

1988

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Recommended Citation

Osterhaus, Carolyn, We Call it Koori Music: INTERVIEW WITH ROGER KNOX, *Kunapipi*, 10(1), 1988.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol10/iss1/26>

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Abstract

Roger Knox was born at Toomelah Aboriginal Mission near Moree in NSW in 1948. Six years ago he was badly injured in a plane crash. In 1983 he formed his own band which he named Euraba after the Euraba bush. He chose this title because it was the juice from the Euraba bush, along with goanna oil, with which he was treated after his plane crash and which he believes was instrumental in his recovery.

We Call it Koori Music

INTERVIEW WITH ROGER KNOX

INTRODUCTION

Roger Knox was born at Toomelah Aboriginal Mission near Moree in NSW in 1948. Six years ago he was badly injured in a plane crash. In 1983 he formed his own band which he named Euraba after the Euraba bush. He chose this title because it was the juice from the Euraba bush, along with goanna oil, with which he was treated after his plane crash and which he believes was instrumental in his recovery.

Today he is not only a major figure in the world of Country & Western music in Australia, he is also a leading spokesman for the aboriginal people. He is deeply involved in the 'Rock Without Grog' campaign and in 1988 toured the Northern Territory promoting alcohol-free concerts. 'Alcohol is a really bad problem for our people', he said. 'We find a lot of hotels won't book our band because they think we will attract drunks. But not all Aboriginal people are drunks and it really isn't as bad as it's made out to be. I'm hoping the 'Rock Without Grog' tour can show people that Aboriginal people don't have to be drunk at a concert'.

Another venture in which Roger Knox is involved is giving free concerts for prisoners in NSW prisons.¹

Roger's aim is to create a better world for his people and he believes that what is necessary is a greater understanding by white people of aboriginal culture and history. 'White people don't know a lot about Aboriginal history, although I know a lot about white ways. It is important that this balance is changed. I think I can partly achieve this through my music'.

Carolyn Osterhaus

In October 1988 Carolyn Osterhaus interviewed Roger Knox.

I spoke with Roger Knox on the telephone at his home in Tamworth, New South Wales, for approximately one hour on September 14, 1988. When I asked to do an interview, he asked me to wait while he went for a glass of water and pulled up a chair.

The circumstances at my end were not so comfortable. The office was noisy and I cradled the phone hard against my shoulder in order to hear. I typed on the word-processor as he spoke. My concentration was intense and I spoke rarely, interjecting questions only where they seemed appropriate. Roger spoke softly, punctuating his sentences with a deep, exhaling 'wow'.

Roger Knox and his music have been described as country or country and western, partly because he is based in Tamworth, home of Australia's country music industry. When I asked him what he called his music, he said:

WE CALL IT KOORI MUSIC

We call it Koori Music and we just use words that tell the way of our people in song.

On the mission where I grew up the only music I knew was Slim Dusty and gospel music. The gospel songs I learned from my grandmother, from missionaries and people in the community. I didn't realize until I left the mission that this music I knew, the songs I learned from my grandmother, were songs that everybody knew.

Then came people like Slim Dusty, I know all of his songs. I learned them as I was growing up, not from the radio but from other people singing them. Everybody in the community knew him and knew the songs. He would come to Goondiwindi which was close.

I didn't have any big influences until I came to Tamworth at 16 or 17 years of age. I didn't have any dreams up to then. I just sang me songs because people asked me to sing.

I came to Tamworth to work on a farm; the guy I left the mission with invited me up. We went to see a band in one of the hotels here, a live band, the first time I'd seen a live band.

It was country music – a Slim Dusty song. This guy Geoff Brown sounded like Slim as well. Albert Bennet, he knew I could sing a bit. I was asked to get up to sing a song and it was an all white audience. The band was all white. Just going to town was something – to get up and sing was worse. I don't know how I did it, I just got up there and sang an old song. Then everybody started jumping up and clapping. I was shocked. *(He said when he sang in the community people sat and listened. He had never been 'applauded' before, the physical outburst was wholly unexpected).* I was really scared, then when I saw this happen, I thought 'wow', I must be doing it right.

Roger's singing became a regular Friday night event.

I was invited to go into a Talent Quest by John Minson in Tamworth. I didn't realize then it was country music, it was just songs.

I was approached by a guy who had a tour, he would travel around by plane and said, 'I'd like to give you a place', so I accepted the job to sing in a band that used to fly around the central and northern part of the country right into outback settlements. Brian Young was his name. I had to learn to play bass to become part of the band. Because of the size of the plane he could only fit a singer/bassplayer not a singer AND a bass player.

During one of these tours in the early 80s Roger was severely injured in a plane crash and received burns to 75% of his body.

That's how I got my hands. I never played the guitar again, my hands are sort of tender and disfigured. It stopped me from playing the guitar but it never affected my voice. I still have the desire to sing and travel to the communities.

I sing mainly to all Aboriginal audiences, I started that about two years ago. I got involved with some fund raising at the start and from then until now I have been singing mainly to Aboriginal communities. Because of my injuries it's hard for me to get going. *(Besides the physical trauma of the accident, he alluded several times to mental anguish.)* Also, from October to March each year I go into prisons, all the major prisons in NSW, and do concerts. Sometimes we do three shows a day, especially over the weekend. We go to

Grafton, down to Cooma, Tumbarumba and finish up in Sydney's Parramatta and Long Bay. (*Parramatta and Long Bay are jails in Sydney.*)

Aboriginals make up a big proportion of the prison community. Judging by the letters we get from people inside they always look forward to us. There's heaps of talent inside there, a lot of good song writers, a lot of really heavy stuff. We found the majority like country. I've got quite a few songs from them I'm thinking of doing.

I always sort of talk to people and try to really encourage them once they get out. Wow there's so much talent there, everywhere we go we run talent quests inside, not only for Aboriginal people but for everyone. A lot of Kooris in there get really down, they tend to be forgotten.

The topic of songwriting led to one of language. Did he speak or sing any aboriginal languages?

We lost our language. That's gone. That's lost. It's totally destroyed. We did know a lot of words but not enough to speak, not enough to communicate. Growing up on the mission there I remember my mother and father saying they weren't allowed to speak it. 'If you speak it we'll take your children away', they (*white authorities*) said. My mother was taken away when she was twenty-one months old. We were threatened by that. That's why it's gone.

I would like to sing a song in my language but there would be no point. No one would understand it.

The white Australian Country and Western singer, John Williamson, received tremendous acclaim for his album Mallee Boy and in particular for the song 'True Blue'. It was taken up by the present government and given multi-media exposure to promote a sense of national pride, a unity and the idea that the 'real' Australian is the Australian 'hero' of the period of the 1890s, the 'true blue' Australian who is Anglo/Celt, male, enjoying male corporate life in the outback, an image which excludes Aborigines, women and people of other ethnic origins. What was his attitude to that particular song?

Shit, I don't go along with that. Who's blue? I'm black. We don't want to be blue. I'm true but they can't accept that fact, that I'm true. 'True Blue', that doesn't do anything for me. Dundee and all that shit (*Crocodile Dundee*).

We've been here for thousands and thousands of years. Today RSL clubs are on about this Asian thing, you go to different parts of Sydney and hear them (Asian people) speaking the language of their own culture, but our thing was wiped out. Our language was wiped out. Aboriginal people fought and died in both wars and fought and died before....

I have a song called 'Our Reserve'. This guy on the radio introduced it as a controversial song. Controversial! It's been called political. I call it true fact. It's about being told Australia was founded by a sailor 200 years ago. We were here 40,000 to 50,000 years ago. I get a bit tired of this. Because I grew up in a tightknit community and I come out and I try to get people to understand and I sing about it and then it gets called controversial or political. I wouldn't call that song controversial. I was talking fact.

Does he see any change, has the 'Bicentennial Year' made any difference?

It's going to start to happen and white people are listening and maybe understanding. They say '200 years'. I can understand them being here 200 years. I can't accept that Australia is only 200 years old. You can't just ignore the real facts. As we were growing up we were told that Blaxland and Lawson were the first people to cross the Blue Mountains. That's taught as a historic fact.

I went to a school yesterday. It was Aboriginal Day and I went up to sing songs to the kids. There were a lot of white teachers. They did everything for them kids. They had artefacts, all kinds of things. But we weren't even allowed to talk about our culture at school. We were not even allowed to mention blacktrackers.

Eighty-eight has been a really good year, it's opened up a lot of eyes, opened up a lot of eyes in different parts of the world. England and parts of Europe now know more about Aboriginal culture than Australians do. It's a crazy situation.

Is there an Aboriginal label?

There's nothing. (No black label, no black studio.) When I first went into a studio I was scared, nobody told me what I should do, if I was doing it right. There's one in CAAMA (Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association)

but there's a white person there. I reckon there should be one run by all black people. Because Aboriginal people are shy, we've still got that in our blood from years back, it's still part of you. You still get worried too much about it. I'd love to do a sort of proper recording with all black people running it.

What about his music?

We're learning rock and roll. Chuck Berry, you know, wow. I'd love to learn blues. We do our own business now, we play different songs. We can perform for anyone, white or black.

As long as its a story of understanding, a good ballad-type song, I like to get an understanding across, especially to non-Aboriginal people. It could be about anything, as long as it's for me.

I've been through mental problems, I was really into the drugs, pain killers, because of the accident and I just went cold turkey. I still have problems but I believe I have a strong spirit in me, a dreamtime spirit, some force is there stronger than we are. Aboriginal people were here before Adam and Eve and my god is stronger than that.

We played in a place in Alice Springs, in a hotel, it's a pretty racist town. We thought well, we'll check this out and do something, we'll pick what we'll do and we looked to give them some rock and roll. Everybody really liked it, they even rang up some of their friends and they boogied all night.

What about the country and western image as portrayed in the media?

People tend to know where I stand on issues like that. I do things my way. People can't make me what I'm not. I couldn't stand up in a white coat and be a redneck.

How does he feel about Midnight Oil, an all white band singing about Aboriginal issues?

I feel they're doing a good thing as far as getting people to understand our ways. Musically I can't sort of take to it but the intentions are pretty good. Some of the Aboriginal people were shocked by *Midnight Oil*.

(He laughs.)

The band didn't know how to perform to these people. Some people reckoned he was sniffing petrol.

I'm a fighter against alcoholism. That's why I did these 'Rock Without Grog' concerts. The *Midnight Oil* guys did pretty much the same. But give me Jimmy Buffett anytime.

What songs do Aboriginal communities request most?

'Johnny Be Good' and 'Mountain of Love'.

He still finds it difficult dealing with fame.

When I was growing up I wanted to be either a footballer or a fighter. I didn't dream of singing. People keep ringing me up. Maybe one day we'll get fair dinkum. I'd love to go to Nashville just to see how things are done. I reckon it would be great.

NOTE

1. A disproportionately high number of inmates in Australian prisons are Aborigines. See John Janke's article.