

13 / **AUSTRALIAN HIP HOP'S MULTI-CULTURAL LITERACIES / A SUBCULTURE EMERGES INTO THE LIGHT / TONY MITCHELL**

Much has been written in recent years about the relationship between hip hop culture, pedagogy and youth literacies in an African-American context (Ibrahim 2003; Dimitriades 2004; Ginwright 2004; Richardson 2006). However, hip hop is also being used increasingly in the broader educational contexts of language learning and popular culture studies both in the US and throughout the rest of the world. Hip Hop Studies is now a discipline taught in US universities (Forman & Neal 2004) and is gradually spreading to educational contexts in other parts of the world. In *Hiphop literacies*, Elaine Richardson (2006) argues for “the depth, the importance, and the immediate necessity of acknowledging one of the most contemporary, accessible, and contentious of African American literacies, Hiphop literacies” (p.xv). She sets out to locate hip hop discourses “within a trajectory of Black discourses” and to consider hip hop as an oral and semiotic form of discourse, analysing “rap music and song lyrics, electronic and digital media, including video games, music videos, telecommunication

devices, magazines, ‘Hip hop’ novels, oral performances, and cinema” (Richardson 2006, p.xvi). Richardson’s study is restricted by two major limitations. Apart from looking at the use of African-American language in online German hip hop sites, neither considers the indigenising global spread of hip hop beyond the boundaries of African-American vernacular cultures, nor the non-linguistic but fundamentally semiotic aspects of hip hop such as beatboxing, DJing, breakdancing and graffiti writing, which are arguably of equal importance to MCing as hip hop literacies. This chapter examines the development of hip hop in an Australian context, far removed from the strictures of African-American essentialism, and its emergence as a major contemporary form of youth literacy.

The “four elements” of hip hop – MCing, DJing (both of which have their historical roots in Jamaican sound systems and DJs “toasting” over dub plates rather than in New York street culture – see below), graffiti writing and breakdancing are arguably epistemologies of contemporary youth culture which primarily celebrate a poetics of identity and place (Mitchell 2001; Forman 2002). Most MCs or rappers let us know from the outset who they are and where they are from, and “signify” (in hip hop parlance, a term meaning to represent or produce variations on) their place in a subculture that is both local and global. I have argued elsewhere (Mitchell 2003b) that hip hop, especially Australian hip hop, can be regarded as a subculture in the way that the term was used by the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies, despite the “post-subcultural” arguments of Bennett (1999), Hesmondhalgh (2005), Muggleton (2000), Muggleton and Weinzierl (2003) and others. With homology among its four elements, stylistic bricolage in its use of sampling (as well as in its clothing styles and other elements) and a perpetuation of socially oppositional values, along with a prevailing masculinity and ethical notions of authenticity (“keeping it real”), it strongly resembles “classic” subcultural groups and music related genres such as bikers, teddy boys, punk, goth and heavy metal. Due to its continual “underground” status, having been largely overlooked or misunderstood by the mainstream Australian music industry, Australian hip hop’s enforced do-it-yourself (DIY) dynamics have ensured that it has remained, for the most part, a self-sufficient parallel musical culture with a growing national network of protagonists who support one another in terms of organising gigs, selling CDs and collaborating on recording and performance projects. There is a prevailing commitment to expressing strongly defined notions of Australian hip hop identities, which include rapping in Australian accents and speaking about local issues, references and concerns, as well as partying in a distinctively Australian style. As Mark Pollard, editor of the Australian hip hop quarterly *Stealth Magazine* (which has grown steadily in size and scope since it began in 1995) has stated:

What we’re about takes many forms – from raps about BBQs, drinking beer, smoking pot and painting trains, to political and social inspections about race, class inequality and gender issues. The content of Australian hip-hop is as varied as its practitioners (Pollard 2003).

Australian MCs are sometimes divided into “ockers”, “falafels” and “wogs”, as George Stavrias pointed out in his 2003 study of aspects of Aboriginal hip hop in Sydney and Melbourne (2003, p.25). “Ockers” are predominantly Anglo-Australian MCs who insist on using a broad Australian accent complete with frequent swearing and “ockerisms” and decry MCs who rap with an American accent as “wack” (ridiculous). Their music often celebrates aspects of Anglo-Australian working-class culture, such as barbecues and beer. Prominent exponents include the Adelaide-based Hilltop Hoods, Brisbane’s Lazy Grey and Perth-based Layla (another subgenre known as “beer hop” is sometimes referred to; this would include groups such as the Sydney-based, comedy-inflected Two Up, who celebrate sport, RSL clubs and the like). “Falafels” is the colloquial term for “conscious” rappers who generally express a left wing or anti-government perspective in their lyrics. They are sometimes characterised as “hippies” for their espousal of a critical, oppositional and even intellectual view of Australian issues such as refugees and the war in Iraq. Sydney group The Herd is perhaps the most distinctive example of this subgenre, along with Melbourne-based ecological hip hop sound system Combat Wombat. “Wog” rap denotes MCs of non-Anglo descent who mobilise a reverse identification with the discriminatory term “wog”, a practice which arose after the stand up comedy show *Wogs out of work* became widely successful throughout Australia in 1989. Prominent practitioners of “wog” hip hop include Lebanese-Australian MC Sleek the Elite, multicultural Melbourne crew Curse ov Dialect and TZU, fronted by Eurasian MC Joelistics, as well as Koolism from Canberra and Perth crew Downsyde. The music of some groups and individuals, such as pioneering Sydney crews Def Wish Cast and Brethren – who are also exponents of a Christian ethos – overlaps a number of these categories.

The use of Australian accents and expressions in local hip hop is not just confined to “ocker” MCs. In fact, a 2003 sociolinguistic study by Renae O’Hanlon, which compared a representative sample of 30 tracks of Australian hip hop with the same number of tracks from contemporary Australian rock, pop and country music, demonstrated that, despite its reliance on US-derived hip hop terminology, Australian hip hop uses a far greater proportion of culturally specific Australian slang and accents, including much greater concentrations of the lexical, phonological and grammatical features of Australian English, than the other contemporary Australian music styles. Two-thirds of the hip hop tracks O’Hanlon analysed contained:

... at least one example of either Australian place names, cultural references, or abbreviations ... or uniquely AustE [Australian English] lexical items. Many of the songs are saturated with such examples ... In addition to broad phonological features, AHH [Australian hip hop] artists perform using non-standard AustE grammatical forms which are generally associated with the working class (O’Hanlon 2003, p.45).

On the other hand:

The language of other youth music genres in Australia contains markedly fewer examples of AustE language. In fact, twenty-eight of the artists studied did not use any (non-phonological) linguistic devices that would identify them as Australian ... The majority of youth music genres in Australia, most notably pop and rock, are dominated by an imported cultural identity which relies heavily on the USA (O'Hanlon 2003, pp.54, 56).

The findings from O'Hanlon's study, together with indicators such as the widespread use of Aboriginal English by a range of Indigenous Australian MCs from Western Australia, Northern Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, and, arguably, the influx of various inflections of non-Anglo migrant variants of Australian English into Australian hip hop, suggest that hip hop has provided a vitally important medium of expression for colloquial and working-class forms of Australian English. Apart from providing evidence of hip hop's "indigenisation" in Australia, these indicators also suggest that hip hop has become an important repository for idiosyncratically local forms of uniquely Australian English.

The use of languages other than English in Australian hip hop is also on the increase. A prominent example of this trend is 'Unpredictable', the opening track on The Herd's 2005 album *The sun never sets*, which contains sections in Czech and Spanish. Multilingualism also features heavily on *Sonic allsorts*, a 2003 compilation of tracks by 17 Australian artists from around Australia who perform in over 20 languages, with code switching (switching between different languages in the one song) a recurrent feature. Compiled by Brendan Palmer, producer of the SBS Radio program *Alchemy* and prominent local and international DJ and electronica artist, *Sonic allsorts* demonstrates the linguistic and cultural diversity evident in Australian hip hop. Dale Harrison, a member of The Herd, noted that the album was both "born out of a need to represent other less emphasised elements of Australian culture, and to reclaim from the rampant parochialism and jingoism the very idea of being 'Australian'" (Harrison 2003). *Sonic allsorts* leads off with a track in Swahili by Sydney-based hip hop producer and MC Mr. Zux, followed by the French and Punjabi track 'Eh Mate' by Brisbane artist Prussia, and a Spanish rap by Adelaide-based Joel Castell. 'Curse ov the Vulk Macedonski' features traditional Macedonian music and MCing by Borsch from Curse ov Dialect. Sydney-based Latin American collective Ila Familia, who released the mostly Spanish language hip hop album *Pa' mi gente* (For my people) in 2004, are also featured on *Sonic allsorts*, along with Creator, a Tasmania-based MC from Sierra Leone who raps in French in this instance, but also performs in Mende, Creole and English. *Sonic allsorts* is much more than a curio – it raised the bar considerably in the showcasing of multilingual and multi-cultural Australian hip hop.

A prominent figure in Australian multicultural hip hop is Sydney-based Lebanese-Australian MC Sleek the Elite, who is probably best known for his eponymous role in SBS Television's popular "wog" comedy show *Pizza* from 2000 until 2005. Directed

by and starring Paul Fenech, the show has become renowned for taking non-Anglo-Australian comedy to new extremes of gross bad taste and political incorrectness. Sleek the Elite is a suave, flamboyant and witty rapper and freestyler who raps about Australian racism and political life, capitalism, sexual encounters, solidarity with Aborigines, and his Lebanese-Australian background, among other topics both serious and flippant. After being a notable presence on the Sydney scene for a number of years in the early 1990s as a freestyler, rapper and breakdancer, he released his debut album *Sleekism* in 1997. In both *Pizza* and his recorded output, Sleek negotiates a very thin line between parody and espousal of the more misogynistic and homophobic posturings of US gangsta rap and the ostentatiously vulgar displays of wealth endemic to the “bling bling” aspects of mainstream US hip hop, complete with jewellery, fawning semi-naked “babes” and macho boasting. The cover of his 2003 EP *Oh yeah* features Sleek borne aloft by five busty blondes, while a girlie chorus intones his name in the refrain of the title track, which is also interspersed with quotations from African-American femcee Missy Elliott’s sexual come-on ‘Get ‘ur freak on’ (from her 2000 album *Miss E ... so addictive*) and a string of anecdotes about sexual prowess. But he is also probably unique among male MCs worldwide for having dressed up in drag for video clips and album photos. His signature track ‘Child of the cedar’, written in 1992 and included on *Sleekism*, includes references to Sleek’s own Lebanese background alongside espousals of Aboriginal land rights and attacks on Anglo-Australian xenophobia and the culture of “beer and meat pies”. Middle Eastern musical inflections are added to the track’s hip hop beats, mixed by DJ Soup. A sequel, ‘Child of the cedar 2’, features on his second album, *Hard for a rapper*, released in 2004. On this album, Sleek was even more aggressive in his assertion of his Lebanese identity and his attacks on the Australian press, television, police, government and the anti-immigrant party One Nation. A more rock oriented, guitar-based album than its predecessor, *Hard for a rapper*, co-produced by Sereck, combined playful interweaving of Sleek’s own identity as a rapper, poet and ladies man with ancient Arabic poetry and storytelling, embodying a comfortable negotiation of his role as a Lebanese-Australian battling racism, discrimination and stereotyping.

Hip hop myths of origin

The much-repeated mythology of hip hop’s origins locates them in the South Bronx in New York City in the mid-1970s, when Jamaican MC and DJ Kool Herc (Clive Campbell) imported the sound systems of Kingston into the US, complete with sampling, and DJs toasting over dub plates – talking over records which have been modified to emphasise their drum and bass elements (Campbell & Brody 1999). This style of music quickly became associated with the block parties popular in predominantly black, Hispanic and multicultural neighbourhoods in New York at that time. These neighbourhood street parties were spearheaded by Afrika Bambaataa, founder of

The Zulu Nation, and Grandmaster Flash, doyen of “message rap”, which was later espoused in the “conscious rap” of Public Enemy and other hip hop artists. The first hip hop recording was the relatively mainstream 1980 pop release ‘Rapper’s delight’ by the African-American Sugarhill Gang. This was followed by films such as the 1982 rap and graffiti documentary *Wild style* by Charlie Ahearn (featuring Grandmaster Flash), the 1984 rap and breakdance feature film *Beat street* by Stan Latham (featuring Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa, among others), and hip hop music videos such as Malcolm McLaren’s ‘Buffalo gals’ (1983; single released in 1982). These three key hip hop visual texts had a considerable impact in Australia, as elsewhere in the world, where fledgling and aspirational breakers and graffiti writers, and later rappers and turntablists, copied every move from the videos and began taking their newly acquired skills out onto the streets. Burwood Park in Sydney’s inner west was one of the earliest breakdancing sites in Australia, and was not without the occasional violent encounter, as represented in multicultural crew Sound Unlimited’s 1992 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.

The multicultural origins of New York hip hop have been mirrored in different forms in Australia, as elsewhere, and represent an alternative to the monocultural African-American discourse which continues to dominate US hip hop (Rose 1994; Tate 2005). As Australian hip hop has grown and developed, it has moved progressively further away from US influences, as indicated most overtly by groups such as the avant-garde Curse or Dialect, with its defiantly multicultural make-up of Maltese, Macedonian, Maori, Pakistani and Indian performers and use of wildly diverse samples and musical styles; and TZU, with its Chinese philosophical base and use of rock music and agitprop rhetoric, as well as the various musicians that make up the Melbourne-based hip hop/break beat Symbiotic collective to which TZU belong. What follows is an inevitably Sydney-centric account of Australian hip hop, one which will nonetheless attempt to acknowledge its regional diversity as well as its particularly local characteristics.

Koolism’s ARIA Award and All the ladies

Kool Herc was in Sydney in 2004 to witness a key moment in Australian hip hop, when Canberra duo Koolism – whose name is a direct reference to Kool Herc himself – received an ARIA (Australian Recording Industry Association) Award for their album *Part 3: Random thoughts*. The duo, made up of Tongan-Australian MC Hau and DJ Danielsan,

had previously released a number of distinctively Pacific island-inflected tracks, including a track in Tongan, with MC Hau name checking his Tongan ancestors on the group's 2003 EP *Blue notes*. Danielsan's ARIA Award acceptance speech in 2004 caused a stir in music industry circles after he dedicated the Award, presented to Koolism by US commercial hip hop crew The Black Eyed Peas, to all the Australian hip hop artists who were "keeping it real" and refusing to be "fake wannabe Americans". The Australian DJ then turned to The Black Eyed Peas and said, "Oh, I didn't mean you of course". It was a nicely symbolic moment, illustrating how Australian hip hop had developed its own distinctively diverse identity, far from its supposed "origins" in US hip hop. Or, as Sereck of Def Wish Cast put it some years earlier when summing up the "indigenising" local dynamism of Sydney hip hop in defiance of any African-American prerogative: "They'll tell you it's a black thing, man, but it's not. It's *our* thing" (cited in Maxwell 2003, p.67). Koolism later held a celebratory barbecue in Canberra, at which a highly supportive Kool Herc was invited to DJ. Their award was celebrated by most of the Australian hip hop community, as it was the first major mainstream Australian music industry acknowledgment of local hip hop – albeit under the rather meaningless rubric of Best Urban Release. Koolism beat a number of mainstream R & B artists for the award, representing what had been by necessity an underground music scene for at least 15 years.

Another prominent Pacific Islander Australian MC is Fijian "femcee" Trey, one of a growing number of women rappers on the Sydney scene. In a sequence from *Basic equipment*, Paul Fenech's 1997 documentary about Sydney hip hop, *Trey* described the four elements of hip hop as modern extensions of analogous elements in traditional Fijian culture (*Basic equipment* 1997). She relates turntablism to the beats of the *lali* log drum (used to announce mealtimes, among other things), the MC to her grandfather's public speaking in a circle around the *kava* bowl, breakdancing to the ceremonial *meke* story-performance dances, and graffiti to cave painting or the designs of the *tapa* or *masi* cloth. Patterns recounting ancestral Fijian stories are stenciled, stamped or smoked into these bark cloths, made from the paper mulberry tree, which are used in traditional Fijian ceremonies and religious rituals. Trey has used *tapa* cloth designs on her CD covers and her website, as well as wearing them in performance. She also incorporated the name of the cloth into the name of her record label (Tapastry Toons) and the title of her second album (*Tapastry tunes*). In *Basic equipment*, Trey points out the diverse ethnic backgrounds of some Australian rappers, and invites Pauline Hanson, then a federal MP and leader of the One Nation anti-immigration party, to get down with them. Trey's emphasis on equivalences between hip hop and Fijian cultural formations indicates how rap music has been indigenised or localised in the Pacific region (Mitchell 2003a).

Trey was also a contributor to the all-women Australian hip hop compilation *First words*, which appeared in 1999 on the Mother Tongues label. Established by Heidi Pascal of Creative Vibes, Mother Tongues claims to be the first all-women hip hop label in the

world. Trey's influence on Australian women MCs was acknowledged in the documentary *All the ladies*, made by Colleen Hughson and Chilean-Australian Mary Quinsacara (MC Que) in 2003 (*All the ladies* 2003). The film profiled a number of female MCs, including Layla, whose gutter-mouthed first album *Heretik* made a big impact on Australian hip hop in 2005; Lil' G, a half-Greek, half-Aboriginal MC who calls herself the "Wogarigine" and raps about subjects like the Yorta Yorta tribe and Aboriginal deaths in custody; MC Que, whose 1993 cassette tape *Tellin' it like it is* was the first release by a female MC in Australia; Italian-Australian MC A-Love from Melbourne; and Mexican-Australian MC Maya Jupiter from Sydney, who is also a salsa artist and hosts national youth radio station Triple J's *Hip Hop Show*. In 2007, Trey and Maya Jupiter joined forces with Austrian-Australian DJ Nick Toth to form Foreign Heights, a multicultural "supergroup" whose lively eponymous debut album featured Tanzanian-Australian MC and producer Mr. Zux as well as a number of female MCs.

The increasing number of female MCs in Australian hip hop, nurtured by all-women workshops run by artists such as Trey and Maya Jupiter, is having a destabilising influence on the predominant masculinity of hip hop culture (Maxwell 2003, p.33). Layla is a particularly good example of this. Part of the otherwise all-male Syllabolics (SBX) Crew (including Downsyde, Clandestien, Matty B and Hunter) who have put Western Australia definitively on the Australian hip hop map, Layla's debut album *Heretik* was one of the most anticipated Australian hip hop albums of 2005. A diminutive, dark featured femcee in her early twenties, Layla has a strongly assertive, abrasive way of expressing herself which commands attention, and she is not averse to streams of expletives. This is shown to good example in the invective track 'The fuss about sluts', which deals with the fractious issue of women in hip hop and their assumed sexual availability by most male "playas", but is also about the legions of Britney Spears "wannabes" in the music industry who exploit their sexuality as an instrument of trade. The first thing about *Heretik* that strikes the listener is Layla's broad Australian accent, followed by the anger which surfaces in many of her lyrics, often expressing the turmoil and torment of a difficult adolescence. Another striking feature of *Heretik* is Layla's and DJ Dazahstah's use of samples from other Australian hip hop artists such as The Hilltop Hoods, Bias B, Lyrical Commission and Mass MC, which pay homage to the efforts of Layla's peers and predecessors in the local hip hop scene. While *Heretik* contained enough energy and promise to install Layla as a potentially major new figure on the Australian hip hop scene, its widespread use of expletives prevented the album from gaining the airplay and recognition that it deserved.

In 2001 Draino, a Melbourne-based MC involved with the crew Puah Hedz, released *The OZ cella*, a multimedia CD ROM documenting artists active in the Australian hip hop scene. An accompanying website was regularly updated by Draino until 2005. By June 2003, *The OZ cella* had chronicled 509 individual Australian hip hop artists, 105



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groups, 24 crews, and 141 recordings, representing every state and territory apart from the Northern Territory (where multicultural soul-R & B-funk group Culture Connect were arguably producing a hybrid form of hip hop) (*The OZ cella* 2001). Most of these local hip hop releases have been either self-produced or released on small independent labels. Melbourne-based Obese Records has gained a high profile as a recording label in recent years, following its beginnings as a hip hop record store in 1995. Its roster features local artists such as label founder Pegz, Reason, Bias B, Muph and Plutonic, Art of War, Hilltop Hoods, Sydney-based Hijack and Torcha, Brisbane-based Lazy Grey and the Perth Syllabolix Crew. Crookneck, another Melbourne label, is run by Malay-Australian MC Raph and has released important albums by Raph's group Mnemonic Ascent, as well as DJ Ransom, A-Love and Sydney-based Celsius. The label Nuff Said, run by MC Que and her partner Prowla, has released a number of compilations as well as albums by Prowla, MC Que, Plutonic Lab and Dedlee, while also operating a record shop. Sydney-based label Parallax View's releases include work by Koolism and the *Airheads* compilations; Invada, run by Sydney DJ Katalyst, has also released work by Koolism, among other artists. Elefant Traks, run by major Sydney crew The Herd, has put out albums by hip hop instrumentalists Hermitude and Unkle Ho, and Melbourne-based militant rappers Combat Wombat, as well as The Herd's own albums. In Adelaide, three *Culture*

of kings compilations (released in 2000, 2002 and 2003), featuring hip hop artists from all over Australia, were put together by DJ Dyems of the group Terra Firma and released on Obese Records.

A number of Australian hip hop artists have released work on major labels to mixed responses from both the hip hop community and the wider public. Although prominent hip hop artists such as 1200 Techniques (who broke up in 2003), and T'ZU, both based in Melbourne, managed to gain support from major labels (Sony and Mushroom/Liberation respectively), they were still treated with respect by most of the hip hop community. On the other hand, the more mainstream artist Figgkidd, from Bankstown in Sydney, was regarded with general disdain when his US-produced and US-accented debut CD *What is Figgkidd?* was released twice in 2005 by Sony in a misguided attempt to market him as an Australian version of Eminem. Phrase, an Australian-accented MC with some underground credentials from the suburbs of Melbourne, released the album *Talk with force* through Universal in 2005. According to Steve Duck, the editor of Melbourne-based underground hip hop magazine *Out4Fame*, *Talk with force* “will be looked back on in time as a landmark release in Australian hip hop” (2005, p.48). Two local hip hop compilations curated by Sydney DJ Josie Styles, *Straight from the art* I and II, were released by Warner in 2003 and 2004 respectively, but without sufficient promotion to make much of an impact.

In 2004, Crookneck Records released the compilation *15.OZ vinyl: 15 years of Australian hip-hop on vinyl*. This compilation was mixed by DJ Ransom, a veteran from the AKA Brothers, who, in 1989, became the first Melbourne hip hop group to release a recording. According to the album's accompanying liner notes (written by various leading Australian MCs), the first Australian hip hop release appeared in 1983. A novelty record entitled ‘The Aussie rap’ by the Average Aussie Band, it appears to have sunk without a trace. However, Sydney hip hop luminary Blaze (1994) regards the 1988 independent release ‘Combined talent’/‘My destiny’ by Just Us (available on the *15.OZ Vinyl* compilation) as the first “true” Australian hip hop record. Just Us was a Sydney hip hop group, consisting of Maltese MC Case and Mentor. More recently, Maekism's 2004 novelty hip hop version of Slim Dusty's Australian anthem ‘A pub with no beer’ was made available as an MP3, while Mass MC and MC Thorn's 2000 track ‘The BBQ song’ became something of an Australian hip hop anthem, which virtually spawned a subgenre known as “barbecue rap”. But as noted by Pollard (2003) Australian hip hop has, for the most part, remained “independent, marginalised and largely ignored by the masses”. One reason for this, according to Pollard, is that local hip hop's extensive use of Australian accents has ostracised “many more used to the American way of doing things”, including “music industry decision makers” (2003). Unlike the commercially flourishing hip hop scene in Aotearoa/New Zealand (which is largely dominated by Pacific Island MCs such as Scribe, and the South Auckland Dawn Raid collective, including Mareko

and Savage, who rap in American accents and regularly reach the top of the local single and album charts), Australian hip hop has had little in the way of commercial success. Exceptions include the short-lived group 1200 Techniques, led by veteran DJ and B Boy DJ Peril, whose single 'Karma' won Best Independent Release at the 2002 ARIA Awards (ARIA Awards 2007a). Another notable exception is the relatively mainstream Adelaide crew The Hilltop Hoods, whose 2003 album *The calling* and 2006 album *The hard road* both reached platinum status, selling more than 70,000 copies in Australia (ARIA 2006, 2007). *The hard road* also debuted at number one on the ARIA Album Chart, while a number of songs from both albums made Triple J's annual listener-voted Hottest 100 poll in their respective release years (Triple J n.d.; 2005). The Hilltop Hoods won ARIA Awards in 2006 (Best Independent Release and Best Urban Release) for *The hard road* (ARIA Awards 2007b); and 2007 (Best Urban Release) for *The hard road restrung*, a reworking of tracks from *The hard road* recorded in collaboration with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra (ARIA Awards 2007c).

Sydney hip hop history: Kickin' to the underground

The first book-length account of Australian hip hop was Ian Maxwell's *Phat beats, dope rhymes: Australian hip hop down under comin' upper* (2003), which focused on the Sydney scene in the mid-1990s. In the book, Maxwell noted that the only two Australian hip hop albums which had any noticeable impact on the Australian music scene of the mid-1990s both contained references to Australian hip hop's underground status in their titles: Sound Unlimited's *A postcard from the edge of the under-side* and Def Wish Cast's *Knights of the underground table* (2003, pp.196-204). While diametrically opposed in their approaches to hip hop – Sound Unlimited are regarded as mainstream, Def Wish Cast as underground – it is no coincidence that both groups have their origins in the western suburbs of Sydney, an area often stereotypically regarded as working-class, underprivileged and crime-ridden, home to a large number of non-Anglo immigrants, and lacking of many of the social and cultural amenities enjoyed by those living in the inner and northern suburbs of the city.

A postcard from the edge of the under-side, released by Columbia/Sony in 1992, was the only Australian rap album to come out on a major label for more than ten years. It was mastered in Boston by the Antunes Brothers – much of the work done without Sound Unlimited's participation – on state-of-the-art equipment using live instrumentation. A number of samples used on individual tracks gave the album a somewhat Australian flavour, including Daddy Cool's anthemic 1971 Oz Rock track 'Eagle rock' and Men At Work's 1983 US and UK chart topper 'Down under'.

Sound Unlimited, who consisted of Chilean-Filippino brother and sister MCs Rossano and T-Na, Kode Blue, an Anglo-Australian, and DJ Vlad BTL, of Russian extraction, began life as the Westside Posse. In 1988, their Public Enemy-influenced track called

'Pull the trigger' was featured on *Down under by law*, a compilation of Australian hip hop released on Virgin Records. This compilation, the first collection of Australian hip hop, also included Mighty Big Crime, Swoop, Sharline (aka Spice, Sydney's first major female MC and graffiti artist) and Fly Girl 3. Nearly all the tracks on *Down under by law* show their US influences in very obvious ways. As such, the album is a measure of how far Australian hip hop has progressed in defining its own sound in the past two decades. While Blaze (1994) has described *Down under by law* as "very poor" and "a tub of lard", he acknowledges 'Pull the Trigger' as being "the closest to what we wanted".

Sound Unlimited earned the scorn of Sydney hardcore hip hoppers after teaming up with the Antunes Brothers – who had formerly worked with US pop group New Kids on the Block – to record *A postcard from the edge of the under-side*. Their hip hop image suffered a further blow in the late 1990s when they reinvented themselves as Renegade Funk Train and pursued a blatantly commercial pop-soul and R & B sound.

In stark contrast to the production methods used on Sound Unlimited's *A postcard from the edge of the under-side*, Def Wish Cast recorded *Knights of the underground table* in a suburban garage on a four track machine, with the aid of turntables, old records, a VCR and rented videos such as John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981) and a selection of B-grade horror flicks. The album was released on the group's own independent Random Records in 1993. Pollard (2003) has described Def Wish Cast as "the quintessential, possibly never-to-be-eclipsed Australian hip hop group" and their album, which sold 6,000 to 7,000 copies – a considerable achievement at the time for a self-produced release – as "the Australian hip hop manual". Their anthemic single and video 'A.U.S.T. down under comin' upper', which was released in 1994, featured most of the leading figures on the Sydney hip hop scene at the time.

Def Wish Cast disbanded in the late 1990s, with key members Sereck, Defwish, Die-C and DJ Vame going on to collaborate with other important groups such as Celsius and Killawatz, as well as working individually. Sereck narrated *Basic equipment*, Paul Fenech's comprehensive 1997 documentary film about Sydney hip hop, which was screened on ABC Television (*Basic equipment* 1997). He went on to form a record label named after the documentary, as well as mentoring and producing a number of younger MCs. Def Wish Cast reformed in 2003 with a renewed emphasis on their "westside" connections, as expressed in their shout-outs during a full-tilt performance at the Parramatta Riverside Studios during the Sydney Festival in 2005, where fellow Sydney hip hop veterans were also among the acts on the bill. Def Wish Cast finally released a follow-up to *Knights of the underground table* in 1996 – *The legacy continues* – but they appeared something of a spent force by then, their "old school" styles having been eclipsed by numerous newer hip hop artists and groups able to achieve more media impact.

Miguel D'Souza, a prominent advocate of Australian hip hop in Sydney weekly street music paper *3D* until 1998 and through his longstanding role as host of community

radio station 2SER's hip hop radio program *The mothership connection*, claimed that Fenech's documentary *Basic equipment* managed to "document what has happened to hip hop culture in the West, and re-emphasise the point that resistance still is at the core of Western Suburbs hip hop" (1998, p.2). D'Souza also argued, with some justification, that Sydney hip hop had become "gentrified" in the mid-1990s, moving away from its western suburbs origins to a more inner-city base. As Kurt Iveson has argued, hip hop has been an important identity marker for Indigenous Australians and youth of non-Anglo ethnic backgrounds, many of whom are located in Sydney's west:

Young people in this position have been forced to seek out the materials to develop a culture that is relevant to their cross-cultural experiences. In hip hop, some found a culture which has the means to fight back against the experience of racism, by addressing the segregation and victimisation experienced by people of colour. Rap talks about racism, and other elements of the culture like graffiti and hip hop style provide the means to make space in segregated Australian cities for cultural production. The appeal of hip hop to ethnic and indigenous young people in Australia lies significantly in its valuing of that which isn't white in a white racist society (Iveson 1997, p.42).

This "reterritorialisation" of hip hop from a black American vernacular expression into an often "non-white" migrant Australian context parallels similar appropriations in other parts of the world.

Aboriginal hip hop

In their study of contemporary Aboriginal music in Australia, *Deadly sounds, deadly places*, Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson note that "hip-hop in particular has become a common feature of everyday Aboriginal life across Australia" (2004, p.122). They cite Aboriginal hip hop artists such as BrothaBlack, formerly of the multicultural Sydney group South West Syndicate, and Brisbane-based Native Rhyme Syndicate, which includes members from Arrente country in central Australia and the Gkuthaarn clan in the Gulf of Carpentaria, for whom hip hop has proven to be "one of the most effective means to communicate with young people" (Dunbar-Hall & Gibson 2004, p.123). They also refer to Lez "Bex" Beckett, an MC from Cunnamulla in central Queensland, who spent his teenage years in prison before becoming an MC. Beckett was featured in Penny Nutt's documentary *A place of peace*, in which he is seen co-ordinating a two-week series of hip hop workshops at the Settlement Neighbourhood Centre in Redfern, Sydney in 2001 (*Message stick* 2001). A number of other hip hop artists were involved in these workshops, including Organics, MC Trey, Elf Transporter, Wizdm, and Koori femcee Ebony Williams. Beckett received an award for most promising new talent in music at the 2005 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Deadly Awards (*The Deadlys* 2005).

More recently, MC Murriz, three teenagers from Brisbane tutored by femcee Liones,

released the EP *Ain't No Suckas* in 2004, combining party rap with serious messages on tracks like '2 Black 2 Strong' and 'Respect', about pride and respect for Aboriginal people, and a eulogy for Brisbane, incorporating didjeridu and hip hop and dub beats. Sydney-based Wire MC, of Gumbainggir background, combined hip hop with rock and acoustic guitar, collaborating with MC Morganics in the 2004 hip hop show *River rhythm beatbox*, and the hip hop theatre shows *Stereotype* (2005) and *Survival tactics* (2007). *River rhythm beatbox* featured pre-teen Aboriginal rappers The Wilcannia Mob, who had something of a hit in 2003 with their track about life in Wilcannia ('Down river', which was released on the *All you mob* compilation), as well as other young Indigenous hip hop artists including The Broken Hill Girls, Tashina Barba, Victor Riley, and Bourke-based artists The Back Lane Brothers. In the two-man show *Stereotype*, Wire and Morganics combined hip hop, theatre, comedy and beatboxing at the Sydney Opera House Studio.

Local Knowledge, a trio from Newcastle, New South Wales, have combined hip hop with traditional Aboriginal dance and storytelling to produce an educational form of rapping, dealing with issues such as alcohol and drugs, deaths in custody, racism, sex education and Aboriginal history, while their 2005 track 'Blackfellas' featured shout-outs to Aboriginal groups all over the country. Local Knowledge were the subject of an SBS Television documentary screened as part of the Aboriginal music series *Blaktrax* in 2004. This documentary showcased the group in performance and interviewed them about their approach to hip hop through Indigenous culture and education (*Blaktrax* 2004). In 2005, Local Knowledge won Band of the Year at the Deadly Awards (*The Deadlys* 2005) and headlined Klub Koori: Indigenous Hip Hop, an all-Aboriginal hip hop event held at the Manning Bar at Sydney University. Local Knowledge split into two separate performing groups – Street Warriors and the Last Kinecton – in 2006, both of whom performed at that year's Klub Koori events.

While very few recordings by Aboriginal hip hop artists have been released beyond hard-to-find compilations, most of them have performed widely in both Aboriginal and "whitefella" contexts, and have received airplay on Triple J as well as community stations such as Koori Radio. The aforementioned Klub Koori events are the largest Aboriginal hip hop events to be held in Australia. Joining Local Knowledge on the Klub Koori bill in November 2005 were veteran MC and breakdancer Munkimuk, formerly of the South West Syndicate (who was described by BrothaBlack in a Klub Koori concert in 2004 as "the architect of Aboriginal hip hop"), Ebony Williams and Lez Beckett among others. The number of younger crews who also performed at Klub Koori in 2005 gives an indication of the significant growth of Aboriginal hip hop in the preceding years. These included Indigenous Intrudaz (who were nominated for a Music Oz award in 2005), Jakalene Extreme (a Sydney-based political rapper who also featured in the SBS "ethnic" comedy *Pizza*), the spoken word artist Radical Son, the Brisbane-based female

duo MIZ (who come from the Torres Strait and the Seychelles), the Tribal S.U.N.S. Regime (featuring DK from Native Rhyme Syndicate), and Townsville-based Sneak1 and Rockhampton-based Stray Dogs (the latter two groups have their origins in the Torres Strait Islands). Through the workshops of MCs such as Morganics, BrothaBlack, Wire MC, Combat Wombat's Lab Rats and others, hip hop skills, particularly MCing, beatboxing and breakdancing, have been adopted by Aboriginal young people and combined with more traditional aspects of Aboriginal culture such as oral storytelling and dance. As Wire MC has stated, hip hop has been fully indigenised into contemporary Aboriginal culture: "I'm a modern day blackfella, this is still Dreamtime for me, Hip hop is the new clapsticks, hip hop is the new corroboree" (cited in Iten 2003, p.79). But Aboriginal hip hop gets little in the way of wide acknowledgment within the Australian hip hop scene, occupying a dual subcultural status within the subculture itself (see Mitchell 2006).

Hip hop pedagogy

One of the most important fulcrums of Australian hip hop was Metabass 'n' Breath, a Sydney crew made up of three prominent MCs and beatboxers – Morganics, Baba and Elf Transporter (the latter two are both expatriate Americans) – and Austrian-Australian DJ Nick Toth. The group's beats incorporated traditional music from Australia, Asia and South America, and they released a notable album of globally-inflected hip hop called *Seek* in 1997. Their line-up also included a drummer, a keyboardist and a bass player, and the album contained two tracks in Spanish – evidence that they were looking at global influences rather than exclusively US ones. The group toured the US twice and released their album *The life and times of a beatboxer* on the San Francisco label Bomb Hip-Hop Records in 2000 before breaking up later that year. Metabass 'n' Breath have the dubious distinction of being the only Australian hip hop group to be included in the international *All music guide to hip hop* (Bogdanov et al. 2003) where Keith Farley, after mistakenly identifying beatboxing as "turntable sparring" rather than a vocal form of largely non-verbal sonic freestyling (or vocal percussion, hence the "Breath" in the group's name), describes them rather homogenously as:

... very similar to their comrades in the Northern hemisphere, possessing a similar style to the Roots but with more emphasis on raggae [sic] and turntablist skills. Highlighted by the single "Possession," *The Life and Times of a Beatboxer* is a solid album of left-field hip hop and a positive departure for the increasingly turntablist Bomb Hip Hop label (Bogdanov et al. 2003, p.323).

Following the breakup of Metabass 'n' Breath, Elf Transporter joined the Melbourne-based hip hop activist collective Combat Wombat (formed by Monkey Mark and femcee Izzy), who released albums in 2003 and 2005 and who, under the name Lab Rats, tour

extensively through central Australia, running hip hop workshops with disadvantaged young people and espousing an ecological lifestyle (St John 2005).

Meanwhile, Morganics has become one of the key figures in the formation of an Australian hip hop identity, as well as a hip hop pedagogue who has taught MCing, DJing and breakdancing skills to young people throughout Australia. A former actor and theatre director who frequently sports an Akubra hat, he played roles in the Australian television soaps *Neighbours* and *A Country Practice* and worked with the Australian Theatre for Young People before emerging as a prominent hip hop figure. He directed the 1995 Urban Theatre Projects production *Hip hopera*, which brought together a number of young Western Sydney performers from different ethnic backgrounds. In 1998 Morganics began working as a facilitator on community educational hip hop projects with disadvantaged young people around Australia, teaching beatboxing, breakdancing and MCing, often in tandem with Aboriginal artists Wire MC or BrothaBlack. The ABC TV documentary *Desert Rap* (2000) featured his, Munkimuk's and BrothaBlack's work with Aboriginal young people in Alice Springs, while his album *All you mob*, released in 2001, was a collection of tracks made with mostly Aboriginal young people from Darwin, Wilcannia, Redfern and a host of other places. In 2002 Morganics was awarded a special justice commendation by the New South Wales Government for his work with disadvantaged youth, and he continues to work as a facilitator on urban and rural youth hip hop projects throughout the country. His 2003 one-man show *Crouching b-boy hidden dreadlocks* detailed some of his work in prisons and community centres as well as outlining his hip hop philosophy. His second album *Evolve* (2003) contained the track 'Multilingual MC', which includes snippets of lyrics from 15 different languages, including Japanese, French, Spanish and Pitjantjatjara, which Morganics had to learn in order to communicate with young Aboriginals in Central Australia. *Evolve* was a double album, comprising one CD of his own work together with *All you mob 2*, a CD sampling tracks made with Aboriginal, Arab, Maori, Pacific Islander and Indian young people, as well as prisoners and juvenile detainees from Kempsey, Bowraville, Bourke, Coffs Harbour, Brisbane, Broken Hill, Melbourne and elsewhere. *All you mob 2* also included 'Baakanji boys are back', a follow-up track by the Deadly Award-winning Wilcannia Mob. Most of these tracks were produced under primitive circumstances (some with a simple beatbox backing) and performed by young amateur MCs, but nonetheless offer revealing, touching and raw snapshots and testimonies of disadvantaged and Aboriginal life from around the country. In 2005, *Stereotype*, Morganics's theatre collaboration with MC Wire, received a Deadly Award nomination (Australian Music Online 2005). Morganics also released a third album, *Odyssey*, in 2005. His fourth album, *Hip hop is my passport*, was released in 2007 and features hip hop sounds from around the world, together with a documentary film about his travels in Africa, Brazil, Germany, Bali, New York and elsewhere.

In January 2005 Metabass 'n' Breath took advantage of brief Sydney sojourns by Baba and Elf Transporter to stage a reunion performance at the Hopetoun Hotel, which consisted of an improvised performance of the group's history interspersed with their most well-known tracks. They also reformed to play a number of Sydney reunion shows, including the Spirit of Soul Festival, in January 2008.

Conclusion: Hip hop and religion

In speeches made to the Scots Church, Melbourne, and Sydney's Hillsong Church in mid-2004, Australian treasurer Peter Costello reportedly called for "greater Christian faith as the answer to the decline of moral values represented by rap music and drug barons" (Hamilton 2004). He later cited US rapper Eminem's track 'Kill you' as an example of this morally questionable music (Costello cited in Koutsuokis 2004). Costello's reference to the US gangsta rap "that you hear mindlessly over and over on television and radio" (cited in Grattan & Donovan 2004) indicated his and many other public figures' complete lack of awareness of the decidedly different strains of Australian hip hop, and a common perception in Australia that hip hop is still dominated by a largely formulaic, clichéd and stereotypically African-American concern with violence, drugs, misogyny, homophobia, ostentatious wealth and other non-Christian and non-humanitarian values. Yet some Australian hip hop artists, such as Brethren, are practising Christians, rap music is even performed at Hillsong gatherings, and few if any Australian hip hop artists espouse, or are even capable of espousing, the brutal, materialistic and nihilistic values of "bling bling" hip hop which still tend to dominate music video programs on commercial television networks. In 2006 the ABC television program *Compass* devoted an episode to the Australian hip hop community. The program underlined how many local hip hop practices connect to spiritual and educational values in ways which provide young people with a sense of self-worth and identity (Compass 2006). In its roughly 20-year history, Australian hip hop has developed its own distinctively multicultural, indigenous, localised and diverse identities, accents, expressions and frames of reference which bear increasingly less relation to either the US forms of commercial rap music which dominate global broadcasting, or to US hip hop in general. In its espousal of an educational field of activity, its promotion of literacies and, in some cases, a strongly politicised engagement with national social issues, it has proved that it has become a powerful vehicle for self-expression among Australia's youth.

Endnotes

- 1 A zoological term meaning a similarity between species that is not functionally necessary, which was adopted by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss to explain the connection between apparently different cultural practices, and borrowed by Dick Hebdige in *Subculture: The meaning of style* to refer to the "symbolic" "fit" between a subculture and its lifestyles and attitudes. In hip hop it could be said to apply to the connection between the four elements.
2. A term (from the French "bricole", trifle or small job) also borrowed by Hebdige (1979) from

Lévi-Strauss to indicate the adaptation of existing signs, materials or resources to create new meanings or variations on old meanings. Hebdige was referring to punk clothing and fashion but the term also has wider applications.

- Blaze (1994) also chronicles a number of other important (and extremely rare) early Australian hip hop releases: 'One time live' (1989) and 'I hate hi-nrg' (1989) by the Melbourne-based group Park Bench Royals; 'Coming out large' (1989), 'Poetry in motion' (1989), and 'Tall poppy syndrome' (1989) by the Melbourne-based AKA Brothers; and 'Let yourself be yourself' (1990) and 'Called to add mind' (1990) by the Melbourne-based group Rize & Tarkee, who later became Mama's Funkstikools, and were featured on the global rap compilation *Planet rap*, released by US label Tommy Boy in 1993. Adelaide-based Finger Lickin' Good, featuring Quro (who later formed the Fuglemen and Reference Point, and released solo albums), released a six-track EP, *Illegitimate sons of the bastard funk*, which also featured DJ Groove Terminator, in 1993. Melbourne female rapper MC Que produced a six-track tape in 1993. A Melbourne compilation made in the same year by Organised Rhyme Productions featured tracks by Rising not Running, Doo Dayz, and Brudas United as One. The Sydney group Illegal Substance released their album *Off da back of da truck* in 1994, and Fonke Nomaads and the Urban Poets (later Easybass, who released a widely acclaimed cassette, *Space program*, in 1996, and later still known as Moonrock) were featured on a jazz compilation, *Undertones*. Blaze's own group Noble Savages produced an eight-track cassette album in 1994, and *Capital punishment*, a six-track tape, produced by DJ Vame.

Questions for discussion

- In what ways has hip hop been used as an educational vehicle?
- How have Australian Aboriginal hip hop artists adapted US forms of hip hop to express their own cultures?
- Why is hip hop widely practised among CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) Australians?

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