Perfect Beat v3 n2 Jan 1997

FEATURE REVIEW

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL INSTRUMENT?

Grieve, R (1995) *A Band in a Waistcoat Pocket: The Story of the Harmonica in Australia*, Sydney: Currency Press

BRUCE JOHNSON

Scotland: the bagpipes. Finland: Kantele. Ireland: Uillean pipes? Spain: probably guitar, but getting a bit dodgy now. I ran an informal poll. Name an instrument associated with a country, or vice versa. In the case of Australia it was most often the didjeridu. Other candidates were the gum-leaf, comb-and-paper and lagerphone (there was actually a lagerphone[1] category in the Western Australian Musicians Union directory when I visited there in the 1980s. It had one entry). Although Australia is unique in that it is the only continent whose political and geographical borders correspond almost exactly, national identity is nonetheless a discursive construction. In our own case it has shifted sharply in the last decade. Perhaps it is therefore hard to make the imaginative leap to a time when composer Alfred Hill could declare our national instrument to be the mouth organ (see below).

Ray Grieve writes as one who has made that leap, and the result is the evocation of an Australia which is disappearing from a collective post-TV memory. A lot of the quotidian detail which would be expunged from a traditional 'academic' study, in fact brings the era to life in ways that increase the sense of its connection with us, as part of a continuum of culture and history. Grieve writes from the inside of vernacular music production, as a performer and record producer through his Bushlark label. Like so many writers on everyday cultural practice, the author is so lovingly immersed in his subject that for the most part he simply presents a chronicle to speak for itself. This is a gathering of data which has not been pulled together before. Recently in Canberra I heard a senior arts bureaucrat give a presentation to a gathering of people in the music community, on the export of representative Australian music. It was so bad that he had the whole room falling about with unmistakably contemptuous laughter. In the words of another arts administrator present, it was the most disgracefully ill-informed presentation she had ever heard from someone in his position of power. Among the things missing from his account was any recognition of the actual conditions of most Australian music making. In an industry fixated on glam pop and art music, Grieve's book is an invaluable

reminder that most Australians' experience of music has been in areas demeaned by the authoritative discourse, and that it is empirical work such as this that is most urgently needed in Australian music studies.

It's a question of balance, of course, and the downside is disclosed in the final sentence of the book, suggesting teleological closure which is altogether too neat. When Larry Adler incorporated some rock/pop material in his repertoire during his 1969 Australian tour, it "was a sign that the harmonica had come of age" (104). This reflects the absence of any overarching problematising theoretical framework for the narrative. Don't go to the book looking for sustained analysis of the place of the mouth organ in the larger cultural politics. It doesn't set out to do that; it's an enthusiastic chronicle of an instrument unwarrantably ignored in the discourse of Australian music. While it doesn't enter far into broader reflections, it does provide data which enables us to rethink Australian vernacular music along some of the lines I go on to sketch speculatively, and for which I, rather than Grieve, accept the blame.

Those of us who have scarcely given a thought to the humble mouth organ in our musical history will be surprised by the factual material presented here. In the course of its history in Australia the instrument notched up some surprising landmarks. A mouth organist, Percy Spouse, became the 3rd performer/group to be electrically recorded, after Jimmy Elkins, and the Palais Royal Californians, and in November 1952 a harmonica group (Horrie Dargie's) made the first Australian micro-groove recording to go gold. Perhaps the most striking claim for the instrument, however, was Alfred Hill's comments as adjudicator of the mouth organ championships held at Scots Church, Sydney in 1935. Suggesting that the instrument be renamed the Australian pipes, he noted that they were frequently the only instrument available to people of the outback, and described it as Australia's national instrument.

This Australian coding is in calculated opposition to the anglo-centrism which was so powerful a determinant of our artistic attitudes. Perhaps the instrument's arrival in Australia with the German settlers of 1838 in the Barossa, and its popularity on the multi-cultural goldfields of the 1840s, assisted in this construction. The Albert company's advertising for the harmonica in 1913 recognised the lonely Australian outback as the site of a potential market and they produced a brochure which incorporated an 'assimilation' narrative – pommy (British) immigrants in bush school organise a mouth organ band which strengthens the identity of the school community and also results in the immigrants' acceptance as 'dinkum Aussies'. Note, then, that the most popular model in the history of the mouth organ in Australia was Albert's 'Boomerang'. How many other instruments were promoted through this indigenous linkage? Other names included: Cobber, Kangaroo, Wallaroo, Coo-ee, Kookaburra, Budgeree. A Jindyworobak instrument. Later alliances with country (The Australian Hill Billys [sic]) and folk music (The Bushwackers), prompts Grieve to comment that the "the diatonic mouth organ is well and truly regarded as a traditional Australian folk music instrument" (82).

It was, however, a question of who owned the meaning of 'Australia' – or who wanted to. If the mouth organ is Australian, it is a demotic Australia that constructed itself out of an ambiguous mixture of defiance and subservience. Unquestionably it was a significantly democratic instrument, 'a band in a waistcoat pocket' as an Albert's representative called it. Its relative cheapness, ease of learning and above all portability (one was played by astronauts in Gemini 6), made it popular with many otherwise culturally marginalised groups defined by gender, class, race, age and geography. It had an instructive connection with the construction of such groups, as in the case of the 66 coalminers who, in a 203 hour stay-in strike in Wallarah colliery in 1958, called for musical instruments to hold underground concerts, for which they formed a mouth organ and banjo band. They emerged to the strains of *Waltzing Matilda* on the mouth organ. Such detail provided by Grieve is a fascinating glimpse of the role of music in the construction of collective identity and political cohesion, and provides a tantalising example of a moment at which some ethnographic opportunism would have been richly rewarding.

The Mouth Organ Band movement in particular is rich in implications regarding music, class, and national identity. These bands burgeoned in, and helped to define communities that included trade organisations, social clubs, regional associations, department stores. Their activities (competitions, broadcasts, dances, concerts) were very important in Australian community music in a pre-TV era. The Rockhampton Mouth Organ Band would travel 700 kms to Longreach for an eisteddfod, its members excused from work by their employers, and return to a huge welcoming crowd. The potential for the construction of its own musical discourse, and the consequent sense of a relatively autonomous community, are suggested in the band members' custom of whistling the first seven notes of their own march (composed by the band-leader) to each other in the street, proclaiming a freemasonry that also puzzled those not part of the group.

The information on the Mouth Organ Bands provides the basis for a fascinating study in the complex power relations which traverse popular culture. The harmonica placed the means of making music into the hands of the culturally and economically underprivileged – the poor, the transient, the unpropertied (for a piano assumes the ownership of fixed space), the untutored. It provided reflective musical pleasure to the solitary, informal and spontaneous bonding at domestic festivities. But in the growth of the Mouth Organ Band movement, we see the infiltration by a hegemonic discourse which sought to regiment popular pleasure. Here was an instrument even more accessible than those of the brass band, and as such a threat to the control of music production and consumption. 1932 saw the formation of the Victorian Mouth Organ Bands Association (VMOBA), "set up to train, adjudicate and co-ordinate the affairs of the state's bands in the tradition of the brass band associations" (52).

This movement (like the brass band movement) became a way of recuperating a form of popular music, after the abandoned excesses of the twenties, and reinstalling it under the control of the dominant cultural discourse. As such, it is a revealing site for the study of the tensions operating between high and popular culture (and a

reminder that the dichotomy itself cannot be articulated simply as oppositional). Even while local popular musics are asserting their integrity against internationalist high-art imperatives, nonetheless in accepting the latters' discourses, they are complicit in it to their own disadvantage. Like other potentially oppositional cultural currents, to prove its worthiness and good faith, it submitted to a degree of conspicuous regimentation that reassured the owners of the meaning of culture that they had nothing to fear from its demotic energy. Grieve quotes a review which discloses how harmonica bands were important sites at which certain ideological protocols which were threatened by popular culture, were reclaimed:

> *In lively measures, the Band has all the jaunty and infectious gaiety of a brass or military band. The missing parts are discreetly supplied by a sympathetic pianist ... and by the bass drum, and musical listeners are grateful for the two well played violins that help to add finish. The triangle and cymbals complete the scheme.*
>
> *Whatever the band essayed, from marches and fantasias and national medleys to operatic selections, everything was played with musicianly feeling and sensitive expression. In music in a lighter vein, the bandsmen showed a sense of humour that was not lost on the listeners, and the warmest applause made itself heard after each number.* (32)

This is worth some discourse analysis, with its measured articulation of decorums, the language of established consensual aesthetics, unarguable standards of excellence and closed symmetries. Even the prose style itself with its ponderous provincial elegancies, its periodicities resonant with Victorian/Edwardian complacencies, its discreet passive voicings and genteel circumspection, proclaims the triumph over demotic culture of an order in which the harmonica band has a status analogous to that of the regimented Aboriginal gumleaf band in the 1933 film *The Squatter's Daughter*. That is, the band is a pleasing reminder that the natives are, within the limits of their picturesque innocence and tendencies to waywardness, achieving a gratifyingly decorous approximation of 'The Right Thing'. There are 'missing parts' but these are 'discreetly supplied by a sympathetic pianist'. The idea that parts are missing clearly signals that the band is working in a transplanted aesthetic rather than from its own particular capacities and strengths. 'Finish' is added by two violinists, and the scheme is 'completed' by percussionists.

I am not suggesting that the band should not have played what it pleased. Rather, what it pleased was largely compliant with a hegemony under which it was relatively disempowered. Design and closure remained in the control of a 'superior' sensibility whose mission was to preserve standards of music and stage conduct. To a large extent, the performers in the mouth organ band movement did not own the music – it was on loan to them. Its repertoire and performance protocols were borrowed. The oversight of the instruments themselves is revealing: "At the completion of the entertainment they were then collected, put away in their correctly named boxes and packed neatly into the small fibre port kept exclusively for this purpose" (30).

A description of the drilled stage deportment, with military style uniforms, the leader's adorned with extra gold braid, is eloquent in this connection. Although this band movement, like the brass band, is a demotic phenomenon, it is reassuringly regimented by a top-down discourse. In complying with that discourse it voluntarily incorporated a sense of its own subservience. Its competitiveness was internal, and never threatened the aesthetic imposed from above.

At the same time it must be emphasised that the movement did construct a community with a strong sense of its own identity, and as such was a major musical force in the formation of a working and lower middle class sensibility in Australia. The Yarraville Mouth Organ Band is still active. Its objective is to provide free entertainment for those 'less fortunate than ourselves'. Most members have always been from Melbourne's western suburbs, and it is described by Jack Lack as "the foremost example of the district's homegrown working-class culture" (38). In theorising this history, the Scylla and Charybdis are romanticisation and trivialisation. We should not sentimentalise the movement as a salt-of-the-earth populist music, because it was also tightly regulated by an enfolding bourgeois discourse. But it should not be regarded as inauthentically risible, because it was also the source of real satisfactions for people otherwise excluded from music making. In that incandescent convergence of body, mind and musical instrument, intellectual posturings about ideology, reification, recuperation, really are in an important way irrelevant to what is being experienced deep in the physical and psychic subjectivity, and it is equally important to try to imagine ourselves into that subjectivity. Music is the projection of the complexity of a particular moment in the process of identity formation, the encounter between private and public history, between the subjective and the social, inscribed with fine nuances as personal as a signature. It is dense with specificity.

The emergence of the 'blues harp' music in the 1960s renewed interest in the mouth organ, but there was a significant discontinuity with the earlier tradition, the latter having constructed itself very much within a white local bourgeois discourse (even if largely sustained by the working, rural and lower middle class). As Grieve puts it, in relation to rock and its offshoots, the chromatic players generally preferred to think of themselves as "serious musicians", separating themselves from this mainstream pop, and playing to older television and club audiences. This is a fascinating dynamic. Here was a 'popular music' tradition that was woven into both the fabric of community life, and the 'imaginary' of Australia, conceived in those white patriarchal terms which dominated the public construction of our collective identity throughout most of the century. The mouth organ movement is a vivid thread in the tapestry of our society, but which is now fading from memory, overshadowed by rock in an ambiguous juncture which provides instructive data about the relationships between different kinds of popular music and the dangers of essentialising the category in, say, class terms. The disruption between the two traditions was more powerful than the continuity of a shared demotic instrument: the earlier one a more regional and engagingly ingenuous vernacular movement, the later one an outcome of an increasingly sophisticated global industry mediated technologically.

The mouth organ thus became the point of both convergence and rupture for two strands in our popular music and its shaping sensibilities, an ambiguity theatrically played out in Norman Gunston's encounter with Frank Zappa. This culminated in an on-stage performance by Gunston, at Sydney's Horden Pavilion in January 1976, which elicited the highest praise from Zappa, even in the same breath as he talked incredulously about the 'bits of toilet paper' on Gunston's face (98). A meeting of the hip and the hapless, harmonica as stylish blues/rock voice, and as the preferred instrument of the suburban or regional 'nerd' yet it is as the latter, however deeply scorned, that the instrument has most distinctively embroidered Australian society. Gary McDonald's Gunston persona is probably the most ambiguously shaded portrait of something distinctive in the Australian sensibility since Edna Everage disappeared into the upper reaches of camp. McDonald's appearance, the pathetically arranged strands of hair, the eyes alternately signalling fear of imminent ridicule and conspiratorial belonging, the shimmering blue lamé, and the notorious bits of cigarette paper fluttering like cabbage moths alighting on his shaving cuts ... the 'knowing' of the actor, the gaucherie of the persona, and with all this, the 'loving' at the centre of the whole act: we Australians love Norman even—especially – at his worst. His harmonica manifests and reinforces the double coding, and reminds us of its own place in Australian music. The instrument associated with the marginalised, the poor, but played by a huge section of Australian society left out of the accounts of Australian music and culture. The Norman Gunston of Australian music. But sitting in its brace around the neck of actor and blues harpist Gary McDonald jamming with – strewth, Zappa himself!! – it is also the cinderella instrument, hip as Bob Dylan, Stevie Wonder, Charlie Musselwhite. Yet also, in this identity, buoyed by hype that overshadows the dedicated musicianship of all those harmonica virtuosi of the 1930s and 1940s.

Grieve describes the Zappa jam as a 'great blues harp jam session' (98). Great? Musically, I don't agree, on the basis of memory and report. It was a cathartic relief that made the audience think that. We're not as fumbling as we look. A contemporary urban blues harpist is the acme of chic. A white Australian virtuoso of the 1930s, playing The Anvil Chorus to the delight of thousands in Ballarat's Coliseum Theatre, is something we just can't bear to look at, like an old uncle bursting into a teen rave and insisting on playing the spoons along with the Carl Cox CD. These equivocal codings are what make instruments like the mouth organ such a provocative field of enquiry into the shy competencies of our everyday cultural production.

ENDNOTE

1. A homemade musical instrument consisting of beer bottle tops loosely nailed to a broom handle. Banged on a hard floor, or shaken, or (most frequently) struck with a piece of hard wood, it produces a quick-decay jingling reminiscent of a tambourine.