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**BOOKS**

Haunting songs of life and death reveal a fading world

Nicolas Rothwell  
February 18, 2006

**Songs, Dreamings and Ghosts: The Wangga of North Australia**

By Allan Marett, Wesleyan University Press, 292pp, \$27.50

A GENERATION ago, when musicologist Allan Marett was beginning his fieldwork on the Aboriginal song-cycles of northern Australia, he was asked an intriguing question by a young indigenous man.

Why was traditional Aboriginal music - music of endless subtlety and beauty - not as highly valued as the Aboriginal paintings that Australians have come to view as potent emblems of national identity?

This book is Marett's attempt to provide an answer and to redress that imbalance. The most profound and detailed study of an indigenous musical genre yet attempted, it has been two decades in the making, and even before publication acquired a kind of legendary status among the small circle of experts addicted to the sounds of indigenous song. It is a specialist volume, yet it is written with a clear, cool passion.

It sets out the overwhelming evidence for the finesse and compositional craft of the Top End's song cycles and brings the master-singers of the region and their beliefs and experiences to vivid life. It deserves the widest possible attention, not just because Marett is the doyen of Australian ethnomusicologists, and this is his masterwork, but because the art form he seeks to anatomise is dying.

Aboriginal song is, of course, elusive: in its traditional form, it is sung in language, it is brief, coded, meshed with dance. It tends to be ceremonial in nature, and this has kept outsiders from disseminating its splendours to the wider world. For what do everyday Australians know, in truth, about indigenous music, other than the noise of the didge and the guitar chords of Treaty?

Marett turns his attention on the Aboriginal songmen of the Daly region, who live today gathered in the remote community of Wadeye, close to the Bonaparte Gulf, and at Belyuen, on the Cox peninsula opposite Darwin. Their key song cycles, the Wangga, take the form of sharp, jewel-like chants, accompanied by clap-stick and didgeridoo. Poetic in the extreme, filled with rhythms that summon up, like Western leitmotifs, whole worlds of association, these are musical slivers that make up a dictionary of the singer's world. Their core is religious: the Wangga are sung at times when the living and the dead draw together. They are often learned in dreams; and they plunge deep into the entwined fabric of the traditional domain. Marett picks apart several songs and unfurls the aspects of life they express: "The essential interconnectedness of the living and the dead through ceremony; the mutual responsibilities of the living to look after each other in everyday affairs; the exigencies of everyday life; and the intimate relationship that the living and the dead maintain with a sentient landscape".

The world revealed is one of infinitely varied songs and rhythms, swift, succinct, full of conviction.

Marett gives his readers a glimpse of the urgency with which these themes are perfected and performed: there are vignettes where he is

**IN THIS SECTION**

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- [Vibrant Sydney party girl steals the show](#)
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- [I think, therefore I think](#)
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- [Georgian England exposed](#)
- [Author lost in tortured wake of great white whale](#)
- [Haunting songs of life and death reveal a fading world](#)
- [The only art is in the put-down](#)
- [Stranger than fiction](#)
- [Focus of](#)

scolded for using the wrong words in a practice singing session; at one point he turns in amazement from his chapter-length analysis of a single, minute-long snatch of music, staggered by the amount of submerged information it contains.

In his field years Marett became very close to several great song-masters from Belyuen, and he was planning to devote himself to the study of one of these figures, Bobby Lambudju Lane, a man at once gentle and voluble, Western-trained, literate, a fluent speaker of English and of his own traditional languages. Lane "had the rare capacity to speak the texts of songs and give their translations the moment he had finished singing".

He was, in short, the Homer of Wangga song, the man at the end of the tradition who could fix and read the music's mobile shards. But Lane died at 52, and, as Marett says bluntly, even though other singers have taken up his duties, "the tradition will probably never recover from this blow".

Much of Marett's book is devoted to examinations of Lane's work, above all a haunting, evanescent song from Badjalarr, a low-lying sandy islet that has become, in the imagination of the Belyuen people, a far-off, generalised land of the dead, although on our maps it is merely North Peron Island, a favourite weekend sports-fishing haunt for Darwin's boat-going class.

Lane's death has been duplicated many times across the north: the old songmen are dying in the Kimberley and in Arnhem Land, a curtain of silence and mass-consumption music is coming down. Hence the vital importance of this book as a guide to the power and fluidity of a traditional form.

Marett covers much ground: he shows how singers shift their songs to explain their relationship to country; how melodies relate to certain ancestor figures; how songs and dances set out social themes.

An astonishing idea lurks glinting in the closing pages of his work as he considers the depth and scale of the musical system being uncovered. Like many music scholars, he is intrigued by the ultimate questions: where did the music come from and what connections may exist between Aboriginal and Southeast Asian traditions?

The role of the Macassan traders who visited north Australia in contact times may well have been critical in spreading musical models. But, more broadly, Marett speculates that deeper study could well reveal "something startling" about north Australian music, namely that it forms a continuum, in its rhythmic organisation, with the music of the Middle East, Southeast Asia, India and Indonesia.

Such elusive, attractive ideas: but how can they be tested when the material is dying out? Marett is centrally involved in a new recording project, which is strongly supported by the surviving traditional songmen of the north. "My own experience," he says briskly, "is that most Aboriginal communities, at least in the north of Australia, want their music to be more widely disseminated and better understood."

At the recent Garma culture conference in northeast Arnhem Land, a clarion call was sent out in headline words: "Indigenous songs should be a deeply valued part of the Australian cultural heritage. They represent the great classical music of this land. These ancient traditions were once everywhere in Australia, and now survive as living traditions only in several regions. Many of these are now in danger of being lost forever. Indigenous performances are one of the most rich and beautiful forms of artistic expression, and yet they remain unheard and invisible."

It is this trend of eclipse and cultural extinction, tragically immediate and fast-advancing, that Marett's meticulous, pioneering work - at once tribute and testament - has been written to resist.

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