

## Arnhem Land Aboriginal Music

### Cultural background

Traditional Australian Aboriginal music is intrinsically linked to Aboriginal views of cosmology, religion, ceremony and the general education of society. Australian Aborigines believe that creativity is rooted in the Dreamtime, a mythological period within which the known world was formed. As a result, the creation of songs is ascribed to ancestral beings from the Dreamtime rather than to the people of the present day. These songs are said to be the creation of spirit-familiars, who communicate with their chosen human vessels in dreams.

Unlike in other hunter-gatherer societies, where the most highly-respected person is typically a hunter or food-gatherer, in traditional Aboriginal clans leadership is given to the Songman, or Master of Music. The Songman is responsible for songs containing mythology, folklore, legend and gossip, and the teaching songs that are passed down through generations. The Songman is credited with psychic power, since it is he who is said to learn new songs in dreams and through visitations from spirits.

Arnhem Land is the area to the North of the Northern Territories in Australia. The music of this region falls into three categories: sacred, which includes totemic and heroic cult music; secular; and secret. The song transcribed and recorded illustrates the secular category, which may be performed at any time in camp. Subject matter tends to be commentary on past or present incidents, ballads, natural phenomena and species, and (increasingly) introduced articles such as axes, tobacco, boats and cards. Sung commentary on events or individuals can take a metaphorical form, because Aboriginal society does not encourage the making of direct personal comments. Instead, songs about animals can be used as a veiled means of commenting upon the personality or experiences of a particular individual.

### Aboriginal music

Traditional Aboriginal music is primarily vocal, with songs for rain-making, rain-stopping, love-magic and secret incantations. These songs are characterized by non-verbal sounds and syllabic chanting. Non-verbal sounds include grunting, high-pitched falsetto, growling and wailing. Vocal qualities range from low huskiness to high, dynamically-contrasting falsetto. Some songs are for solo voice, others are performed in a heterophonic style, and still more may be sung by different groups simultaneously.

Vocal music can be accompanied by rhythm sticks, drum, and in some areas by striking together pairs of boomerangs. Further percussion instruments are fashioned from bark, seed-pods and fish-skin. The body is also used to provide percussive sounds, such as hand-clapping, or slapping the thighs or buttocks.

An important instrument is the didjeridu, used both for accompaniment and for solo performance. Usually about four or five feet long, and tipped with a mouthpiece of wax or hardened gum, the didjeridu is made from either a hollowed-out branch or a length of bamboo. Performance may require the use of circular breathing (using cheek pressure to exhale from the mouth while quickly inhaling through the nose). The instrument provides a droning sound elaborated by intricate cross-rhythms.



Track 18

### *Birruck*

The birruck is a rock wallaby found in the caves and rocky slopes of Arnhem Land. Ostensibly, *Birruck* tells of a wallaby finding a wild plum tree laden with