
Beckah Gerber
Fourth-Year Student (Bachelor of Music, Vocal Performance)
Millikin University, UNITED STATES

Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson combine their knowledge of native Australian music to create Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places: Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Australia. Aborigines, or native Australian peoples, have contributed greatly to Australian culture through the music industry. By using popular music genres such as country and hip-hop, Aboriginal groups can educate their country about Aboriginal history and culture. These authors theorize that indigenous Australians use music to “enact self-determination and cultural identity” (16). In this book Dunbar-Hall and Gibson document this neglected aspect of Australian culture and music, and discuss how the music has been used politically in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The first four chapters provide a historical background about Aboriginal culture in order to offer context for the discussions of contemporary music in later chapters. The two most popular music styles, country and hip hop, are introduced after this historical contextualization. The importance of these two genres, Dunbar-Hall and Gibson point out, is the impact they have had on Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal musicians use music as a way of expressing aspects of their cultures, such as language and history, through a mainstream venue. Indigenous country musicians are played on the radio alongside white Australians, and in this way listeners across the country are exposed to Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal teachers also use hip-hop to renew dangerous Aboriginal cities and engage those within their communities. Workshops from programs such as the Comin’ at Ya! campaign—a program that encourages self-esteem
and positive thinking in Aboriginal adolescents in low-income areas—use music to express positive messages and set goals for younger generations of Aborigines. In this way, the community claims ownership of its history and music. The use of hip-hop as an educational tool shows the positive political side of Aboriginal culture. Aside from this, Dunbar-Hall and Gibson make a point of using an objective tone to inform the audience of Aboriginal history, which aids the discussion of current uses of Aboriginal music in subsequent chapters.

Chapters five through nine discuss the cultural importance of place, drawing upon the geographic work that Dunbar-Hall and Gibson establish in the beginning chapters. Aboriginal cultures have a religious connection to land. When Aborigines are removed from their land, cultural destruction commences. This cultural destruction can be seen in the history of the Djabugay people. After colonization in the late nineteenth century, the Djabugay people were forcefully removed from their land and sent to Anglican missions. Over the next century, fundamental components of the culture, most notably language, died out. Dunbar-Hall and Gibson use this history to show how contemporary Aboriginal musicians use native language to revive their culture’s roots, and spread it across the country. These chapters are more political than those that precede it, assisting the larger goal of the book.

The major contribution of this book is that it engages deliberately with Aboriginal people and their histories. The majority of interviews and quotes used are by Aboriginal people, which gives their community a historical voice. Though this tactic may not offer a complete documented history, it offers a unique perspective through an indigenous lens.

The last chapters again present this unique perspective. Chapters ten and eleven discuss the importance of place, and the use of Aboriginal music as protest. The music discussed here is meant to educate Aboriginal people, but also express the significance that place has to culture, as well as to encourage indigenous people to fight colonial oppression. Dunbar-Hall and Gibson make a point of providing a complete history of the music, but again offer it through an Aboriginal viewpoint. Though references such as legal documents help to provide an objective voice, many interviews and photos are strictly from Aboriginal culture. Using Aboriginal interviews exclusively gives the book a unique perspective on past events and speaks on behalf of Australia’s indigenous peoples.

The sections of this book work together to present a larger understanding of Aboriginal music and culture. The music is first shown through two lenses: by popular genre and by musical connection to place. Elaboration on the musical connection to place shows the ways in which Aboriginal music interacts with culture, government, and the society which surrounds it. Discussing specific Aboriginal cultures, such as the Djabugay, provides a glimpse into the important link between land and culture to these groups. Aborigines use music to tell others about their connection to place, and
through this, fight the social injustices they have experienced. This is why this is identified as protest music. This also alludes to the title, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places*. Though the land occupied by aboriginal groups was and is seen as an empty or “dead” land, native music cultures thrived and are thriving. This tradition represents the artificiality of naming this a deadly sound and place.

By the end of their book, Dunbar-Hall and Gibson achieve their goal of establishing a documented history of Aboriginal culture, and discussing the contemporary use of Aboriginal music. The audience is more educated in their knowledge of Aboriginal culture and Australian history as a whole. The authors have met a need for educating others about Aboriginal culture, something that has been neglected throughout history. Using quotes from Aboriginal individuals offers a different perspective for the history of Australia, and also helps to give the Aboriginal community a voice concerning the country’s past and current affairs. The politics of the book provide a unique perspective on the subject outside of what has been written previously. Dunbar-Hall and Gibson are informative and insightful in their work on *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places: Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Australia*. The book is thorough and precise when discussing Aboriginal culture and its connections to music and is a good source for those who choose to expand their knowledge of Australian Aboriginal music and culture.