

Introduction

Australia is home to an enormously varied and vibrant range of African and African-influenced musical practices. In this chapter, we examine African Australian music practices across contexts ranging from new multimedia arts initiatives, music festivals, community events and schools. We provide insight into the challenges and opportunities experienced by many African-born performers as they seek to find a place in the Australian cultural and political environment for the knowledge, practices and meanings associated with music in their place of origin. This is an environment that is built on exclusionary ideas about race and belonging, as well as assumptions about the place of music in cultural life that may be at odds with the significance attached to music in artists' places of origin. It is also an environment that can nurture new interactions of musical practices and uncover meanings that become more apparent and valued in the Australian context. The diversity and complexity of African Australian musical practices reveals distinctive aspects of the Australian cultural landscape that have not been adequately captured in existing research. It also provides insight into the politics of Australian multiculturalism, notions of race and racism and aspects of African diasporic experience that have been neglected in existing studies focused on transatlantic cultural exchange.

This chapter draws on evidence from ethnographic research with African Australian performers since 2016, including interviewing and participant observation (McConnell) and over fifteen years of observations and experiences within the African music scene in Australia from a performer and educator perspective (Sonko). In this chapter, while we focus primarily on the experiences of African-born musicians, we use 'African Australian' as an inclusive term to refer to people of African descent residing in Australia, whether they are recent migrants, refugees, long-term residents or Australian-born. While the term 'African Australian' is contested, we use this term to emphasise forms of belonging

in Australia, and to push back against dominant notions of Australian identity that exclude people of African descent.¹

The music of African Australian performers and composers has not received extensive attention from researchers, despite its prominence within African Australian communities, in representations of Australian multiculturalism and in Australia's popular cultural landscape more broadly. Some important exceptions include Samantha Dieckmann's research with South Sudanese Australian communities in Blacktown;² Kathryn Marsh's work on school and community-based music programmes for young refugees and migrants;³ Dawn Joseph's research on incorporating African music in education settings;⁴ and McConnell's research with African Australian performers in Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra.⁵ In addition to this music-focused research, there is a growing body of scholarship by African Australian researchers that has provided a nuanced understanding of African diasporic experiences in Australia, addressing issues such as race, racism, identity and belonging,⁶ and including some discussion of music,⁷ which provides an important foundation for understanding the significance of African Australian musical practices.

Research shows that music can be a potent form for navigating changing forms of belonging and articulating the 'multiple consciousnesses'⁸ associated with diasporic experience in Australia.⁹ People of African descent in Australia frequently negotiate multiple layers of identity as they may maintain a connection with Africa; with a particular country, region, language or ethnicity; with a worldwide African diaspora and/or with an Australian identity. Scholars such as Finex Ndhlovu have noted that people identify themselves differently according to social context and that identification and senses of belonging may change over time through experiences of migration and resettlement.¹⁰ In particular, scholars have discussed the experience of 'becoming' black and African after migration to Australia.¹¹ While this may be experienced as a positive assertion of identity that builds solidarity and pan-African pride, in some cases it is felt as a negative ascription that homogenises and erases other important aspects of identity and belonging based on factors such as ethnicity, nationality, language or religion. Furthermore, while people of African descent may identify or be identified as 'black', the term 'black Australian' is strongly associated with Indigenous peoples in Australia, making the use of this term contested.¹²

This diversity in African Australian identities and experiences is reflected in the enormously varied musical practices associated with African Australian people and communities. This also means that while

some musics may be appreciated by different communities of African origin, such as Congolese soukous for older generations of African migrants, other musics may be specific to particular ethnic, national or linguistic groups.¹³ There are also significant differences based on age, with younger generations often showing a strong identification with African American music and culture, whereas older generations express concerns about African American music being a negative influence, reflecting broader anxieties about loss of culture and traditional values among the youth.¹⁴ In short, just as the notion of a unified African Australian identity is complex and contested, African Australian music is likewise multifaceted and diverse both in terms of the musical sounds and styles represented and in their significance to individuals and communities.

Background

There is a long history of African migration to Australia, with the first settlers of African descent arriving on the First Fleet in 1788.¹⁵ The important role of people of African descent in the early years of colonial settlement has been obscured, however, in dominant narratives of Australian history shaped by particular notions of race and Australian identity that became entrenched leading up to and during the White Australia Policy era.¹⁶ Beginning in 1901 and not completely dismantled until 1973, the White Australia Policy consisted of a set of race-based restrictions that prevented people of non-European descent from coming to Australia. As a result of these restrictions, migration from Africa to Australia during the first half of the twentieth century primarily consisted of white South Africans and (from 1940–1960) Egyptians.¹⁷ Migration from other African countries increased gradually from the 1960s onward, and by the 1990s black Africans made up a large proportion of Australia's humanitarian entrants. As Fozdar, Prout Quicke and Mickler note, while much research on the African diaspora in Australia has focused on refugees from countries such as Sudan/South Sudan, these humanitarian entrants are outnumbered by African-born migrants entering Australia through the skilled worker and family migrant programmes. At the time of the most recent census, 2.6 per cent of the Australian population was either born in Africa or had one parent born in Africa.¹⁸ Reflecting varied migration pathways over time, the African diaspora in Australia is highly diverse in terms of national origin, ethnicity, culture, language and socio-economic status.

The growth of the African-born population in Australia in the 1980s following the dismantling of the White Australia Policy led to the emergence of African performers in the developing multicultural arts scene. Smith and Brett describe the development of ‘public multicultural music’ in the 1980s, led by ‘performers and cultural activists, some from the folk scene, others from ethnic communities and various levels of public administration’.¹⁹ The multicultural arts scene provided important opportunities for artists, but it also entailed reframing musical practices to fit within the ‘framework of a state-sponsored multiculturalism’.²⁰ As we will discuss further below, multicultural festivals in particular have provided a space for self-representation and community engagement for African Australian artists, while at the same time imposing constraints on the way in which music and cultural practices can be represented and shared.

The legacy of the White Australia Policy continues to be felt in what Mandisi Majavu describes as the ‘normative whiteness’ that underlies Australian multiculturalism and the ‘everyday racism’ experienced by African Australians.²¹ Negative representations of Africans in the Australian media, including sensationalist reporting on ‘African gangs’ in Melbourne,²² also reflect racial anxieties and ideas about national identity and belonging that exclude people of African descent and that shape the opportunities available to African Australian artists and the way their music is received.²³

The musical practices associated with African Australian individuals and communities are highly varied. There are a growing number of African Australian artists who have achieved mainstream success, particularly in genres such as R&B and hip hop, for example Timomatic, Sampa the Great and Tkay Maidza, among others. Zambian-born Sampa the Great is particularly notable for the strong emphasis on African themes and stylistic influences in her music, lyrics, videos and stage presentation, and for her rapid rise to international popularity.²⁴ For our research collaborators, the success of these artists is celebrated for providing much-needed positive representations of Africans and African Australians and challenging the notion that artists of African descent are only suited to performing in settings designated as ‘multicultural’. The majority of African Australian music-making occurs in less high-profile settings, however, including performances associated with community and family gatherings to mark holidays, births, marriages, coming-of-age ceremonies or religious worship. Other performances take place in public settings at venues ranging

from community centres, bars, restaurants and nightclubs to concert halls, and in educational contexts where varied music and dance practices are taught to children or adults in schools or community centres.²⁵ Australia is also home to radio programmes featuring African musics and a growing Afrobeats DJ scene featuring the most popular music from West Africa, particularly Nigeria.²⁶

While some performers seek to maintain traditional music practices very much as they are performed in their communities of origin, others engage in processes of collaboration and exchange, developing new stylistic approaches to reflect their experiences in Australia. For example, the Melbourne African Traditional Ensemble is a unique Australian creation that combines instruments from Ethiopia, Ghana and South Africa to develop an innovative pan-African musical creation. The Ethio-jazz band Black Jesus Experience experiments with musical crossovers that are distinctly Australian, such as their collaboration with Kuku Nyunkal man Sean Ryan on Yiki Yiki (didjeridu) on the album *Good Evening Black Buddha*.²⁷

The performances of African Australian artists must also be contextualised through a consideration of the broader influence of African diasporic styles and sounds on the development of Australian music culture. This broad influence of African diasporic musics has been neglected in dominant representations of Australian music history which have emphasised whiteness.²⁸ A growing body of research, however, has explored the way First Nations peoples in Australia have adapted, and made their own, African diasporic musics such as hip hop and reggae and the cultures of resistance associated with these musics.²⁹ This process of cultural exchange has been made possible both through consumption of recordings featuring African diasporic artists as well as through direct engagement with African and African diasporic musicians who have toured or resided in Australia.³⁰

Striking in this scholarship is the way African and African diasporic musics have been instrumental in the development of shared cultures of resistance to colonialism and racial oppression. The absence of African Australian perspectives in this research is notable, however, reinforcing a representation of African and African diasporic culture as a foreign, non-Australian influence that is only made Australian when it is adapted and performed by First Nations artists. A more complete picture emerges when the perspectives and musics of African Australian artists are included. There is a long history of African Australian musical practice that is informed by the Australian cultural landscape,³¹ and contemporary African Australian performers and composers have used music to

negotiate ideas about race and belonging and to build solidarities with First Nations peoples in Australia and with a global African diaspora.³² Solidarities may be articulated through reference to shared experiences of racism and discrimination, and in some cases through reference to Indigeneity and histories of colonial oppression in Africa and Australia. In addition, African Australian performers frequently emphasise ways in which music can contribute to building social connection and healing in the face of challenges encountered in the Australian social environment, such as cultural loss, intergroup tensions and discrimination.

Contexts of Performance Practice: Senegalese Australian Examples from the Work of Lamine Sonko

In this section, we briefly discuss three projects led by Lamine Sonko that serve to illustrate his unique creative approach while also providing insight into broader themes that have emerged through our work with African Australian artists.³³ These three projects highlight contrasting contexts of African Australian music practice and the challenges and opportunities experienced in these settings.

Sonko's approach as an artist draws from his cultural heritage and education as a *guéwel*, as a descendant of the Sing Sing clan and Korings of Kaabu and as a member of the Serer, Wolof and Mandinko cultural communities of Senegal. A West African hereditary role, a *guéwel* is responsible for maintaining and communicating cultural knowledge through customs and rituals that are channelled through music, dance and oral storytelling.³⁴ A *guéwel*'s practice is informed by a lifetime of learning within the community. Beginning in early childhood, this cultural education is guided by community elders and takes place through observation and participation in rituals and ceremonies including rhythmic, chant and dance traditions. A *guéwel* is skilled as a communicator and mediator. This communication can occur through music, song, dance or speech. *Guéwel* comes from the Wolof word for circle (*güew*), while the verb '*guéwel*' means 'to create a circle'.³⁵ Traditionally, a *guéwel* is someone who gathers people together when there is an important message concerning the spiritual or physical wellbeing of the community that needs to be communicated.

Sustaining these culturally significant musical practices associated with the *guéwel* after migrating to Australia has, for Sonko, involved multiple iterations and different approaches to engaging people through music. In

some settings, such as within family and Senegalese community events, music is performed and enjoyed in ways that are closely aligned with cultural practices in Senegal. For example, Sonko performs at naming ceremonies for Senegalese families living in Australia. In Senegalese culture, naming ceremonies celebrate the birth of a new child and give the child a name that reflects their cultural heritage. As is true for many African cultures, Senegalese names are not just a way to identify an individual but also carry deep cultural and spiritual significance. As *guéwels* are a fundamental part of the spiritual and physical well-being of the community, they have a key role in the naming ceremony by evoking ancestral knowledge through the playing of specific rhythms. A naming ceremony is also an opportunity for the family to share their joy and excitement with others and to receive support and guidance from the community as they raise their child. In this way, naming ceremonies play a role in building strong, connected communities and in passing down cultural traditions and values from one generation to the next.³⁶

While musical events such as naming ceremonies are important for Senegalese families to sustain cultural heritage in the context of migration, such events are limited in number, reflecting the small size of the Senegalese community in Australia. In addition to performing in these community settings, Sonko has developed a range of creative projects that explore new ways to share culture and engage people through music in the Australian context. In the following sections, we examine three examples of this musical-cultural work, including festival performances, school and community programmes and a collaborative multi-artform project.

The Multicultural Festival

Scholarship on music and multiculturalism in Australia has shown that performers often encounter challenges when adapting their musical practices in the context of multicultural events that cater to a predominately white Australian audience.³⁷ Multicultural festivals have been described by Ghassan Hage as a kind of ‘multicultural zoo’ featuring ethnic cultures as a ‘collection of “otherness”’ for the benefit of white Australians.³⁸ Others such as Rimi Khan have suggested that this ‘ethnic zoo’ model of multiculturalism does not adequately capture the creativity and agency of festival performers and audiences who engage in forms of self-representation and community building through festival participation.³⁹

The diversity of music festivals featuring African Australian artists, and the range of performer and audience experiences within those festivals, resists easy classification. Nonetheless, presenting their music on festival stages involves processes of adaptation to align artistic expressions with the expectations of audiences and organisers in the Australian context. Through this process, old meanings may be lost and new meanings attached to the musical sounds, attire and dance movements shared. For some performers, this reflects a process of transforming the associations of music with religion, education or other aspects of cultural life into entertainment. At the same time, performances can provide important opportunities for public representation and cultural sharing.

Sonko's band *The African Intelligence* is a popular music ensemble that has performed at festivals throughout Australia and achieved significant recognition including winning Best Reggae and Global Album at the Music Victoria Awards (2017). Sonko established the band in 2011 as a way to connect with broad and diverse communities and advocate for the issues that African migrant artists faced in Australia. The music combines Senegalese traditional music and a unique blend of jazz, blues, salsa and Afro-funk genres. The name of the band (*The African Intelligence*), musical style and song lyrics work together to present a compelling message of African cultural strength, history and resilience. This message is particularly important in the Australian context, where media and political discourse represents African cultural difference in negative ways, contributing to problems of racism and discrimination against people of African descent.⁴⁰ The songs of the *African Intelligence* address histories of colonisation and slavery, while emphasising a narrative of solidarity in the face of racial oppression and a positive vision of the future.⁴¹

While many supporters of the *African Intelligence* appreciate the lyrical messages and the representation of African culture, the band's success can also be attributed to the unique mix of genres that make the music both accessible and interesting to a wide audience. Perhaps most importantly, the band's exuberant and high-energy performances get people dancing. *The African Intelligence* uses festival performances to entertain audiences, while also presenting positive representations of African culture in Australia and communicating values of community unity.

The African Intelligence can be seen as part of a movement of African Australian artists pushing back against negative representations of Africa and Africans in the media and in political discourse, with other examples including the young women's arts collective *New Change* and Zimbabwean Australian hip hop artist Kudzai, among many others. Performances in

festivals provide a space for self-representation and public celebration of African culture and identity that is highly valued by many participants, including artists and audiences.⁴² Indeed, audience members interviewed by McConnell explained that dancing to performances by the African Intelligence and other African Australian artists gave them a strong sense of cultural pride and belonging that they had not previously experienced in the Australian context. These examples illustrate that the 'multicultural zoo' model does not adequately describe the festival experiences of many African Australian participants.⁴³ At the same time, for some artists, adapting music practices with cultural significance into staged entertainment or spectacle is a challenging process, serving as a point of friction and learning in the context of diasporic experience.

School and Community Programmes

Many African Australian artists note that making a living as a performer is challenging. In addition to the general challenges associated with the music profession, African Australian performers noted that they felt a sense of exclusion from performance opportunities as a result of their skin colour, migrant or refugee status, or assumptions about their place of origin. This was attributed to a range of factors, including racism and discrimination, lack of connections or understanding of the industry, and approaches to arts programming that result in culturally and linguistically diverse performers being restricted to events and opportunities marked as 'multicultural' or 'world'.⁴⁴ In the face of these challenges, one of the strategies that African Australian performers use to make a living through music in Australia is to diversify their activities, engaging in public performances while also teaching or conducting workshops with schools and community groups. For many performers, these activities are also valued as an opportunity to educate and share culture in ways that are not possible in public performance settings.

The Knowing Project was established by Lamine Sonko to share African ways of learning in the education sector in a mode that pays respect to the cultural knowledge embedded in musical practices. The Knowing Project draws on the cultural tools within music practices of Senegal, particularly drumming, to promote playing and learning together as a collective, and an understanding of music as a tool to break down barriers, heal and teach us how to relate to and connect with each other in new ways. While these are cultural philosophies rooted in Senegalese culture and *guéwel* traditions,

the Knowing Project shares these practices in recognition of a universal human need to connect, to have purpose, identity and belonging. In addition, the Knowing Project aims to promote positive understandings of African culture and to tackle issues of inequality and racism from early on. This approach has been used in schools and also with local government areas in programmes designed to improve community safety in outdoor public spaces and strengthen social cohesion and inclusion.

These kinds of school and community-based music activities with African migrant communities and young people have begun to receive attention from researchers. For example, a study by Cain, Istvandy and Lakhani examined how community-based, participatory music practices may contribute to well-being for migrants and refugees in Australia.⁴⁵ While not focusing specifically on African musical practices, their research included newly arrived migrants and refugees from Sudan and Congo. Likewise, Bartleet, Dunbar-Hall, Letts, *et al.* include some examples of African Australian musical practices in their discussion of the large-scale Sound Links project, which aimed to ‘stimulate understanding and appreciation of community music activities’ across different settings in Australia.⁴⁶

Focusing more specifically on young people, Kathryn Marsh has conducted research on school and community-based music programmes for refugees and migrants, including participants from Sierra Leone and South Sudan.⁴⁷ Her research indicates that programmes contributed to a sense of inclusion both for children and their parents. In addition, Marsh, Ingram and Dieckmann examined an innovative music-teacher training programme at Sydney Conservatorium of Music that engaged South Sudanese Australian youth.⁴⁸ The programme enabled multidirectional learning, building university students’ understanding through engaging with South Sudanese Australian musicians and young people, while also facilitating music engagement and intercultural learning for South Sudanese Australian participants.

School and community-based programmes such as these represent a significant area of research and practice. While varied in their form and structure, programmes frequently emphasise sharing of African music practices and the cultural knowledge embedded within them as a means to support intercultural understanding, well-being and social inclusion. In these settings, music can provide a tool to engage a broad audience and create awareness of the complexity and depth of African music practices that may be overlooked in mainstream music education settings. Furthermore, for many African Australian artists, engaging in school or

community programmes can provide an important source of income, while also enabling sharing of culture in ways that is frequently not possible in public performance settings.

13.12 Project

Scholarship on multicultural arts in Australia has identified a tension between so-called 'grassroots' initiatives oriented toward community development and artistic 'excellence'.⁴⁹ That is, multicultural arts are frequently represented as amateur or of lesser quality than mainstream arts but as possessing value for building community and cross-cultural understanding. Furthermore, a perceived incompatibility between commercial goals and community goals has shaped the way multicultural arts programmes are represented and supported.⁵⁰ Some African Australian performers have identified challenges in working sustainably in this cultural environment, where longer-term creative development may be hampered by funding models for community programmes, and community-based ways of working may not be well aligned with programmes oriented towards developing individual artistic excellence.

In this section we offer a brief discussion of Sonko's 13.12 project, which aims to bridge this tension between 'grassroots' and 'excellence' by maintaining both a strong grounding in community and emphasising long-term creative experimentation to develop unique artistic outputs.⁵¹ The 13.12 project presents a new model of working that is built on deeply rooted cultural knowledge systems from Senegal, while also being engaged and innovative within the Australian arts context. It was established in 2018, informed by Sonko's cultural background as *guéwel*, his early career experience in the performing arts scene with Senegalese and Swiss-based theatre companies, and his years of experimentation with the African Intelligence band and the Knowing Project. The challenges of adapting musical practices with cultural significance in the Australian arts context provided motivation to develop new ways of working in a collaborative, research-informed creative process that combines in-depth cultural knowledge and artistic experimentation.

The 13.12 project brings together a team of producers, artists, academics, cultural elders and communities to develop and present multi-artform experiences including theatre, music, visual art and film and to nurture research that promotes wisdom cultures and global Indigenous ways of knowing. The name '13.12' refers to an ancient celestial ratio including the

cycle of the moon and sun; it is also a sacred number connected to the constellation of the star *Yoonir* (Sirius). One of the key concepts in the 13.12 project is the idea of music as an embodied or internal knowledge, described as *xaam xaam mou yeug yeug* in Wolof, the most widely spoken language in Senegal. In this context, musical practice activates an awareness in the individual to understand and follow cultural ways of viewing the world, cosmologies and metaphysical principles. An example of this is seen in Senegalese *bakk* (rhythmic invocations), which are chanted messages that have a rhythmic equivalent and contain sacred language limited to performance by specific members who hold particular roles in the community.⁵² These rhythmic languages show how knowledge is communicated beyond words to connect with the past and present through sound.

A key element of the 13.12 project has been the focus on in-depth and long-term research and development, including exploration of cross-cultural composition and how to bridge gaps between Western classical music and African music pedagogies. Outcomes have included the production of a short documentary film *Deup* (2021), as well as theatre and music productions. The performance narratives developed through the 13.12 project, particularly for presentation in a music theatre context, look to subvert dominant colonial histories of Africa that have relied on written archives and mostly excluded the embodied and oral traditions. The work seeks to evoke a new awareness of collective belonging by highlighting the knowledge embodied in music and new perceptions of African and broader global Indigenous cultures. In this way it aims to be both grounded in cultural knowledge and practices from a specific area of West Africa while also exploring solidarities and commonalities with other Indigenous cultures, including First Nations cultures in Australia, that have likewise been marginalised through an emphasis on written archives.

The 13.12 project is a unique exploration of both cultural specificity and universality that is grounded in guéwel knowledge of music as the fabric of collective experience. The project provides insight into key issues that have emerged in broader research with African Australian artists, particularly the challenges experienced in adapting musical practices and associated forms of cultural knowledge in the Australian music environment. Whereas scholarship has identified tensions between ideas about artistic excellence and community engagement, the 13.12 project explores models of working that bridge this tension, maintaining long-term community involvement as well as new forms of creative collaboration.⁵³

Conclusion

In this chapter we provided an overview of research on African musics in Australia and shared examples of projects led by Sonko in order to highlight diverse African Australian musical practices and contexts of performance. These included the African Intelligence, an innovative popular music ensemble that has performed extensively at music festivals and other events throughout Australia; the Knowing Project, which runs school and community programmes focused on building cultural understanding through music; and 13.12, a multi-artform project that explores creative, collaborative ways of engaging and sharing art in Australia, based on deeply rooted music-knowledge systems from Senegal. These three projects share common goals while also employing distinct ways of engaging Australian audiences through music.

Together, these three projects provide insight into key themes that emerge in research on African musics in Australia. Firstly, they demonstrate an interplay between cultural specificity and ideas about universality that is a recurring theme in representations of African Australian musical practice. Many artists emphasise a connection to a specific ethnic group, country, or region of origin, seeking to challenge homogenising representations of Africa in Australia. At the same time, artists frequently embrace ideas about universality, seeing music as a way to forge connections with new communities in Australia and globally. In Sonko's work, both cultural specificity and universality are layered together, enabling artistic practices to emerge that are grounded in Senegalese *guéwel* practice while also embracing broader Indigenous solidarity against racial oppression and notions of shared human experience and a coming-together across difference.

Secondly, these examples highlight challenges and opportunities experienced by African Australian artists in engaging with multicultural arts programming. Research has shown that multicultural arts programmes can reinforce exclusionary notions of Australian belonging in providing funding and space for artists to perform in segregated events that are designated as 'multicultural' and that may cater primarily to white Australian audiences.⁵⁴ Even as celebratory notions of multiculturalism represent the arts as a space of openness and inclusion, the expectations of venues, event organisers and funders frequently require adaptations of musical practices that may not always align with their cultural significance and individual artistic priorities of performers. At the same time, for many

African Australian artists and audience members, festivals and other multicultural event performances offer valued opportunities to share music and culture with people from African and wider Australian communities.

Taken together, these examples illustrate the way artists use music to negotiate the complexities and challenges of diasporic experience and to articulate the relevance of African cultural practices in contemporary Australia. This is significant in a country where dominant notions of identity, race and belonging exclude people of African descent and where racism and discrimination continue to negatively impact the lives of individuals and communities. A growing body of research points to the importance of community-based musical practices for supporting social connectedness and belonging in the context of migration and resettlement.⁵⁵ We suggest that the diverse and varied forms of African Australian music-making deserve further research in their own right, and also for the insight they provide into changing notions of Australian belonging and African-diasporic experience.

Notes

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11. Phillips, 'Convenient Labels'; Zwangobani, 'Convivial Multiculture'.
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