



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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The Didjeridu: From Arnhem Land to the Internet

Edited by Karl Neuenfeldt

Sydney: John Libbey & Company, 1997, 184 pp.

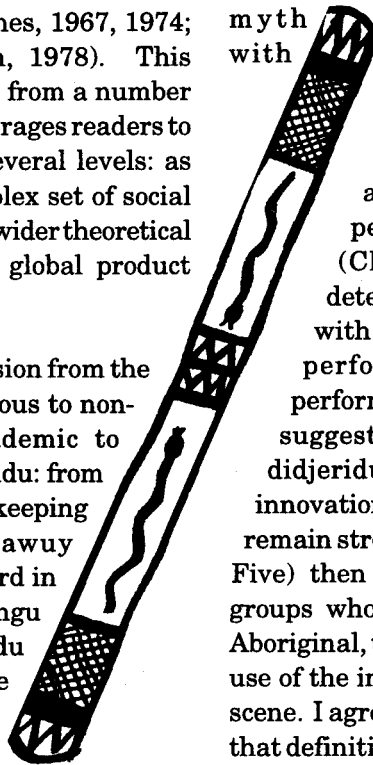
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Until recently, much previous work on the instrument has focused more specifically on the process of sound production and construction of the didjeridu (see for example Jones, 1967, 1974; Moyle, 1974, 1981; Stubington, 1978). This anthology examines the didjeridu from a number of different perspectives and encourages readers to understand the instrument on several levels: as icon and sound, as part of a complex set of social relationships, as a way of engaging wider theoretical issues, and as both a local and global product which will continue to develop.

The format of the text is a progression from the past to the present, from Indigenous to non-Indigenous, and from non-academic to academic perspectives of the didjeridu: from Arnhem Land to Internet. In keeping with this progression, Mandawuy Yunupingu's voice is the first heard in this text. A member of the Yolngu community from where the didjeridu or *yidaki* is believed to have originated, Yunupingu explains the origins of the instrument and its role in traditional Aboriginal society, drawing attention to the intimate link between the didjeridu and sound, kinship, healing power and gender relationships. Given Yunupingu's status in his own community and mainstream Australia as an educator, political activist and musician with the popular band *Yothu Yindi*, Yunupingu's inclusion urges respect for the instrument and further adds a sense of legitimacy to this text.

The didjeridu is then transported into a different performance arena through a series of interviews with three Aboriginal didjeridu players. Musician and social activist Kev Carmody discusses with Neuenfeldt (Chapter One) his connection with the didjeridu in a special and performance context,

emphasising the relationship between the ancient voice of this instrument, mother earth and its place in contemporary expression. Also interviewed by Neuenfeldt (Chapter Two), cultural support officer Mick Davison highlights the way he uses the didjeridu as an educational tool for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, while David Hudson presents the didjeridu as a symbol of a culture that is still alive and thriving in his discussion with Fred Tietjen (Chapter Three). It is unfortunate that the voices of these respected Aboriginal artists do not speak for themselves in the same way afforded Yunupingu. This gesture may be construed by some as bordering on tokenistic, reinforcing the myth that cultural authenticity lies only with the 'real blackfellas'.



There are a number of themes running through this anthology. Continuation and change in the context of didjeridu performance is discussed by Knopff (Chapter Four). He examines the determinants of style in didjeridu playing with reference to traditional clan song performance and contemporary performances in the rock/pop scene. He suggests that while performances of the didjeridu in popular music will allow for innovation in style, the traditional context will remain strong and viable. Dunbar-Hall (Chapter Five) then discusses didjeridu performance in groups who are considered, or call themselves, Aboriginal, through an analysis of its presence and use of the instrument in the contemporary music scene. I agree with Dunbar-Hall when he suggests that definition of the didjeridu as a pan-Aboriginal instrument is not universal and further, that contexts of place and subsequent associations with Aboriginal traditional music are important factors in understanding levels of continuation and innovation in didjeridu performance.

A unique characteristic of this work is the inclusion of 'threads', that is, discussions derived from the Dreamtime didjeridu site (didjeridu@eartha.mills.edu). 'Thread One' presents an Internet discussion of gender and didjeridu performance which occurred in February 1996. The friendly and at times not so friendly banter of on-line discourse is illustrated. Neuenfeldt points the reader to significant issues presented in this discussion such as the absence of women or Aboriginal people taking part and the lack of respect

shown in language usage for Indigenous people of Australia in general. In relation to this thread and the apparent misrepresentation and disinformation, Neuenfeldt raises the important question of who has the right to speak for Aboriginal people. As suggested earlier, this question is valid and should be asked not only in reference to the Internet discussion documented in this text, but any text written about Indigenous cultures.

'Thread Two', which began in late 1995, deals directly with the notion of authenticity as it relates to the construction of the didjeridu. The discussion expresses concerns relating to the type of material used in construction, sound quality as related to construction, and the skill of the artisan and the performer. Neuenfeldt comments that judgements of what is more or less authentic centre on the aesthetic. In the context of this thread where the participants are non-Indigenous performers, indeed the general consensus appears to be that whatever material transmits the earthy visual and auditory character of the didjeridu is more authentic.

The politics of appropriation and notions of authenticity are major issues addressed in this anthology. Barwick (Chapter Six) takes up the challenge of rebutting the myths about gender taboos and didjeridu playing while Neuenfeldt (Chapter Seven) examines the commodification of the didjeridu as an object of culture and commerce. Homan (Chapter Eight) further emphasises the didjeridu as a symbol of pan-Aboriginality as it has entered the world music scene through the performance of Australian Anglo-Celtic performer Charlie McMahon. Turning to the alternative lifestyle scene, Sherwood (Chapter Nine) examines how the didjeridu as cultural artefact has been used by alternative lifestyleers to build their holistic society. In this context, the didjeridu is seen as providing a basis for personal healing, for re-

establishing an ecological and spiritual connection to the earth and for the reconstruction of community. Macgowan (Chapter Ten) takes the reader both 'out of time' and 'out of place' in her discussion of the similarities and differences in the application of the didjeridu in Aboriginal Australia, Great Britain and Ireland. She focuses specifically on the traditional role of the didjeridu and ways in which the instrument has been appropriated by the British and Irish to form a new 'hybrid' genre of world music.

This anthology of articles about the didjeridu is a unique scholarly representation of the didjeridu as both product and process which takes the reader on a journey from the traditional performance in the world music scene and complements an extensive and expanding body of written literature about the didjeridu.

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