

BOOK REVIEW

Jon Stratton, Jon Dale and Tony Mitchell, eds. *An Anthology of Australian Albums: Critical Engagements*

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E-book reviewed by Benjamin Hillier

An Anthology of Australian Albums: Critical Engagements is a welcome addition to the growing body of work that examines Australian popular music from a critical and scholarly perspective. It was conceptualised by eminent Australian musicologist Tony Mitchell as an academic companion to the often excellent work of non-academic journalists examining Australian popular music albums. As such, this book provides a critical perspective on Australian albums across a range of genres, from black metal to hip-hop, singer-songwriters, and the ever-present pub-rock bands that dominate the landscape of Australian popular music. This perspective leads the volume to consider some of these more common topics from new angles, omitting many of the great works of the canon of Australian rock royalty from the 1970s (AC/DC, The Angels, et al.) in favour of significant yet overlooked or marginalised artists. It is also decidedly contemporary in its choice of albums to analyse, with ten of the fifteen chapters focused on albums released in the twenty-first century, thus providing a valuable insight into recent developments in Australian popular music. Finally, the volume's focus on individual works and albums makes it a useful complement to other scholarly volumes, such as *Sounds of Then, Sounds of Now: Popular Music in Australia*,¹ which tend to give broad overviews of scenes and genres rather than specific releases.

¹ Shane Homan and Tony Mitchell, eds, *Sounds of Then, Sounds of Now: Popular Music in Australia* (Hobart: ACYS, 2008).

The anthology is organised into two sections, with the first five chapters covering releases between 1965 and 1999, and the later ten discussing releases between 2002 and 2016. Each chapter is organised in roughly chronological order. Though this volume does not intend to give a historical account of the development of Australian popular music, the way in which the chapters are organised gives the reader some idea of how Australian popular music has developed, and each chapter provides sufficient historical context for the works analysed therein.

The first chapter, by Jon Stratton, examines the sole, self-titled album of Australian rock band The Missing Links released in 1965. Stratton illustrates how The Missing Links pushed cultural and musical boundaries in Australian rock during the mid-1960s, especially when contrasted with their famous contemporaries The Easybeats. The next chapter, by Julie Rickwood, argues for a new contextualisation and appreciation of Wendy Saddington (and, by extension, women in Australian rock), through an examination of the album *Wendy Saddington and The Copperwine Live* (1971). Paul ‘Naz’ Oldham then gives an account of The Coloured Balls’s 1973 album *Ball Power*, giving a historiographic overview of what Oldham describes as an overlooked yet important release for Australian rock, prescient for its experimentation with genres such as punk rock—features that would become a core aspect of Australian popular music in the subsequent decade. The following chapter, again by Stratton, explores *Blood Red River* (1983) by The Scientists. Stratton uses this album to explore both the tensions between mainstream pub rock groups and the more avant-garde groups (represented by The Scientists), as well as the influences behind the band’s music. The final chapter concerning twentieth-century releases is by Caroline Kennedy, which examines the ways in which the sound and lyrical themes of *Gun* (1994) by The Plums, and *Deadstar* (1995), *Milk* (1997), and *Somewhere Over the Radio* (1999) by Deadstar interrogate, comment on, and complicate our understandings of how gendered bodies are represented in Australian popular music.

The anthology of twenty-first-century releases begins with Panizza Allmark’s discussion of Shakaya’s self-titled album (2002), showing firstly how the duo was compared to international girl groups in the 2000s, and secondly how transnational ideas of blackness in hip-hop and R&B interact with Shakaya’s Indigenous identity and its presentation in Australian scenes. The next chapter presents Catherine Hoad’s thematic and aesthetic analysis of *Spiritual Catharsis*, the 2004 release by Tasmanian black metal band Striborg. Hoad shows how references to nature and landscape, as well as themes of eco-horror, contrast with international black metal uses of the same themes. This is followed by Sarah Attfield’s exploration of Curse ov Dialect’s *Wooden Tongues* (2006), detailing the band’s exploration of Australian multiculturalism through a hybridised hip-hop sound. Next, Adam Trainer analyses *I See Seaweed* (2013) by rock band The Drones, contextualising their overtly political lyrics within the landscape of Australian popular music and showing how these themes are supported by the band’s experimental musical style. Country music is then explored through Liz Dean and Roger Knox’s discussion of Knox’s albums *Give It A Go* (1983) and *Stranger In My Land* (2013). Dean and Knox explore how narrative is shaped through song and the tensions of identity that Knox explores as an Indigenous artist—one that is simultaneously prominent in the Australian country music scene, yet has been marginalised repeatedly across its history.

Non-white Australian identities are further explored in Sarah Keith’s chapter on Dami Im, examining the K-pop influences that Im demonstrated during her time on the reality singing show *The X-Factor*, and using these themes to engage with Asian-Australian identities

in Australian popular music. John Encarnacao then explores the work of Courtney Barnett, whose style he contextualises as an intersection of grunge and indie rock influences. Encarnacao shows how Barnett's unpretentious presentation and vocal delivery belies a complex and thoughtful approach to song- and lyric-writing. Tensions of identity are also unpacked in Laura Glitsos's chapter on the Australian singer, songwriter, and producer Sia. Using the contrasts between light and dark present on the album *This Is Acting* (2016) as a framework, Glitsos explores how Sia positions herself as an artist and individual within the narratives and consequent dialectic of the album's themes. Next, the late Ed Montano and Gene Shill explore the EDM artist Flume, notable as one of the few Australian artists (of any genre) to have won a Grammy award. Montano and Shill show how Flume achieved international success despite their relative isolation from global scenes in Australia and unknown status prior to the release of *Skin* (2016). The authors also give a detailed account of the hybridised elements that contribute to Flume's distinct sound. The anthology concludes with an analysis of A.B. Original's *Reclaim Australia* (2016), provided by Suzi Hutchings and Dianne Rodger. Drawing on interviews with the duo and their own analysis of the album, the authors explore the lyrics of *Reclaim Australia* to demonstrate the cutting political messaging of A.B. Original and their advocacy for Indigenous Australians, their rights, and their struggles.

One of the key goals noted in the introduction to the volume was to illustrate the diversity of Australian popular music post-1960. I will briefly trace this theme through some of the book's more notable chapters. In many ways, the anthology is successful in this goal, especially because of the variety of artists and releases examined in the chapters about twenty-first-century releases; however, there are areas where this diversity could have been enhanced. The chapters from the twentieth century are less musically diverse, focusing largely on rock bands, though rock bands with an element of the avant-garde in several cases. The discussion of overlooked groups within the history of Australian rock is welcome, but it does not significantly expand the musical palette of Australian popular music at this time, omitting discussions of nascent genres such as heavy metal, electronica, and jazz. For one, it highlights the actual diversity in this time that is often occluded by dominant narratives of Australian popular music history, and it does an excellent job of criticising many of the problematic elements of these narratives. Rickwood's chapter on Saddington compellingly dismantles the chauvinistic attitudes that permeated Australian popular music in the 1970s and 1980s, simultaneously critiquing previous analyses of Saddington and her reception in broader music scenes. Contributions such as these deepen our understanding of the diversity of the artists involved in the Australian rock and popular music scene across the latter half of the twentieth century.

The sections focused on releases in the twenty-first century more successfully highlight the remarkable diversity of sounds present in contemporary Australian popular music. Hoad's examination of *Spiritual Catharsis* provides valuable insight into the relationships between the local and global within more obscure musical genres. Though Striborg is a one-man band located in the small Tasmanian town of Maydena, Hoad shows how they drew attention from international metal scenes through a VICE documentary and explores the implications that such international attention has for an isolated band in Tasmania. Hoad also provides a particularly apt analysis of how Striborg embodies Tasmanian isolation, history, and ecology in their music. These interactions between global and local are likewise present in Glitsos's examination of Sia, an Adelaide-based pop musician who needed to move overseas to further

her career. This context is pertinent to the paradoxes that Sia explores around a range of themes in her music, as Glitsos explains. The most prominent of these is between authenticity and disingenuousness, and Glitsos persuasively argues that Sia presents a view that the two concepts are not mutually exclusive for a pop icon.

Finally, the chapters in the anthology focusing on Shakaya, Roger Knox, and A.B. Original discuss the works of Indigenous musicians in concentrated detail. Most interesting to me was the analysis of A.B. Original's *Reclaim Australia* as a scathing deconstruction of racial and political identities in contemporary Australian culture. Rodgers and Hutchings show how, in developing their own style, A.B. Original draws on the rap protest music of American artists such as Ice Cube and Public Enemy, infusing elements of hip-hop and rap with Indigenous musical approaches to strike at the heart of the discrimination toward Indigenous Australians by wider, White Australian society. The authors argue convincingly that, in doing so, A.B. Original questions the marginalisation of Indigenous rap in the broader landscape of Australian hip-hop and rap, and problematises the ways in which Australian popular music has developed to marginalise Indigenous voices.

Overall, *An Anthology of Australian Albums: Critical Engagements* is a valuable contribution to the literature on Australian popular music. It illustrates a remarkable variety of Australian popular music across its history, particularly in the past decade, and is useful for providing general scholarly insight to a multidisciplinary audience of popular music scholars. Given that it does not feature detailed music analysis and is written in a straightforward academic tone, it would also be useful in promoting discussion of any of the albums featured, as well as the general development and current landscape of Australian popular music, in both scholarly and classroom contexts.

About the Author

Benjamin Hillier is a PhD candidate at the Conservatorium of Music, University of Tasmania. His doctoral research focuses on the musical characteristics of Australian extreme metal bands and the potential for a unique Australian sound among them. His interests are primarily in music theory and analysis of metal music, supported by ethnomusicological inquiries into metal communities and scenes.