

Review

Åse Ottosson. 2016. *Making Aboriginal Men and Music in Central Australia*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic. ISBN 978-1-4742-2462-8 (hbk). 216 pp.

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Making Aboriginal Men and Music in Central Australia is based on extensive and in-depth fieldwork with Aboriginal musicians, and explores the articulation of masculinity and indigeneity through popular music practices. The book offers a personal account, with the author—a Swedish traveller (at that time)—arriving in Alice Springs in 1983 and being captivated by the sounds and culture she experienced. Thereafter, Ottosson embarked on a journey of scholarship on Aboriginal musical culture, aiming to comprehend the complexities of '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' (xii).

The author offers a multi-sited and gendered approach to her field research. This process included such spheres as touring with performers, studio operation, different localities, interviewing and participant observation. With such approaches, Ottosson—a white European female—was able to capture some of the social processes that have helped create Aboriginal men and music in Central Australia, revealing through ethnographic research how maleness is constructed and what it means in this particular cultural context of ethnic identity in contemporary Australia.

Chapter 1 sets the cultural scene by exploring 'Real and imagined Aboriginal music, men and place'. This chapter outlines the diversity of Aboriginal culture and the links between men and music, particularly in a modern-day setting that over the past half century or so has seen a shift from Aboriginal marginalization to a celebration of Indigenous national identity. Ottosson discusses music in terms of mediations, not in relation to music analysis, but rather as cultural comprehension. She notes that 'different aspects of indigeneity and manhood are emphasized and negotiated as the men articulate their sense of themselves as Aboriginal men

and musicians' (9). Other important themes for the author include identity, interculturalism, cultural relations, communities, and 'othering'.

The context of the study is stressed in chapter 2, 'Desert musics'. The author discusses the plethora of musical performances, especially in everyday life, which include numerous musical styles. Most musicians in this setting haven't received any form of institutional or formal training in music, and have been socialized as musicians through cultural engagement: watching or imitating others, often relatives and friends. This chapter discusses many of the music genres played, including gospel, country, rock, and reggae, along with the meaning connected with such styles.

In chapter 3, 'Music and men in the Aboriginal studio', the context under discussion is the recording studio. The author offers much description and social/cultural analysis of the scene and social process involved in musical production, which is extended into chapter 4, 'Men making the studio'. As the author notes in connection with her discussion of Aboriginal etiquette, competition and allegiance, '[t]he overarching value that is constituted through the concept and practice of their "healthy competition" is ... a blackfella [Indigenous Australian] allegiance, which is part of the dynamic of the blackfella and male studio ethos and ownership' (90).

The notion of 'battle' is explored in chapter 5, 'Playing Aboriginal communities'. Here, the author focuses on festivals that include sport within a celebratory setting that sees bands playing to entertain audiences into the night. 'Many aspiring bush musicians make their debut as performers before larger audiences in this circuit of community concerts, and it is in this hinterland music scene that most community bands and musicians establish and maintain their regional reputation' (103). The type of 'battle' to which Ottosson refers is the 'Battle of the Bands', which is commonplace at such local community festivities.

Cultural contact between 'blackfellas' and 'whitefellas' is the subject of chapter 6, 'Blackfellas playing whitefella towns'. Such encounters are recalled in home communities as part of the process of being an Aboriginal performer, and these performers frequently recall their personal stories of travel and cultural experience as part of an ethnic Australian binary. Such 'town' performances 'are thought of as connecting ... to a mainstream, non-indigenous musical sphere—an artistic community that stands for what their everyday situation is not' (123).

The subject of touring musicians is continued into chapter 7, 'Touring blackfellas'. The author uses her ethnographic approach to portray such themes as organizing a tour, life on the road, cultural encounters within Aboriginal communities and social networks, cultural encounters between Aboriginal musicians and non-Aboriginals, brotherhood amongst performers, and social tensions. A section on

brotherhood offers a fascinating account of close social relations amongst performers, which constructs 'a distinct, idealized blackfella socio-musical brotherhood without frontiers' (153).

The last chapter of the book, 'Changing Aboriginal men and musicians', studies social and cultural change in connection with the lives of Aboriginal male musicians. Through touring, Aboriginal men return home with a world view that often differs from many others in their own community. Through her examination of 'intercultural mediation', the author looks at 'cultural engagements and entanglements' (179) as an analytical tool that helps ultimately in comprehending what it means to be a male Aboriginal musician from Central Australia.

The book has extensive endnotes, references and a very useful index. There are 12 illustrations, comprising two maps and 10 black-and-white photographs. The latter help show the context under study. There is very little to criticize in this book, although I did find myself wanting to read more, in terms of length and depth. Each chapter covers a vast amount of relevant material, which is often summarized. There is much fascinating analysis and cultural exploration in this highly original and informative book, but, on many occasions, I wanted to hear the music, watch a video, or have some detailed dialogues of Indigenous voices. Such materials might have been provided with supplementary sources (an accompanying CD or online web page with further listening, viewing and reading). Still, *Making Aboriginal Men and Music in Central Australia* is an outstanding and original contribution to research in the field of popular music in the Australian region with innovative scholarly content, methodology, and argument. Its subject matter will appeal to scholars and university students across many fields, including popular music studies, Australia, indigenous studies, gender studies, and anthropology.