The Didjeridu: From Arnhem Land to Internet

Edited by Karl Neuenfeldt
Acknowledgements

In an undertaking such as this there are numerous people to thank for their input and inspiration. The research has taken place over several years and continents and has profited from the kindness of informants who have put up with many questions and hopefully not too much humbug from myself and the other contributors.

Aside from the informants and contributors I especially thank Philip Hayward for giving me the opportunity to do the project and the Department of Media and Communication Studies at Macquarie University, Sydney for continuing to support Perfect Beat Publications. As well, the Aboriginal-Islander College of Music in Perth, Clarice Butkus, Noel Dyck, Mark Evans, Bernard Fernandes, David Goldsworthy, Suzanne Huebsch, the Internet participants, Kerry McKenzie, Phillip Moore, Barry Morris, Jon Stratton, the Tinleys, Janice Vercoe and the academic and support staff of the University of Newcastle (Sociology and Anthropology) all contributed either to the book itself or to the genesis of the interests and ideas that inform it. Technician Ken Scott worked diligently on many of the photographs.

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This book is dedicated to my parents Lillian and Albert; my siblings Donna, Alice and Kurt; my children Erik Shah and Kyana-Lili and my grandson Kyle. May their lives be filled with music and may this book help explain what I have been doing the past few years.
Main front and back cover photograph courtesy of George Chaloupka. The depiction of the didjeridu player is from Yuwunggayai in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory. The original image is 90 cm in height and dates from what is often referred to as the 'freshwater' period.

For further discussion of this and other Arnhem Land rock art paintings, see George Chaloupka (1993) *Journey in Time*, Sydney: Reed.

The Editors express their gratitude to John Colquohoun of Bandigan Arts & Crafts for the loan from his collection of the didjeridus photographed in the colour plate section.
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About the Authors

Karl Neuenfeldt lectures in Communications and Media at Central Queensland University (Rockhampton campus) and has worked in the music industry in North and Central America and Australia variously as a performer, recording artist and producer.

Linda Barwick is an ethnomusicologist who is currently a research fellow at the University of Hong Kong. She studied central Australian women’s music with Cath Ellis and is now working on the didjeridu-accompanied wangga and lirrga songs of northwest Australia.

Kev Carmody is a musician, singer-songwriter, performer and activist. In 1996 he received the Australian National Indigenous Arts Advocacy Association’s award for ‘Most Outstanding Contribution to Indigenous Music’.

Mick Davison is with the University of Newcastle’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Centre. He sees himself as a ‘connector’, using the didjeridu to create awareness of his Goori (Aboriginal) culture.

Peter Dunbar-Hall lectures at the Conservatorium of Music, Sydney University. His PhD thesis was a study of Aboriginal rock music and he is author of several books, including A Guide to Music Around The World.

Philip Hayward is Head of the Department of Media and Communication Studies at Macquarie University, Sydney. He is editor of Perfect Beat – the Pacific Journal of Research into Contemporary Music and Popular Culture and has written and edited a number of books.

Shane Homan has played drums in various rock bands in Australia. He is currently a postgraduate student at Macquarie University, Sydney, where he is researching a doctoral thesis on the regulatory history of live music venues in New South Wales.

David Hudson is an Aboriginal musician, dancer, artist and actor. He helped establish the highly successful Tjapukai Dance Theatre, in Kuranda, Queensland, one of Australia’s premier tourist attractions.

Steven Knopoff is currently an associate lecturer in ethnomusicology and music theory at the University of Adelaide and a PhD candidate at the University of Pittsburgh. He has spent 18 months studying traditional Yolngu songs in and around Yirrkala, Northern Territory.

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Fred Tietjen has a private shamanic counselling practice in San Francisco. He is a collector/dealer in didjeridus and a chronicler of Aboriginal stories from both hemispheres.

Mandawuy Yunupingu is of the Yolngu people of northeastern Arnhem Land. He is an educator, political activist and musician with the group Yothu Yindi and was Australian of the Year in 1993.
In Australia’s northeast Arnhem Land, where the so-called didjeridu originated, the instrument is known to Yolngu (Aboriginal) people as the Yidaki. The Yidaki is deeply entrenched in Yolngu spiritual existence. It holds a special place in the presentation of Yolngu art, music, dance and history. Its basic role in Yolngu society is to accompany the singers, serving as a percussion instrument as well as setting time for the rhythm of songs. Good Yidaki players are those who start to play before they are circumcised. Once they start playing in serious ceremonial business they build the confidence to play in public with an understanding of the rhythms of the song cycles.

The Yidaki comes from northeast Arnhem Land and was originally played only in Australia’s Top End. Yolngu understand the Yidaki has become an Australian icon and accept that non-Yolngu people throughout the world now use it for informal purposes and enjoyment. Be aware, however, that its origins are sacred and secret to Yolngu men. Those stories cannot be told here, can only be shared with initiated men. The Yidaki is a male-orientated instrument. In Yolngu society women are forbidden to play it as its origins are sacred to men.

The tree from which Yidaki is usually cut is the Stringy Bark hollowed out by termites. Other trees used for Yidaki manufacture include the Woollybutt and the Bloodwoods. Yidaki players are the best people to collect them. They can be collected all year round.

We recognise different clans’ individual rhythmic processes and sounds. In northeast Arnhem Land Yidakis tend to be long and therefore the pitch is low. The further west we travel, the shorter the Yidaki and therefore the higher the
pitch. The Yidaki has its own language in that the tongue plays a major role in transforming air into sounds.

The Yidaki has a serious role to play in men’s ceremony, but it is also used as a popular instrument that can be played for the enjoyment of women and children. Songs are distinguished between serious and fun, formal and informal. Formal songs are of a set fixed pattern and are practised formally in everyday Yolngu life. In this context it is centred on history and important events that effect Yolngu lives today and into the future. The informal context is ‘fun’, public enjoyment which is about contemporary Yolngu life interspersed with its formal use.

Yolngu people have long recognised the healing powers of the Yidaki. Through the provision of exercises for breathing, the Yidaki holds collective powers in the healing process. The sound transfers peaceful vibrations that penetrate the mind and create inner spiritual oneness in an individual or group. In some cases, the Yidaki is used for physical healing with the player concentrating his breath on an afflicted part of the patient’s body.

Yidaki playing is a discipline encompassing art, music and history. Today it is used in the healing process between Yolngu and Balanda (Euro-Australians). Technology today accepts natural science and music, thereby opening new horizons in the study of music which combine sophisticated contemporary sounds with those of the old and draw people together in the process.

Cherish the sound, for it is the sound of Mother Earth.
The Didjeridu: From Arnhem Land to Internet
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The Didjeridu: From Arnhem Land to Internet is the first comprehensive study of the Australian Aboriginal instrument, the didjeridu, from a range of musical, cultural and sociological viewpoints. Written in an informed but accessible style, individual chapters analyse traditional uses of the instrument; its use in contemporary Aboriginal rock; the perspective of various accomplished players (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal); and aspects of the instrument’s global diffusion in the 1990s.

The book includes a foreword from Mandawuy Yunupingu, cultural activist and lead singer with the internationally renowned Aboriginal rock band Yothu Yindi. Other contributors include noted Aboriginal musicians such as Kev Carmody, David Hudson and Mick Davison; and leading writers and academics in the field of contemporary music studies from Australia, North America and the United Kingdom.

Dr Karl Neuenfeldt lectures in Media and Communications at Central Queensland University (Rockhampton campus). He has published widely in a variety of journals and has also worked as a professional musician in North and Central America and Australia.

ISBN 1-86462-004-8