

ARTIST PROFILE

MC Trey: The 'Feline Force' of Australian Hip Hop

Tony Mitchell

A Hip Hop Role Model

Fijian-Australian MC Trey, aka Thelma Thomas, is arguably Australia's leading female MC, who has begun to receive prominent mainstream media coverage for her Pacific Islander style, dynamic live performances, distinctively street-wise and musically diverse recordings, and her hip hop workshops. Described by Andrew Drever in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as 'one of Australian hip hop's true role models,'¹ to date she has released two acclaimed mini-albums, the ten-track *Daily Affirmations* (2000)—described as a 'landmark for the Australian hip hop scene' and album of the week in Sydney street mag *Revolver*²—and the eight-track *Tapstry Tunes* (2003), described by George Palathingal in the *Sydney Morning Herald's* 'Metro' as '[d]emonstrating potentially the biggest leap forward for Australian hip hop.'³ Trey (initially an anagram for 'The Rhymin' Edifying Young'un') has also contributed tracks to numerous Australian hip hop compilations, most notably the all-woman *First Words* (2000), released on Sydney-based label Mother Tongues, described by label founder Heidi Pasqual as 'the first label in the world dedicated to the development of Women in Hip Hop Music.' On the US release *Best of International Hip Hop* (Hip-O Universal, 2000) she represents Australia with her 'melodic, realistic, personal, political, positive' MC style, alongside a host of non-Anglophone male MCs and crews from Argentina, Algeria, Switzerland, Israel, Romania, Greece, Austria, Greenland, Croatia, France, South Africa and Portugal.

Trey's track on the international hip hop compilation, 'Feline Forces,' is about the African-American and Australian women in hip hop who have influenced her, from Roxanne Shante to MC Lyte, Baby Love, MC Que and local graffiti artist and MC Charlene aka Spice, who 'in '88 dropped the first Aussie female tune' (on the Virgin compilation of Australian hip hop

¹ Andrew Drever, 'Trey bien,' *Sydney Morning Herald* 27 June 2003: 'Metro' 10.

² Sahlands, review of *Daily Affirmations*, *Revolver* 23 May 2000: 36.

³ George Palathingal, review of *Tapstry Tunes*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 April 2003.

Down Under by Law). It caught the attention of high profile (and resolutely Anglophonic) New York rock critic Robert Christgau, who commented in the *Village Voice*: 'when Fijian-Australian Trey comes on, it's not her modest boast that'll perk you up, or even her dulcet female tones, it's her English per se.' Christgau could not resist adding rather chauvinistically that the beats of non-US hip hop often tend to be 'limp' and that it cannot emulate what he regarded as the 'better music' of African-American artists.⁴ This response exemplifies a standard US response to hip hop in the rest of the world, which is often seen as merely a technologically-inferior attempt to imitate US models or at best to appropriate a US-owned art form. Trey replies:

some people want to emulate while others want to create their own style. I must admit, though, in terms of beats, we have been lacking in sound quality and knowledge of production techniques, but that's changed.

Inevitably, Australian hip hop got its initial impetus from US crews like Run DMC and Public Enemy, but in the past two decades its MCs have developed an idiosyncratic, multi-faceted identity of their own, while DJs and producers still struggle to obtain the resources and skills to match US peers like the Neptunes, Timbaland or Prince Paul. As Trey told Ian Shedden in a 2001 interview in the *Australian*,

Most of us were raised on American hip hop. It's just difficult to try to get that sound over here, but producers are working on getting our sound up to scratch. I like to do my own thing, but I want to get it out to as many people as possible.⁵

In the ten years since Trey began emceeing in 1995, Australian hip hop has developed, expanded and proliferated to the point where it is becoming all but impossible to keep up with the range and quantity of activity and releases going on. *The Oz Cella*, a CD-ROM first released in 2001 and last updated in December 2004 by Draino, a Melbourne-based MC, chronicles 544 individual Australian hip hop artists, 120 groups, 29 crews, and 185 recordings, with representatives in every state except the Northern Territory (where multicultural soul-RnB-funk group Culture Connect is arguably producing a hybrid form of hip hop). While most of the releases are self-produced or on small independent labels, groups like 1200 Techniques have begun to get major label support (from Sony), and Trey looks positioned to do likewise in the near future. Her 2001 single 'Creepin', with dance DJ and producer Fatt Dex, was inspired by the *Knightrider* TV show theme, and released on SonyDance as well as in two versions on the all-Australian compilation of TV theme collaborations *Variations to a Theme*. It received high rotation air play in both its audio and video versions on Triple J and Channel V.

Trey has also taken Australian hip hop overseas, beginning with a self-funded trip to the USA in 1999, where she busked on street corners. In New York, 'the kids spun out because they thought it was another form of hip hop. It was so foreign to them.'⁶ Over the years she has performed with US MCs in New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Oakland, as well as in Tokyo and London and throughout Australia, and her distinctively smooth, sweet-voiced but sassy and assertive flow has become a staple on Triple J and other local radio playlists. She

⁴ Robert Christgau, 'The World's Most Local Pop Music goes International,' *Village Voice* 2 May 2002.

⁵ Ian Shedden, 'Rapt in Local Political Issues,' *Weekend Australian* 19-20 May 2001.

⁶ Shedden, 'Rapt in Local Political Issues' 20.

has also worked on Foxtel's Channel V as a veejay, and she co-organised the first three national Urban Xpressions hip hop festivals in Sydney from 1998 to 2000, which were instrumental in building up a collective national hip hop identity: 'I just wanted to help provide a space for artists to do their thing. Every hip hoppers dream, 10 days of non-stop hip hop events.'

Bustin' Moves in the Pacific

Trey grew up in Fiji listening to her father's gospel singing, along with Polynesian and reggae music. Her first encounter with hip hop was when she was nine years old, at primary school in the mid 1980s, watching videos of the Rock Steady Crew at a neighbour's house: 'They had a copy of "Hey You" and "Uprockin'." I remember seeing Baby Love and was like, "wow she's great, I want to do what she's doing".' She set about finding out as much as she could about emceeing and breakdancing, and at primary school she began scribbling down lyrics in exercise books:

I was so young and didn't have funds or much access to hip hop and didn't even know what was happening in other countries, but I watched as many vids as I could. My older cousins would learn breaking moves off the vids and I'd learn off them, and at family parties, we'd entertain them with our dance routines.

Her cousins in Australia and New Zealand sent her the *Beat Street* video and Run DMC tapes and she copied the moves and the flows.

Trey's early breaking performances in Fiji coincide with an influx of breakdancing in the Pacific, particularly in Western Samoa, from which it spread to Aotearoa / New Zealand, where Maori and Pacific islander youngsters formed breakdance teams who appeared on local television and in a national breakdance competition. As Tania Kopytko has pointed out, the US import culture of breakdancing provided these mostly disadvantaged kids, who often had little chance of achieving recognition through conventional channels such as school, sport and social position, with 'a very strong and positive identity that did much to raise their self esteem and realise their capabilities.'⁷ It also provided both Maori and Pacific Islander young people with a more accessible substitute for their own culture, which in many cases they were disconnected from, and had difficulties accessing, and arguably it was a conduit to gaining more knowledge about their own cultural background. Trey admits that she still doesn't know a great deal about Fijian culture, but sees hip hop as a mode of expression which provides her with the motivation to discover it. Her track on *Daily Affirmations* 'So Where U Wanna Go,' which addresses MCs looking for direction, begins with a description of a trip to Fiji and the migratory journeys of her Pacific ancestors, before embodying the local-US syncretism of much Australian hip hop by hooking up with African-American MC Eligh from Living Legends. She uses the metaphor of her Pacific ancestors setting their seafaring course by the stars to express her own progress and direction in hip hop.

Representing Multicultural Australian Hip Hop

Her family moved to Parramatta in the western suburbs of Sydney when she was eleven, and she pursued her interest in hip hop by going to local jams in the then emerging Sydney hip

⁷ Tania Kopytko, 'Breakdance as an Identity Marker in New Zealand,' *Yearbook for Traditional Music* vxviii (1986): 21–22.

hop scene, which had started with breakdancing parties in the park at Burwood, and whose first, very US-influenced MCs were chronicled on *Down Under by Law*. By 1992 anthemic tracks like Sound Unlimited's 'Kickin' to the Undersound' and Def Wish Cast's 'A.U.S.T (Down Under Comin' Upper)' had firmly established a new-found local, but still very underground, Australian identity in hip hop:

I used to go and watch Def Wish Cast, go to jams, and when I was old enough or could sneak into clubs I would. I then started getting up at open mic nights and got to meet a lot of DJs and MCs through that.

These included other women MCs like Spice, Thorn, Kelly K and Melbourne-based MC Que, who, along with T-Na of Sound Unlimited provided welcome alternatives to the majority of male line-ups which have dominated Australian hip hop. In the early 1990s, local hip hop gigs were still very small and populated by passionate followers of the genre: 'Sometimes I miss those intimate "family-like" gatherings, but then it's also cool to go to gigs and see new faces all the time. The real heads will always be there.' Trey's first 'official' gig was in 1995 at Spooky Tricks, an Australian hip hop night with one of the first Australian hip hop producers, DJ Bonez, in Martin Place. In 2001 she took part in a national tour with Brisbane-based Shin Ki Row and former Adelaide crew Reference Point sponsored by Triple J, which in January 2001 had started its Australian hip hop show broadcast late on Friday nights. In 2003 she did a solo national tour backed by Kid Confucius, a seven-piece funk band.

Trey plays a prominent role in *Pizza* protagonist Paul Fenech's 1998 film about the Sydney hip hop scene, *Basic Equipment*, as the only female MC to be profiled, pointing out the multicultural nature of Australian hip hop, and challenging Pauline Hanson to come to one of her jams, and even to rap. (Her debut release, the 1997 self-produced cassette tape, *Projectile*, features a diss of Hanson called '1 Nation Party,' attacking racists 'still crawling about like infants,' which she later developed into the track 'Eyesore' on *Daily Affirmations*.) After doing a rap for Fenech's film about the importance of the DJ in hip hop, she talks about the way that she regards the four elements of hip hop as modern extensions of analogous elements in traditional Fijian culture: turntablism relates to the beats of the *lali* log drum (used to announce meal times, among other things), the MC to her grandfather's public speaking in a circle around the *kava* bowl, breakdancing to the ceremonial *meke* story-performance dances, and graffiti to cave-painting or the designs of the *tapa* or *masi* cloth, a traditional bark-cloth used in traditional Fijian ceremonies and religious rituals, made from the paper mulberry tree, into which patterns which recount ancestral Fijian stories are stencilled, stamped or smoked. Trey has used *tapa* cloth designs on her CD covers and website as well as wearing it in performance, and appropriating it as the name of her record label, and the title of her second album, *Tapastry Tunes*. As the liner notes state: '*Tapastry* metaphorically represents the various elements of life experience, knowledge and creativity that interweave to create Trey—the artist and her music.'

These rhetorical and metaphorical connections and correspondences between traditional and ceremonial elements of indigenous culture and hip hop have also been explored by Maori and Pacific Islander hip hop artists in Aotearoa/New Zealand (as displayed in Sydney film maker Carla Drago's 1998 documentary film *Island Style*, in which Trey appears). It is also evident in hip hop in numerous other parts of the world, from the Nuuk Posse in Greenland,

who sample whale songs and throat singing, and rap in Greenlandish, Inuit, Danish and English, to the numerous Islamic hip hoppers in Algeria, Morocco, Germany and France, to Southern Italian rappers who sample traditional folk music and rap in regional dialects. It is part of the indigenisation or 'glocalisation' process which has seen hip hop take root in local cultures through out the world. As Trey comments:

I feel that a lot of young people who are removed from their culture or have grown up without a culture are drawn to hip hop because of its elements and sense of belonging it provides. For me, emceeing is modern day story-telling, just like my ancestors did around the *kava* bowl.

In her view, it is important for Australian hip hop to be multicultural, 'because it brings different music styles and tales of different lands, and can only add to the beauty of hip hop.'

Tapastry Tunes begins with the sound of a ukelele, and elsewhere, on a track called 'The Harvest' she samples sea sounds, 'combining traditional culture with contemporary culture.' Trey goes back to Fiji every couple of years, keeping in touch with her homeland, as well as performing with other Pacific Islander hip hop artists from both Australia (Tongan MC Hau from Koolism, who guests on 'The Harvest' on *Daily Affirmations*) and Aotearoa/New Zealand (Samoan MC King Kapisi and the now defunct Christchurch-based female crew Sheelaroc). At the 'Sons of Samoa' event at the Sydney Festival in 2001, she teamed up with Kapisi and Koolism at a jam which included traditional Samoan tattooing and music performances:

It's just so fantastic to see other Pacific Islanders doing their thing and doing it well. I feel it also inspires young Pacific Islanders to do their thing as well. Pacific Islander cultures are similar and our ancestors worked so closely with each other, it's hard for us not feel a sense of unity. A lot of younger Pacific Islanders though are not taught their cultures, which is a shame. Events like 'Sons of Samoa' are a great way to get the younger generation interested in their roots.

As far as US influences are concerned, apart from the female artists listed in 'Feline Forces', and Sade and Nina Simone, Trey has cited the early pedagogical 'infotainment' hip hop of KRS1's Boogie Down Productions, searing ghetto rapper Nas, Del and L-Boogie, as sources of inspiration, along with underground rappers Aceyalone, the ex-Freestyle Fellowship MC who guests on *Daily Affirmations*, and Supernatural 'for their free-styling skills, and (African-American performance poet) Maya Angelou for her journey and words of wisdom.' She sees her own work as being about 'personal stories which sometimes reflect political beliefs, or rhymes to motivate, or even love tales.'

Workshopping Feline Hip Hop

Another important female MC with whom Trey has worked extensively is Mexican-born Maya Jupiter, who emerged from the RnB club scene in Sydney at the 1998 Urban Xpressions festival during a panel discussion at the University of Technology. Trey met her in Parramatta when she was working with Et-Nik Tribe, a multicultural crew featuring DJ E.S.P. and MCs Khalil and Torcha, whose 1998 EP release *Romancing the Racist* was another landmark in multicultural Australian hip hop for its extended critique of Pauline Hanson. Trey and Maya have performed together, as well as teaming up with Aboriginal MC Wire for the Hip Hop Down Under

program, which took them on a hip hop music exchange to the London Ocean Music Centre's Rising Tide project, along with Lena Nahlous, executive officer and tour manager of ICE (Information and Cultural Exchange), a community organisation based in Parramatta. In 2002, Nahlous received a \$200,000 grant from the New South Wales State government to establish SWITCH, a multi-media and music production facility for western suburbs youth. While in the UK, Trey and Maya checked out several community music centres in London and Northern Ireland, including Asian Dub Foundation's Education Centre, and performed at gigs in Kings Cross, Oxford Street and Cheltenham, as well as participating in open mic gigs and hooking up with Spider Johnson, an associate of reggae and dub legend Lee 'Scratch' Perry, who contributed to a track on *Tapastry Toons*.

Trey also performed with leading Brooklyn woman MC Apani B Fly and ex-Company Flow DJ Mr Len in Tokyo on the way back, an association dating back to her days as a shop assistant at Just Sport shoe store, where she not only became angry about Nike's exploitation of third-world labour (an anger expressed on *Projectile*), but also started learning Japanese phrases so she could communicate with the Japanese customers she frequently had to deal with. This led to establishing contacts and distribution for her recordings in Japan. The London trip also opened her to reggae influences in hip hop, and as she stated in the ICE media release in 2002:

It was a great learning and inspirational experience. I learnt a lot about the way the community access programs came about and identified with the fact that most of these centres were born out of a need for spaces of self-expression, creative development and basically a space for young people to hang out and learn in a comfortable and positive environment. On the performance front, we definitely rocked every spot we performed at. For most we were their introduction to Australian hip hop.

The four of them presented a 'show and tell' about the trip along with performances and rough cuts of a film they shot while on the trip in the august setting of the 2002 Sydney Writers' Festival.

This community workshop aspect of hip hop is something that Trey has been involved in for some time, dating from the mid-1990s and Urban Theatre Projects' community play *The Bridge*, where she first encountered ex-MetaBass'n'Breath MC, producer and breaker Morganics, who has facilitated hip hop workshops with Aboriginal and disadvantaged young people throughout Australia, along with Aboriginal MCs BrothaBlack and Wire. For Trey, Morganics

is one of the many people in Australian hip-hop [who] acknowledge the owners of this land we live in, and makes an effort to give back. Being involved in hip hop music has helped me achieve many things, so it's important for me to be able to give that back to the next generation.

For the soundtrack of *The Bridge*, Trey developed her first and one of her most distinctive tracks, 'Reality Tales,' with DJ Bonez, one of four local DJs she has worked with (the others are Austrian-born Nick Toth—a deejaying encyclopedia—Koolism DJ Danielsan, and one of the few Australian female DJs, Groovy D, whose scratches feature on the robotik track 'Arcade Warriors,' about playing Space Invaders as a schoolkid). She has run workshops with Maya Jupiter for disadvantaged teenaged girls in western suburbs Guildford, Parramatta and

Bankstown, and between February and May 2003 they ran 'Feline Beats and Rhymes,' a TAFE-accredited course in contemporary music, affiliated to South Sydney Youth Services and covering instrumental technique, voice, songwriting and other hip hop skills for indigenous women, early school-leavers and young women from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

At the end of the course, a CD, *SoulJah Sistaz*, featuring songs and raps in four different languages (including Samoan and Maori), was launched by fifteen of the predominantly Pacific Islander girls (as indicated by songs like 'Pasifik Beauty' and 'Island Song') together with Trey, Maya and Groovy D at the Metro, and the SBS program *Insight* screened a documentary segment about the course. Stand-out tracks on the CD, the cover of which features a hibiscus flower superimposed over the Sydney CBD skyline, include the feisty 'Fist It,' by Krackhore, about how large women should deal with sexual harassment and insults from boys, and 'The War Track,' by Jestah, about her objections to Australia's involvement in the gulf war. The girls also performed at the Surry Hills, Brackets and Jam and SmartArts festivals and were featured on the ABC TV program *Stateline*. They provide ample evidence that given the right training and opportunities, there are plenty of young up-and-coming female MCs capable of battling their male counterparts in the Australian hip hop scene. She was involved with a similar TAFE course in 2004, as well as Sistahood Hip hop Workshops' in Marrickville and Camperdown, and Arabic hip hop workshops with SWITCH in Granville. As Trey, who begins *Tapstry Tunes* with a diss of 'so many mediocre MCs,' comments: 'I'm impressed by the amount of talent coming through, yet there's signed artists out there with no talent at all.'

Trey's own understanding of the dilemmas of disadvantaged girls is evidenced by the fact that as a struggling, teenaged migrant 'westie' she did time in prison, something she refers to in her track 'With or Without,' where she treats it as a learning experience and a wake-up call: 'The shit I've been through, you wouldn't have a clue / Hate goin' into details, 'cause I ain't proud of it / Spent some time in jail, as a consequence / Made me think quite a bit, about the direction I was heading.' This is at the opposite end of the spectrum from 50 Cent's flaunting and boasting about his (apparently fictitious) prison time, which he uses as a badge of gangsta street credibility. One of Trey's future plans is to run hip hop workshops with teenaged girls in Fiji, as well as doing a joint EP with Maya Jupiter, but her activities have been scaled down to an extent after she gave birth to a daughter, Lyric, in February 2003. Being a mother 'has changed my relationship to everything. Not taking no crap now, and am more focused, and making extra efforts to be a positive, supportive model for her.'

In May 2003, Trey took part in 'Ladies First,' (a title courtesy of Queen Latifah, from her 1989 album *All Hail the Queen*) an all-female hip hop event held at the Bar Broadway in central Sydney, alongside Groovy D and MCs Que, Maya Jupiter, Macromantics, Thorn, Jade Nemesis and Sydney-based Canadian MC Eternia. MC Que also presented the twenty-minute documentary film *All the Ladies* she made with RMIT media student Colleen Hughson, featuring six women MCs: A-Love (aka the 'wogorigine'), Little G, MC Que, Layla, Maya Jupiter and Thorn. One fact to emerge conclusively from this event was that Trey had provided inspiration for virtually all these MCs, and their collective 'feline forces' represented a highly distinctive and many-faceted local alternative to the far more numerous male MCs and crews who dominate hip hop. Also, the necessity for staging such events, even when they are emceed by a token male, as 'Ladies First' was with *Stealth* magazine editor and promoter Mark Pollard—

who has arguably done more than anyone else for Australian hip hop—was also evident. As Eternia stated in an interview in Sydney weekly dance music paper *3D World*,

sexism, albeit in an extremely subtle form, still exists within hip hop. But more importantly I believe that women simply don't have the support networks that many male artists take for granted. There aren't many female producers, or financiers, willing to take a risk on a female artist. I'd actually go as far as to say that in terms of equality issues, the hip hop world is a good ten years behind the wider community. Things are slowly improving however, and I think nights like 'Ladies First' are a part of the solution.⁸

Eternia also noted that more female MCs in Australia were releasing product than in her hometown of Toronto. Her aggressive, brash and battling 'ghetto funk' style of emceeing provided an interesting contrast to the softer, more melodic and even occasionally literary style of the Australian women MCs (with Macromantics making reference to Sylvia Plath). When all seven artists took the stage together with Josie Styles for a final freestyle, their collective impact was enough to earn the respect of the most hardened male hip hop battlers.

Beating the Cultural Cringe

One of the difficulties Trey and other Australian hip hop artists have to counter is what appears to be a resurgence of the 'cultural cringe' in relation to local hip hop, as has been noted by Drever:

Hip hop fans in Australia are still getting used to rappers spitting out rhymes with a thick Aussie accent. Many have struggled to get to grips with the ocker accents flaunted by local crews such as the Herd, Resin Dogs, Downsyde and Koolism.⁹

While Trey's 'dulcet tones,' which include an increasing amount of RnB and gospel-styled singing, are not as self-consciously 'ocker' as many of her male peers like Ozi Battla of the Herd, she also has to struggle against a still-prevailing sense among Australian listeners that US hip hop is the 'real thing' and Australian hip hop a pale imitation. A series of letters to the Sydney weekly street paper *Drum Media* in August 2003 debated this issue, focusing on the Herd and their controversial track '77%', which attacks the Howard government's refugee policy (with which a poll showed 77% of the Australian people to be in agreement). The Herd's track met with controversy after being played on national youth radio Triple J because of its use of the c-word expletive in its chorus: 'Wake up, these c—s need a f—g shakeup.'

The *Drum Media* debate was sparked off by a letter berating Triple-J for:

saturation it's [*sic*] playlist with awful "Aussie hip hop"... [which] is plain embarrassing. A bunch of wannabe's [*sic*] talking about being Aussies, but rapping in tragic American accents (most of the time, except for the ones who are almost parodies of what it is to be an Aussie hip-hopper)...As one of those P-Plate Puff Diddy's [*sic*] states ... "Wake up, this country needs a f—ing shake up."¹⁰

⁸ Mark Hebblewhite, 'Ladies First,' *3D World* 12 May 2003: 64.

⁹ Drever, 'Trey bien' 19.

¹⁰ *Drum Media* 661, 15 Aug. 2003.

This drew several rejoinders, including one that claimed that the ‘problem with JJJ is they don’t play ENOUGH of this sort of music.’ The writer agreed that ‘playing local hip hop is tokenistic,’ while noting that the Beatles ‘were just aping American bands with a Liverpool accent.’ Another claimed that the ‘reason JJJ is playing a small amount of Oz hip hop (usually less than 5 songs during the working day—hardly a saturation of the playlist) is because it is now one of the fastest growing music scenes in the country.’ McGowan argued that Australian hip hop:

is easily the most recognisably Australian sounding music being produced today (bar Slim Dusty, of course—nuff respect!) replete with broad Australian accents unlike any rock band’s [*sic*] that spring to mind...those MC’s [*sic*] who choose to rap in American accents are the most lambasted of all! What other Australian music includes references to pinny parlours, Mad Max, Boag’s [*sic*] and Kantong’s [*sic*]?

Another letter added fuel to this argument by claiming that ‘JJJ is giving aussie hiphop the support it deserves. Why? Hmmm, maybe because it’s by far the most exciting, energetic, and just plain damn funky sound coming out of the oz music scene at the moment.’¹¹ The following week, ‘Tom G’ opined: ‘Hip hop, no matter where it comes from, is grotesquely overexposed. If you want to support Aussie music, support metal.’ Justin Heazlewood stated:

I’d rather hear the Herd bagging out John Howard and how racist Australia can be than some trussed up millionaire crapping on about girls [*sic*] arses ... Long live Triple J and Aussie hip hop, New Zealand hip hop, Indonesian—pick a country.

These sentiments were echoed by Zoë of Newcastle:

The Herd ... are the antithesis of cheesy American gangsta-rap and Aussie groups who imitate that scene ... true Aussie accents, intelligent raps and musicians who create their own beats and sounds. And believe it or not, there are more groups out there just like them.¹²

Apart from a widespread deficiency in the use of apostrophes, this debate suggests that while arguments will continue about the pros and cons of US influence, Australian hip hop has a number of very vocal and informed supporters, who are particularly sympathetic to the anti-Howard views expressed by the Herd. Evocations of the Beatles, Slim Dusty and hip hop in neighbouring countries suggest that processes of indigenisation of US-derived music are by no means confined to hip hop. More informal discussions reveal, however, that the embarrassment factor associated with Australian hip hop in Australian accents is quite widespread. As Drever notes, it tends to be Anglo-Australian male rappers who use overtly ‘ocker’ accents that may grate on some listeners, while ‘Trey’s up-front Aussie accent is part of her style, but her voice isn’t harsh on the ear.’¹³

Nonetheless, she has met with criticism that has overtones of ‘cultural cringe.’ Elizabeth Colman began her review of *Tapstry Tunes* in the *Australian*: ‘Trey’s elemental rhythm suits her gentle dub track ‘Wall-Paper’ so perfectly it’s unforgivable the rest of this CD sounds so starkly amateur.’ From a hip hop perspective, ‘Wall-Paper,’ a rather bland, slow, RnB-styled

¹¹ *Drum Media* 662, 12 Mar. 2003.

¹² *Drum Media* 663, 19 Mar. 2003.

¹³ Drever, ‘Trey bien’ 19.

melodic track with horns and guitar on which Trey sings, is, as its title suggests, the weakest and most lyrically insubstantial track. Coleman goes on to describe the album as 'a mish-mash of hip hop rap, dub and ska ... burdened with Byron Bay-style affirmations ... tunes are jammed in like the pieces of an ill-fitting jigsaw puzzle rather than interwoven threads of a tapestry.' While ska influences are hard to detect anywhere, the 'interwoven threads' analogy suggests that the Pacific Islander 'tapastry' aspect—where there are no threads—has been misunderstood, as is affirmed by Colman's naively exotic, essentialist and simplistic reference to 'a broad, Islander sound that invokes blue sky and green grass.'¹⁴



An important aspect of Australian hip hop frequently overlooked in debates about the desirability of Australian accents and ocker cultural references is the cultural diversity of much local hip hop, which is a by-product of the indigenisation of hip hop by second generation immigrant youth throughout the world. Culturally diverse crews such as Downsyde, Koolism, South West Syndicate and Curse ov Dialect, with their wildly surreal 'rainbow hip hop,' and individual MCs such as MC Wire, Maya Jupiter and Trey ensure that Australian hip hop, as with hip hop in Aotearoa/New Zealand, with its strong Maori and Pacific Islander inflections, and hip hop in Indonesia, Hong Kong and elsewhere, maintains a unique cultural diversity and musical syncretism which constitutes a highly original and distinctive view of the world and representation of the nation. While most Australian hip hop is in English, a factor which tends to accentuate comparisons with US hip hop, and place it in an analogous position to that of UK hip hop, which has been similarly disparaged, the growth of culturally diverse elements, such as the use of Spanish language and Salsa Rhythms by Maya Jupiter, Ila Familia and Downsyde, and Samoan and other Pacific Islander languages by the Souljah Sistas, along with the inclusion of Aboriginal language by artists such as South West Syndicate and Native Rhyme Syndicate, suggests that this diversity is becoming even more diverse. And it is arguable that Trey has had a profound influence on Australian hip hop's movement in this direction.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Coleman, review of *Tapastry Tunes*, *The Weekend Australian* 15–16 March 2003: 'Review' 20.

Acknowledgment

Thanks to Monica Tan for drawing my attention to the *Drum Media* letters in her tutorial presentation on Australian hip hop in my 2003 Music and Popular Culture class. Quotations from Trey are from an interview conducted by email on 2 September 2003. The photograph of Trey on page 46 is by A. Gharevinia.

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