

Review

Dan, Henry 'Seaman' and Karl Neuenfeldt. *Steady Steady: The Life and Music of Seaman Dan*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press. ISBN 978-1-922059-208 (pbk). 170 pp.

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Keywords: Australia; Indigenous music; Torres Strait Islander

Few people reading this journal can be unaware of Torres Strait Islands (TSI) musician/composer Seaman Dan. I would hope that this publication brings him to broader public attention. Combining taped interviews with the subject and the co-author's knowledge of TSI culture, this represents a double-pronged account, both of the life of an extraordinary performer and his culture. These are also disclosed further in the photographs, the CD and in the lyrics of the songs included here.

Seaman Dan is described as a 'crooner' and, indeed, born in 1929, his life is close to contemporaneous with the style. And, like that tradition, the voice is largely given over to narratives of the everyday, which in his case is a story of cheerful adaptability and versatility. In his long career, the singer's occupations have encompassed drover, muster cook, prospector, iceman, taxi driver, construction site labourer, pearl diver and lugger skipper; it is the sea which pulls the whole *oeuvre* together. The TSI are at the junction of a rich variety of cultural traditions, refracted in Dan's work through local string band, hula/south seas, hymns, jazz, country, blues, folk, Cajun, rock, reggae and 'lounge music' (shades of Nat King Cole), delivered in a range of Pacific rim dialects and languages.

Although he had always made music socially, as a career it only started in his seventieth year, when he met Karl Neuenfeldt, collaborator on this book, as well as (to a greater extent than his modesty discloses here) on Seaman Dan's musical career. While the book carries this role of 'cultural broker' very lightly, in fact these complexities are rarely addressed with such sensitivity and creativity in the encounter between what has been called 'the West and the rest' (see further Johnson 2005). Upon meeting Karl, at an age usually associated with pottering retirement, the most celebrated phase of Seaman Dan's career was about to begin. It has included a very substantial body of recorded work; nomination for

numerous music awards, including Australian Record Industry (ARIA) awards, of which he won two; national and international tours; and writing and performing for national leaders, and on soundtracks for documentaries, feature films and TV series.

The second half of this book traces Seaman Dan's performance career, with a detailed account of the provenance of his recorded songs. The personal and the cultural history are intertwined, as Seaman Dan becomes not only an individual performer but a multi-cultural conduit, both musically and linguistically. In doing so he breaks out of what I have referred to as 'post-cardism' (64). This is not just 'island music' in the Hollywood sense of smiling hulas and cheerful ukuleles. With musical directors, producers and accompanists that include Neuenfeldt, Nigel Pegrum (ex-Steel Eye Span), and musician and musicologist Denis Crowdy, the settings lift us out of 'sepia tinged' (112) cliché, into a confident journey through twentieth-century popular music styles and arrangements, but always grounded in Seaman Dan's personal experience. When his CDs won ARIAs in the World Music category, it was in the best sense of the term, in that his music draws on such a vast cultural range, rather than being boxed into the exotic 'other'.

One of the axioms of contemporary ethnography is honoured here: let the subject speak. But in doing so, a larger history also speaks. Like the music, the book is not just a life, but also a way of life, a cultural as well as a personal history. This also reflects Neuenfeldt's decades of immersion in TSI culture as an academic and musician, both knowing and loving. The subject is not suffocated under analysis and theory. Apart from an inspiring story, however, this is a fund of information for the exploration of a range of more general issues—cultural diffusion and diaspora, social history, musical globalization—but the cultural contextualization flows naturally from the life experience of the singer. The book quotes Indigenous author Terri Janke about island life: 'Your bones become the sands, your blood the ocean. Your flesh is the fertile ground. Your heart becomes the stories, dances, songs' (118). Here's the point: if you are interested in any of the above, buy this book!

Reference

- Johnson, Bruce. 2005. 'Torres Strait Islander Music: Comments in Review'. *Perfect Beat: The Pacific Journal of Research into Contemporary Music and Popular Culture* 7/3 (July): 60–66.