

Rhythmic Landscapes: Performing A Sense Of Place

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The territory is not primary in relation to the qualitative mark; it is the mark that makes the territory. Functions in a territory are not primary; they presuppose a territory-producing expressiveness. In this sense, the territory, and the functions performed within it, are products of territorialization. Territorialization is an act of rhythm that has become expressive, or of milieu components that have become qualitative.

Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 315

In their essay, 'Of the Refrain', Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari use music as a metaphor for the processes involved in marking out one's place in the world. They argue that space is territorialised through the use of periodic, recognisable signs that then establish ownership of that place, while deterritorialisation is the breaking free from such coding. In this paper, I want to use this musical metaphor to examine the connections between music and place. How can a performance of music be a means of connecting its participants to place and, in doing this, create a sense of identity? I want to explore this by looking closely at one particular performance, a duet performed by the composer-guitarist Michael Fix and didjeridu player William Barton.

The performance was held at a Top Half Folk Festival in Mt Isa last year. This festival is a shared event, rotated each year through a number of places in the Top Half of Australia — Darwin, Mt Isa, Katherine, Alice Springs and Jabiru.

Overhead: map of northern Australia

Rotating the venue of this festival in some ways could be seen as a disruption to the connections between a place and its community, but after talking to festival participants

and thinking about the festival's music performances, it appears that this dislocation provides an impetus for community formation. The name of the festival, the 'Top Half', locates the event in a particular space, that of the top or northern end of Australia. More specifically, the towns that take part mark out a boundary 'on the ground' of a roughly triangular area covering approximately 58 000km. By travelling and re-establishing a Top Half Festival at points within this region, participants act out a difference to those folk festivals held in the south-eastern states. Generally music festivals are linked to a particular and geographically small place. The Top Half, in contrast, locates itself within a large geographical area that requires participants to travel quite extensively so as to be present at the event (but not nearly the distance required to travel to the south-eastern states). Although sharing the administration and expenses of the festival is a pragmatic move, travelling such distance also acts out the lifestyle of the Top End. Here one participant talks about the characteristics of this festival -

I think it's because in the Territory and the north here generally it is a relatively unpopulated place with a lot of distance between places. And it's a lifestyle thing, too. I mean people who live in the north are generally much more laid back. These Territory festivals are much more friendly and laid-back than the big festivals down south. They're not so involved in making a show of things. People are more interested in having a good time than competing with people, judging people, or whatever. I mean, we've come up from Maryborough, Pete and Aud have come from Toowoomba, and basically the festival is why we've travelled all this way – to be here. We'd left the Territory and moved down to Maryborough. We went back [to the Top Half Festival] for the first time last year, to the one at Jabiru. When we heard that this one was to be at Mt Isa, we thought great! That's only half way! We'll be there!

(Ian 1998)

Participating in this festival marks out one's identity as part of the north: laid-back, friendly, and one who is familiar with travelling large distances. Being part of the festival opens up a space that reaffirms participants' membership in this far-flung group. Transience, this movement through space, is viewed as a major characteristic of being 'up north', for, as one person said, 'if you're anywhere like this, you've always come from somewhere else' (Pam 1998). The annual performance that is the Top Half Festival creates a space of belonging, a space of an intensification of connections that resonates to notions such as 'northern Australia', distance, inclusiveness, travelling, being relaxed, that for participants at this festival means being 'folkies'. The festival site becomes a site for this community's identification.

Before proceeding, I'd like you to watch a video of the duet of Michael Fix and William Barton. They perform one of Fix's own compositions, *Sunrise over Alice*. Fix had played this as a solo the previous evening, but asked Barton to join him for the final concert.

Video: Fix & Barton

I want to explore this performance through notions of 'rhythm', drawing on two particular concepts, that of Deleuze and Guattari in their essay 'Of the Refrain', and the musical understanding of 'rhythm' as discussed by the musicologist Christopher Hasty in his book *Metre as Rhythm* (1997).

Hasty argues that central to an understanding of rhythm is the notion of regular repetition although other attributes are also important in its musical comprehension, notions like 'continuity or flow, articulation, proportion, pattern, form or shape, expressive gesture, animation and motion' (Hasty 1997: 3-4). Hasty argues that we make sense of music because something that is rhythmic attracts and holds our attention. He says that 'rhythm implies participation and sympathy. We are drawn into the event in order to experience its rhythm. As something experienced, rhythm shares the irreducibility and the

unrepeatability of experience' (ibid: 12). Hearing music then is structured around this ordering of sounds through rhythm.

Deleuze and Guattari argue that every living thing is formed from a series of milieus, composed of interiors, exteriors and boundaries of these various environments. Music is used as a metaphor for the processes involved by these living things when marking out a territory. They argue that space is territorialised through the use of periodic repetitions that signal ownership to others. What they call 'rhythm' are the traces of encounters between different milieus, between self and non-self. The resulting rhythmic improvisations are the observable changes in the signalling of the ownership of place. In a similar way that rhythm orders sounds into a musical structure, so mapping space through repeated signs is a means of establishing possession.

So we have rhythm as the 'lived' experience of music, where the performer inhabits and gives life to music, and rhythm as the sign of ownership, the response to potentially threatening, outside influences. Both these concepts of rhythm can help unravel layers of meaning within this particular performance of *Sunrise over Alice*.

First, Fix locates the work in a particular place, Anzac Hill near Alice Springs. He introduces the performance with these words:

This piece of music is designed to evoke the sunrise in central Australia. If you can, imagine yourself up on Anzac Hill overlooking Alice Springs. It's absolutely pitch black. It's about a quarter to six in the morning, maybe five thirty. And it's a little bit eerie, 'cos you're right out there in the middle of Australia. And you start to see the first rays of the sun coming up over the Macdonnell Ranges and the sky changing colour. (Fix 1998)

This places the piece at the 'geographical centre' of Australia but it also positions *Sunrise over Alice* historically and culturally. Anzac Hill functions as a sacred site, memorialising the Anzacs

at Gallipoli an event proclaimed by many as the day the Australian nation was born. (Inglis 1991: 17; White 1981: 128). Each year on Anzac Day, this event is celebrated nationally with a dawn service. In Alice Springs it takes place at Anzac Hill. Although not explicitly talked about by Fix, these associations have some impact. In his introduction, Fix invites us to imagine ourselves at this place and the opening sounds of the piece conjure up the eeriness of early dawn in some primordial, Australian landscape, perhaps also an allusion to the sacredness of this place. These rapid and unstructured percussive sounds are referential; they suggest the movement of the wind and the sound of birds at dawn, as well as the physical sensation of shivering, provoked by this sense of eeriness. Perhaps, too, this feeling of unease alludes to Fix's sense of sacredness about this place.

Sunrise over Alice can also be transposed to the more general place of outback Australia. This had been established in a previous concert at the festival, where Fix said in his introduction 'I suppose you get something pretty similar here in Isa, so I guess you won't have too much trouble imagining [this scene]'. (Fix 1998) Through his introductory description — the mood of the piece is 'eerie' and you feel 'right out there in the middle of Australia' — he locates and activates his musical narrative within a set of notions about this mythical outback. The unstructured introduction — where the rhythmic pulse of the piece is yet to be established — conjures up the pre-dawn sky, where it is difficult to discern the land's features. We can imagine within the structuring of the music that with the sun's first rays, Fix begins to see and make sense of where he is. The rhythmic and melodic structuring in the music embodies Fix's positioning of himself in relation to the landscape.

Including William Barton on the didgeridu in this performance brings other readings into the music. Entering the introduction after the guitar, the didgeridu is also unstructured in a rhythmic sense and it too evokes a sense of eeriness and the sounds of birds at dawn. However, unlike Fix's previous performance of *Sunrise* at the Top Half festival and in his recordings (*Fingerpaintings*, 1993; *The Heart Has Reasons*, 1996) where the guitar structures the rhythmic pulse, here it is the didgeridu that creates the pulse through its drone.

Throughout the performance, there is a sort of dialogue between the two performers, particularly with the didjeridu imitating the guitar's melodic fragments or percussive effects. Yet it is Fix who watches Barton for musical cues when ending the piece. For example, Fix follows Barton's cue to finish, where Barton breaks out of the melody with blown overtones, a common cadential pattern for some traditional performers (Neuenfeldt 1997: 44-45).

I think this performance maintains the shifting of place between the mythic and the more specifically located place. Barton's didjeridu technique can be described as referential — for example the bird call sounds in the introductory passage — but the didjeridu is itself referential, an iconic sound that reinforces an aural image of outback Australia. Along with this, Barton is specifically linked to a place, the area around Mt Isa, because he is a member of the Kalkadoon. (and this identity was called on a number of times during the festival when Barton was introduced publicly). But what of *Sunrise over Alice*? The didjeridu could be read superficially as a sign of a pre-European Australia, a sign of the natural world that Fix observes then encapsulates in music. But I think something different is happening. In earlier recordings of *Sunrise over Alice*, there are no references to indigenous instruments. The first recording, in 1993, imagines a place through the instrumentation and timbre of country music. In this version, we reconstruct Fix's 'Alice' through the weary slide of the guitar that brings to mind images of the outback, cattlemen, dust, and heat.

Unlike the 1993 recording, the later 1996 version uses only one instrument, the guitar, from which Fix achieves a variety of effects through a number of technical and technological methods. The tonal quality is deeper and more rounded while the tempo is much slower to that of the 1993 recording. Unlike this earlier version, where an organising pulse originates in shakers and guitar chords, here unstructured percussive effects on the guitar alone gradually evolve into an organising rhythmic pulse.

In contrast, the didjeridu bumps up against the organising function of the guitar. Although Fix's composition, in this duet it appears that Barton directs the musical soundscape through

his rhythms, recreating and reinterpreting the Alice through his musical language. In a Deleuze and Guattarian sense, Fix and Barton respond to this cultural intersection through musical improvisation. There is a shifting back and forth between the didgeridu, the iconic voice of the Australian land, and the guitar on Anzac Hill, a place resonating with the so-called birth of the nation. The folk festival and its associated imagery frame this performance, yet the actions of these festival performers recreate what these images may mean.

This duet is then an event in flux, catching within its configuration aspects of both the local and non-local, of being in and being out of place. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, motifs, the markings of place, 'do not refer to a landscape; they carry and develop within themselves landscapes that do not exist on the outside' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 319). It is the redeployment of such markings — exemplified here in musical rhythms — that gives a sense of connection to place, albeit an imagined place. In understanding this connection, Sara Cohen suggests the term 'musical pathways', as it encapsulates how various participants open up and maintain links that then go on to create a sense of belonging (Cohen 1993: 128). This linking is not necessarily to a particular place, although participants may talk in these terms, but more through the numerous people and processes involved in this often fleeting musical performance and its associations to place. Deleuze and Guattari write:

One launches forth, hazards an improvisation. But to improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it. One ventures forth from home on the thread of a tune. Along sonorous, gestural, motor lines that mark the customary path of a child and graft themselves onto or begin to bud 'lines of drift' with different loops, knots, speeds, movements, gestures, and sonorities. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:311-312)

The framing of this performance gives meaning and situates the music within a discourse of identity and belonging. In venturing forth, the music of Fix and Barton embodies and gives voice to their relationship to place and offers, through participation, a means for others to identify and locate themselves. How this performance was contextualised —

where it was performed, who was involved, how they talked about this — are the lines of drift, the musical polyphony of connections that creates different yet intersecting senses of identity and belonging.

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