Lines of drift: festival participation and performing a sense of place

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It’s funny how the difference in each nation organised a different rhythm almost. The beat, the beat is different, it’s much faster here than in the States. Mainly in bush music it’s like that, if you call it bush music. You know this, this lagerphone? Well this lagerphone beat is usually much faster than you would hear in America, that’s the way we felt it when we first arrived. Now it’s fine, it fits, you know! But for some reason, it didn’t quite [fit], it was just a bit too fast for what I was used to from the States. (Glasco 1998)

Frederique Glasco, a participant at the 1998 Top Half Folk Festival held in Mt Isa, Queensland, talks here about the unsettled experience she had upon hearing what she described as an ‘Australian rhythm’: it felt different, it was too fast, it did not ‘fit’ to her own sense of rhythm. Yet, her initial perception changed after living for a time in Australia and this new rhythmic pulse did feel appropriate to her in her new surroundings. Two questions arise from this: first, how does a musical coding of space help create a sense of place? Second, how does engagement with this aural symbol create an identity through connections to place? In this paper I am interested in examining this relationship between music and place by focusing on participation in the community music festival, specifically participation in the 1998 Top Half Folk Festival, which was held in northern Queensland.

The phrase ‘community music festival’ suggests an occasion characterised both by its location and by the community involved. Festivals Australia, an Australian Federal Government cultural grant programme, defines it as ‘a regular celebration which is organised by members of the community and has clear and strong community support’ (Department of Communications, Information Technology and The Arts 1998, p. 3). The community music festival, then, can be seen as a means of promoting a community’s identity, or at least how that community would like others to see it. There is a sense of the local at various levels: through performances, the audience and how the festival is organised. Yet, although the community music festival can be seen as an articulation of local connections between identity and place, this is problematic. First, such festivals include non-local participation. The need to generate income in order to cover the expenses of such an event means that organisers invite performers from outside the community who are expected to attract larger audiences (Rodgers 1998). The creation of a local place is not in the music performance alone, but how this is framed within the structure of the festival. Second, there can be no simple linking of a bounded and identifiable group of
people to a particular place, for identity and place are not fixed and unchanging, but multiple and shifting. The argument of cultural theoretician Arjun Appadurai, that contemporary society is best described as an ‘ethnoscape, a fluid landscape of tourists, immigrants, exiles and other moving groups and persons’ (Appadurai 1991, p. 192) best suits the perspective of this paper. This fluidity is seen as an essential defining feature of the people living in the Mt Isa region. Participants interviewed in 1998 talked about the region’s transient populations and its cultural pluralism (Ian 1998; Peter 1998; Rodgers 1998). Yet this transience and multiplicity leads to many taking part in social activities that will provide supportive networks, in turn further defining those who engage in these activities as members of a particular community. The geographer Doreen Massey argues that a sense of place is created out of the numerous articulations occurring within spatialised social connections (Massey 1994, p. 120). The Top Half Folk Festival illustrates such an understanding of place. The festival can be seen as a site of intensification, with links and connections within and beyond the locality in which it is held. Participating in the community music festival is one means of acting out this identification.

The Top Half Folk Festival was established in 1970, following the formation of a number of folk music clubs in Mt Isa, Darwin and Alice Springs at that time. There are two key characteristics that define this festival. First, as its name suggests, it is a festival devoted to performing and listening to folk music. However, this folk music is understood by festival participants as encompassing a range of musical styles. Those attending the 1998 Mt Isa festival classified folk music as a music for and by the people, as ‘any music that belongs to some one, some nation’ (Gordon 1998; Rodgers 1998). This inclusiveness is not limited to this particular festival, but is an important concept in what the musicologists Graeme Smith and Judith Brett have termed Australian public folk music. Smith and Brett see this incorporation of a musically diverse programme as representative of the folk ideology, one committed to authentic performance practices and participatory cultural forms (Smith and Brett 1998, p. 5). Yet for participants at the Mt Isa festival, this inclusivity is a means to create a space of belonging. The second key characteristic of this festival is a sense of isolation and the gathering of ‘Top Enders’ at each festival was in response to this. As noted by many of the festival organisers interviewed, distance and travel costs hindered participation in events held in the more populous southeastern Australian states (Nankivell 1997; Shaw 1998).

The Top Half festival is a shared event, rotated each year through a number of places in the Top Half of Australia – Darwin, Mt Isa, Katherine, Alice Springs and Jabiru (situated in Kakadu National Park). Rotating the venue of this festival in this way could be seen as a disruption to the connections between a place and its community, but after talking to festival participants and reflecting on the festival’s music performances, it appears that this dislocation provides the impetus for community formation. The name of the festival, the ‘Top Half’, locates the event in a particular space, that of the top or northern end of Australia. More specifically, the towns that take part in the festival mark out a roughly triangular area covering approximately 58,000 km. Generally music festivals are linked to a particular and geographically small place. The Top Half, in contrast, locates itself within a large geographical area that requires participants to travel quite extensively so as to be present at the event (but not nearly the distance required to travel to the southeastern states). Although sharing the administration and expenses of the festival is a pragmatic move, travelling such a distance also acts out the lifestyle of the Top
End. By travelling and re-establishing a Top Half festival at points within this region, participants act out a difference to those folk festivals held in the southeastern states. One festival participant talked about how this sense of distance and the need to travel helps create the perceptions they have of themselves as a group. He reflected:

I think it’s because in the Territory and the north here generally it is a relatively unpopulated place with a lot of distance between places. And it’s a lifestyle thing, too. I mean people who live in the north are generally much more laid back. These Territory festivals are much more friendly and laid-back than the big festivals down south. They’re not so involved in making a show of things. People are more interested in having a good time than competing with people, judging people, or whatever. I mean, we’ve come up from Maryborough, Pete and Aud have come from Toowoomba, and basically the festival is why we’ve travelled all this way – to be here. We’d left the Territory and moved down to Maryborough. We went back [to the Top Half Festival] for the first time last year, to the one at Jabiru. When we heard that this one was to be at Mt Isa, we thought great! That’s only half way! We’ll be there! (Ian 1998)
Festival participants hear the performances framed by these images of the Top Half, and this is reinforced in stage talk and performances. On stage, in spoken introductions to songs, a recurring theme was the distance that participants had travelled to reach Mt Isa, with performers introducing themselves with such statements as: ‘I’ve come all the way from Maryborough – hop, skip and jump of 3000 miles!’ (Ian 1998); ‘All the way up from Karumba’ (Campbell 1998); ‘I’d like to welcome everybody to this Top Half festival, especially those who have come from so far away’ (McCullogh 1998). Intertwined with this need for movement to actually get to the festival is the image of the landscape as vast and one that needs to be travelled through. Festival participants are constantly reminded and located within this Top Half space. Participating in this festival marks out one’s identity as part of the north and being part of the festival opens up a space that reaffirms participants’ membership in this far-flung group, for, as one participant commented, ‘if you’re anywhere like this, you’ve always come from somewhere else’ (Pam 1998). The festival becomes a site for an intensification of connections – particularly the musical and social – that resonates to notions such as ‘northern Australia’, distance, inclusiveness, travelling, being relaxed, performing to small audiences, notions that, for participants at this festival, mean belonging as a ‘folky’.

Rhythmic space

At the 1998 festival, the guitarist-composer Michael Fix and didjeridu player William Barton performed one of Fix’s own compositions, ‘Sunrise over Alice’. This piece had been performed as a solo by Fix the previous evening, but after hearing Barton play, Fix invited him to join him for this concert. I want to examine how the duet is framed by the festival and by the performers in such a way that a particular image of place of the Top Half is created. A way into understanding this is through notions of ‘rhythm’, drawing on two particular concepts: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their essay ‘Of the Refrain’ (1987); and the musical understanding of ‘rhythm’ as discussed by the musicologist Christopher Hasty in his book Meter as Rhythm (1997).

Hasty argues that central to an understanding of rhythm within the musical realm is the notion of regular repetition. Yet, paradoxically, within this definition there is a dichotomy, for, as Hasty points out, that rhythm can mean both regularity, lawfulness and measure, and an expressive or compelling motion, gesture or shape (Hasty 1997, p. 4). It is the regular repetition of a time period (the metre) that controls the unfolding of music, while what Hasty calls the rhythmic is heard as expressive and musical because it seems to work against this metrical constraint. Hearing music is structured around an ordering of sounds where its expressive qualities take shape against a measured framework. Hasty writes that

[r]hythm focuses our attention, not on time as a substrate or medium for events, but on the events themselves in their particularity, creativity, and spontaneity. To speak of rhythm is to speak of the rhythm of something – a characteristic gesture or shape that makes this something special. Moreover, it is to raise the question, special for whom? (1997, p. 7)

In this, Hasty suggests that this structuring of the musical experience points to a framing presence outside the music, one that recognises the musical structure as having meaning. Deleuze and Guattari have also explored the notion of rhythm,
using it in a metaphorical sense that nonetheless has some similarities to Hasty’s examination of musical rhythm.

Deleuze and Guattari argue that every living thing is formed from a series of milieus composed of interiors, exteriors and the boundaries to these various environments. Music is used as an analogy for the processes involved as these living things mark out a territory. They argue that space is territorialised through the use of periodic repetitions that signal ownership to others. What they call ‘rhythm’ are the traces of encounters between different milieus, between self and non-self. The resulting rhythmic improvisations are observable changes, reactions to challenges that call for a signalling of ownership. As rhythm orders sounds into a musical structure, so mapping space through repeated signs is a means of establishing a structure of possession.

Rhythm then can be defined as the ‘lived’ experience of music, where the performer and listener inhabit and give life to music, and rhythm as a metaphor, the sign of ownership and the response to potentially threatening, outside influences. Both ways of understanding rhythm suggest a sense of agency, that within the concept of rhythm there is a will to control space and time. These concepts of rhythm can help unravel the layers of meaning within the duet of ‘Sunrise over Alice’. Fix locates the work in a particular place, Anzac Hill near Alice Springs. He introduces the duet with these words:

This piece of music is designed to evoke the sunrise in central Australia. If you can, imagine yourself up on Anzac Hill overlooking Alice Springs. It’s absolutely pitch black. It’s about a quarter to six in the morning, maybe five thirty. And it’s a little bit eerie, ‘cos you’re right out there in the middle of Australia. And you start to see the first rays of the sun coming up over the Macdonnell Ranges and the sky changing colour. (Fix 1998a)

This places the piece at the ‘geographical centre’ of Australia, but it also positions ‘Sunrise over Alice’ historically and culturally. Anzac Hill functions as a sacred site, its name memorialising the Anzacs at Gallipoli (a first World War battle that the Australians were very much involved in) in an event proclaimed by many as the day the Australian nation was born (Inglis 1991, p. 17; White 1981, p. 128). Each year on Anzac Day this event is celebrated nationally with a dawn service taking place at Anzac Hill in Alice Springs. Although not explicitly talked about by Fix, these associations with the Gallipoli commemoration colour the performance, linking the performance to a particular imagined Australia, and one attached to an Anglo-Australian notion of its own history.

The piece is programmatic in the sense that Fix wants to encapsulate in music the scene of a sunrise at Alice Springs and he introduces the piece, both in concert and on his recordings of the work, by explaining this. Yet, by tracing through the various versions of ‘Sunrise over Alice’, it appears that the music itself is linked to and creates a sense of the ‘Top Half’. In both the 1993 and 1996 recordings of ‘Sunrise over Alice’ (Fingerpaintings, 1993; The Heart Has Reasons, 1996), the piece begins with a sound resembling that of the wind blowing, followed by percussive sounds that initially have no discernible pulse. In the earlier recording, this initial percussive sound is performed using a drum machine, followed by the introduction of electronic keyboard, glockenspiel, shakers and use of glissandi. After about twenty-five seconds of introduction, the shakers and guitar initiate the pulse of the composition: the shakers create a rhythmic pulse through repeated percussive intervals, while the guitar plays a chordal progression that establishes the key of
the piece. The Alice Springs depicted in the 1993 version is imagined through the instrumentation and timbre of country music, in particular the twang and pitch-glides of the electric and slide guitars. As the musicologist Graeme Smith notes, the association of sound with place reflects both musical competencies and learned cultural responses: what we hear is influenced by how we have been taught to hear (Smith 1992, p. 40). The 1993 ‘Sunrise over Alice’ suggests that the listener enters into this soundscape through the semiotics of country music and its allusions to an untamed and rugged landscape. Subjectively, Fix’s ‘Alice’ can be reconstructed through aural sounds that conjure up visual counterparts, and it is the guitar that invites us into this representation of place, its weary slide bringing to mind such images of the outback as cattlemen, dust, and heat. In his discussion of the country singer’s voice, Smith argues that the country singer’s vocal production – created out of a high, tense voice position, with ornaments and breaks using the falsetto voice that decorate the melodic line – ‘projects a body under great emotional strain, a body continually defended and all the more vulnerable because of this’ (ibid., p. 39). In Fix’s composition it is the voice of the guitar that embodies and acts out the sunrise experience and that the listener identifies as embodying or recreating the physical experience of place. Fix leads the listener through the impact of the transient and awe-inspiring moments of dawn on Anzac Hill through the vulnerable voice of the country guitar.

In the 1996 version (and in his concerts at the Top Half festival), Fix creates the opening’s rapid unstructured percussive effects by tapping the body of the guitar with his fingers, as well as through the use of glissandi. The tonal quality of this introduction is deeper and more rounded compared with that of the earlier version, while the tempo is much slower. Unlike the earlier version, where an organising pulse originates in the shakers and the chords of the guitar, in this version the unstructured percussive effects created by Fix on the body of the guitar gradually evolve into a repeated rhythmic pulse. It is these musical elements, in addition to Fix’s introductory comments, that help shape the listener’s understanding of the piece.

In her analysis of Peter Sculthorpe’s work, ‘Mangrove’, Naomi Cumming uses the semiotic methodology of David Lidov to examine signification within musical structure. In this approach, music is understood as having specific references to aspects of the world, bodily motions and emotional states (Cumming 1997, p. 194). Cumming observes how Sculthorpe uses musical sounds to evoke a particular Australian landscape through the imitation of natural sounds. For example, within Australian musical culture analysed by Lidov, rapid glissandi in the extreme high registers of the orchestra’s string section resemble the sound of bird calls. Cumming also argues that while other sections of the work may not be imitative they nonetheless have referential content, rendering in sound, actions or moods (ibid., p. 201). In Fix’s ‘Sunrise over Alice’ similar strategies are used. With Fix’s introductory comments to suggest the scene, the opening sounds of ‘Sunrise over Alice’ conjure up the eeriness of early dawn in some primordial, Australian landscape through the piece’s rapid and unstructured percussive sounds. These sounds are referential: they suggest the movement of the wind and the sound of birds at dawn, as well as the physical sensation of shivering provoked by the dawn chill or perhaps a sense of the place’s eeriness. Perhaps, too, this feeling of unease alludes to the feeling of sacredness resonating through the name Anzac Hill. The soundscape of ‘Sunrise over Alice’ is
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Yet ‘Sunrise over Alice’ can also be transposed to the more general place of outback Australia. This had been established in Fix’s earlier concert at the festival, where he said in his introduction ‘I suppose you get something pretty similar here in Isa, so I guess you won’t have too much trouble imagining [this scene]’ (Fix 1998a). Through his introductory description – the mood of the piece is ‘eerie’ and you feel ‘right out there in the middle of Australia’ – he locates and activates his musical narrative within a set of notions about this mythical outback. The unstructured introduction, where the rhythmic pulse of the piece is yet to be established, conjures up the pre-dawn sky, where it is difficult to discern the land’s features. We can then hear, within the structuring of the music into a recognisable form, that with the sun’s first rays Fix begins to see and make sense of where he is. This fixing of experience illustrates Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of rhythm at a number of levels. The sunrise experience is translated into music, with the physical and emotional responses to the landscape coded in aural images which then have the potential to effect the listener and performer. Fix’s memories are embedded within a musical sound that gives him possession of a virtual, imagined Alice Springs at sunrise. In turn, this musical narrative and coding offers the listener a way into this ‘Alice’ soundscape.

The 1996 recording – the version performed at the Top Half festival – does not have a specifically country music feel, and its more mellow sound suggests a quite different musical aesthetic that is more middle-of-the-road. However, including William Barton on the didjeridu brings another layer of possible readings into the performance of this music. Barton’s physical and musical presence activates other discourses about the Top Half, specifically those around Aboriginal Australia. Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs argue in Uncanny Australia (1998) that central Australia is imbued with the Aboriginal sacred, a complex system of knowledges, sites and objects. This Aboriginal sacred circulates and impacts on Anglo-Australian discourses of place and identity, which they argue leads to a fluctuation between unity and reconciliation on the one hand and division on the other (Gelder and Jacobs 1998, p. 22). They propose that out of this uncertainty the familiar is made strange, made into an uncanny experience where one senses being both in and out of place (ibid., p. 23). Fix’s reference to Anzac Hill looks to an Anglo-Australian myth about origins, yet Barton indicates another understanding of that same space. The festival’s master of ceremonies, Greg Hastings, introduced Barton as ‘local – his family’s been local here for about 60,000 years!’ making explicit his intimate and extended connection to this place (Hastings 1998). Festival participants are made aware and reminded of the juxtaposition of Anglo-Australian and indigenous Australian claims to space in the physical presences of these two performers. Barton’s musical presence reiterates this uncanny sense of place.

Entering the introduction after the guitar, the didjeridu follows the unstructured rhythms of the recordings and it too evokes a sense of eeriness and the sounds of birds at dawn. However, unlike Fix’s previous performances, where the guitar structures the rhythmic pulse, here it is the didjeridu that creates this pulse through its drone. The didjeridu also indicates changes between sections, with Fix listening and watching Barton for musical cues. Fix, too, follows Barton’s cue to finish, where Barton breaks out of the melody with blown overtones, a common cadential pattern for some traditional performers (Neuenfeldt 1997, p. 44–5). However, the function
of the didjeridu is not just to provide a rhythmic framework. Throughout the performance there is a sort of dialogue between the two performers, with the didjeridu imitating the guitar’s melodic fragments or percussive effects.

This performance can be understood as alternating between a mythic and a more specifically located sense of place. Barton’s didjeridu technique can be described as referential – for example, the bird call sounds in the introductory passage – but the didjeridu is itself referential, an iconic sound that reinforces an aural image of outback Australia. Along with this, Barton is specifically linked to a place. He is a member of the Kalkadoon, the indigenous people of the region in which Mt Isa is located, and this identity is specifically cited during the festival. But how does Barton’s presence affect this performance of ‘Sunrise over Alice’? The didjeridu could be read superficially as a sign of a pre-European Australia, a sign of the natural world that Fix observes then encapsulates in music, but something quite different happens during performance. In earlier recordings of ‘Sunrise over Alice’, there are no references to indigenous instruments. The 1993 recording encodes place through the sound of country music. The 1996 recording evokes a slightly different sense of central Australia, more in keeping with New Age or ambient marketing labels. In contrast, in the 1998 performance the didjeridu bumps up against and asserts itself with regards to the non-indigenous sound and organising function of the guitar. Although it is Fix’s composition, in this duet it appears that Barton directs the musical soundscape through his rhythms, recreating and reinterpreting the Alice through his musical language. In a Deleuze and Guattarian sense, Fix and Barton respond to their musical and cultural intersections through musical improvisation. There is a shifting back and forth between the didjeridu, the iconic voice of the Australian land, and the guitar on Anzac Hill, a place resonating with the myth of the so-called birth of the nation. The folk festival and the associated imagery circulating about the Top Half frame the performance, yet the actions of these individual festival performers recreate and reframe this meaning. The duet is then an event in flux, catching within its configuration aspects of both the local and the non-local, of being in and being out of place, through musical, bodily and textual motifs. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, motifs, the markings of place, ‘do not refer to a landscape; they carry and develop within themselves landscapes that do not exist on the outside’ (1987, p. 319). Hasty, too, refers to rhythmic markings and their effects, saying that ‘we cannot abstract rhythm from the wholeness of the event or from the event’s particularity. Whatever being it has rests in the uses memory will make of it in the formation of novel experience’ (Hasty 1997, p. 12).

The music performed by Fix and Barton draws on a musical vocabulary that creates connections between place and identity. In doing this, Fix and Barton illustrate how the performers at the Mt Isa festival are marked by, or mark themselves as, belonging to their imagined place. It is the redeployment of these markings – exemplified here in an understanding of musical rhythm – that gives a sense of connection to place, albeit an imagined place. These spatial markings are evident in other ways in the performances of the Top Half festival of 1998, ways that mark out a more local sense of place.

Localising space

Ronald Bogue, paraphrasing Deleuze and Guattari, notes that the territorialisation process induces two important effects: a reorganisation of functions and a regroup-
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ing of forces (1991, p. 90). Following this argument, Bogue explains that activities that are territorialisled undergo modification and specialisation resulting in the creation of new functions. Further, each territory has a centre of intensity where its forces come together (ibid., p. 90). By moving through the points of the Top Half space, participants alter place by recoding it and claiming it through the folk music aesthetic. The festival is a centre of intensity, where the creation of place is concentrated through the voice of folk performance and spills out onto surrounding space, so, for these people, becoming a specific ‘Top End’. In this way, the festival illustrates Deleuze and Guattari’s understanding of the relationship between place and performativity as one of territorial possession, where a territory is marked out through artistic practice and where possession is made known through being marked by this art (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, p. 316). The Fix and Barton duet in some ways is out-of-place in that the music is not what might be narrowly defined as folk music, yet through its associations and connections it does recreate a Top Half that is recognisable to the festival participants. The ‘Sunrise over Alice’ performance is heard through a folk music ideology that aims to be inclusive (Rodgers 1998; Gordon 1998). When performing within the context of the music festival, participants use this aesthetic to create, and reconnect to, their sense of place and to others within the folk scene. Incorporating traditional British and Australian folk songs and tunes, such as ‘Whisky in the Jar’, ‘Stepping out Mary’, ‘Shores of Botany Bay’, ‘Augathella Station’ and ‘Lachlan Tigers’, along with music less obviously ‘folk’ (as illustrated by Fix’s work), they draw on common musical and historical vocabularies enabling the Top Half Festival participants to frame space, delineating for themselves a folk space. There is this notion of a vast Top Half folk space in which participants are positioned, yet there are other, more localised, folk-space constructions. Although under the umbrella of the Folk Federation, with a recommended format for each festival, individual host towns often have a theme that locates the festival within that particular place (Shaw 1998). In 1998, the city of Mt Isa celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary and the Mt Isa Folk Club proposed holding the festival in Mt Isa as part of this celebration (Rodgers 1998; Shaw 1998). The ways in which the 1998 festival was constructed illustrates how it was marked as belonging to the city of Mt Isa.

When I attended this festival, it was very clear that the Mt Isa Mines company, in terms of employment opportunities as well as in its physical presence, dominates Mt Isa (see Figure 2). Mining activities have significantly altered the landscape, the skyline is dominated by smokestacks and buildings towering over the stark area where silver and lead had been extracted. As a means of specifying the festival as occurring in Mt Isa, the festival organisers used the image of the smokestack in the logos of the 1998 festival, combined with representations of folk instruments (see Figure 3). This juxtaposition of mining and folk images positions the 1998 festival participants; they are in the folk scene of Mt Isa.

Mt Isa was also historically located by the festival participants as a specific part of the Top Half folk scene. The 1998 festival theme was ‘Back to the Isa’, a theme that once again suggests movement in that those attending ‘returned’ and reinscribed Mt Isa as part of the festival circuit, but it was also a chance to remember the history of the Isa folk club and its origins. As part of this theme, two folk bands from the folk club’s early years, Rafferty and Buckley’s Chants, were reunited through a grant from Festivals Australia. Talking about
Figure 2. Alma St, Mt Isa. Sign pointing to the Top Half Folk Festival. Mt Isa Mines in the background.

Figure 3. Logo for 1998 Top Half Folk Festival

this reunion project, Annette Gordon, a performer and member of the Isa folk club committee, said

I think the reunion [of the two bands] was a great thrill for the former band members and they will have wonderful memories from the event that will last for the rest of their lives. For the members of the Folk Club, especially newer members such as myself, it has made us more appreciative of all the hard work the members of these bands and many others did to ensure we have the great facilities and resources the Folk Club enjoys today (Gordon 1998).

The performance of these founding groups enabled participants, particularly folk club members, to frame their activities within a historical context that bound them to a Top End folk tradition, but, as indicated by the festival participants, one that expressed a local, Mt Isa folk tradition. This connection to a folk past was made
explicitly in an exhibition put together by Allen Shaw, an original member of the Isa folk club (see Figure 4). The exhibition consisted of newspaper articles, flyers and posters and was held in the Isa folk clubrooms over the time of the 1998 festival. Festival participants could see and read about the club’s past activities, and it opened up and generated an active dialogue between people and this past. This connection to a folk past was also made in a physical sense. By attending the various concerts over the period of the festival, participants moved through the venues that had been used by past Isa folk events. For example, the Irish Club was the host for the two reunited bands as both Buckleys Chants and Rafferty had often performed there during the early years of the Isa Folk Club (Rodgers 1998). Participants, then, were given opportunities to revisit and reaffirm their personal links to this Isa folk past.

A folk space was also marked out by connecting and incorporating images of the landscape of Mt Isa. The current folk clubrooms are situated, along with a number of other Mt Isa clubs, in the riverbed of the Leichhardt River. This site has been incorporated into the identity of one of the local bands, conferring the band local and specifically Mt Isa links through its name, Leichhardt Silt. Barry Rodgers, guitarist and lead singer of this group as well as the Isa folk club president, explained the origins of the band’s name, ‘we called ourselves Leichhardt Silt because this club is in the river bed – we’re in the middle of the Leichhardt River at the moment – and we just sort of said, you know, we just sort of washed in like a couple of cask bladders and here we are!’ (Rodgers 1998). The band is located in a specific place in which folk music in Mt Isa is performed, but other associations link the band and its members to this place. Rodgers talked of Mt Isa’s transient population, a population whose source of employment is based on contracts with the Mt Isa Mining company. His description, ‘so you get a lot of floaters’, indicates
a population in which individuals have little family or social ties (Rodgers 1998). Rodgers’s explanation of the origins of the band’s name is evocative of Mt Isa in two ways: it alludes to the action of the river in Mt Isa but Rodgers’s language also evokes the city’s shifting population.

This mark of belonging is made in other, more obvious, ways. There is a sense of dialogue between inhabitants and the landscape. The construction of Mt Isa as an identifiable place and its marking on Mt Isa people are spoken back to the land through the images and stories incorporated into the lyrics of Mt Isa performers. One very clear example is Annette Gordon’s own composition, ‘The Spinifex and Stone,’ a song that describes the effects of mining on the land around Mt Isa. Talking about its composition, Gordon said that the song

was years in the making. When I went to Townsville, at Uni, I used to come back on the bus all the time. When you get to just outside of Cloncurry, and you get there early in the morning and you’re just waking up, you know you’re nearly home because you’re hitting the hills. The colours of the hills in the morning – it’s just incredible. Some of the places out bush have got a real spiritual feeling, so that’s what I wanted to say in that song. (Gordon 1998)

Gordon illustrates a sense of bonding to a place through a combination of absence and return, in a way similar to that talked about by audience members at this festival. Her travels through this space reinscribe her belonging, but it is her perception of the landscape around Mt Isa and its sheltering of a spiritual sacredness that connects her to this place. Gordon shows she belongs to Mt Isa in that she is both marked by the landscape and puts her mark onto it through her song.

In understanding the connections between place and music, the anthropologist Sara Cohen suggests using Ruth Finnegan’s notion of ‘musical pathways’, as this encapsulates how various participants open up and maintain links that then go on to create a sense of belonging (Cohen 1993, p. 128). This linking is not necessarily to a particular place, although participants may talk in these terms, but more through the numerous people and processes involved in musical performance and their associations to place. The participants of the Top Half Folk Festival create for themselves a Top Half space, coded through a folk music aesthetic and ideology. However, this is not based within music alone. As the musicologists Graeme Smith and Judith Brett point out, folk music is characterised by a strategy of interpretive control. The Australian folk repertoire has grown out of a musical reactivation of the Australian legend, a radical left, nationalist tradition (Smith and Brett 1998, p. 7). This is an Australia peopled by rugged men of the bush, the ‘itinerant male bush workers of the nineteenth century’ (ibid., p. 2). Such images of Australian Outback can still be heard at the Top Half festival in the ballads, jigs and reels of the Anglo-Celtic tradition, as well as in more recent work such as Fix’s ‘Sunrise over Alice’. Yet, as pointed out by Smith and Brett, the contemporary folk movement in Australia acknowledges and participates in both a cultural recovery and a contribution history. Contemporary performers incorporate non Anglo-Celtic influences in their musical performances, as well as telling of the people and events that have until recently fallen outside the confines of the Australian legend – the women, indigenous Australians and the various ethnic and cultural groups who also shaped both the development of Australian culture and its nationalism (ibid., p. 3). The musical performances of the Top Half Folk Festival recreate both this sense of interpretive control and participate in a cultural recovery. Although associated with images of the Outback, the Top Half festival defines itself in such a way that it
remains open and able to claim musics outside the immediate folk music realm. The 1998 festival at Mt Isa attempted to incorporate the city’s various ethnic and cultural groups in both its musical programme and its audience members. By framing musical performances within an apparently open system, where all who want to be are included, the Top Half festival territorialises the space of Mt Isa as ‘folk’.

The framing of musical performances by the associations the Top Half Folk festival has, gives meaning to and situates the music within a discourse of (folk) identity and belonging. In venturing forth, the music of performers such as the duet of Fix Barton and William Barton, the Mt Isa band, Leichhardt Silt, or the singer-songwriter Annette Gordon, embodies and gives voice to a relationship to place and offers, through participation, a means for others to identify and locate themselves. Deleuze and Guattari write:

One launches forth, hazards an improvisation. But to improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it. One ventures forth from home on the thread of a tune. Along sonorous, gestural, motor lines that mark the customary path of a child and graft themselves onto or begin to bud ‘lines of drift’ with different loops, knots, speeds, movements, gestures, and sonorities. (1987, p. 311–12)

Meaning is given to the musical performances of the festival because they operate and are interpreted within particular framing strategies. What Deleuze and Guattari call ‘lines of drift’ are the ways in which this Top Half Folk festival is embedded within a greater context, enabling participants to attach and reattach themselves to a sense of place and to make claims of belonging.

Acknowledgement

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Endnotes

1. Both this transience and the number of cultural and ethnic groups in the region are seen as outcomes of the mining industry in Mt Isa. Barry Rodgers, president of the Mt Isa folk club and workplace trainer and underground driller at Mt Isa Mines (MIM), explained that Mt Isa has around fifty-four different nationalities (Rodgers 1998).
2. Smith and Brett use this definition to separate this from the category of musical folk culture. They see Australian public folk music as a popular movement that self-consciously borrows and maintains aspects of folk culture (Smith and Brett 1998, p. 3).
3. The term ‘authenticity’ is problematic in its definition. Smith and Brett see it as a cluster of features: an acoustic and slightly rough production of sound, simple lyrics, the friendliness of those attending these performances and a particular historical consciousness regarding its repertoire (Smith and Brett 1998, p. 3).
5. Both these recordings were available at the festival, and Fix performed the 1996 recorded version at his concert the previous evening.
6. The festival programme includes a ‘blackboard concert’ where anyone can perform by placing their name on the performance list, concerts with invited guests, a poets’ breakfast (a competitive event in which all ages are encouraged to participate) and jam sessions held after the evening concerts.
7. Festivals Australia is a federal government grant that provides funding to regional and community Australian festivals for the presentation of cultural activity. It specifically tries to assist those festivals in rural and remote areas (www.artsinfo.net.au cited June 20 1999).
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