal hip-hop. They quote MC Lez Beckett: “before Australian and Aboriginal hip-hop really took off, we [Aboriginal youth] all followed what the Americans did. It really influenced me because it was a black face on television, and when you are a young fulla growing up in Cunnamulla in central Queensland, it is a pride thing to see another blackfella in a position of power.”<sup>4</sup>*

African-American hip-hop artists Mark has been influenced by include 'old school' crews and MCs like Run DMC, the Sugar Hill Gang and Grandmaster Flash, along with Public Enemy and Ice T, both of which he has met up with in Sydney several times, and Fu Schnickens, “the first guys into speed rapping”. But he reserves a special place for 'conscious' MC Michael Franti of Spearhead and formerly the Disposable Heroes of Hiphocrisy, a fairly regular visitor to Redfern over the past decade, “for showing me you could do instrumental music and rap all in the same minute on stage”. Like Franti, Mark sometimes plays acoustic guitar when he raps, and he points out that a number of other Aboriginal MCs like Lez Beckett, Brotha Black, the Sydney-based 'Abodigital' rapper MC Wire, aka Will Jarratt, a Gumbayngirri descendant from Bowraville, and political femcee Jakalene Extreme (also known as Shazza on the SBS

comedy *Pizza*) do likewise. “More of the Aboriginal hip-hop artists are into playing their instruments, especially didj. Remember with Aboriginal culture, our aunties and uncles have been raised on country music, which is heavily influenced by people like [African American country singer] Charley Pride. All of us have grown up listening to that sort of stuff, from the elders. Country music is still a big thing, you’ve got Uncle Roger Knox and Troy Cassar-Daly out there doing their thing. So we like to pick up a guitar, and it’s good to be able to see Warren H. Williams out in Alice Springs and be able to strum a few things with him, sit around the campfire and have a bit of a jam, sing ‘Midnight Special’ and a few of his songs. We throw a couple of raps in the middle of it!’ This suggests that the country music embraced by Aboriginal people over the past half century may be just as influential on some Aboriginal hip-hop artists as their African-American counterparts.

South West Syndicate, an extended family of a crew which included Lebanese-Australian MCs, as well as Pacific Islander, Croatian, German and Anglo members at various times, formed in 1992, and played a major part in Hip-hopera, a western Sydney community hip-hop project directed by Morganics and Urban Theatre Projects in 1995. Hip-hopera was a watershed for Sydney hip-hop, and SWS subsequently won a Deadly Award in 2003, shortly before they called it a day. They were also involved in A Place of Peace, a three week hip-hop project filmed by Penny Nutt for the ABC’s Indigenous Unit in 2001, which was held at the Settlement Neighbourhood Centre in Redfern, funded by the NSW Department of Education and Training and included as facilitators Morganics, Lez Beckett, Fijian-Australian MC Trey and Elf Tranzporter, another hip-hop pedagogue who rapped with Morganics in the important Sydney group MetaBass’N’Breath, and is now based in Melbourne with the workshop facilitators Lab Rats and the militant ecologist hip-hop crew Combat Wombat.<sup>5</sup> After SWS broke up, Mark began working with the NSW education department, and he has participated in the *Indig Readers* project, which has produced educational books by NSW Aboriginal role models and elders such as Anthony Mundine, Michael O’Loughin, Adam Goodes and Cath Farrarwell. Mark published *Raps for Little Fellas and Raps for Big Fellas*, “and they come with a CD as well, so they can pop a CD in and read along, to help the kids who are illiterate to learn the words. That’s a bit of a hit in the communities and I did colourful graff stuff in all the books – I think some of the kids look at the pictures more than anything else! I do a little song in the gamilaraay language, but then I’ve written the English translation on the other side of the page and it’s on the CD in language too.” He claims that every time he shows up at a school, the attendance rate usually shoots up to nearly 100%: “I try to teach them to stay in school and while I’m there we’re writing raps, and I’m showing them things to do with maths, artwork, dance, all of those things.” His workshops in Bogabilla led to the formation of a pre-teen hip-hop group called the Bogabilla Thrillers who have 15 members and have performed numerous gigs in southern Queensland and northern NSW. “Mainly for me it’s being able to see smiles on kids’ faces, and not just the kids, smiles on the faces of the elders, smiles on parents. We try to go toward a corroboree and that sort of thing. Aboriginal language was never a written language; it’s always been an oral and visual language, stories being passed down through rituals, corroborees, song and dance. Hip-hop fits in quite well with that, which is lucky for me I’d say! Aboriginal hip-hop is out there and all the communities know about it. Tonight on the bill we’ve got all these deadly artists who are all indigenous hip-hop artists – basically the cream of the crop of Aboriginal hip-hop – and there is a whole heap of them all around the country who are getting their stuff out there, and now it’s becoming predominant in Aboriginal communities. The elders know that Aboriginal hip-hop exists and are keen to get these people into their communities to show the kids that they can get their own people doing it.”

A couple of hours later Mark is onstage, doing his own idiosyncratic version of the moonwalk, microphone in his right hand, left hand gesticulating furiously, pumping out a freewheeling track called ‘Walking in the Sunshine’, which makes references to refugees and Howard’s toadying to Bush and the USA among other topics. This segues into ‘So You Want A war’, with its obvious references to Iraq. At one point Mark describes himself as ‘the brother who looks like a gubba’, and he finishes his set with a bout of breakdancing, culminating in a body arch, to appreciative applause from a crowd which has a definite

majority of Kooris along with some of the usual Manning Bar students and a few Oz hip-hop followers. The DJ console is draped in the red, black and yellow of an Aboriginal flag, Koori Radio's logo is prominent, and so is a banner which reads 'Live 'N' Deadly'.

Ebony Williams comes on next, with short cropped hair, jeans, sneakers and a bright red T shirt, shouting out for indigenous hip-hop. A descendant of the Wiradjuri Tribe, she also has African-American parentage, and got her start at 15 in Hip-hopera in 1995 in a duo called Two Indij. She is currently working on her debut solo album. Tonight she launches into 'And the Beat Goes On', a track first released in 2003 on a compilation put out by the Sydney-based Mother Tongues collective, which claims to be the only all-women hip-hop label in the world. Its assertion of Aboriginal rights is a far cry from Cher's song of the same name: 'As a young black woman/I have to make my point more stronger/So it'll encourage others to recognise /They're part of what we've been denied for many years/As hip-hop makes me stronger/ Hopefully you will understand you have to wake up/ If you want something before you're left behind ... Don't let your dreams dry like glue/Stick with it!'

She follows this with 'You Never Seem to understand Me', which dates back to Hip-hopera days, a more personal track about family discord, which seeks solace in the Dreamtime: 'Family is family, so why the fighting/Our race should stick together /When families are uniting/That's what our elders are stressing to us/As they teach and explain/The ways of the Dreamtime.'" Then comes 'Open Up Your Mind' a track with a didj riff from 1999, which starts its history lesson 200 years ago with the white invasion of Australia and its traumatic consequences for Aboriginal people, including the stolen children. The final two verses are a sustained diss of Pauline Hanson: 'You're trying to hold my people to ransom/Dancing with the devil, Pauline Hanson/ ... She don't like my people/In her eyes they're never going to be equal ... Wanting me to feel out of place in my own country ... A high profile trouble maker/Go back to selling fish in your stupid shop!'"<sup>6</sup>

BrothaBlack, aka Shannon Williams, an actor with Urban Theatre Projects as well as an MC and a Bboy, comes on, stating how he wants to 'put my people on the map'. He has said 'I started out by trying to imitate Chuck D [of Public Enemy] and people like that. Listening to rap music was just part of my everyday life."<sup>7</sup> More recently, he came to the defence of his workshop cohort Morganiacs when the latter was attacked on the Vibe Aboriginal and Aussie Hip-hop forum as "wack cant rap an need to stop messin up our kids by tryin 2 teach them to rap, gubba tryin 2 teach black music?" BrothaBlack's response spoke for the hundreds of Aboriginal MCs Morganiacs has tutored: "that's my boy you're talking about (Morganiacs) so what if he's white he's doing good in our community, which is a lot more I can say than what other people are doing at the moment. If you going to put him down you have got a few more people to have a go at because there's quite a few white fullas in Aboriginal music and not just Hip-hop (Think about it). If you think he's in it for the money and Kudos your wrong I can back that up 100%."<sup>8</sup> Some Koori women are dancing to Brotha Black's beats as smoke billows through the red, blue and green lights. A scratch DJ goes into action – 'This is more than history, it's my identity/ A new generation, the indigenous nation / Calling out to my people ... We fight for the rights of our population.'" At the end of his set he is joined by Ozi Batla, an Anglo MC from militant multicultural Sydney hip-hop crew The Herd, the two MCs gripping hands as they swap rhymes.

Lez Beckett is heralded by two didjeridu players and traditional dancers in bodypaint, tracing the movements of kangaroos among other gestures, demonstrating the adaptability of hip-hop into traditional Aboriginal storytelling and dance. Lez performs tracks from his new EP, *We Were Soldiers*, and there is even more dancing now, but the act everyone is waiting for is Local Knowledge. As Joel Wenitong, originally from the Kabi Kabi tribe in south-east Queensland, MC with Local Knowledge and lecturer in Health Sciences at Newcastle University, told *Australian Music Online*, Local Knowledge is primarily "about getting young blackfella mob back into their culture and teaching our history through music".<sup>9</sup> Their track 'Blackfellas', for which they completed a video in Redfern last October, has been on high rotation on

Triple J, and is the feature track of their debut EP, which they have been selling at gigs, and has already gone into a second pressing. It starts with a shout out to all the Aboriginal groups throughout Australia: Kooris, Murris, Nyonga, etc. They even throw in 'Maori', in commemoration of the numerous Maori immigrants in Australia and the Indigenous Down Under workshops they did with Maori crew Upper Hutt Posse in Wellington, Aotearoa, in 2003. As Abie Wright recalled to me a few weeks earlier, when they were supporting Melbourne crew TZU at the Manning Bar, "Upper Hutt Posse are deadly lads and they are pretty staunch about their culture, their history and their identity, and they stand up and say what needs to be said, which is basic human rights as far as they are concerned." Local Knowledge are also into Nesian Mystic and Che Fu, more R&B-inflected, mixed Polynesian hip-hop groups from across the Tasman, along with Crunk, 'Dirty Southern' hip-hop from the Mississippi as practiced by Lil' Jon and the East Side Boys. As Abie explains: "it's a form of hip-hop, but it's repetitive with lots of screaming. It's sort of like Zulu chanting, with a heavy bass going through it. To us it's like when we were sitting around singing corroboree songs. Them fellas with their Zulu chants and us fellas with our old people sitting around and stomping on the ground 'boom boom boom', it saves us from letting our aggression out through our fists, or whatever".

This undercurrent of anger comes out in 'Who's Gonna Stop Me' from the EP – a track based on a bunch of Aboriginal fellas being barred from a nightclub in Newcastle, referred to as 'savages' and refusing to take it lying down, which they perform tonight. The chorus, "Who's gonna stop me - Nobody!" is repeated with increasing intensity until the track finally winds down into slow motion. Brothers Abie and Wok Wright both have a background in rugby league and traditional Aboriginal dance; as Wok says: "Me and Abie laugh about it a lot because we try and structure our shows like we used to structure our corroboree shows. We'd start out with a bang, with a spectacular dance, and then we'd slow it down in tempo, then we'd do a strong dance, a slow one, and then we'd go into something leftfield – a hitch hiker's story on a didgeridu". Tonight they begin with their website back-projected on a large screen, accompanied by series of heroic brass fanfares, and a rather drawn-out fire-making ceremony, until the three of them leap onto the stage, jumping up and down, left arms whirling in unison, right hands gripping their mics, goading the audience into action – "Are you ready to rumble? We'll shake the world!". They perform the tracks 'Rumble' and 'Murri Flows' off the EP, with a bit of didj accompaniment, and hit their peak in a triumphant version of 'Blackfellas' which has everyone up on the dancefloor. They're playing down the more educational side of their repertoire tonight – health promotion songs about alcoholism and sexually transmitted diseases, for example – in favour of the less confrontational and more feelgood tracks. "A lot of our early stuff was just rapping about straight-up, hardcore issues, about the Stolen Generation, about being hassled by coppers, all that sort of stuff. We just wanted to make the kids know that there is still a lot of work to be done, and we can't lose them to drugs and alcohol, just to tell them they do have a role to play", Wok explains. This side of them was shown on the 2004 SBS *Blaktrax* program, 'Local Knowledge: The Message', which provided a useful background to the group's development as an educational crew in Aboriginal communities since they formed in March 2002, as well as the way they use Aboriginal English and diss American wannabes.<sup>10</sup> But as Wok emphasises, "I like the more commercial stuff to be honest, the feelgood stuff, just because I don't like reminding the kids of how when they get home from school, there is no food. dad's hitting mum, mum's hitting dad, so they go into their room and put music on, they don't want to hear anyone singing about that. They want to go on a journey with their music. So that's one thing we do, the easy going feel, but we have a bit of a go at everything – Abie likes his crunk, Joel's a straight hip-hop lover, as well as reggae and ragga." As Joel adds, "In our communities storytelling, music, dance, creative arts are the only form of communication, it's the way we've passed on our knowledge, and that's one of the big reasons hip-hop is huge in Aboriginal communities. There isn't one Aboriginal kid who doesn't like hip-hop because it's that oral communication that we've been used to over thousands and thousands of years. And you can also dance to it, which is a bonus!"

Local Knowledge's recent success has drawn attention to the increasing number of younger Aboriginal

hip-hop practitioners, especially in Brisbane, who are using hip-hop to explore their own identity and to get in touch with traditional aspects of their culture. Indigenous Intrudaz, a trio out of Glenala State High, were nominated for a 2005 MusicOz award in hip-hop, and their track 'Clap Your hands', about growing up on the wrong side of the tracks in Brisbane, was a finalist in Triple J's Unearthed competition. MC Murriz, a teenage trio, released an EP, *Ain't No Suckers*, in 2004, which expressed pride in their Aboriginal heritage as well as in Brisbane, and brought them radio airplay, particularly for their track '2Black 2Strong'. They have performed at Brisbane's Stylin' Up festival, which has been something of a showcase for recent Aboriginal hip-hop, including groups like MIZ, a female duo who consist of Torres-Strait-born Sarah Patrick and Seychelles-born Marsha Chang-Tave. whose track 'Where It's At' has had Triple J airplay, and MC Dizzy, aka Charmaine Doolan, a Townsville-born Murri now based in Brisbane. But the senior exponents of Brisbane Aboriginal hip-hop are undoubtedly Native Rhyme Syndicate, who formed in 1994, and were nominated for two Deadly Awards in 1998, as well as being the first Australian hip-hop group to receive a certified National Music Award in the same year. One of the group's members, Daniel 'DK' Kinchela, comes from the Gummilaroi clan and is a cousin of Wok and Abie's as well as lead MC with a new crew, Tribal S.U.N.S regime. Native Rhyme's main MC, Cameron 'C-Roc' Callope, is from the Gkuthaarn clan in the Gulf of Carpentaria, and was appointed an elder of his clan for the work he has done in educating Aboriginal youth through hip-hop. They started recording in 1998 on a compilation called *Emerging Artists* with a cover of 'Chain Remains' by African-American hip-hoppers Naughty By Nature, whom they played support for in Brisbane. They followed that with 'Together', a collaboration with Kev Carmody and the Cruel Sea on the 2003 *Corroboration* compilation, and 'We'll Always Love you', a memorial for a dead friend, which was included on the 2004 Redhotgreenblack environmental awareness compilation UnAustralian. The Rockhampton-based Torres Strait Islander crew Stray Dogs have also celebrated their heritage with a track called 'Saltwater People'.

In Melbourne, Little G, also known as the Wogarine, due to her mixed Greek and Aboriginal background (her real name is Georgina Christanthopoulos), illustrates the crossover between Aboriginal and multicultural hip-hop which also occurs in Perth crew Dowynsyde, whose members come from Aboriginal, Middle Eastern, South American and other backgrounds. Little G, as George Stavrios has noted in his 2003 Honours thesis at Melbourne University, has written and performed tracks about Aboriginal deaths in custody as well as the Yorta yorta tribe, which she initially believed was where her mother came from, until she discovered otherwise. As Stavrios points out, Little G's "entry into hip-hop occurred simultaneously with her desire to learn about her Aboriginal heritage."<sup>11</sup> She started exploring her Aboriginal side after she learned Aboriginal cultural studies from an elder, but her negotiation of her Aboriginal identity was a complex and difficult process, compounded by her mixed heritage and involving a great deal of anger as she learned about past massacres and the treatment of Aboriginal people throughout Australian history. Hip-hop became a means of channeling this anger, as well as encouraging younger Aboriginal kids to be proud of their heritage. As she has said, "Hip-hop for me is like another form of boxing, except lyrically ... The young people will not learn through schools to be proud of themselves, so if we can do it through music, or film, or art, that's the right choice."<sup>12</sup> Little G was one of the protagonists of MC Q and Colleen Hughson's 2004 film *All the Ladies*, which profiled six Australian women MCs, most of whom come from mixed heritage, and she sometimes performs with Melbourne multicultural groups Curse ov Dialect and TZU. Nonetheless, she feels doubly marginalized from much of the Melbourne hip-hop scene due to her identification with her Aboriginal heritage, and her association with 'conscious' or 'felafel' rap: "You get the ockers, the wogs, the felafel rappers which is us, you know on the outside, the bloody hippies. I don't ever think I'll be accepted by everyone, because I'm indigenous, and they're all gonna always compare me with overseas."<sup>13</sup> Stavrios concludes his study, which also contains a chapter on Morganiacs and Wire MC, with the following statement which demonstrates the importance of hip-hop as a means of helping Aboriginal youth to negotiate their identities and to connect with traditional culture:

*Negotiating tradition and modernity, Aboriginal culture is actually a culture in the making and hip-hop is a powerful tool in helping Aboriginal youth with this negotiation. Sampling and representin', characteristics which ground it in the local, allow traditional sounds into the music, traditional dances into the breakdancing, and traditional values and language into the raps. The rap itself enacts traditional knowledge through storytelling. Yet hip-hop as a medium for identity recognition is not limited by its attachment to traditional forms. Inspired by the African American oppositional politics it provides an avenue for Aboriginal youth to discuss their concerns in a manner that is not only fashionable, but also empowering. Importantly, it is energised by that key ingredient for youth and children – having fun.*<sup>14</sup>

Hip-hop's connections with traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island culture are perhaps best expressed by Wire MC, who performs a track called 'It's A Modern Day Corroboree' and who told Moses Iten in 2003: "This is my lyrical healing. I can't go and get scarred any more and I can't become a traditional man. I'm a modern day blackfella, this is still Dreamtime for me. Hip-hop is the new clapsticks, hip-hop is the new corroboree".<sup>15</sup> Wire was the subject of a personal documentary-essay film by Australian Film, Television and radio School graduate Grant Leigh Saunders in 2005 entitled *B.L.A.C.K.: An Aboriginal Song of Hip-hop*, which takes its title from what is probably the best-known track performed by Wire, and is also an anagram for 'Born Long Ago Creation's Keeper'.<sup>16</sup> In the track Wire interrogates what being black means to him today, regarding it as a positive thought process through which he explores his own identity and relates it to Aboriginal history and tradition, including contemplating the Aboriginal massacres of the past. As he explains: "It's not just my skin colour, for even the blackest brother can be white. You see black is a thought process, for me a way of life. To be black is to be free, free from the heart, free from the head. Free to take that man for what he is, free to choose and make my own decisions."<sup>17</sup> Using snippets from Local Knowledge, 'The Block', a track about Redfern devised by Morganics with kids from Fort Street school, MC Murriz's '2Black 2 Strong', as well as the pre-teen Morganics-produced Wilcannia Mob's celebrated 2002 track 'Down River' and Girls Out Loud, Saunders explores his own personal history in the film as a fair skin Koori through hip-hop, "which gave me back what they stole from my past". He traces Aboriginal hip-hop back to the 'old school breakers' of 1982, interviewing Leonie Morcombe (aka Leapy), Ralph Saunders and Sean Choolburra, who reinforce the importance of the 'no shame factor' of breakdancing and its expression of the centrality of dance to Aboriginal culture. He also namechecks B Boys Venom, 2 Ezy, Lama Rock, Dougan, Ninginaas and DJ Vilas, who like many other B girls and b boys around the world were greatly influenced by the Rock Steady Crew, a crew with a high proportion of Latino Americans rather than African Americans. In the film Wire explains the predominant focus of Aboriginal hip-hop on MCing and Bboying by the fact that most Aboriginal hip-hoppers can't afford turntables, and Aboriginal graffiti artists "would just get locked up for life". He adds that hip-hop is his own way of sublimating feelings of anger and frustration, echoing Little G and Local Knowledge: "If I didn't put pen to pad, I could be putting fist to face."

As an educational format, a vehicle to express anger and pride in one's heritage, a way of binding communities together through dance and performance, a declamatory form of storytelling set to music, hip-hop's affinities with Aboriginal cultural forms make it an ideal means for youth to get in touch with their tribal identity and cultural background and articulate their place in today's world. At the same time as hip-hop has been globalised, spreading to Greenland, where the Nuuk Posse rap in Greenlandish, Danish and English, and incorporate whale songs and throat singing into their hip-hop, and to Argentina, where El Sindicato Argentino del Hip-hop express 'blood, sweat and rage' about the issues such as money and the hard times their country is experiencing,<sup>18</sup> hip-hop has also been indigenized, and incorporated into local languages and cultural forms. Which makes it ripe for appropriation into the world's oldest living form of traditional culture.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Sound Unlimited, *A Postcard from the Edge of the Under-Side*, Columbia/Sony 1992.

- <sup>2</sup>. See Andrew Stevenson and Edmund Tavros, ‘Years of rejection erupted in open rebellion’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 17-18, 2005, p.7. The article tries to suggest that murdered MC Tupac Shakur and US gangsta rap – a genre which died out around 1995 – were inspirations for “a very ugly manifestation of cultural chauvinism” displayed by Lebanese-Australian youths in the Cronulla riots.
- <sup>3</sup>. Tony Collins, *Desert Rap*, ABC TV, 2000.
- <sup>4</sup>. Condie 2003, p. 36, quoted in Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places: Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Australia*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004, p. 123.
- <sup>5</sup>. Penny Nutt, *A Place of Peace*, Message Stick, ABC Indigenous Unit, 2001. (Also released as a CD, *Hip-hop, A Place of Peace*, Self-produced, 2001).
- <sup>6</sup>. Mother Tongues, *Quartermass CD*, 2003. First Words, Mother Tongues/Creative Vibes CD, 2000.
- <sup>7</sup>. *Koori Mail*, 27 November 2002, p.33, quoted in Dunbar-Hall and Gibson, p.123.
- <sup>8</sup>. *Vibe* Forum – Aboriginal & Aussie Hip-hop <[http://deadlys.vibe.com.au/forum/topic.asp?TOPIC\\_ID-108](http://deadlys.vibe.com.au/forum/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID-108)> (Accessed 6/9/05)
- <sup>9</sup>. Interview with Joel Wenitong, *Australian Music Online*, 12 December 2005 <[www.amo.org/au/qa\\_interview.asp?id1054.ott.gen.muso](http://www.amo.org/au/qa_interview.asp?id1054.ott.gen.muso)> (accessed 24/12/05)
- <sup>10</sup>. Kris Flanders, *Local Knowledge: The Message*, SBS TV, 2004.
- <sup>11</sup>. George Stavrios, *Identity and Appropriation in Aboriginal Australian Hip-hop*, Honours Thesis, Department of English with Cultural Studies, University of Melbourne, 2003, p.17
- <sup>12</sup>. Little G, Interview with Colleen Hughson, in Colleen Hughson and Mary Quinsacara, *All the Ladies*, video documentary, Hughson Gyrl Productions, Melbourne, 2003.
- <sup>13</sup>. In Stavrios, p. 24.
- <sup>14</sup>. Stavrios, p. 50.
- <sup>15</sup>. Moses Iten, ‘All You Mob, Get Into This’, *Juice*, April 2003, 78-81.
- <sup>16</sup>. Grant Leigh Saunders, *B.L.A.C.K.: An Aboriginal Song of Hip-hop*, Australian Film, Television and Radio School, 2005.
- <sup>17</sup>. MC Wire, quoted in *Message Stick* <[http://www.abc.net.au/message/radio/awaye/ms\\_opera/music\\_mewire](http://www.abc.net.au/message/radio/awaye/ms_opera/music_mewire)> (accessed 26/12/05)
- <sup>18</sup>. Sindicato Argentino del Hip-hop, *Sangre, Sudor y Furia, Machete/Universal* 2005. Apart from the title track, this CD contains tracks entitled ‘El Dinero’ (Money) and ‘Tiempos Dificiles’ (Hard Times).