

# NUMINOUS AMBIENCE: Spirituality, Dreamtimes and Fantastic Aboriginality

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## Abstract

Peter Weir's apocalyptic thriller *The Last Wave* (1977) drew on aspects of Aboriginal culture and spiritual beliefs to construct a highly atmospheric fantasy of indigenous 'otherness' enacted in contemporary Sydney. This article analyses the film's score and sound design and, in particular, the manner in which it creates sonic ambiances and dramatic emphases within the narrative. The article commences with discussion of the Aboriginal concept of the Dreamtime (and how this has been interpreted by Western writers) and then proceeds to consider how Aboriginality has been represented in film scores, with particular emphasis on the role of the iconic Aboriginal didjeridu.<sup>1</sup> Following a consideration of how US popular fictional texts (such as Philip Kaufman's 1983 film *The Right Stuff*) have engaged with aspects of indigenous Australian spirituality, the main body of the article looks at the ways that score and sound combine in particular moments in *The Last Wave*, the nature of the musical sounds (and cultural associations) deployed and the film's 'sonic conclusion'.

## Keywords

Aboriginality, Dreamtime, Peter Weir, numinosity, ambience

## Introduction

Australian filmmakers have represented Aborigines (and Torres Strait Islanders) on screen since the earliest days of the medium, initially in short ethnographic/travel films and subsequently in feature-length productions. Notable examples of the latter include Charles Chauvel's *Uncivilised* (1936) and *Jedda* (1955), Australian cinema 'revival' films such as *Walkabout* (Nick Roeg, 1971) and *Storm Boy* (Henri Safran, 1976), and recent features such as *Yolngu Boy* (Stephen Johnson, 2001), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002)<sup>2</sup> and *Ten Canoes* (Rolf de Heer, 2006).<sup>3</sup> As might be expected, these films are imbued by ideologies that mirror the social-political zeitgeist of the periods they were produced in and the variously affirmative and dissenting agendas and imaginations of their authors. Like any representation, the films reveal as much about the imagination of Australia's colonisers as they do of

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the instrument is spelled variously, including the previously more common 'didgeridoo'. The usage here reflects an Australian ethnomusicological convention established by authors associated with the journal *Perfect Beat* in the late 1990s.

<sup>2</sup> See Kibby (2005) for an insightful discussion of sound and music in the film.

<sup>3</sup> See Krausz (2003) for a detailed overview of Australian cinema's representation of Aboriginality.

actual Aboriginal cultures and communities and the manner in which they inhabit the spaces of the Australian continent.<sup>4</sup> (Australian) Aboriginality has also registered an occasional presence in Hollywood and global cinema, where it has been posed as an ultimate ‘other’ to the rational and increasingly technologised West in films such as *The Right Stuff* (Philip Kaufman, 1983), *Where the Green Ants Dream* (Werner Herzog, 1985) and *Until the End of the World* (Wim Wenders, 1991).

## Dreamtime

Central to the image of Aboriginality as pre-modern ‘other’ is an interpretation of Aboriginal concepts of spirituality and attachment to nature. The latter concepts are, of course, highly complex: ‘nature’ being a concept of the flora and fauna as an integrated entity within a broader geo-material one; and ‘spirituality’ being a broad catch-all term for (the imagination of and engagement with) a transcendent reality and power. Perhaps the best-known aspect of Aboriginal spirituality is that of its Dreamtime. This term refers to Aboriginal mythologies of creation and the earliest period of human life (when interaction with powerful entities shaped landscape, the biomass and human destiny). The concept first appeared in the work of late 19<sup>th</sup> Century anthropologists Gillen and Spencer and reflected their engagement with the Central Australian Arrente people and their common belief that the remote past was (an) *alcheringa* – a state that they understood and translated as “dreamtimes, in which their mythic ancestors lived” (Dean, 1996: 12). Current perceptions of this state as a core pan-Aboriginal concept appear to largely derive from the research of Anglican clergyman and anthropologist A.P Elkin, particularly as asserted in his 1969 article ‘Elements of Australian Aboriginal Philosophy’. As critics such as Dean have identified, while Elkin’s particular characterisation of the Dreamtime may have accurately represented the cosmology of the Northern Territory Murinbata clan (at least at the time he researched them) there are a wider variety of inflections and perceptions of historical consciousness across different Australian Aboriginal societies than Elkin’s work suggests. Drawing on a range of sources, Dean has identified a set of core spiritual perceptions to traditional Aboriginal societies:

*There is no sharp distinction between the sacred and secular, since the spirit world and human world interpenetrate. All aspects of the Aboriginal environment are affected by the power of spirits. The very land itself is a kind of ‘church’; it is a kind of theophany where the land contains the essence of the Ancestors, and is the work of the Ancestors. The whole land is a religious sanctuary, with special regions throughout it which have acquired special sacred status. The Aborigines regard themselves, whether as individuals, groups, categories, sexes or genetic stock, to be in mystic communion, via the sacred spaces, with certain totemic beings... They are intimately connected with their whole environment which is pervaded by the supernatural, the result being that their experience of the whole environment is charged with numinous ambience. (1996: 2)*

Within this context, Dean identifies common ‘Dreamtime’ beliefs as expressive of immutable values, an aspect that Yanyuwa clan<sup>5</sup> member Harvey Mussolini has expressed in the following terms:

<sup>4</sup> There is also a growing body of work by indigenous filmmakers that reflect rather differently on Australia, Aboriginal experiences and settler society, Ivan Sen’s 2002 feature *Beneath Clouds*, Rachel Perkins’ features *Radiance* (1998) and *One Night The Moon* (2001) and Warwick Thornton’s *Samson and Delilah* (2009) being notable examples.

<sup>5</sup> The Yanyuwa people inhabit the area in the southwest of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

*Dreaming is a really big thing for Aboriginal people. In our language, Yanuwa, we call the Dreaming Yijan. The Dreamings made our Law or narnu-Yuwa. This Law is the way we live, or rules. This Law is our ceremonies, our songs, our stories; all of these things came from the Dreaming. One thing that I can tell you though is that our Law is not like European Law which is always changing – new government, new laws; but our Law cannot change, we did not make it. The Law was made by the Dreamings many, many years ago and given to our ancestors and they gave it to us. (quoted in Hardison, 2005: 6)*

A number of aspects of Aboriginal cosmology have been co-opted into Western New Age beliefs where they have been misrepresented and de-localised as a resource for transnational cultures. As Grossinger has expressed it, a perception developed in some New Age circles in the 1980s that Aborigines

*are not only ‘dreaming’ their olden legend-time: they are dreaming all of nature. They are maintaining the sacred hearths for all of us... Their Dream Time is a universal human experience that has become totally unconscious and vestigial in the rest of humanity. (Grossinger, 1986: 117)*

As subsequent sections of this article discuss, this constitutes a significant appropriation of indigenous beliefs for western ends.

In mainstream cinema, uses of music and sound have been particularly prominent as signifiers of difference in films that have attempted to represent mystic and, indeed, *para-normal* Aboriginality<sup>6</sup> and its relation to (very specific white interpretations of) the Dreamtime. The role of music in cinematic representations of Aborigines was first characterised by Kibby and Neuenfeldt (1998) in a chapter that remains a seminal reference point for the field. As the authors demonstrate, the didgeridu, an instrument traditionally confined to Aboriginal groups in the far north of Australia, has become a ubiquitous audio marker of Aboriginality (or simply of the Australian bush itself) either through its actual use or through the imitation of aspects of its timbre and pitch by other instruments (deployed primarily to produce drones and rumbles). Indeed, as the editors of a volume addressed to the various musical and cultural applications of the didgeridu asserted, it constitutes:

*- a distinctive instrument, icon and sound  
- a nexus of social relationships  
- a way of engaging with wider theoretical issues such as appropriation, globalisation and commodification. (Hayward and Neuenfeldt, 1997: 9)<sup>7</sup>*

Along with the didgeridu, Aboriginal songs, often accompanied by clap-sticks, provide further obvious audio markers of exotic Aboriginality that composers and sound designers can draw on or directly sample into their mixes.

This article commences with a discussion of the representation of mystic Aboriginality in two prominent American fiction texts that exploit the archetypal New

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Grossinger's statement that: "Cut off from the rest of the species for anywhere from 10,000 to 100,000 years, they have perhaps developed unique parapsychological (and parapsychical) abilities" (1986: 117).

<sup>7</sup> The authors add that it also (and in their words "most importantly") comprises a "local and global product and process" in active development (*ibid*).

Age perception discussed above; and then rewinds chronologically to a film only referred to briefly by Kibby and Neuenfeldt, Peter Weir's 1977 feature *The Last Wave*. Due to the fantastic nature of its scenario, the film has often been overlooked by critics concerned to address Australian cinema's engagement with issues of Aboriginal rights, living circumstances and politics. Despite this, the film merits attention as a rich audio-visual fantasy of Aboriginal otherness. It is marked by an unease about settler history and its relation to the deep histories and Dreamtimes of the continent, a relation in which Aboriginality spiritual 'otherness' provides an apocalyptic conclusion to white settler alienation rather than a pathway to spiritual rapture.

### American Imagination

The first significant Hollywood representation of Australian Aboriginal culture occurred in 1983 in Philip Kaufman's feature *The Right Stuff*. Adapted from Tom Wolfe's eponymous 1979 publication, the film relates the story of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's development of manned space flight, focusing on the character and achievements of its pilots. Kaufman's screenplay and direction emphasised a spiritual – and often mystical – aspect to its narrative that is far more understated in Wolfe's original book. Suitably in this regard, the film begins with a piece of modern folklore, a story of there being a demon who lives on the sound barrier, intent on keeping humans at bay. After a prologue that shows this demon being (figuratively) conquered by test pilot Chuck Yeager (played by Sam Shepard), as he breaks the sound barrier in a sub-orbital test-plane, the film commences on its main narrative of the early astronaut program. The film scooped honours for soundtrack at the 1984 Academy Awards ceremonies, securing Best Music and Original Score awards for composer Bill Conti and his collaborators and Best Sound Effects Editing and Best Sound for its audio personnel. But while Conti's orchestral score<sup>8</sup> (performed by the London Symphony Orchestra), accompanied many of the film's most dramatic flight scenes, one of its most effective sequences combines more subtle underscore and sound elements specific to its scenario.

The scene in question involves NASA trainee astronaut 'Gordo' Cooper (Dennis Quaid) traveling to an satellite tracking station in the Australian outback, at Muchea, north of Perth, to communicate with astronaut John Glenn (Ed Harris) as he passes over on his – and the Americans' – first manned orbit of the planet.<sup>9</sup> The representation of this (actual) event commences with Cooper driving up to the station with an Australian colleague (played by Anthony Wallis). The scene's Australianness is flagged through the two duetting on a chorus of the iconic Australian bush ballad 'Waltzing Matilda' (which Cooper cheekily confides to his driver he thought was written by [early US country music icon] Hank Williams<sup>10</sup>). Outside the small building Cooper encounters a group of Aborigines and converses with a young man (played by Aboriginal performer David Gulpilil) who asks Cooper what he's doing there. After hearing of the American orbiting the planet he replies, "You fellas do that too?" and identifies a tribal elder sitting by a rock as both capable of astral navigation and able to help the astronauts. This interaction is complemented in the soundtrack by a brief didjeridu sample followed by an unsettling electronic didjeridu-like motif as the sun sets. These tones continue as the scene cuts to the rocket launch pad at Cape

<sup>8</sup> Which derived substantial inspiration from Gustav Holst's 'The Planets' (1914-16) and Tchaikovsky's 'Violin Concerto in D Major' (1878).

<sup>9</sup> An event that occurred in May 1963.

<sup>10</sup> Possibly a garbled reference, since Jimmie Rodgers recorded a hit version of the song in 1959.

Canaveral, giving a sense of foreboding. After the countdown and take-off, the score provides more triumphant, almost processional orchestral passages, underscoring the achievement of orbital flight and the impressive vistas Glenn witnesses. As Glenn's capsule orbits into night the scene cuts back to Muchea, where the Aborigines' campfire crackles loudly. Glenn then talks to Cooper on the radio as he crosses the West Australian coast and flies on to dawn again (heralded by a rousing horn motif). At this point the mood switches: cutting back to the quiet business of mission control interrupted when, a loud beeping signal alerts the ground crew that there is a problem with the capsule's heat shield. The mission controllers have no clear answer to the problem and tension immediately rises, accompanied by an unsettling drone at the rear of the mix.

The narrative then cuts back to the campfire, which is now roaring. Gulpilil's character begins dancing, accompanied by a short rhythmic didjeridu motif and clap-sticks (with the former soon morphing into an orchestral tone) and a Yolngu chant (suggesting an incantation), with animal-like cries adding atmospheric intensity. The camera shows bright embers flying up from the fire into the night sky. Cutting to the capsule, Glenn (who is, as yet, unaware of his technical problems) sees a cloud of embers encircling his craft and responds with glee, describing them as like fireflies and wondering whether they can be alive. A series of further cuts between the capsule and campfire emphasise the connection between the Aboriginal dance and song, the embers from their fire and the sparkling cloud that enmeshes the spaceship. As the film moves on to show Glenn's fiery re-entry and subsequent tickertape parade through Manhattan, the sense of spiritual aid, of an unspoken magical gift from the pre-Modern to the rocket age, further adds to the film's mythic celebration of America's grand enterprise. Or, as Grossinger (1986) has less ambivalently embellished it, having "travelled by rocket back into the Dream Time, and, in the absence of his heat shield, (Glenn) is protected by Aboriginal shamans sitting before their fires" (116-7). Just as the term 'shamans' is inappropriate to Aboriginal culture, so is the performance. Gulpilil's dance and the chant are Yolngu clan properties and the didjeridu is a traditional instrument of Yolngu and adjacent clans from northern 'Top End' Australia – lands and cultures far from the traditional lands of the Noongar clan of Australia's south west coast where the action takes place.

Although there is no evidence of a direct link between the texts, a second significant American mythologisation of Aboriginal mysticism – based on similar misrepresentations – followed in 1990 in the form of Marlo Morgan's book *Mutant Message Down Under*,<sup>11</sup> a work that purported to recount the author's meeting with nomadic central Australian Aborigines. Accompanying them on a three month long trek, she learns skills of telepathy and transformation, becomes acquainted with stories from the deep Dreamtime, attends didjeridu performances and – in a spirit of reciprocity – teaches the group the popular US spoke line dance<sup>12</sup> 'Cotton Eyed Joe', waltzing and square dancing. The experience (of the former, rather than the latter) transforms her perceptions and she returns to western culture with an important 'mutant' message for the spiritual health of mankind. Her fanciful observations on the particular powers of the didjeridu (in a chapter entitled 'Medicine and Music') are, as Neuenfeldt identifies, riddled with "inaccuracies and inanities" that have the overall effect of producing a "hyper-spectacularisation and hyper-spiritualisation of Aboriginal culture" that "overwhelms the genocide and ethnocide

<sup>11</sup> Initially published under the title *Walkabout Woman: Messenger for a Vanishing Tribe* but best known by its subsequent title.

<sup>12</sup> A dance in which lines of dancers enact a collective motion akin to a wheel turning around when viewed from above.

experienced by many Aboriginal people in the past” and “diminished life chances in the present” (1998: 90) in favour of a fantastic exoticism.

First self-published in 1990, as a supposedly authentic narrative, and promoted by the author on lecture tours across the US in early 1990s, Morgan built a cult following and the book was republished by Harper Collins in 1994 with a substantial advance to its author. The high profile publicity accruing to this edition rekindled accusations of its fictitiousness that culminated in the Dumbartung Aboriginal Organisation publishing a comprehensive refutation in 1995. Key to their critique was the manner in which Morgan provides a mishmash of New Age garblings of North American First Nations beliefs and secondarily sourced information about Aboriginal culture that mixes traditional ‘Top End’ (Northern Territory) references (such as the didjeridu being performed as a traditional instrument) with very different central Australian Aboriginal customs (which, for instance, do not include use of the instrument).

News of Morgan selling the film rights for her book to United Artists for just under two million dollars in 1995 prompted a delegation of senior Aboriginal elders to visit Hollywood to protest against the projected film and to continue their denunciation of the book. In a statement issued as part of a series of press releases referred to as the *Bounuh Wongee* (‘message stick’) series, Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation leader Robert Eggington referred to Morgan’s book as a ‘New Age Masquerade of Imperialism’ and identified it as imbued with a more deep-seated attempt to constrain, desecrate and exploit indigenous culture, arguing that,

*Whilst Governments and their instrumentalities such as tourism commissions promote Aboriginal culture overseas to attract international tourist and business dollars our people suffer from the denigration of loss of culture and spiritual growth and identity. (ibid)*

Eggington goes on to castigate Morgan’s book as a “New-age infringement into indigenous spirituality and cultures” that “creates the belief that all people through evolutionary change have a rightful claim of ownership to the knowledge and sacredness of indigenous cultures” and identifies his critique as part of the “the world’s indigenous peoples’ struggle against spiritual colonization” (*ibid*).

Eggington’s delegation met with United Artists’ representatives, staged a successful media conference and participated in a meeting arranged by actor and social activist Steven Seagal during which a phone conference with Morgan was held in which she apologised, retracted and undertook to publish and acknowledge the same. While the publicity resulted in United Artists withdrawing their production plans, Morgan subsequently reneged on her promises and continued touring to promote her book, amid growing publicity, with the film project being acquired by a film company entitled Next Wave films. While developed by Barbara Boyle and Michael Taylor and scripted by Gerald DiPego<sup>13</sup> in 1997, the project never went into production.<sup>14</sup> As a fantasy of Aboriginal spirituality in which indigenous powers and prophecies were introduced to a white westerner, Morgan’s book invites comparison to the earlier

<sup>13</sup> The producer/writer team responsible for the 1996 feature film *Phenomenon*, directed by John Turteltaub, that has a similar mystical/New Age/paranormal slant.

<sup>14</sup> A script for the film is identified in the Online Archive of California’s Haskell Wexler Collection of Scripts for Television and Motion Pictures, 1967-1996 (listed as Box 31). While the catalogue credits this as written by Morgan, lack of any mention of Morgan having developed her own script suggests that this is DiPego’s script. See catalogue reference at: <http://content.cdlib.org> - accessed October 2008.

fictional text that this chapter now turns to analyse, with particular regard to its uses of sound and music, Peter Weir's *The Last Wave* (1977).

One of the salient points about the historical vignette provided above is that the space of recent Australian cinema is one in which wilder imaginations of Aboriginality have been largely absent, as Australian settler society belatedly attempts to redress past injustices and misrepresentations and struggles to comprehend indigenous cultures. *The Last Wave* is significant since its imagination of Aboriginal mythology and connections to mystic prophetic powers emanates from a moment of Australian cinema (and social) history when attitudes towards Aboriginal history and rights were in transition. Like Morgan's book, the film also attracted criticism and protest from Aboriginal rights groups during its production on the grounds of its misrepresentation of an embattled section of the Australian community who had only succeeded in being granted citizenship by a national referendum in 1967 and were still subject to considerable institutional and informal racism and harassment. But unlike Morgan's book, the controversy accruing to the film was less sustained and acute, reflecting its nature as an entirely fictional work; its employment of Aboriginal actors and a cultural consultant (Lance Bennett, of the Aboriginal Cultural Foundation); and – it must be said – the less-organised and less well facilitated Aboriginal activist network existing at the time of its production. Such a film would be unlikely to be made in contemporary Australia and *The Last Wave* thereby represents a period in which 'politically correct' sensibilities were still in their infancy (and is all the more revealing for that).

### *The Last Wave*

*The Last Wave* was written and directed by (then) emerging filmmaker Peter Weir and followed his first feature, the cult hit *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974) (henceforth *Cars*) and the more widely popular *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) (henceforth *Picnic*). These films presented two very different representations of non-urban Australia, its otherness and inhospitality to urban white settler culture. *Cars* is an exercise in what has been termed 'Outback Gothic', presenting non-urban Australia as a place of threat, manifest in its landscapes and the uncivil population that inhabits it. The 'Paris' in question, a small country town,<sup>15</sup> is dominated by wreckers<sup>16</sup> who cause car crashes in order to plunder the vehicles and their contents, often killing their (urban) drivers and passengers in the process. The threat here is of white settler society 'gone feral' and the discordant hurdy-gurdy waltz that welcomes the film's chief protagonist to town and the harsh growling tones of revved up custom cars underline the menace of their drivers and the town's general support culture.<sup>17</sup> *Picnic*, by contrast, offers a more mystical, unseen threat, that of the film's central location, the monolithic 'Hanging Rock' that its genteel senior high school girls visit on a summer picnic, only to disappear, vanishing into a brooding, ancient materiality. The film's soundtrack is significantly different to its predecessor, blending deep almost inaudible tones that suggest menace, with prominent environmental atmos, well-known classical pieces (signifying the girls' cultured background) and atmospheric *nai* (Romanian pan flute) melodies (performed by Gheorghe Zamfir), which evokes a seductive, mystical otherness appropriate to the often trance-like nature of the film.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Actually the rural New South Wales town of Sofala.

<sup>16</sup> Like the coastal ship-wrecking communities of the settler population's 'home country', the United Kingdom. See Bathurst (2005) for a survey.

<sup>17</sup> For an illuminating contextual discussion of *The Cars That Ate Paris*, see Simpson (2006).

<sup>18</sup> For an overview of Peter Weir's oeuvre and its uses of sound and music see Johnson and Poole (1998).

In précis, *The Last Wave*'s plot involves a lawyer named David Burton (played by Richard Chamberlain) who represents a group of Aborigines he suspects of having murdered a member of their clan as part of a traditional law punishment. During this engagement he experiences increasingly vivid premonitions in dreams and begins to associate these with his real-life involvement in the case. Bizarre meteorological events convince him that traumatic events are about to unfold. After realising that he is implicated within a spiritual narrative created in the distant Dreamtime – and, indeed anointed as the agent of a divine power he can barely imagine<sup>19</sup> – he finds himself in combat with the clan's 'shaman' deep underground. While he emerges triumphant he realises that his victory is in vain as he sees a giant wave surging towards the city.

In interviews in the mid-late 1980s Weir characterised *The Last Wave* as having being inspired by his interests in mystic writers such as Carl Jung and Carlos Castaneda and in the forgotten events, races and beliefs suggested by the writings of pseudo-historians Immanuel Velikovsky and Erich von Däniken. Reflecting the latter in particular, early sketches of the film's narrative included ancient Australian indigenes pulling rafts across the continent. The film represents a synthesis of these western pseudo-historical fantasies and an interest in actual Aboriginal culture that Weir has identified as having been kindled by meeting young Yolngu performer David Gulpilil (who also starred in *Walkabout* and appeared in *The Right Stuff* in 1973). As he later recounted:

*He made me realize that everything I had been taught in school about the Aborigines was total hogwash. Through long conversations with him, I realized the absurdity of the history books, which teach that the Aborigines were a kind of Stone Age people in the dawn of time, nomadic, without any culture of significant or enduring qualities, that they collapsed in contact with a more advanced, superior, and complex culture. Talking with David, I realized the Aborigine culture was very much alive, if underground, so to speak. It was simply a different culture, and we had been looking at it with our own definition of culture. The Aborigines use the same word, culture, to mean something far richer than what we have come to mean by it. Here was a most interesting case where we had lost something since contact with the Aborigines – something they still had. They lost something too – the land and a lot of tribes. (McGilligan, 1986: online)*

Weir and co-writers Tony Morphett and Petru Popescu channeled these elements into a scenario that revolved around a fictional 'lost tribe' who inhabited the location of present-day Sydney in the pre-colonial period. This fabrication of an Aboriginal identity was, in itself, a problematic project and was one that Weir negotiated with Aboriginal Groote Island elder Nandjiwarra Amagula, who played the character Charlie in the film and acted as a key advisor on the limits of viable cultural appropriation. As Weir later revealed, while Amagula "accepted the principle of recreating a lost Sydney tribe and their symbols, and tokens" that was key to the film's script, he unequivocally vetoed Weir's request to use any actual Aboriginal symbols, and the director employed the film's art director Goran Warff to create a wholly fictional set of motifs that Amagula approved (Rayner, 2003: 91).

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<sup>19</sup> See Evans (2006: 100-105) for discussion of the Christian concept of anointment.



Weir has described the plot and themes of *The Last Wave* as initially inspired by a sense of premonition he had upon finding an artefact in the ruins of an ancient city in Tunisia. After considering how an archetypally rational westerner might grapple with such an impulse he discussed the conflict with Gulpilil and “gradually the forces began to come together” (*ibid*) and (inspired by Velikovsky and Däniken) developed the film’s plot and script (Kass, 1979). As Grossinger has succinctly summarised, the final product was

*a movie in which charismatic Aboriginal actors... bring their voodoo and interior visioning to the cities... Here the Dreaming is portrayed not as decorative myth but a source of real energy, from beyond the known forces of science, with the capacity to act geologically and meteorologically and to return the land to its aboriginal state.* (1986: 116)

Despite severe budgetary constraints impacting on the realisation of the project,<sup>20</sup> the film was favourably received by critics and received Australian Film Institute Awards for Best Achievement in Sound (awarded to the team of Don Connolly, Greg Bell and Phil Judd) and Cinematography (to Russell Boyd). The film also garnered international recognition, receiving a special jury award at the Avoriaz Fantastic Film Festival in 1978 and being nominated as Best Fantasy feature at the 1980 Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Films annual awards.

### Soundtrack Elements

*It seems to me we’ve lost touch with the fear of nature... Tonight when we leave this building and there’s a special kind of wind blowing (and) if that wind is howling with a voice like the voice of a person, a four-year-old child might say to us, ‘The wind’s talking to us,’ and we’ll say, ‘No it isn’t, don’t be silly. It’s just howling around those wires’... It’s just part of something we’ve lost touch with, another way of seeing the world.* (Weir, in Kass, 1979: online)

Sound plays a central role in *The Last Wave*. Indeed, many key sequences of the film – and their sonic features – are imbued by the “numinous ambience” that Dean (1996: 2) ascribes to Aboriginal perceptions of place. While Dean’s use of the term emphasises the spiritual infusion of place and resultant holiness, the film’s sound (and particularly various sonic ambiances) embody a related aspect of numinosity, namely senses of awe that border on terror or panic. The term is derived from the Latin term *numen*, referring to the power of the divine that imbues places, material artefacts and, on occasion, human agents. This aspect is communicated in the film through a meld of atmos tracks (derived from natural sound sources) and sonic ambiances, low-dynamic sound passages that infuse the aural space as unsettling, reverberant underscores and occasionally rise to prominence for dramatic impact.

The mysterious aspects key to the film’s drama are established from the outset in a subtle opening sequence that plays on disjunctures between the screen images and the sound that accompanies them. The opening shot shows a mature Aboriginal male painting a design on the rock-face beneath an overhang at sunset. The soundtrack accompanies this with a low volume, indistinct sound (wind? waves? both?) punctuated by occasional birdcalls. The camera closes into the artist and

<sup>20</sup> Including a lack of special effects budget leading its final apocalyptic wave sequence being sourced from the Australian surfing film *The Crystal Voyager* (David Elphick, 1973).

shows him to be using a paintbrush before moving on to look at the images painted on the rock surface: a star-like design resting on a turtle's back, a dolphin or whale and (accompanied by bassier rumbles), a mysterious symbol comprising a cross inside concentric white circles. The image of this symbol then cross-fades to that of a sun-drenched, outback settlement under blue skies. Enigmatically, the bass rumbles continue over the transition. Indeed, they become more recognisably the sounds of a storm and increase in volume. The characters' behaviour soon establishes that this sound is now a diegetic element, as individuals look to the sky, puzzled about the incongruous juxtaposition of sound and image. Realising that nature is 'out of joint' an older Aboriginal male gesticulates to the sky and hurries two Aboriginal boys into a shelter. The image track then switches to a schoolyard where the children are also increasingly puzzled. One boy encapsulates the enigma with the simple phrase, "there's no clouds". The rising sound of the storm then gives way to different noises, mixed loud on the soundtrack – the sound of rain gushing down and delighted children whooping with glee as they dance in it. The teacher then calls the soaked students inside, expressing her puzzlement with the simple phrase "(it) never rains in November". After the excited children have been quietened down, a further sonic element intrudes in the form of a hard percussive drumming on the roof. As the teacher and children listen in alarm, the source becomes clear, as first one giant hailstone and then a flurry smash the classroom windows and litter the yard, their impact sounds mixing with the children's screams. Peering anxiously at a hail-strewn landscape under a resolutely blue sky, the teacher's nervous expression is underscored with a sustained, eerie electronic tone that carries over another image transition, this time to an equally sunny Sydney cityscape. The disjuncture of storms from a clear sky is not only foreshadowed and emphasised by the soundtrack; the sounds that cross over the transitions of image and locale shift from an ambiguous diegetic role to diegetic realism and then away again – weaving a trail across the narrative, cued by the mysterious circled cross symbol seen at the beginning.

While the opening sequence is non-musical, the film's score often blends with sonic ambiances and supports its mysterious and spiritually imbued and brooding atmosphere. Indeed, one of the notable aspects of the film is the convergence of these elements. Despite this complementarity, sound mixer Phil Judd has emphasised that the final mixes were made without reference to the score, which was produced separately at the same time, and that the convergence of sound and music was a fortuitous outcome of the respective personnel's interpretation of Weir's overall creative brief. While emphasising that Weir "is one of the few Australian directors who is not 'cloth-eared' and who is able to use sound to tell a story",<sup>21</sup> Judd has also noted the considerable interpretative freedom afforded to the sound crew. The latter was, in substantial part, born of necessity, as lack of access to library music required the crew to produce their own Foley effects<sup>22</sup> and record the film's distinctive environmental sounds, such as frog noises. The film's subtle sound mix, made in mono, also caused problems when mixed down for transfer to optical film track due to the number of bass frequencies present, a problem that was exacerbated by the use of similar frequencies in the score (*ibid*).

Suitably enough, for a commercial film representing a spiritual fantasy, the composer, Charles Wain<sup>23</sup> was an experienced TV advertisement composer who lived

<sup>21</sup> Interview with the author October, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Such as producing the hailstorm noises described above by pelting a corrugated iron sheet with walnut shells.

<sup>23</sup> Confusingly, he is referred to in Unattributed (1978) as 'Charles Wayne' and is registered with Australasian Performing Rights Association for his composer credit for *The Last Wave* as Wain Myers. He is referred to in this chapter by his film credit surname.

on an ashram as a devotee of esoteric Hindu Siddha Yoga guru 'Baba' Muktananda. Wain has stated that his inspiration was "the element of spirituality in both the concept of the film and in many of the locations" (Unattributed, 1978: 26). Wain's score was a notable innovation for Australian cinema by virtue of being primarily composed and performed on a (analogue) synthesizer. At that time, the instrument was relatively novel as a primary soundtrack provider, having been pioneered in this role in 1971 by Walter Carlos (for Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*) and, in the same year, by Gil Mellés for Robert Wise's *The Andromeda Strain*) and by subsequent composers such as Matt Camison in 1975 (for Just Jaeckin's *Story of 'O'*). Wain has identified that the synthesizer was appropriate for the film due to what he has described as the tendency for early-mid 1970s' synthesizer music (of the style typified by German artists Tangerine Dream and Klaus Schuze) to resemble "chant-like tribal music" (*ibid*: 27) – presumably referring to their use of drones, slow modulations and gradual crescendos and diminuendos. These elements are strongly in evidence in the film's soundtrack and are also associated with the iconic cinematic sound of Aboriginality: the didjeridu. Wain has characterised the decision to use didjeridu sounds in the score as Weir's idea but his approach was to blend the instrument with his score, retaining its signature sound but infusing it as an ambient element, rather than a fore grounded one. The didjeridu sounds derived from tracks performed by David Gulpilil and these were subsequently slowed down to half-speed to "embellish" the instrument's "eeriness and to make it a much thicker and fatter sound without destroying its natural qualities" (*ibid*).

The predominant sonic colouration of the film, as described above, is an affective one, a numinous ambience that creates a continuing sense of unease for its white protagonist and its audience. The only point in the narrative when western music predominates is a brief diegetic sequence whose significance is more cryptic (and even arcane). This is all the more notable for its inscription within (arguably) the key scene of the film and the one where the processed didjeridu is most overtly associated with Aboriginal spiritual power. The sacred objects of the city's secret Aboriginal clan are contained within (what has now become) an underground sewerage plant, close to the sea. While visiting there at night, an uninitiated Aborigine, Billy Corman (Athol Compton), is confronted by the clan's mysterious shaman who tells him that his theft of sacred objects has been discovered and that he will die. Corman's terror is signaled by a brisk rhythmic tapping that carries over the edit into a very different scene located inside a Sydney pub. The edit reveals the rhythm to be that tapped out on a bodhrán (a traditional Irish frame-drum) by a performer in a neo-traditional Irish music band as the introduction to an up-tempo reel. The link between the two scenes is made apparent by the image of Corman, drunk, with his head on the bar-top. The band (comprising a bodhrán, two fiddles, two guitars, a mandolin and accordion) plays as a group of young Aboriginal men walk in from the rain, confront Corman and chase him outside. A melee ensues and the police arrive, with Corman running off down an alley. The image then returns to the pub interior where the band is playing on, unconcerned. As the number concludes, the image cuts to a building site where Corman seeks escape, enmeshed in a sound mix of thunder, rain noises and police sirens, and then stops, startled, as he hears a high vocable call (not dissimilar to a traditional Australian 'cooee' call but without the final syllable). After a moment of silent stillness the sound of the didjeridu fills the soundspace, growling, with occasional guttural 'barks'. In the dark, tense space of the building site, with Corman seeking to elude his pursuers as their shadows loom large on a wall behind him, the didjeridu signals primal power and menace, an interpretation that is reinforced when Corman encounters clan elder Charlie, pointing a bone at him and murmuring an incantation. Clutching his heart, Corman staggers back and dies.

The incantation, vocable and didjeridu sounds clearly conform to the standard cultural and cinematic conventions of 'sounding Aboriginal', and function within the narrative in this regard but the cameo performance of Irish music is cryptic and open to interpretation in one of several ways. It can be seen to represent one essence of European settler society, a form implicitly 'other' to Aboriginal marginality. Alternatively, read in terms of the historical subordination of Irish settlers to an Anglo-British colonial establishment, it can be seen to offer a point of connection to Aboriginality. However, senses of connection are undermined by the narrative. The Aborigines in the bar appear indifferent to the music and enter the space primarily to pursue their target. Similarly the band are unconcerned both by the (somewhat surprising) presence of Aborigines in a 'niche' music venue<sup>24</sup> and by the brawl that occurs. There is no sense of any inter-racial solidarity. In narrative terms, particularly in such a complex, subtly plotted narrative, the scene is oddly ambivalent. Turning to the music, the lively, uptempo ensemble performance can be seen as 'spirited' (if not *spiritual*) and the players are clearly communing, in that they are 'locked into' their groove, but the aims and effects of their collective engagement are so radically different to the spiritual murder that takes place outside that comparisons are strained. Nevertheless, there is a significant point of connection that has, if anything, increased since the decade of the film's production – even if it requires unreasonably specialist knowledge to discern. As Graeme Smith (2001) has identified, there has been a particular syncretic engagement of Aboriginal music and Irish/Irish-derived Australian bush band music through use of the didjeridu as a drone instrument in modern neo-traditional Irish music ensembles in the 1980s and 1990s. Although primarily sonic, rather than political and/or spiritual, a point of connection exists. However cryptically, *The Last Wave* inscribes the (actual) beginning of this connection in the form of the featured band, led by Declan Affley.<sup>25</sup> A committed socialist and anti-authoritarian, Affley was a supporter of Aboriginal rights during the campaign for Aboriginal citizenship in the mid-late 1960s and went on to teach fiddle and banjo at the Eora Aboriginal Cultural Centre in Sydney's Redfern in the mid-1980s until his sudden death in 1985. Orientated by this information, the scene has greater sense of connection to the film's general themes, particularly with the benefit of hindsight. Yet it still operates on a markedly different level of textual operation – and requires more specific knowledges to interpret – than the film's overall sonic design, its depiction of a world unsettled by a numinous ambience that reflects a preceding and more powerful and enigmatic culture.

The narrative has an extended climax whose drama is substantially generated by its soundtrack. Returning home after losing the court case, Burton's rational universe becomes fully unhinged as his house disintegrates around him. Standing in his hall he hears deep subterranean rumblings as the house sways violently and the power cuts out. A loud barking didjeridu enters the mix, seconds before a tree smashes loudly through the rear glass door. Rain pours down on the house, flooding the upstairs, and thunder rumbles and lightning cracks intensify the mix as open doors and windows slam frantically to and fro. Looking outside into the storm, Burton sees Charlie beckoning him and holding the sacred stone in his outstretched hand. They drive to the sewerage plant together and climb down into the chambers below, where Charlie reveals his clan's sacred place, where paintings explain the myth-narrative

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<sup>24</sup> Particularly in a decade in which Aboriginal presence in mainstream metropolitan pubs was minimal.

<sup>25</sup> Affley was a British migrant of Irish and Welsh ancestry who settled in Australia in 1959 and became renowned for his spirited performances of Irish 'rebel songs' in inner city pubs and folk clubs in the 1960s and 1970s and formed one of the first Australian 'bush bands', The Wild Colonial Boys in 1969. In 1970 he began playing the traditional Uilleann pipes, becoming one of the first Australian performers of the instrument.

that Burton has been struggling to comprehend. As he interprets the images, a slow synthesiser melody underscores the gravity of his revelation and, as he deciphers the calendar painted on the wall, a low rumble alludes to the film's imminent conclusion. At this point a harsh didjeridu passage intrudes immediately before Burton sees the figure of the clan's shaman, bedecked in ceremonial body-paint, speaking in language, forbidding him to interfere with what he has found. A brief conflict ensues, during which Burton kills him with the sacred triangular stone. As he flees the scene, dense, ominous tones of processed gurgling waters rumble on the soundtrack. As the film proceeds to its conclusion, the 'Laws' configured in the Dreamtime and the specific elements of the clan's 'Mulkurul' prophecy that bind Burton into the narrative are enacted in the form of an apocalypse – represented as a giant wave (the 'last wave' of the film's title) that looms over Burton as he kneels at the edge of the sea. Its sounds are massive and monstrous, comprising deep, bassy rumbles and watery churnings that signal imminent, inescapable and numinous doom.

## Conclusion

*The Last Wave* provides its audience with a fantasy of Aboriginal spirituality and paranormal power that is radically 'other' to the metropolitan colonial West that the city of Sydney, 1970s' Australian society and the film's white characters represent. The soundtrack is dominated by tones and textures that imbue the cityscape, landscape and Aborigines' underground sacred site with powers that reflect the clan's "mystic communion" with "totemic beings" and their intimate connection with a "whole environment which is pervaded by the supernatural" (Dean, 1996: 2). In this manner, the film and its soundtrack posit an Aboriginal spirituality that collapses the sacred/secular split of Western cultures and offers a holistic model along the lines of the one that Bradley and Mackinlay identify in Yanyuwa culture, where "there is only one world, one environment, one country that is simultaneously material and spiritual" (2007: 77). Unfortunately for Burton and white Australia, this world is not theirs and their fate is in the hands of a Dreamtime prophecy that precedes them and which they are powerless to deflect. *The Last Wave's* fantasy thereby reflects the deep anxieties of colonial culture, transported from far-away Europe. The rumbling, slowed-down didjeridu sounds blended with Wain's synthesizer score and processed atmos tracks underlay the entire film and allow little, if any, sonic 'light' into the *numen* that Burton uncovers. While in *The Right Stuff* the didjeridu propels spiritual assistance to an astronaut in space, no protection (or quarter) is given in *The Last Wave*. Unlike that other national cinematic icon *Mad Max*, produced two years later, there is no suggestion of a *post-Apocalyptic* future for white Australia, with the soundtrack dwindling to a single, regular bleep – like the audio signal on a cardiac monitor – that cuts out before the credits conclude, leaving silence.

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