

The Impact of Indigenous Music on Australian Culture

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Indigenous people have always held a part in Australian culture. Although Australia has taken great influence from Western culture, there is still the Indigenous culture that goes unspoken. In comparison to the United States, there seems to be more awareness and desire to explore Indigenous culture, at least superficially. This difference between countries propelled the question: how does Indigenous music of Australia impact its society? How has that changed over time? This essay will explore the impact of Indigenous music on Australian culture and how that has evolved alongside the development of Australia. Australian culture is shown to have taken inspiration from Western culture, but Indigenous culture still reiterates its importance to the development of Australians. There is a clear focus on our contemporary period, giving hindsight and wisdom to what has succeeded or what has been lacking in the relationship between Indigenous and Australian culture. This essay will use the terms “Indigenous” and “Aborigines” interchangeably to align itself with its research, but recognizes that there are differences between the two terms.

Observing the impact of Indigenous music on modern culture, it seemed most efficient to explore how that music is taught. An article from *The Australian Journal of Education* titled, “Walking Carefully towards Bridging the Gap: Exploring Australian Music Educator Voices about Teaching Indigenous Music” exemplifies both beneficial impacts and areas teachers need more knowledge of. Although Australia seems to have more awareness of how racism impacts their culture, that awareness doesn’t erase the impact of the decades of misaligned policy. Dawn Joseph and Brad Merrick’s study of Australian music education showed how much of the curriculum is catered to Western tastes. The article mentions how, “Some music educators are challenged to teach diverse music, whereby they find it “either unacceptable or impossible to

implement” according to Cain (2015, p.73) and subsequently focus on what they know or are familiar with in terms of Western music (Southcott & Joseph, 2007; 2015)” (Joseph and Merrick 2023, 91). Joseph and Merrick highlight how educators are intimidated by Indigenous culture. Although there is no physical aggression, educators are fearful of misinterpreting Indigenous music and sharing misinformation. Teachers share Western music more because it engages with students, however it is also important to note that Indigenous music can also engage students to a similar degree. Joseph and Merrick argue the importance of integrating Indigenous music with Australian schools, stating how, “Teaching non-Western music of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples may push students and teachers out of their comfort zones. Mackinlay (2008) argues that the inclusion of Indigenous music in Australian education settings provide an opportunity for pedagogical change and societal transformation to take place” (Joseph and Merrick 2023, 91). This societal transformation implies the longevity of that process of changing culture. While many can agree on its importance some people don’t have the patience to see through that long goal due to present responsibilities.

Indigenous music impacts the relationship people have with their culture, their awareness of their surroundings and how things came to be the way they currently are. As it brings people out of their comfort zone, students gather experience within a community of others who are also likely having their first experience with Indigenous music. The article mentions how Indigenous music has started to blend itself with certain tendencies of Western music. Joseph and Merrick mention artists like Baker Boy, a Yolngu musician who bridges the two styles of music together. While it risks losing important aspects of Indigenous music to Western music, many younger people hold interest in that mixture of styles. When Joseph and Merrick interviewed Australian teachers about integrating Indigenous music they found a similar sentiment. Teachers wanted to

engage with Indigenous culture but were unsure how to integrate Indigenous music into the curriculum. The two authors emphasize how, “Many respondents said ‘not a lot apart from welcome to Country at the start of everything’. One in particular said ‘NAIDCO (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee) week seemed a fitting time to do so’, which seemed tokenistic rather than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures being used as an ongoing part of the curriculum” (Joseph and Merrick 2023, 97). The responses show that the teachers have the intention to respect Indigenous culture, but only observing the culture instead of teaching it. There is the acknowledgement of their importance in relation to Australian culture, but there’s also a negligence in integrating Indigenous culture as Australian culture instead of being placed as “the other”. Joseph and Merrick comment on this idea of multiculturalism, highlighting its importance in gaining understanding of another culture while also highlighting the need to grow past tolerance and value another culture with equality and justice. While teachers do make an effort to highlight the relevance of Indigenous music, they fail to fully relate the significance of that culture beyond its acknowledgement. That acknowledgement leaves Australians aware of Indigenous people, but not very knowledgeable of their history, music, fashion, or customs.

One important development in teaching Indigenous culture has been the introduction of the internet to school’s curriculums. Due to the lack of resources to teach Indigenous culture, many teachers turn to Youtube to share firsthand experiences. Joseph and Merrick comment that, “Peoples were key, whether it be in person or through the application of various online material to provide cultural authenticity in the process” (Joseph and Merrick 2023, 97). It’s clear that the Indigenous people of Australia can’t be replaced, reiterating the importance of giving them a

voice. The solution the internet has bridged shows that firsthand experience is more effective than secondhand regurgitation.

Another *Australian Journal of Education* shows how representation communicates that culture. Authors Michael Webb and Thomas Fienberg relate sounds to visual aid in the context of film, mentioning that, “traditional indigenous sounds of didjeridu and clapping sticks combine with a rock percussion groove, to provide a standard soundtrack function. Here we hear how the score music can draw on Yolngu sound worlds for musical material” (Webb and Fienberg 2011, 36). Webb and Fienberg exemplify integration of Indigenous culture into Australian culture through film. This collaboration between mediums of sound and visual arts propels people to experience Indigenous culture. One risk that comes with the film is risking the authenticity of Yolngu music to cater better towards the film and potential audiences. There is a lasting impact on the atmosphere of Australian culture that is due to Indigenous culture. The didjeridu featured in the soundtrack is an instrument that has gone on to represent Australian music to outsiders. For better or worse, that instrument has become an audio and visual shorthand to connect oneself with Australian culture. Indigenous music has lent itself to visualize aspects of Australian culture while never truly assuming the same status as that culture.

Indigenous culture has held a lasting impact on Australian society. Music is shown to be a driving force in creating community. People are exemplified as what best communicates others with a culture. Observing modern Australian practices, aspects of Indigenous culture have been made popularized, like the didjeridu, while other aspects like the methodology to their customs have been left out of conversation. Teachers turned to Youtube to find primary sources because they felt unequipped to talk about Indigenous culture. Reflecting on the limits experienced during the research process, one limit was the lack of resources available on the topic. While

Indigenous culture connects itself to the heart of Australian culture, it's important to emphasize how that impact has been altered or even minimized as seen through teaching methods. One possible solution to that lack of resources can be found in the primary resources that helped Australian music education. Having access to a larger community of perspectives helps give more context to Indigenous culture. It's also important to acknowledge the present bias found in all sources. While these authors may hold good intentions, that passion for the topic can impact the relevance of their arguments. Studying the bias of teachers in *The Australian Journal of Education* reiterates how bias is present in everyone. Their current acknowledgement of their lack of action propels the Australian curriculum to further improve and grow to a point that values Indigenous culture with justice.

Works Cited

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