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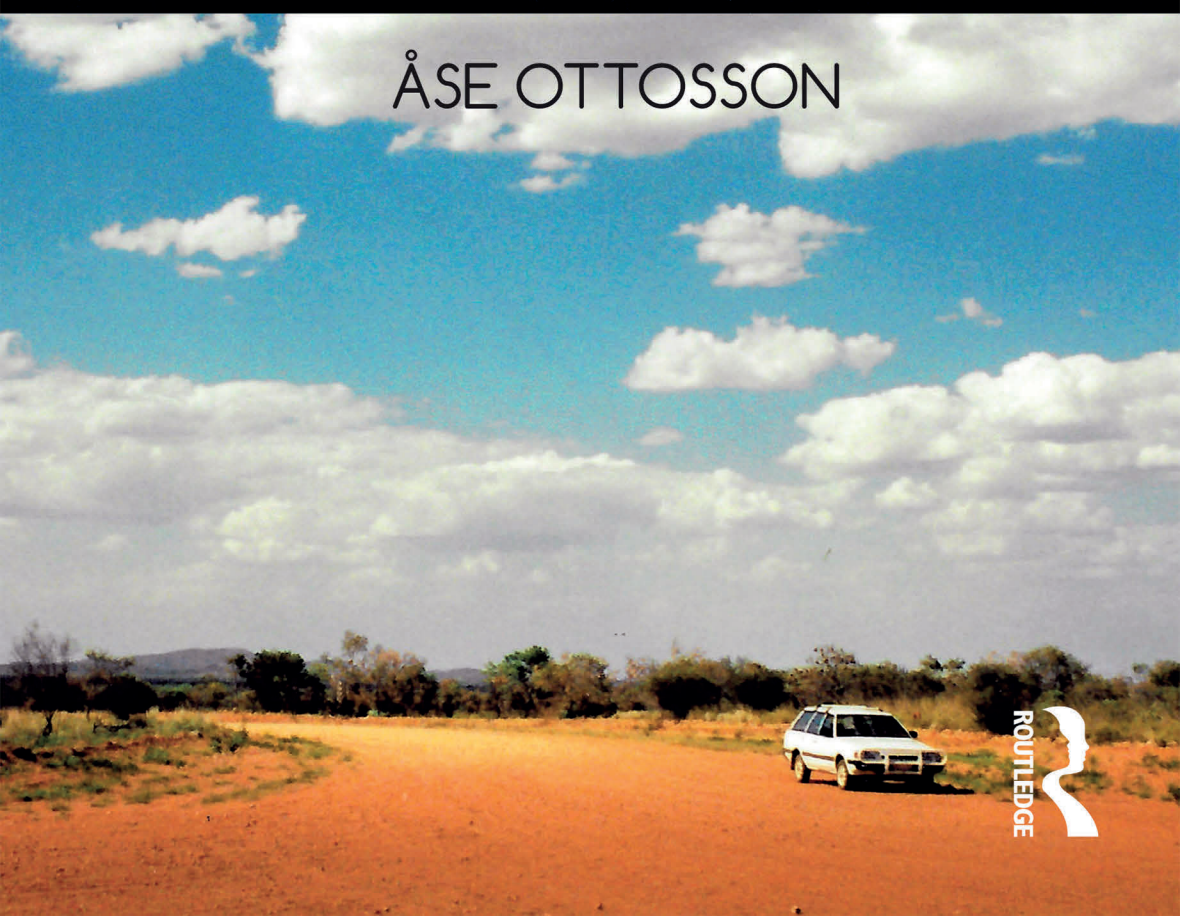
MAKING ABORIGINAL MEN AND MUSIC IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

ÅSE OTTOSSON



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Making Aboriginal Men and Music in Central Australia

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BY ÅSE OTTOSSON

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Aboriginal people from Central Australia are advised that this book contains names and images of deceased people that they may wish to avoid seeing. Other readers are advised to consult with knowledgeable local people before sharing the content with Aboriginal people from the desert region.

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Preface

Hitch-hiking around remote Australia in 1983, I first arrived in Alice Springs on a freezing July morning. After exploring the surrounding desert ranges for a few days, I returned to the rather dreary-looking town and went looking for a beer. It was a quiet evening in the town centre, with small groups of Aboriginal people sitting on public lawns and keeping warm around smoky camp fires in the dry Todd River bed. I heard music somewhere in the distance. Following the sound, I ended up in front of a sturdy door in a brick-wall on the side of an unsightly shopping-complex building. I stepped inside and found myself in an undecorated barroom. Men and women, most of them Aboriginal, were standing at the bar and in groups around the room. I found the source of the music in a corner of the room where a five-piece, all-male Aboriginal band was playing the final verse of an old Hank Williams number.

The band members looked as if they had blown in from separate worlds and times. The young, brown-skinned singer was dressed in a Bob Marley T-shirt and his reggae dreadlocks were held in place by a headband in the political colours of the Aboriginal flag: red, black and yellow. The rhythm guitarist was a dark-skinned, barefoot man. His shirt and trousers were soiled and torn, his black hair matted and his face showed signs of years living on the grog. The lead guitarist looked part-Indian. In his mid-thirties, he appeared in tight, brand new jeans and a buckle belt, shining cowboy boots, a rodeo-style shirt and a well-worn Akubra, the Australian-style felt cowboy hat. The skinny bass guitar player was the most dark-skinned and the oldest of the band members, maybe in his mid-fifties. He was dressed neatly in a sports jersey, jeans and sneakers – the standard attire of many non-indigenous men in town. The twenty-something drummer showed off his muscles in a black T-shirt with ripped-off sleeves. He looked more like a street fighter than a country music drummer with his mirror sunglasses, a cigarette hanging from his lower lip and scars lining his light brown face and tattooed arms.

With the ease of highly experienced performers, this eclectic combination of black, male-styled guys served out country covers that belonged firmly in the tradition of the honky-tonks I know from southern Texas. The affectionate response from the likewise variously styled and coloured Aboriginal patrons in the pub was similar to that of the people in those Texan bars, too. Just like

country was 'our' music for the working-class, red-neck folks I would meet there, this was clearly 'our' blackfella music in Central Australian life worlds.[1]

After emigrating from Sweden to Australia a few years later, I continued to seek out Aboriginal country, rock and reggae gigs across Australia. Apart from truly enjoying the music, I have been drawn to this largely blackfella musical world because of its untidy sociocultural quality and melding of musical and gendered styles that I find both captivating and refreshing. Every performance is a healthy reminder of the futility in trying to fix categorically what others and selves are and can be. They provide a counter-narrative to a globally widespread preoccupation with defining and purifying national, racial, gendered and other forms of being in ways that delimit, and, at times, violate, people's rights to define their experiences and existence in their own terms.

The invigorating 'mongrel' qualities of distinctively Aboriginal ways of being that characterize Aboriginal contemporary music making and events are rarely represented in national public debate or media. The inherently generative social and cultural processes involved in Aboriginal popular music making have not been investigated or theorized much in the substantial anthropological literature in the field of indigenous studies either. Both popular and scholarly representations of, and conceptual approaches to, indigenous and non-indigenous people, practices, experiences and relations largely continue to be cast in terms of two separate and fundamentally different social and cultural realms. The day-to-day reality of constant interaction, interexperience and complex relational dynamic in which indigenous and non-indigenous people from a variety of backgrounds constantly engage does not map neatly onto such bounded notions of difference. Yet, similar to people in multiethnic and indigenous-settler societies around the world, Aboriginal and other Australians purposefully and habitually assert certain forms of distinction in relation to each other. A great deal of time, money and emotions are also invested by indigenous and non-indigenous stakeholders to uphold institutionalized ideas of radical difference between the two categories. This book is interested in the day-to-day experiences and practices underpinning, but also exceeding, such categories of difference and identification. As Jackson puts it:

> Though it is inevitable that many people will always categorize themselves as black and white, colonizer and colonized, traditional and modern, the goal of anthropology is to deconstruct such categorical oppositions by bringing home to us the various reasons they are invoked, the various uses they serve, and the complexity of the lived experience they mask. (1998: 101)

Taking heed of Jackson's advice, I want to bring back to centre stage the complexity and contradictions of the lived experience of contemporary

Aboriginal men. From my detailed ethnographic explorations of the largely male homosocial world of Aboriginal country, rock and reggae music making in Central Australia, this book becomes an argument for conceptual approaches to contemporary Aboriginal male modes of being as intrinsically intersubjective and context-specific processes, in which sociocultural boundaries and categories are at the same time asserted, transgressed and transformed. I develop the analytical concept of 'intercultural mediation' to investigate the social world of Aboriginal music making as an interactional arena in which aspects of a range of local and global forms of practice, imagery, values and ideas about being male, indigenous and musicians are connected and recombined in partial and incomplete ways. In the process, ambivalent and multilayered forms of identifying as Aboriginal and male are continuously created. I will show how such ordinary and 'mongrel' ways of becoming-in-the-world are nevertheless experienced as distinctive, coherent and deeply meaningful.

Conceptually, I begin from an understanding of difference as well as of similarity, and of the ideas, experiences and practices that underpin such definitions, as emerging effects of day-to-day social relations, practices and experiences. In theoretical terms, as outlined in Chapter 1, my core argument aligns with the schools of thought that challenge perceptions of social and cultural boundaries and identities as existing prior to social relations. That is, I understand the desert men's sense of male and blackfella selves and understandings of others as always transformed in social practice, which means they are not stable across time, between different places or over a person's life cycle. How the Aboriginal men identify and define others also produce real and enduring political and economic consequences, injustices and at times great sufferings when they operate within entrenched patterns of structural inequalities informed by race, gender, age and other forms of social locations and categorization.

By following an expressive practice instead of staying put with 'a people', this ethnography invites readers to appreciate music as a dynamic social arena of complex, seemingly incongruous and also joyous Aboriginal cultural expressions and forms of articulating contemporary experiences in ways rarely seen in public debate and academic works. It departs from more common anthropological inquiries into the role and meaning of music in particular Aboriginal language groups or local communities. I am instead interested in what happens when Aboriginal people move within and between different indigenous life worlds with their music practices, and when they move about in settings dominated by a diversity of non-indigenous people and sociocultural orders. Because the most commonly practised Aboriginal music genres in the Australian desert region – country, rock and reggae – are an almost exclusively male activity, the book becomes a journey mainly in the company of men.

Formations of masculinity and indigenous manhood, therefore, also become a central conceptual theme.

As I discuss in Chapter 1, many Aboriginal musicians and the music styles encountered in this book do not always make much sense to a non-Aboriginal audience. Basically, the desert men do not deliver on the privileged and narrow expectations of 'real' and 'authentic' Aboriginal music and people, or as modern rights activists – the two models that dominate mainstream imagery and understandings. My main argument in the book emerges from the ethnographic detailing of indigenous life worlds, expressions and ways of identifying as much more complex and nuanced than such privileged notions allow for. Establishing the rationale for this argument, the second half of the first chapter outlines how contemporary Aboriginal Central Australian life worlds and music styles continue to emerge from more than a century of shared experiences and engagements among a range of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. It is an ongoing history of appropriations, adjustments, mutual influences, conflicts and mutual 'othering' among the parties involved.

The Aboriginal desert music scene continues to proliferate both as part of, and as a challenge to, partitioned sociocultural orders. Each socio-musical setting also provides its own dynamics for how particular aspects of Aboriginal and male modes of being are remade. To capture this multisided and multisited character of music and identity work, I follow the musicians in four different settings – an Aboriginal recording studio, remote Aboriginal communities, non-indigenous-dominated townships and on tours beyond the musicians' home region. By attending to such site-specific dynamics in which Aboriginal men and music are made, I aim to make visible the greater range of interdependent aspects of the musicians' life worlds, and how these are co-implicated and co-productive in their crafting of changing and 'mongrel' selves as men and Aboriginal.

Mongrel men and music

By using the racially charged concept of 'mongrel' for how indigeneity and masculinity are formed, I wish to highlight the inherently ambivalent and multilayered quality of the processes explored in the coming chapters. At its most neutral meaning, 'mongrel' refers to a dog of mixed breed. The term has subsequently been appropriated and transformed into an indicator of something deplorable or someone despicable. It has taken on particularly offensive meanings as racialized and morally derogatory notions for people of mixed racial heritage, in effect dehumanizing them to the lowest of animal status – a product of sexually and racially indiscriminate dogs.

Like many powerful and racially insulting labels, 'mongrel' has also been appropriated and reinscribed with inverted and self-assertive meanings in indigenous vernacular idioms (e.g. Carter 1988). The Aboriginal musicians frequently resorted to the word 'mongrel' when something frustrated them, like when they could not get their 'mongrel' fingers to play the guitar the way they wanted, or when a 'mongrel' piece of equipment did not work. The men also addressed themselves by the term. 'You mongrel!' one of them would mutter with a sly grin to a colleague who did something they consider characteristically blackfella. In this use, it was an expression of male and blackfella bonding. 'We're just mongrels,' they could agree assertively and, at times, defiantly as they demarcated the integrity of their male, blackfella domain as distinct from both women and whitefellas. I describe in Chapter 6 how the valued mongrel quality also includes something 'too much' – something excessive, untidy and somewhat crude that is beyond whitefella's or women's control. The men variably see this quality as something valued and as a shortcoming. On an occasion when we discussed their use of 'mongrel', I asked a few musicians if they thought it was a positive or negative description of other people. Without hesitation one of them said 'positive!' with a thumbs-up gesture. He then reflected for a moment before adding, 'Well, it can also be the most offensive you'd call another fella,' meaning another blackfella. He thus acknowledged how the racially insulting and stigmatizing powers of the term remain.

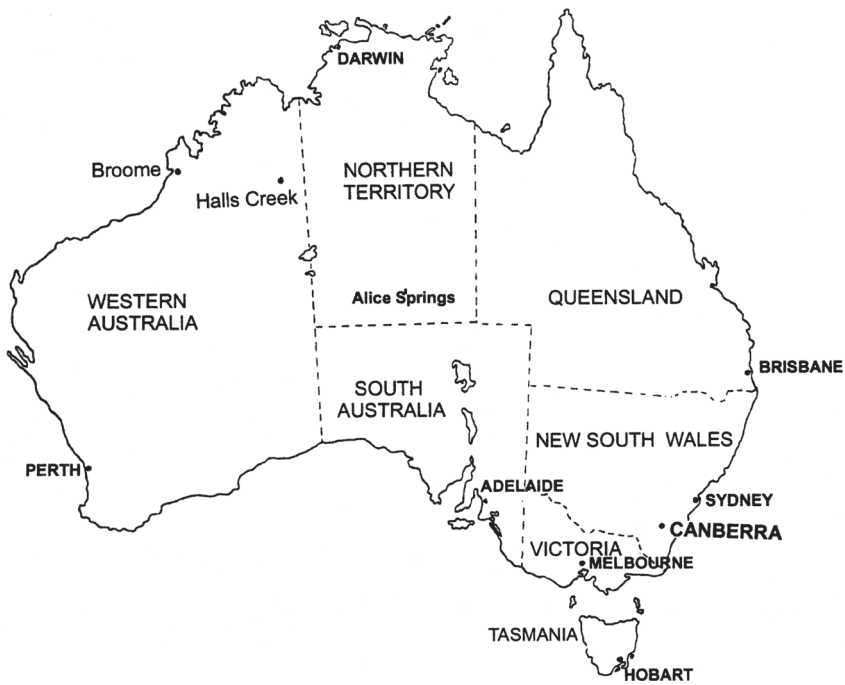
It is precisely the contradictory, multilayered and socially specific meanings of the concept 'mongrel' that make it useful for drawing attention to the complex and ambivalent recombination and reinterpretation of multiple and partial meanings that are co-produced in mediating processes over time and place. The transmission, mutation and transformation of meanings – that is, the mediating processes – embedded in notions of 'mongrel' can, therefore, introduce the emerging and untidy dynamics of the formation of indigeneity and maleness explored in the coming chapters. The music the Aboriginal desert men produce is, of course, in themselves 'mongrel cultural forms' (Gilroy 1993: 3), as it is made in a syncretic dynamic in which styles and forms of different regions and cultures of the world have been reworked and reinscribed in diverse, local indigenous life worlds.

The blackfella bar gig I walked in on three decades ago jarred any preconceived ideas I might have had about what Aboriginal music and men should sound and look like. For the blackfella musicians and patrons, however, the 'mongrel' styles of music, indigeneity and masculinity performed were part of their shared, ongoing socio-musical history and ways of identifying. Despite being an ubiquitous feature of indigenous life worlds not only in the Australian desert region, these kinds of music making have not attracted much serious attention from anthropologists, and explorations of contemporary indigenous

masculinities are also rare. By attending to these somewhat neglected areas, this book presents the social life of country, rock and reggae music making as an important arena for the articulation and mediation of contemporary ways of being male and indigenous. The ethnographic substance of the book is based on fifteen months of field research, often as the only woman in a company of desert men and musicians, wherever they practised and performed their music and manhood.

Multisited and gendered fieldwork

I drove in to Alice Springs to begin work at the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) Music studio in October 2000. Two days later, I was back on the road with a bunch of Aboriginal musicians on a month-long tour. After being baptized into my all-male field by this touring project, I worked at the music studio for eight months, but also took off for the occasional week or two to follow musicians on tour and to performances in other parts of Australia. I got involved in most aspects of the day-to-day studio operation: from administrative and office tasks to assisting in recording projects. I also



MAP 1 *Australian states and relevant locations.*

gained a solid knowledge of localized Aboriginal music styles, and of names of musicians, bands and places, as I was given the task to prepare and detail hundreds of music recordings made in this studio for digital storage.

I subsequently turned my attention to the hinterland music scene and travelled and returned to a number of remote Aboriginal communities to meet up with musicians and participate in music events. I also continued to follow musicians on tour and to music events in the NT and interstate, and came to know a network of music workers who are part of a national indigenous music scene. I conducted interviews with more than fifty musicians and music workers to document their musical and personal biographies and to understand how and why they compose their music and how they perceive themselves as men, blackfellas, performers and instrumentalists. However, the main way in which I learnt about music practices and male relations and aspirations was by being present and part of events as they evolved. This combined method of participation and observation involves using oneself as the medium of research. My own experiences and social locations therefore became central to how I participated, what I could observe and what I was prevented from seeing.

I came to the research as a forty-year-old woman originally from Sweden and an Australian resident since 1989 (now a citizen). I grew up in a large, musical and not very well-off family in a small town dominated by a Volvo car factory and military barracks. Leaving home and supporting myself from the age of sixteen, I worked in a music business and on ships on the North Sea while finishing a college degree externally. My life revolved around music and motorbikes among working-class friends in close-knit, male-dominated groups, and I also travelled extensively through Western Europe. At the age of twenty-two, I left for the big cities and finished a university degree in journalism. I then hitchhiked around Australia for a year. The experience resulted in a fascination with desert environments and a book on Australian people and society (Ottosson 1988). I worked as a journalist for fifteen years, initially as a freelance photo- and radio-journalist specializing in development and human rights in various parts of Asia. After settling in Australia, I covered Australian issues for the Swedish media. In the mid-1990s, I went to Sweden for some work at the national public broadcaster and stayed on for family reasons. This is when I moved over to an academic career in social anthropology, completing a Master's and a PhD. Back in Australia, I settled in Alice Springs, where I have now conducted research and worked for Aboriginal organizations for fourteen years.

Some aspects of these biographical notes made me somewhat 'at home' in my field (Jackson 1989). My familiarity with music practices, all-male working-class socialities, Australian society and deserts, for instance, was soon recognized by the musicians and made me less of a naive stranger.

The fact that English is not my first language was often an advantage among Aboriginal language speakers, perhaps connecting us as non-British and non-colonizers. In a social setting where mature age (ideally) means more respect and authority, my age was mostly an advantage, too, and as most of the men were between thirty and fifty years of age, we shared certain musical influences and memories of world events.

In gendered and racial aspects, I was also an 'other'. Aboriginal Central Australian settings in general are highly gender segregated. I was aware of these conventions but expected the regional music scene to be more gender mixed, as it was in other Australian settings that I had explored. My project thus unintentionally turned out to be rather unconventional, in that a non-Aboriginal woman was studying maleness and hung out with Aboriginal men over a prolonged period. My presence created various degrees of anxiety concerning sex and the protection of gendered domains. Several musicians initially understood me as a sophisticated groupie and I had to negotiate proposals for sexual adventures, but probably less often than if I had been a younger woman. When the musicians realized that I was passionate about music but not necessarily about musicians, our relationship relaxed and friendships developed. Many women and some men on the fringes of the music activities did not make this distinction, though, and I encountered a fair amount of open and covert hostility, especially from women who assumed I was sexually interested in particular musicians. I did not respond much to such (mainly implied) suggestions unless they came from the male musicians, in which case I clarified my independence.

In the light of the above gender aspects, I could rarely socialize openly with individual men in non-musical settings because it could fuel misguided rumours. As a woman seemingly unaccompanied by any man or in the company of women, gig situations were often the most taxing experiences, because I was sexual prey to men in varying states of intoxication and a target for jealous and at times drunken women. I moreover felt I had to choose loyalties and not mingle much with local women. When I initially did so, I felt like a doubly suspect person. The women seemed suspicious of my intentions among the men and expected proof of gendered loyalty in the form of information on what the men were up to. The men's comments implied suspicions that I was indeed 'leaking' information to the women, which made me out as unreliable. My research concerned a highly male-dominated arena of music making and I therefore remained loyal to this domain. I do not know as much about women in my field settings.

My whiteness seemed to be less of a problem for the men, especially when they recognized my working-class background and familiarity with music and all-male sexual bantering. Being non-indigenous did also somewhat 'neutralize' my gendered position. Some men commented that 'a black

woman' could never have done a study like mine because they would not let her into their circle. This refers to the gender-segregated organization of regional Aboriginal practices, in which it would be seen as inappropriate for an Aboriginal woman to hang out with men the way I did. Each man would also have to worry about regional Aboriginal restrictions on how to interact with this woman, on the basis of their relative kin, age and marital positions. They therefore envisaged that an Aboriginal woman's presence would cause unwanted tensions between her and particular musicians, between the musicians and her male kin and partner, and among the musicians (because, they said, someone was bound to have a fling with her, which would cause frictions and upset the music work).

My gendered whiteness had implications for how I was perceived by other people, too. Hanging out with musicians before and after gigs, I would occasionally be subjected to derogatory comments from non-indigenous men and women that implied that they saw me as a white woman shopping for black male sex exotica. Indigenous men and women would likewise comment in disapproving terms that defined me as a sexual/racial tourist in their territory. All up, though, the unpleasant experiences that my gender and whiteness produced provided me with valuable insights about the very practices of gender and indigeneity I set out to explore.

As in any research involving a large number of people, the Aboriginal men have shown various levels of understanding my project, and their interest has varied from one person to the next. A few of them read texts and commented on my ideas throughout the project. One or two were reluctant participants from the start. A majority have shown a modest interest. I have done my best to locate and contact the men or part of the bands that appear in the texts and photos. When possible, I travelled to where they were in order to discuss the content, and many of the men contributed insightful comments that shape the final text. I sent texts to those I could not see or who were not interested in meeting up. After reading a draft, a non-indigenous musician was concerned about appearing inflexible and ignorant. It was not how the Aboriginal men or I thought of him. In the final text, I hope it is clear that I focus on interpersonal instances in order to discuss patterns of intercultural dynamics, not to pass judgements about individuals. To respect his integrity, I have removed overtly identifiable features in relevant sections. The responsibility for any unintentional, remaining shortcomings of the descriptions of people and events is entirely mine.

1

Real and imagined Aboriginal music, men and place

A crowd of about a hundred people are making themselves comfortable on picnic rugs and folding chairs on the lawn in front of Stage 3 of the Womadelaide Festival, Australia's most high-profile world-music event. It is staged in the lush grounds of the Botanic Gardens in the South Australian capital, Adelaide (Map 1). During the three-day event, almost 70,000 people will pass through the gates to experience artists and music from most continents on seven stages. A few indigenous Australian artists are usually included in the programme and it is one of these acts people have come to see on Stage 3. At the announced time, a black African woman MC enters the stage and enthusiastically introduces the Benning Brothers from the NT as 'a living legend in their own time'. She informs us that the group was formed in 1958, and because of the racial policies at the time, they were usually marshalled on and off stage by a police man and a welfare officer. 'How times have changed, hey?' she calls out with a triumphant laugh. She introduces the members as 'a family affair' with brothers Barry and Stan and cousin Eric. 'And they've got a number of whitefellas in the background, just to sweeten the juice,' she adds, without naming the drummer, bass guitarist and fiddle player.

The band starts up with a fast-paced, instrumental guitar tune in North American cowboy country style. The non-indigenous bass player immediately launches his body into the beat. The non-indigenous fiddle player, in a purple hippie-style shirt and hair grown long, also gets into a groove, shaking his legs in what looks like an imitation of a traditional Aboriginal dance style. The three Aboriginal men appear in jeans and country and western-style or plain shirts, and they have well-used baseball caps on their heads. They stand very still, only moving their fingers with great speed and skill over

the strings, as they churn out catchy guitar picking. They also keep skipping beats in the bars of the songs, a common feature of Aboriginal country and gospel music in central and northern Australia that lends it a characteristic urgent and irregular rhythm pattern. This causes the non-indigenous bass player to fall behind and play the wrong notes all through the performance. The end of the first tune also goes a bit astray when the non-indigenous musicians finish before the actual end, and front man Barry ends up doing the full ending on his own. The audience applauds, shouts and whistles. I see a few bewildered faces, as if people do not know how to react to this rather 'loose' musical act. The performance continues with a mix of classic Hank Williams-style, yearning country love songs that are not always sung in perfect tune, and a few fast tempo, instrumental tunes in the style of 1960s' cowboy film soundtracks. During the upbeat tunes, the non-indigenous bass player gets into a head-banging act and turns laughing and yahooing towards the Aboriginal lead guitarist, trying to get a call-response act going. The Aboriginal guitarist does not respond. In fact, he does not even look at the bass player. He remains very still in a relaxed and seemingly disinterested pose, his face motionless, while completing frenetic guitar solos.

Between songs, the Aboriginal men casually swap bass, rhythm and lead guitars between them, and all through the performance, Barry has a big, broad smile on his face while he keeps calling out 'take it away Eric!' (a cue for guitar solos), 'Andrew, all the way from Tamworth' (a cue for fiddle solos) and 'we're from the Kimberleys, we're the Kimberley boys!' Into the third song, people in the audience begin to leave. As the performance proceeds, more follow them. When the two men beside me, one in a T-shirt printed with the Aboriginal flag and the other in a shirt with traditional Aboriginal patterns, start to gather their things, I look at them questioningly. They shake their heads and say something about 'poor imitation of already bad American country'. When Barry calls out, probably for the tenth time, 'We're from the Kimberleys! We're Kimberley boys!' people start laughing. By the end of the performance, the remaining audience laugh at most things the smiling Barry says or does. The whole act – the country tunes in classic North American style, the Aboriginal men standing absolutely still and looking rather indifferent, the non-indigenous men jumping around like hard rockers, the bass player's continuous mistakes, and Barry's big grin – seems to have turned into some kind of joke for the largely non-indigenous crowd.

After the final song, in which a beaming Barry excels in his characteristic, amazing finger-walking guitar solos, the African MC dances back up on stage. 'Thank you very much for sharing *real* Australia! This is what it's about, isn't it? Fabulous! Very *real* Australians, doing *real* Australian things!'

Framing Aboriginal music and men

The Benning Brothers' performance raises some broader intercultural concerns that frame my explorations of the making of male and Aboriginal modes of being. The Central Australian Aboriginal musicians we meet in the coming chapters primarily create their sense of selves within the blackfella and male realms. My main focus is, therefore, on local dynamics of Aboriginal men's interactions and practices. The Womadelaide performance makes it clear, however, that contemporary indigenous music making and life worlds also always emerge in relation to broader domains of people, ideas and practices. Indeed, in this book, the musical styles practised by the men are a prime example of expressive forms that continue to be made at local, national and global cultural crossroads. It is this 'mongrel' cultural quality that makes these forms of music making especially interesting to explore as 'a medium that mediates, as it were, mediation', in that 'music in global culture … functions as an interactive social context, a conduit for other forms of interaction, other socially mediated forms of appropriation of the world' (Erlmann 1999: 6).

Interactions never take place on equal terms but involve complex negotiations of historically dominant and marginalized versions of legitimate and worthy expressions, representations, practices and identifications. The MC's repeated reference to the 'real' quality of the Benning Brothers is a typical example of how certain privileged notions of 'authentic' Aboriginality are reinforced through a loose essentialism of everyday talk and ways of thinking. It hardly escapes the notice of anybody present that the 'real' she wants us to appreciate refers to the musicians' status as descendants of the indigenous First Peoples of Australia. While we do not expect her to explain what she means by 'real' Australians, she nevertheless engages in, and implicates the Benning Brothers, their music and the audience in, the reiteration of certain pervasive understandings of 'authentic' Aboriginal people and expressive forms. Such notions are represented in the festival programme, too, where the Benning Brothers are described as 'most distinctively the essence of popular Aboriginal Australian music'.

Judging from the many non-indigenous people who leave, the Kimberley musicians' version of 'real' Australia and Aboriginal 'essence' is not easy for them to identify with. What is the Aboriginal essence of playing American country music? Where is the distinctive Aboriginal message in sentimental country song lyrics? Where are the globally recognized musical markers of real, authentic Aboriginality, such as the traditional instruments didjeridu and clap sticks, indigenous languages and lyrics on spiritual, mythical, ancestral themes? Like most of the Central Australian musicians discussed in this book, these Aboriginal performers do not vocalize any recognizable modern

and politically activist Aboriginal sentiments about struggling with injustices and disadvantage on the margins of society either. The only glimpse we get of their racial-political location is from the MC's mention of more racist times, followed by her celebratory assertions that these times are now gone, while, we are to presume, something 'real' has survived.

In their appearance, too, the Benning Brothers and the Aboriginal musicians appearing in this book do not exhibit widely recognized signs of traditional 'tribal' or of politically activist Aboriginality. They do not perform with traditional paraphernalia such as painted skin, loin cloths or head-dresses, all of which are included in the now globally established imagery of Australian Aborigines. They do not exhibit any political statements such as the colours of the Aboriginal flag or T-shirts with activist slogans. They are instead modestly dressed like any rural, small-town Australian men.[1] From their style of music and demeanour, these men may seem more or less detraditionalized and Westernized (e.g. Heelas, Lash and Morris 1996). Ultimately, however, they do not fit this bill either. Barry's limited repertoire of verbal expression, for instance, does not exactly fit the image of a successfully assimilated Aboriginal man. Moreover, as performers, the men have not adopted the masculine, often overtly physical and sexually suggestive gestures that are associated with global conventions of country or rock music, and that the non-indigenous band members performed. The Aboriginal men's physically minimalist stage style is a dominant feature also in the Central Australian Aboriginal music scene. Even by the low-key performance standards of global country music or the 'cool' male pose of some rock conventions, these musicians come across as exceptionally bodily modest and even detached. Therefore, people whose tastes and interpretative skills are shaped in global country, rock and reggae conventions may not feel invited to engage with the performers in a shared, intercultural musical experience, which is a raison d'être for events like Womadelaide. The people who do not disengage wholly by leaving Stage 3 instead seem to resort to an alternative congenial interactional genre, that of parody and humour.

A non-indigenous Australian friend of mine came along to Womadelaide. She commented that watching Aboriginal people trying to imitate Western artists and music reminded her of the old minstrel shows. It was quaint and somewhat amusing, she thought, but hardly Aboriginal. Like a majority of people I meet, she expects something else and rather specific from 'real' Aboriginal music, musicians and people in general. Such expectations as well as evaluations and production of indigenous expressive forms have a history in the broader sociopolitical terrain of Australian indigenous issues. Three interrelated processes have been particularly important in shaping this context over the past five decades.

First, since the late 1960s, increased global recognition of indigenous rights and support for indigenous self-determination, combined with a redirection of Australian nationalist sentiments towards multiculturalism and appreciation of ethnic diversity, have resulted in government policies, legislation and funding structures that have underpinned the proliferation of indigenous musical and other artistic production. Secondly, the emergence of a substantial indigenous arts sector, as part of a larger indigenous institutional domain, has essentially been, and continues to be, an intercultural process. That is, like most indigenous organizations and bureaucracies, the creative activities and the organizational structures of indigenous music, media and arts organizations continue to involve a diversity of indigenous and non-indigenous people with different expectations, experiences and beliefs, as well as being circumscribed by changing commercial, political and legal parameters.

Importantly, and as will be made clear throughout the book, by 'intercultural', I not only mean engagements between indigenous and non-indigenous domains. Australian indigenous life worlds and forms of identification are immensely diverse also in a regional setting such as Central Australia. Interactions between people identifying as indigenous, and mutual influences between indigenous intellectual traditions, gendered ideals and expressive forms, may, in other words, be just as intercultural in kind. Moreover, my approach to 'cultural' is as something always already 'inter-'. That is, as human practices, ideas and forms of identification emerge in social encounters and interactions, they are always already socioculturally intermingled and intersubjectively mediated.

From this understanding of intercultural processes, I develop in this book the concept of 'intercultural mediation' as a central analytical tool for exploring the continuous making and re-making of indigenous and male ways of being in the social world of music making. I take mediation to be a socially constitutive process in which coherent senses of selves emerge from peoples' everyday practices and expressive forms. The way in which I apply the concept is meant to bring to the fore the contradictory, ambiguous and ambivalent in the production of still deeply meaningful expressions and coherent experiences of being indigenous and male. With the notion of intercultural mediation, I connect the ways in which male and indigenous practices, desires and identifications operate and how these are experienced and articulated in the different social and musical settings that I investigate. I also use intercultural mediation as a means to connect the various forms of masculinity and indigeneity articulated in broader arenas such as local and global musical, religious and professional domains. It is a means, too, to connect different levels of identification, such as the level of concrete everyday practices and relations, and the more abstract and symbolic levels of identity politics.