

## **Writing Sound: Popular Music in Australian Fiction**

**Peter Doyle, Macquarie University**

The commercial publication of a work of fiction involves many differentiated labours. The authors research, contemplate, write, rewrite, correct, and so on; publishing houses edit, typeset and produce the physical book, identify its audience, celebrate its merits and hopefully promote it with vigour. Then reviewers, booksellers and readers have their turn: more values are explicated, strengths and failings are pinpointed. The book enjoys a long or short life as a pure commodity, is lauded or ignored, is or is not reprinted. Regardless of its commercial vitality, all but a small few books sooner or later sink into the mud of forgotten and discarded culture. To the cultural beachcomber, such items can be remarkably giving artefacts. Works of fiction, regardless of whether they aspire to be art or purely merchandise, create worlds. All stories are told within sets of physical, psychological or cultural coordinates. When the commercial life of a book has all but passed, when its main themes and characters have long since been digested and forgotten, these grids and backdrops can reveal much about the conditions under which the book was produced, and about the conscious thoughts and less conscious suppositions of authors and their readers, and the real and imaginary worlds they inhabited. Aged works of fiction can present to us as both knowing and naive, aware and unconscious. They are primary and secondary source combined.

Popular music studies over the last few decades has broadened from purely intrinsic studies of mainly US and British music, recordings, artists and styles to include more systematic studies of audiences, commercial apparatus and networks, marketing practices etc, and has begun to shift focus towards non-western musics and their audiences. The relationships between popular music and popular fiction writing however have only recently been the subject of scholarly interest overseas<sup>1</sup>, and scarcely at all in Australia<sup>2</sup> even though ‘the rock novel’ excites considerable activity among fans and listmakers<sup>3</sup>.

This piece looks specifically at popular music as it appears (and vanishes) in Australian fiction writing from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century. Those appearances range from the most fleeting, where music is referenced with just a few words, as a mere setting detail, to the more extended, where authors direct their readers’ attention explicitly to music, and on to stories, novels which explicitly concern themselves with music.

I sought references, both brief and lengthy to popular music. The aim was not primarily to assess the works for literary value, (nor to totally ignore literary criticism’s traditional criteria); nor was the project purely historico-ethnographic, that is, to treat the texts as though they were historical primary sources. Tracing a particular trope (or package of

related tropes) through a number of works may tell us much about the works and their creators. And it reveals much about the trope itself. This essay then is no more or less about literature than it is about popular music. Necessarily the piece is exploratory, and provisional.

Scanning Australian fiction looking for references to popular music a few things quickly become apparent: (1) there is not much music in Australian fiction; (2) if we exclude quoted speech, there is not even much *sound*; (3) when music *is* present, it is usually in the form of lyric stanzas or couplets reproduced on the page. By the 1990s, music — songs, titles, sounds — becomes markedly more present. This article concentrates on the scarcer, pre-1990s occurrences, which I will attempt to divide into three broad, not mutually exclusive modes.

Musical references appear most frequently in a mode which might be called ‘incidental’ — a fiddler plays an Irish jig<sup>4</sup>, a young man strums a guitar<sup>5</sup>, a man in the street plays a mandolin<sup>6</sup>, youths dance to unspecified music at a wild bacchanal<sup>7</sup>, a neighbour’s radiogram blares out pop tunes<sup>8</sup>, a girl jives while listening to a radio (131), juke boxes blare out of Kings Cross milk bars<sup>9</sup>, and so on. Such musical references might be imagined as operating rather the way a snippet of ‘period’ music appears in a movie soundtrack — as details, not meant to deeply engage the reader, but included to add veracity, believability or texture to a scene.

The Jazz Age had reached its crescendo: the wail and boop of saxophones, the twanging of ukuleles, and the mad jumping of the Charleston had even begun to invade the hitherto inviolate stuffiness of our suburbs.<sup>10</sup>

Or even more fleetingly:

As the Show Boat made its way up the harbour towards the quay the saxophones picked up and sustained the melody...<sup>11</sup>

The rarely-specified tunes in such scenes do not operate as narrative ‘plot movers’, but rather tend to be minor inclusions in larger, more variegated scenes. 1950s and 60s crime stories, exploitation novels and the like, in which a more stage centre musical presence might be expected also most frequently do music, if they do it all, in this incidental, non-specific mode.

Sometimes, however, these passing, incidental references can be accorded a weight within the text. George Johnston’s melancholy narrator in *Clean Straw for Nothing* (1969) mentions his son Julian’s get togethers with fellow university students:

There is one of Bob Dylan’s songs they keep playing and replaying, a kind of esoteric diatribe against a certain “Mister Jones”, who seems to symbolize the “oldies” and “squares of my generation” and the hoarsely reiterated refrain is taunting, “Something is happening here and you don’t know what it is — do you, Mr Jones?”

But neither do you Mr Dylan. Nor they. Nor ye.<sup>12</sup>

The lyrics are from Dylan's 'Ballad of a Thin Man', from the *Highway 61 Revisited* album of 1965. That song and that album mark the moment at which Dylan started flaunting his own literariness, and we can imagine that the erudite, disaffected Johnston may have taken lines like 'You've read all of F. Scott Fitzgerald's books,' personally. But he treats Dylan seriously, hears in his music a profound loneliness and loneliness, which he likens to that in Yeats' later work — the sort of insight commonplace enough among critics now, but one rarely stated then.

Music figures more prominently (if no more frequently) in writings which might be classed broadly as having a pronounced reportage or 'ethnographic' aspect. Henry Lawson's 'Songs They Used to Sing' begins:

On the diggings up to twenty odd years ago – and as far back as I can remember – on Lambing Flat, the Pipe Clays, Gulgong, Home Rule, and so through the roaring list; in bark huts, tents, public-houses, sly grog shanties, and – well, the most glorious voice of all belonged to a bad girl.

The rest of the piece is a little more than a list of lyric fragments, remembered by the narrator as having been sung in the shanties in his infancy (and before).

Louis Stone's novel *Betty Wayside* (1915) is set in Sydney. Its main characters are musicians, composers and instrument makers.<sup>13</sup> It proposes Sydney as an explicitly musical and sonic site: a soundscape<sup>14</sup>. Sounds and music in *Betty Wayside* move characters and advance the plot; they are sonic causes of material effects, as they are for the struggling young composer Walter Chippendale:

Ever since he was a child music had come to him in this manner, and always with the sound of instruments. Sounds came to him as ideas come to others. He had never forgotten the day when he found himself. One afternoon he was walking home from the office through Prince Alfred Park. As he reached the Exhibition Building he heard the sound of violins rising and falling like the curves of a wave. A famous London orchestra was playing to a crowded audience. And as he listened with the emotion of a foreigner who hears his tongue spoken in a distant land, a shudder of voluptuous ecstasy went through him. He trembled violently, recovered himself with an effort, and stood rooted to the spot, spellbound with a strange and exquisite melancholy. It was an emotional crisis, and the turning-point of his life.<sup>15</sup>

There are street bands, orchestras and rowdy parties in *Betty Wayside*. There is noise. A hostile neighbour answers the music coming from Betty's house with an execrable performance on her own piano — an early representation of 'noise pollution' (48-49).

The novel is expressly concerned with questions of musical style, the place of music in everyday life, with then current debates over modernism and the place of nationalist cultural identity in music. On the latter question it takes an internationalist, anti-local, anti bush-ethos

position. Stalled in his attempts to score a piece called 'Bush Ballad', composer Chippendale takes Betty for a walk in Centennial Park. A brass band is playing in the kiosk.

He stopped suddenly. Fire and energy leaped into his weary eyes, and he thrust his head forward in the manner of one listening. There was intense silence, and Betty could hear the brass band playing tum-ti-ti-tum in the distance. Suddenly he began to hum and whistle to himself. He rubbed his forehead with a swift, automatic movement, evidently unconscious of his actions. Betty, fascinated by this extraordinary behaviour, was alarmed lest anyone should see him; but, fortunately, the other couples were too busy to observe them. Now he was humming and muttering to himself in a tumult of emotion. His body rocked with a rhythmical movement. Presently he stopped and stared at Betty like a man in a dream. Then he pulled himself together with an effort.

"I've got it!" he cried, joyously; "I've been waiting weeks for that. Listen!" And he hummed a phrase. "That's the cry of the curlew. It's given out by the oboe, and repeated by all the woodwind in turn. And now I've got the theme for the violins."

Betty looked disappointed. These disjointed notes conveyed nothing to her (71-72).

Chippendale completes his piece. It consists of three movements and is 'designed to picture a day in the Australian bush' (95). It is 'a strange bizarre composition, Australian to the marrow.' But things do not go well at its first performance at Sydney Town Hall. When the oboes and clarinets mimic the cry of a 'laughing jackass saluting the dawn', the audience laughs. The rattled orchestra members lose their place, and the piece falls apart. The composition is a failure.

Chippendale retires to a King Street wine bar to drown his sorrows. He doesn't go back to his regular teaching work, but instead takes up with a strolling 'Bohemian' string band. The group perform classics and 'claptrap' in the street, at the races, on ferries. Now as a low status flaneur Chippendale discovers a polyglot, worldly Sydney of which he'd hitherto been scarcely aware. The players in the Bohemian Quartet happen to be excellent musicians, though for various reasons are offhand about their talents. With Walter now in the group they try harder, and the quartet soon is very much in demand. Walter writes another piece, 'Song of the Unwept Tear'. It relates to no special place, nor is it crudely mimetic. But it is emotionally authentic, and draws on Chippendale's youthful musical epiphany in Prince Alfred Park. Indeed, the inspiration for the new piece comes to him while he is crossing Prince Alfred Park to his lodgings, meditating on the superlative flute playing of his fellow Bohemian quartet member, Paoli. The 'unwept tear' refers explicitly in Chippendale's mind to Betty's apparent failure to requite the love he feels for her. But its inspiration is music itself, and for him both affect and music are anchored to specific sites, experiences and people.

Stone's novel was written before the modern conception of 'popular music' had taken hold, when the extant distinctions were simply 'low' music ('trashy' in the novel) and cultivated music. Popular music in its

modern forms is scarcely present in fiction until after World War Two, and the first novels that I'm aware of in which it is very present are the youth/pop culture novels of the late 50s and 1960s. William Dick's *A Bunch of Ratbags*<sup>16</sup> is a first person account of growing up in post war working class Melbourne. Its narrator is a bogie, and he carefully delineates his and his friends' clothes, sexual and combat habits, and their cinematic and musical tastes. His listing of favourite rock'n'roll recordings and movies in particular would likely pass in any modern rock canon — he mentions early, Sun-period Presley tracks such as 'Mystery Train' and 'Good Rockin' Tonight', for example, as well as tracks by Little Richard, Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran, Chuck Berry, Fats Domino and even relative obscurities like Ronnie Self (254-255). This was at a time when more anodyne pop 'covers' of those tracks were much more widely circulated and known. Dick seems eager to have his readers know exactly what he and his friends preferred and what they disdained, although the writing never descends to mere listings of consumption patterns. Rock'n'roll in *A Bunch of Ratbags* is exclusively the product of US black and white underclasses, as Dick makes explicit. The fledgling Australian rock'n'roll of the time is not mentioned.

Mudrooroo's (Colin Johnson's) novel *Wild Cat Falling*<sup>17</sup> also locates its narrator as rock'n'roll and jazz-loving, black jeans-wearing bogie ex-convict. But its present tense narration gives the novel less of a social mapping, more of an inner existentialist mood. The narrator cites lyrics – 'Love Me Tender' (4), 'Heartbreak Hotel' (58), 'Trouble in Mind' (48) – and these function as a kind of mood-fixing virtual soundtrack. There is not much story here, but the novel does include a discussion between the narrator and a group of university types he has fallen in with, on how African American despair and oppression finds a transcendent artistic expression in jazz and blues, leading to a discussion about whether Australian Aborigines might 'ever produce an art to rival jazz' (77-78).

*Wild Cat Falling* and *Bunch of Ratbags* are explicitly concerned with the 1950s rock'n'roll experience, but both were published in 1965, after the coming of the Beatles and well into the so-called 'Age of Rock', by which time it had become more or less acceptable to recognise pop and rock'n'roll as a part of the cultural landscape. Dorothy Hewett's social realist novel *Bobbin Up*<sup>18</sup> however was published in 1959 when rock'n'roll was still in equally bad odour with both conservatives and progressives.<sup>19</sup> Set in the inner Sydney areas of Alexandria, Erskineville and Newtown in 1957, *Bobbin Up* is scrupulous in its depiction of everyday life — songs, signage, sounds, smells, sights and speech of the industrial inner city. Hewett was later deeply embarrassed by aspects of the book — its naïve Stalinism, its almost laughably earnest party-line heroic, climactic moments.<sup>20</sup> But it is full of surprises too, most notably in its remarkably non-doctrinaire, non-Adornian embrace of pop culture in general and pop music in particular, which Hewett does without any condescension, even though

she herself was well out of the first flush of youth when she wrote the book.

And she confronts in *Bobbin Up* one of the core technical/craft problems of inserting pop music in fiction: the music poses a charged but different space/time to that of the larger story, which must somehow be incorporated into the larger narrative. In its broad outlines the problem resembles that which narrative film makers encounter in trying to incorporate recorded pop into film, the matter of ‘integration’. Hewett deals with it gamely, using a kind of ‘virtual soundtrack’ to cue scene changes and transitions in the narrative.

Peggy Maguire is slicing onions in her kitchen in Erskineville listening to her radio. We ‘hear’ disjointed bits of advertisements, interspersed with Peggy’s anxious, rambling ruminations. Then

A voice cooed gently in her ear. “Do your hands tell what you do, instead of how lovely you are?”

Then the lyrics of the song ‘At the Hop’ (a pop hit for Danny and Juniors in 1957) are reproduced, reading as though that song is coming out of Peggy’s radio.

But the next paragraph begins:

Flock nylon, rustling taffeta, starched cotton over a roped half-slip, drainpipe trousers with a lurex thread, tropical shirts, char-grey and Sinatra red ... Brylcreem and crew cuts, Wild Poppy behind your ears and in the cleft of your new breasts. The Yank compere sweats in the middle of the hall, the hula girls jiggle lewdly on his fat bum. The trio warms up to it, half steamed already the dust rises off the floor and floats in a steamy haze down the long golden arcade of light and sound and sweat...forgetfulness and romance and Wild Poppy sousing the dust with scent...LET’S GO TO THE HOP... Oh! Baby let’s go [ellipses in original] (96).

We’re now at a dance hall in King Street, Newtown, with Peggy’s daughter Patty. The transition is almost cinematic: the ‘soundtrack’ has cued the scene change, and the music ‘leaks’ from one scene to the next. Thereafter the exposition is disjointed and impressionistic, as though the narration itself has been swept up into the mood of movement, escape and intoxication in the dance hall.

Patty is slated to sing a song with the trio. She chooses ‘Santa Catalina’ (now mostly forgotten, but dominant on Australian radio for a while in the late 1950s). Patty makes an unsteady start.

...”Get the beat kid,” [the drummer] whispered.

The dancing feet shuffled, the drummer thudded out the rhythm. Patty closed her eyes, flung up her head, swayed her body, got the beat.

...

The feet flew, the dust whirled, the drummer’s fair hair banged up and down on his wet forehead, the light globes swayed. ... Outside the trams ground sparks off the rails, the trains rushed with a demented wail through Newtown Station...

The stubby little girl stood, thick legs planted wide apart, breasts swelling up and down under the scooped neckline of her cotton frock. Patty had the beat. She'd always had it, since she was born to the shriek of a factory whistle in Silver Street (99-100).

Hewett's book goes beyond simple literary ethnography or reportage, as does Mudrooroo's. Both allow the music to 'call the narrative shots', to take the story into a dreamlike, euphoric, or nightmarish, hyper-sensory register. The mode might be called 'synaesthetic'. But actual 'music' is of course totally absent — text is silent. The music is invoked only in the form of words written on the page. Perhaps such instances rely on the reader being familiar with the music, or some approximation of it. We read the text, 'hear' the music and re-insert that into the narrative space as a kind of phantom soundtrack, which then acts as a kind of affective subplot.

Earlier instances of this type of musical presence can be found in Dymphna Cusack's *Come in Spinner*, published in 1951, set in Sydney in World War Two.

The orchestra started up. He raised his brows. "Shall we dance?" When they rose, the full-length mirror beside the table showed her the perfect couple; his broad shoulders and perfect carriage were those of a young man, and the grey at his temples only served to make him look more distinguished. He looked his best in evening clothes...

The saxophonist moved to the microphone and began to croon:

*"The southern stars are bright above  
Pale frangipani fills the air,  
Its blossoms star your perfumed hair..."*

As the music sobbed out its sentimental refrain, the pressure of his hand strengthened on her back

*"The night is made for you and love..."*

Through the thin material of her frock she could feel the warmth of his hand. She wished men hadn't given up the old fashion of wearing gloves, although thank heaven it wouldn't hurt this black dress.

*"Your lips are warm and soft, my sweet  
As frangipani in the night..."*

She felt his lips against her hair. The singer's voice melted away in a dying cadence:

*"Your touch is music — all delight.  
I scatter stars around your feet..."*

Deb sighed. Jack would be back next week and all this would come to an end (99-100).

The nightclub (Prince's), the dance orchestra and the crooner are markers of temporary enchantments. For the heroine Deb the song signals her tentative entry into Sydney's wartime upper-middle class.

Its representative and her would-be protector is the suave but reactionary Angus McPharland. The Jack referred to is Deb's absent digger husband.

Later in the book the same song, 'Pale Frangipani' is performed by a female crooner at a US servicemen's party. It has a similarly intoxicating effect on Deb's vulnerable young co-worker Monnie Malone.

She had never felt like this before. They were dancing divinely and there was a tingling feeling all through her...she felt as though she was floating on a cloud, there was a lovely warm feeling in her stomach...(139).

Monnie's drink has been spiked, however, and soon she is utterly ruined. After being virtually date-raped she is delivered, still stupefied, into the hands of a brothel madame.

The song appears once more in the novel, towards the end. Again we are at Prince's. The orchestra strikes up and Angus asks Deb to dance — he calls it 'our tune'. But by now the thrill is gone. Deb is appalled at Angus's reactionary politics, disenchanted by the stifling snobbery of his world.

She wished she had an aspirin. Her head was aching, her feet were sore and she hated the tune anyway. Every messenger boy in town was whistling it (341).

Deb herself is not above a bit of snobbery when it comes to the ubiquity of the popular song. In a curious musical interlude, elsewhere in *Come in Spinner* a didgeridoo, drums and a xylophone are played at a wild hotel room party thrown by two rich (and vilely racist) American twins. Explicitly 'swing' inflected music is notably absent from *Come in Spinner*, although reference is made to the character Guinea's impromptu jitterbugging in the beauty salon where much of the action takes place.

Eric Scott's *The Sound Mixers*<sup>21</sup> of 1977 might be the first Australian rock novel as such. The cover blurb reads, 'The Sound Mixers is a dramatic exposé of the rock industry: fiction that reads like fact...'. Although actual music is sketchily represented, the novel has numerous authentic touches. At one point a band named 'The Romanticas', is booked to play a club but deemed 'too ethnic'. Their name is changed by the booker to Fantails. The five piece band will earn \$250 for the gig — \$50 a head, which seems a fair reflection of what such a band might have earned in Melbourne 1977. (Depressingly similar figures would likely apply now). There is a young heavy rock band in the book plausibly named 'Crackrock'. The action moves, 'at a breathtaking pace to a devastating climax' (in the words of the cover blurb), which happens during the performance of a world famous, Queen-like rock band named 'Andromeda' at the Myer Music

Bowl — typical of the rock novel/movie, the narrative climax coincides with a musical performance.

Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip*<sup>22</sup>, also set in the Melbourne underground of the mid 1970s is surprisingly non-specific about its music. Reference is made to an unnamed band playing 'rock'n'roll' at a dance following a theatrical performance in a Pram Factory-like space (79); elsewhere Stevie Wonder (66) and Bette Midler (93) records play in the background, and Bob Dylan (15) and Joni Mitchell (130) lyrics are quoted. *Monkey Grip* was written and published at a time when the Melbourne/Carlton film, music and theatrical underground was 'breaking out' into wider Australia, when bands like Skyhooks were dominating pop music charts — indeed *Monkey Grip* was part of that break out. Yet for all that, *Monkey Grip* has little of the 'ethnographic' about it. Vaguely drawn characters drift in and out of vaguely drawn scenes. The music in *Monkey Grip*, as with other details, remains sketchy, and whatever values the book may have, surprisingly little of the intensity that characterised Melbourne underground life and cultural participation of the time is conveyed.

In the mid 1990s, music and music themes become commonplace in Australian fiction. Driving this seems to be a new historical awareness of popular music. Prior to this, music for many writers is simply a pleasing (or displeasing) other. With the exception of the Hewett, Mudrooroo and Dick examples, music is generally something of, and from, the exterior world than something pertaining to the inner self. But by the nineties new formulations of popular music and culture emerge in fiction. Rather than the psyche being simply 'influenced' by this genre, popular music structures and even constitutes subjectivity, consciousness and bodily gesture. Christos Tsolkias's narrator in *Loaded*<sup>23</sup> (published 1995, the same year as Nick Hornby's *Hi Fidelity*) is talking:

The Walkman is my favourite toy. It creates a soundtrack for me and lets me slip into walking through a movie (18-19).

*Loaded* is suffused with pop music and sound. Individual tracks are listed carefully, opinions passed as to their worth or otherwise. The first person character constantly alters his mood and behaviour with drugs, and actively chooses (or avoids) his musical accompaniments. The music emanates from his Walkman or radios and sound systems in the various places he visits. While the main character is making his chemically intoxicated journey through daily life, the narrator addresses the reader, explaining, clarifying and justifying the protagonist's — his — choices. The first person narrator is a kind of split performance, thoroughly drug-fucked and simultaneously perfectly lucid: both self-involved *and* attentive to the reader. Thus the story is a kind of participant-observer exercise. For the participant aspect of the first person protagonist, the music accompanies and amplifies the flows of sensation and affect. For the observer, the music is an aspect of a

broader fabric being dutifully recorded and reported to the presumably non-participant reader. And *Loaded* is a text very attentive to its non-participant reader. To again invoke the three-part schema I have been using here, we could say the book operates simultaneously in synaesthetic and ethnographic modes. Recorded popular music is the perfect vehicle and exemplar for this split consciousness — we can immerse ourselves in it utterly, or just as easily ignore it, and we — contemporary western subjects — can switch between levels of involvement instantly, effortlessly.<sup>24</sup>

During the 1980s the recording industry world wide dumped large quantities of back catalogue material onto the market in repackaged or ‘budget priced’ CDs. Many commercial FM radio broadcasters adopted ‘hits and memories’ playlist formats, and more generally, people who had come of age in the late 1970s moved to occupy the cultural centre. Combined with postmodernism’s general embrace of the popular and mass mediated, the idea of ‘popular music’ lost what residual ‘otherness’ it may have had — although, of course, media beat-ups and dramas over individual styles, performers, lyrics etc deemed to be transgressive continued, and even increased. Nonetheless, the understanding that popular culture in general and popular music in particular was integrally implicated in modern western subjectivities, in the making of cultural formations, in everyday behaviours, in gesture, speech, in the creation of spaces both literal and metaphoric was unexceptionable.

This was reflected in writing in ways both small and great. Novel titles (like movie titles of the day) borrow freely from pop songs — such as Mandy Sayer’s *Mood Indigo*<sup>25</sup> and Cathy Cole’s *Skin Deep*<sup>26</sup>. Other books such as Debra Adelaide’s *The Hotel Albatross*<sup>27</sup> draw on and refer to popular song canons. Tim Winton includes references to aspects of US gospel roots music in his *Dirt Music*.<sup>28</sup> Kerry Greenwood recently set her *Green Mill Murder*<sup>29</sup> in a Melbourne dancehall of the 1920s.

During the nineties a number of veterans of the inner city music scenes turned to fiction writing, with various degrees of literary and commercial success. Dave Warner, after writing the ambitious *City of Light* in 1995<sup>30</sup>, then his Ellroy-esque *Big Bad Blood*<sup>31</sup> settled into an Agatha Christie styled clue-puzzle mystery series featuring an ex-rock musician detective<sup>32</sup>. In 2000 veteran of the 1980s inner city ska band Allnighters Dave Lennon published his *Rude Boy Train*, a first person music, drugs and gay sex romp centring on the touring life of a road band called the ‘Intensifiers’<sup>33</sup>. Michelle Moo’s *Glory This*<sup>34</sup> looks closely at suburban Melbourne sharpie cultures of the 1970s. I myself have also produced novels which offer an imaginary alternative history of Sydney’s 1940s and 50s<sup>35</sup> in which the ‘music industry’ — such as it then was — and petty crime are closely entwined.

Perhaps what has not been seen in Australian writing yet is the sort of fine-tuned musical ‘sociological’ mapping done overseas by writers like George P Pelecanos, Elmore Leonard, Daniel Woodrell and Jake Arnott — who use popular music, performed live or heard on car radios, juke boxes, home stereos and so on to shorthand finely delineated sociocultural sub-subcategories. Pelecanos draws on an encyclopaedic knowledge of twentieth century popular music and popular culture, and every character of note has a distinctive and telling taste in music, and his or her own particular sets of memories and structures of feeling revolving around particular songs or artists. When music in contemporary Australian fiction does appear, it is more frequently linked to a single character, as a signifier of higher order interiority or as a marker of place. It has yet to be fully mobilised in a kind of ambitious contemporary social mapping project.

The various published and unpublished works of Peter Lillie however are singularly sensitive to music — its creation, consumption, its place in Australian life and in his own life. *Monarto: My Life in the Australian Music Business*<sup>36</sup> is a fictionalised account of two interstate tours by a Melbourne band which closely resembles Lillie’s own band of the 1970s, The Pelaco Brothers. *Monarto* is a satire written in verse, in the style of the naive vernacular ballad, and its occasionally awkward rhymes are used to heighten the comic effect. It is also an autobiography, and the humour is underwritten by melancholy. At the same time *Monarto* is a deep and subtle reflection on Australian popular music since the 1970s, and more broadly a meditation on ‘Australianness’. Lillie, along with his collaborator Johnny Topper did much in the 1970s to establish the mood of self-awareness and satire, as well as the ironic interest in Australiana kitsch that has characterised much music and performance produced in Melbourne since then — exemplified later in the work of people like Dave Graney. Yet Lillie’s public voice has remained strangely muted, and this too is a source of constant bemusement to the narrator of *Monarto*. The author mostly resists the easy out of bitterness and spite as he strives to understand the success of figures he clearly regards as his artistic inferiors. The verse novel/memoir *Kevin Kelso*<sup>37</sup> centres on the author’s late 1950s childhood, in particular a family caravan holiday trip to Sydney and Queensland in 1959. Both *Monarto* and *Kevin Kelso* overlay other car journeys — to Sydney, Tamworth, Byron Bay and Western Australia in the one narrative, so that we continually slip back and forth between decades and moods. Idyllic childhood journeys are echoed mile for mile by various later, usually anxious, underfinanced journeys, in less reliable cars, sometimes with an infant charge on board. Also present in *Kevin Kelso* is a running commentary from a Rolf Harris-like figure (‘Rolf Dagmore’). But for the narrator, every section of road, every town has its own mood and set of memories. And little escapes him. In one of the shadow trips, the adult narrator stops at a ‘super servo’ in Glenrowan, and because he has neglected to pack a lunch, he goes to a ‘Maccas’. He pushes through the plate glass door, and ‘Standing there in multi-colourama/Is a clown clad in Ned Kelly armour/ Standing

there with water pistols drawn/ And mounted on a patch of Astro-lawn' (73). In the next verse he passes the turn off to Wangaratta, "Nick Cave's birthplace!" its new claim to fame/ but better by-passed all the same'. But before passing on, he muses whether Nick Cave might play Ned Kelly in some future movie. The 1950s journey and its later shadows structure is continued in the still unpublished *Kevin Kelso, Book Two*. Lillie's writing however, like his musical work, has so far remained marginal to the contemporary Australian commercial mainstream.

Australian popular music, or certain of its aspects, seems to be becoming more enmeshed in and with things literary, judging by the publication in late 2006 of *Meanjin*'s 'On Rock'n'Roll' issue<sup>38</sup>. Published not long after the sudden death of Go-Betweens founder Grant McLennan, the mood of the issue has been described more than once as 'elegiac', and we might wonder whether future literary mediations of popular music in Australia are set to replay a kind of personalised greatest hits format, as aging authors revisit their own particular halcyon days in some or other once-hip music scene. If that is to be the case, we might at least hope that some Peter Lillie-styled irony gets included somewhere in the mix.

### Bio note

Peter Doyle lectures in non-fiction writing at Macquarie University, Sydney. His recent publications include *City of Shadows: Sydney Police Photographs 1912-1948* (Sydney: HHT, 2005) and *Echo and Reverb: Fabricating Space in Popular Music Recording, 1900-1960* (Middletown, Ct: Wesleyan, 2005). He is the author of the crime novels *Get Rich Quick*, (Melbourne: Minerva, 1996), *Amaze Your Friends*, (Milsons Point: Random, 1998) and *The Devil's Jump* (Milsons Point: Arrow, 2001). Peter is also a part-time curator at the Justice & Police Museum in Sydney, and a (sometimes) working musician.

---

<sup>1</sup> Some recent essays on the topic include *Popular Music* 24.2; 'Music and Literature' issue; the three issues to date of *Chapter & Verse*, the online journal which 'explores the creative intersection between popular music and the written word', at <http://www.popmatters.com/chapter/Issue3/index.html>; David Sanjek's 'Bloody Heart of Rock & Roll: Images of Popular Music in Contemporary Imaginative Fiction', in *Journal of Popular Culture* 24.1 (1995): 179-209; and Anthony Miller provides a useful overview of the rock novel in 'Rock'n'roll Fakebooks', *Los Angeles City Beat* 4.41 (October 4-11, 2006), <http://www.lacitybeat.com/article.php?id=4432&IssueNum=174>

<sup>2</sup> See Peter de Vries 'Reference to Popular Music in the Novel: the Author's Perspective'. *Journal of Music and Meaning* 2 (Spring 2004), <http://www.musicandmeaning.net/issues/showArticle.php?artID=2.7>

<sup>3</sup> See for example Greg Shaw's 'Bomp Bookshelf' at <http://www.bomp.com/BompbooksFiction2.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Johnston, George. *My Brother Jack*. A & R: Sydney, 2001. 41.

<sup>5</sup> Garner, Helen. *Monkey Grip*. McPhee Gribble: Melbourne, 1977. 152.

<sup>6</sup> Cusack, Dymphna and Florence James. *Come in Spinner*. William Heinemann: London, 1951. 61.

- 
- <sup>7</sup> Bahneinan, Gunther. *Hoodlum*. Horwitz: Sydney, 1963. 87.
- <sup>8</sup> Rohan, Criena. *The Delinquents*. Victor Gollancz: London, 1962. 121-122.
- <sup>9</sup> Harrower, Elizabeth. *Down in the City*. Cassell: London. 5.
- <sup>10</sup> Johnston, *My Brother Jack*, 54.
- <sup>11</sup> Cusack, Dymphna. *Say No To Death*. William Heinemann: Melbourne, 1951. 45.
- <sup>12</sup> George Johnson. *Clean Straw for Nothing*. Collins: London, 1969. 101.
- <sup>13</sup> The citations here all refer to the Sydney Electronic Text and Image Service (SETIS) version of the novel which is accessed at <http://purl.library.usyd.edu.au/setis/id/stobett>
- <sup>14</sup> I am grateful to Sue Doyle for alerting me to Stone's novel. The details and interpretation here owes much to her MA dissertation *City of Shadows: Perceptions of Sydney in Fiction, 1890-1914* UTS, 2001.
- <sup>15</sup> *Betty Wayside*, 21-22.
- <sup>16</sup> Dick, William. *A Bunch of Ratbags*. Collins: London, 1965.
- <sup>17</sup> Mudrooroo. *Wild Cat Falling*. Angus and Robertson: Sydney, 1965, 1992.
- <sup>18</sup> Hewett, Dorothy. *Bobbin Up*. Vulgar Press: Melbourne, 1999.
- <sup>19</sup> See Jon Stratton. *The Young Ones: Working Class Culture, Consumption and the Category of Youth*. Black Swan Press: Perth, 1992, and Peter Doyle. 'Flying Saucer Rock'n'roll: the Australian press confronts early rock'n'roll'. *Perfect Beat* (July 1999): 24-47
- <sup>20</sup> 'When I left the Communist Party in 1968...I felt something close to revulsion about *Bobbin Up*. The true believer I once was seemed to me so insufferably naïve,' Hewett wrote in the introduction to the 1999 edition of the book. (vii)
- <sup>21</sup> Scott, Eric. *The Sound Mixers*. Widescope: Camberwell, Vic, 1977.
- <sup>22</sup> Garner, Helen. *Monkey Grip*. McPhee Gribble: Melbourne, 1977.
- <sup>23</sup> Tsolkias, Christos. *Loaded*. Vintage: Milsons Point, 1995.
- <sup>24</sup> Fiona McGregor's *Chemical Palace* (Allen and Unwin: Crows Nest, 2002) offers an instructive contrast. Here too drugs, music, sensory experience and sexual adventurism are the topics. But McGregor's book makes a point of not offering non-participant readers a 'safe' and stable authorial voice or point of view.
- <sup>25</sup> Sayer, Mandy. *Mood Indigo*. Allen & Unwin Fiction: Sydney, 1990. Sayer's books have much music incidentally woven through them, in the form of references, backgrounds and settings, but at a more fundamental level present life and experience as being in deep alliance with music, especially jazz.
- <sup>26</sup> Cole, Cathy. *Skin Deep*. Duffy and Snellgrove: Sydney, 2002.
- <sup>27</sup> Adelaide, Debra. *The Hotel Albatross*. Random House: Milsons Point, 1995.
- <sup>28</sup> Winton, Tim. *Dirt Music*. Picador: Sydney, 2001.
- <sup>29</sup> Greenwood, Kerry. *The Green Mill Murder*. Allen & Unwin: Crows Nest, 2005.
- <sup>30</sup> Warner, Dave. *City of Light*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press: Fremantle, 1995.
- <sup>31</sup> Warner, Dave. *Big Bad Blood*. Random House: Milsons Point, 1997.
- <sup>32</sup> See for example Dave Warner. *Murder in the Groove*. Pan MacMillan: Sydney, 1998.
- <sup>33</sup> Lennon, Dave. *Rude Boy Train*. Transworld: Milsons Point, 2000.
- <sup>34</sup> Moo, Michelle. *Glory This*. Local Consumption Press: Broadway, 2003.
- <sup>35</sup> Doyle, Peter. *Get Rich Quick*. Minerva: Melbourne, 1996; *Amaze Your Friends*, Random House: Milsons Point, 1998; *The Devils' Jump*. Arrow: Milsons Point, 2001.
- <sup>36</sup> Lillie, Peter. *Monarto: My Life in the Australian Music Industry*. Permanent Press: Melbourne, 1999.
- <sup>37</sup> Lillie, Peter. *Kevin Kelso Book One*. Greasy Pole: Melbourne, 2002.
- <sup>38</sup> *Meanjin* 65.3 (2006).