

A.B. Original's *Reclaim Australia* is ensuring Australians can no longer say "I just didn't know" about Aboriginal issues

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Reclaim Australia is the debut album of hip hop duo A.B. Original that surged the voices and issues of Aboriginal Australia onto the airwaves and into the minds of the public. Fronted by Yorta Yorta man, Briggs (aka Adam Briggs) and Ngarrindjeri man, Trials (aka Daniel Rankine), A.B. Original stands for Always Black Original and their 12-track album released late in 2016 geared up political talks for the upcoming controversies of January 26th, known as Australia Day by some and as Invasion or Survival Day by others.

Music and performance are important aspects of identity and memory in Aboriginal culture (Grant 2014). The enormous place music has in Aboriginal life is purveyed in Senior Tiwi woman Lenie Tipiloura's words 'If all the old songs are lost, then we don't remember who we are' (cited in The Conversation 2014). The forward track of the album is a spoken word piece featuring Archie Roach, an Aboriginal musician who became famous in the 90s through his music. In the A.B. Original track he uses the spoken word to define himself and talks about how the music usurps thoughts of his history and the collective memories of his people.

In this way the forward track is reminiscent of traditional storytelling. While it is contested in the scholarly world whether music with non-Aboriginal influences can be defined as Aboriginal music, the significant characteristic of 'Aboriginal music throughout Australia is that it is a vocal tradition' (Wild 1992, p. 336). Briggs and Trials create contemporary songlines which are integral to Aboriginal knowledge, spirituality, wisdom and cultural values (Songlines: the Indigenous memory code 2016), but even more so they use the vocal tradition as a form of resistance. Andrew Street's review of *Reclaim Australia* (The Guardian 2016) focuses on Briggs and Trials' brutal representation of Australian culture to a greater extent than it being a homage to Aboriginal survival and retaliation, he does however label it as protest music.

To combat the national cult of forgetfulness which W.E.H. Stanner dubbed the Great Australian Silence (Stanner 1969), Briggs and Trials hold nothing back in speaking out



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against ignorant national culture and make heard the atrocities that have, and still do happen to Aboriginal people. The album covers everything from Captain Cook and massacres to police brutality and Australia Day, and it's in a language young Australians can understand and relate to.

Lamingtons, race car driver Mark Scaife and the television show *The Bachelor* all make an appearance in the album's first single, January 26. The track I C U covers the terrors of the Reichstag and the Titanic. By referring to symbols of white Australian culture and to horrors known and acknowledged by the Western world, A.B. Original is making themselves anything but 'The Other' (Gillen & Ghosh 2007) to the heeding audiences. Even the title of the album itself is parodying a far-right nationalist group, with the same name.

Aborigines have been appropriated throughout colonisation as a symbol of the primal human, described as a 'patronising mythology' by Taussig, the imagery of the romantic savage denied Aborigines control over their own existence and future (Morris 1992, p. 84). By taking back ownership of the term 'reclaim Australia' to give it an Indigenous meaning, and by using self-deprecating racial slurs such as 'Gorilla' (Report to the Mist), Briggs and Trials take back power and control of representation which has been used as a form of repression for centuries (Morris 1992, p. 72).

The song 2 Black 2 Strong was one of the most successful tracks in terms of its high rotation on radio station Triple J due to its strength in musical production and linguistic choices. 'Smart black man with a plan, nothing scarier' (2 Black 2 Strong). We can relate the sentiment in these lyrics to the beginnings of the culture of terror. In Morris' article, a scene is from 1837 is described; the image of 1000 Aborigines gathering on the Liverpool Plains, persuaded Governor Colonel Kenneth to dispatch police to the area in fear of an Aboriginal uprising (Morris 1992, p. 76). This line from the song 2 Black 2 Strong uses language in a clear, direct way to illustrate the literal meaning of the lyrics (Thompson 2005 cited in Colima & Cabezas 2017, p. 29), which are showing the continuation of the culture fear of what the Aboriginal might do.

It is difficult to find a flaw in an album so forthright in its message and powerful in its delivery. Perhaps pointing out that many of the songs need a language warning due to swearing, and so their music is not accessible to everyone. Many will remember the controversies surrounding American hip hop group NWA's release of their debut album *Straight Outta Compton*. Tracks were banned from playing on the radio and the themes discussed caused heated political unrest, however, that didn't stop the messages being spread worldwide and the album being considered one of the most influential hip-hop records of all time.

Political action has been demanded largely since the 1930s with figures like Patten and Ferguson pleading for rights, pride and friendship amongst Aborigines and non-Aborigines and a call to end misrepresentation among other desires (McGregor 2012, p. 38). However, many of these issues remain unsolved and are widely unacknowledged as ongoing problems. Music has proven itself in this way to be a powerful vessel of protest and A.B. Original have produced an album reminiscent of *Straight Outta Compton* in its unapologetic and

provocative nature. Bernard Zuel (The Sydney Morning Herald 2016) congratulates the album as being rare as he ruminates 'we just don't do partisan pop here'. On the other hand, I believe protest music is done in Australia, it just hasn't been heard as loud and clear; from Dougie Young recording back in the 1950s to the catchy song by Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly, 'From Little Things Big Things Grow'. Aboriginal politics have been within the music scene, but the songs just haven't been as 'hard to swallow' as the truths A.B. Original are dishing out. Andrew Stafford also draws these conclusions (The Guardian 2017), that being quiet just doesn't cut through sometimes, and I agree that this success of being heard is the album's initial and most important strength.

Two and a half years on from the release of A.B. Originals debut album *Reclaim Australia*, the album is far from forgotten. Perhaps we will see Briggs and Trials release an album that is more likely to make its way into mainstream radio and impact a wider demographic of listeners. But seeming that a measure of the album's success came from the brutal delivery and brave incorporation of historical truths and political controversy, losing these features may risk the meaning of songs to be overlooked or simply the award-winning musical style that is Briggs and Trials will be compromised.

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