

# THE QUARRY

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## **The Heaviest Matter in Australia**

It's Saturday night at the Bald Faced Stag, and the seedy inner-west pub is awash with black t-shirts, flat-caps, bullet belts and ripped jeans. The familiar faces of local metal-heads crowd out the bar while they wait for the first band of the night to start playing in the adjacent room. In the meantime, the bourbon and coke flows freely as mops of long unkempt hair wax lyrical about their favourite bands and who they're seeing next. The answer is usually, 'me too!' Followed shortly by, 'are you going to X?' There are one of two local punters determined to tune out the sea of head bangers as they watch Saturday Night Football on the wall-mounted

widescreen TVs. Before long the thundering distortion of a guitar prompts a slow migration to the stage next door, giving the locals a brief respite. The band tunes up their instruments and sound-check their amps while the crowd of bearded beer-swillers looks on with stony indifference. The front-man nods to the sound guy at the back of the room and approaches the microphone: ‘We are Dispossessed, and Australia is under military occupation.’

Vocalist and lead guitarist Birrigan Dunn-Velasco’s antagonist display of righteous anger continues throughout their set, in stark contrast to his otherwise unimposing stature. His modest height and slender figure are only further diminished by the guitar he wields with ferocious precision. Despite being the main point of contact for the audience, he tends to avoid direct eye contact as he summons hell from within his lungs, preferring the wall running along stage right where the group’s entourage watch on dutifully.

Serwah Attafuah and Jarred Osei round out Dispossessed’s lineup, forming the tight rhythm section which frames Birrigan’s violent rejection of white Australia. Sans bass player, Serwah is left to round out the bottom end of their aural assault. She remains effectively stationary throughout the performance, her eyes darting between Birrigan and drummer Jarrod Osei. Her withdrawn presence is challenged only by the loudness of her guitar and the long dreadlocks that weave down the left side of her face from a loosely bound top-knot. Jarred appears the most at ease, perched on his drum stool-throne, he breezes through blast beats and an array of splashy drum fills. The two remain silent throughout the performance. As it would happen, the majority of the talking this evening would be given to the band’s entourage of guest speakers.

And there’s every reason for their audiences to listen. Indigenous Australia faces a constant up-hill battle for the kind of recognition and respect becoming of the world’s oldest known culture. Somewhat ironically, the average life expectancy of an Aboriginal or Torres-Strait Islander is on average 10 years lower than that of their non-indigenous counter-part<sup>i</sup>. Structural inequality is still an everyday fact of life for Australia’s first people – more children were being taken from their families during the Rudd Labor government than during the stolen generation<sup>ii</sup>. Fast-forward to 2016, and the Turnbull Liberal government refused to consult with indigenous leaders before forming the royal commission into youth detention in the Northern Territory. Only after former Supreme Court judge Brian Martin resigned as commissioner for perceived bias did the federal government appoint Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda alongside Justice Margaret White.

It is for this reason that Sydney-based heavy metal band Dispossessed are so vital to the modern music scene. Traditionally an overwhelmingly white genre, with (ironically) subgenres such as black metal promoting white supremacy, the presence of an aggressively black band has made many a mayonnaise metal fan uncomfortable. So we should feel uncomfortable – hard rock and heavy metal is derived from the blues, which is a black form of music. The entire history of rock music in the Western world is built on cultural appropriation. Elvis Presley made rock and blues palatable for white audiences in the 50s. The Beatles and other British Invasion groups did the same for England in the 60s. As Mos Def once wisely espoused, ‘You may dig on The Rolling Stones, but they ain’t come up with that shit on their own.’ In 1982, MTV allegedly only began playing Michael Jackson’s Billie Jean after CBS Records Group President Walter Yetnikoff threatened to pull all CBS videos. I reached out to Dispossessed multiple times for an interview, hoping to get some insight into their firsthand experience with racism in music (and specifically, heavy metal), but was met with silence. I can hardly blame them for being trepidatious about the motives of a 24 year old white boy.

Heavy metal itself was born with the arrival of Black Sabbath, a group of disaffected white teenagers from Birmingham with an interest in horror movies. Lower-middle class suburbia in England offered little in the way of job prospects, which left academic under-achievers with nowhere to turn but factory labour. It is these foundations that have helped perpetuate the status of heavy metal as a predominantly white genre. People of colour are scarcely represented throughout the genre’s history, with a few notable exceptions: Brazil’s Sepultura helped to pioneer thrash and death metal in the mid to late 80s, before redefining groove metal in 1996 with *Roots*. In America, Run DMC revitalized Aerosmith’s career with their 1986 remix of ‘Walk This Way,’ whilst Living Colour’s 1988 album, *Vivid*, gave funk metal an authenticity sorely lacking in the likes of Faith No More and Red Hot Chili Peppers. They too experimented with rap-rock alongside Public Enemy’s Chuck D on ‘Funny Vibe’. Then there was Rage Against the Machine.

Australia is no stranger to this exclusionary approach to rock. Just last year, critically lauded two-part documentary, *Blood + Thunder*, detailed the evolution of the ‘Australian’ sound guided by the vision of pioneer Ted Albert (founder of Albert Music and Albert Productions). Albert helped the careers of now iconic artists like The Easybeats and AC/DC. Conspicuously absent is Albert’s hand in introducing Australia to jazz and blues, when he brought the Sonny Clay Orchestra to our shores in 1928. As *The Conversation* notes, they

were deported 9 weeks later after a directive from the Musicians Union to ban visas for ‘coloured’ artists<sup>iii</sup>. This ban wasn’t lifted until 1953, a full 25 years later. We are expected to accept the notion that Australian (read: white) musicians simply discovered and mastered the blues through divine providence. This is before we consider indigenous Australians, who weren’t even granted personhood until the 1967 referendum.

There are a select few indigenous rock acts to have achieved varying degrees of mainstream success either before or after the referendum: Jimmy Little, Yothu Yindi, Troy Cassar-Daley, and the Warumpi Band are largely recognizable. Narrow the focus to heavy metal, however, and the list becomes essentially non-existent. Nu metal act NoKTuRNL, who won *The Deadlys*’ Band of the Year in ’98, ’00, and ’03, and toured nationally with Spiderbait, Powderfinger, and Regurgitator, appear to be the only real antecedent to Dispossessed. Even then, NoKTuRNL fall more in line with the hip hop-stylings of Shepparton rapper Briggs than anything resembling Dispossessed’s hardcore-tinged extreme metal. Despite this, hip hop and extreme metal share commonality through their inherently political worldviews. Both speak to the socially maligned and downtrodden, albeit in different ways. It’s amazing Dispossessed didn’t happen sooner.

‘Alright, after this us black fellas are gonna tell you off,’ Birrugan murmurs. A collective chortle emerges from the crowd. ‘I’m serious,’ he retorts with indignation, before introducing a tune tentatively titled ‘Kill All White People’. A second chortle is drowned out by screeching guitar distortion flooding the room as Jarred’s double-bass reverberates through the floor, sending every beer-addled bro off balance for a single moment. Windmills of hair turn in unison as fast as their hardened necks will allow, struggling to keep up with the rapid-fire snare. The song crashes to an abrupt finish and the walls look as though they’re about to cave in around us. As we gather our composure, Birrugan tells us to shut up and listen as he introduces each guest from his entourage. A night of killer riffs evolves into a demonstration before our very eyes.

These extended breaks are a feature of all their gigs, and often provoke defensive indignation if not outright hostility. We are treated to a poem and a rap. The whole room fell silent, and each performer was applauded as they concluded their piece. This, from the same audience that is presently mad at Rihanna for unveiling a metal-inspired type-font at this year’s VMAs, and previous abused Kanye West for doing the same for his *Yeezus* tour merchandise. Such viciously insecure reactions might lend itself to the view that such a scenario as this could never take place. Even as the last speaker, a slightly older indigenous

man who is unmoved by liberal platitudes, tells us in between sips of his drink that we're all complicit in systemic racism, everyone nods silently. 'I'm probably going to be harassed by the police the moment I leave this venue. I have every other night.'

This is not a surprise. Since the tabling of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody 25 years ago, rates of indigenous incarceration have doubled, and their risk of landing behind bars is 13 times that of non-indigenous Australians<sup>iv</sup>. In between 1989 and 2013, 365 indigenous Australians have died in custody<sup>v</sup>. It is hard to believe that the current royal commission into youth detention will yield any real results considering the country's history of inaction on indigenous issues. The terms of reference remain confined to the Northern Territory, meaning that any abuse happening outside the state will continue unperturbed.

The revelations aired by Four Corners have sparked a slew of protests nation-wide against torture in detention. Dispossessed has been actively involved with the promotion of these protests. In an interview with *Vibe*, Birrugan stated:

'I see the work we do as Dispossessed and the work we do on campaigns, speeches at rallies, grassroots stuff like that, as one and the same. The band is a platform for a wider movement.'<sup>vi</sup>

This is in stark contrast to the tendency for musicians and bands to distance their art from their personal views. For Dispossessed, their political ideology is an integral part of their music, not a subtle undercurrent. They are a band with a purpose.

Indigenous Australia needs a band like Dispossessed right now. A study conducted by the Larrakia Nation (representative of the Larrakia community in Darwin) in conjunction with the University of Sydney and the University of Tasmania which suggests many indigenous Australians feel they have to abandon their culture in order to succeed. According to the *ABC*, more than 500 Darwin residents took part in the study, 'ranging from long-grassers to university students.' The report indicated that over 50% of respondents felt unwanted in Darwin<sup>vii</sup>. One anonymous participant is quoted as saying: 'We get our power from knowing we are connected ... knowing who your family is, who your background is, got the country, how you're connected, what your totem is and your dreaming is like.'

'But there's this other culture that says no, that's not power.' Dispossessed command your respect, and refuse to take white Australia's dismissal of

indigenous culture. Every gig they play is a violent reminder that black Australia isn't going away silently.

This lack of respect for indigenous heritage is also part of why constitutional recognition is not perceived within the community as the fix-all the media would have you believe. In an interview I conducted with Jenny Munro of the Redfern Tent Embassy last year, she stated: 'I don't want recognition in the constitution – I want that racist document torn up.' More recently, The Guardian reported on a survey conducted by social media channel *IndigenousX* which found that of 827 respondents, only 25% supported Recognise. This in stark contrast to *Recognize's* claimed 87% support<sup>viii</sup>. The overwhelming sentiment amongst those surveyed by *IndigenousX* is that their lives are unlikely to improve with constitutional recognition. However, the notion of a permanent representative body within parliament garnered widespread support. It's pretty simple, really – indigenous people want their voices heard when the nation makes decisions.

The recent death of a 14 year old indigenous boy, Elijah Doughty, in Kalgoorlie has only further illustrated the need for greater consultation with the community. *WA Today* reports that the boy was riding a scooter when he was involved in a car crash with a Nissan Navara<sup>ix</sup>. Protests erupted outside Kalgoorlie Courthouse demanding justice for the deceased boy, a 'well-loved community member and local football team player.' The protests ended in violence as riot police were brought in to control the crowd, many of which believe the death was a racially motivated murder. Elijah's aunt is reported as telling the *Kalgoorlie Miner* his death was the third in the family in the last few weeks<sup>x</sup>. It is in situations like this that indigenous people feel their lives don't matter to white Australia. It is the reason Dispossessed sees no hyperbole in writing a song called 'Kill All White People,' because white people have done nothing but kill black people since first invading 'Terra Nullius' in 1788.

This predicament is not unique to Australia, however, which the group are often highlighting through their Facebook page. Racial injustice is a systemic problem on a global scale, which greatly affects indigenous communities and people of colour all over the world. Whether it is the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA, or Ethiopian runner Feyisa Lilesa's protest against government killings at the Rio Olympic Games, Dispossessed are consistently among those expressing international solidarity and pushing against discriminatory power structures designed to maintain white supremacy. As Desmond Tutu

astutely proclaimed, 'If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.'

Dispossessed and their guests receive a round of applause as their mid-set showcase comes to an end. The segment has soaked up most of the allotted time for their set, and they're left with just enough to perform one more song. The lights dim and the band dive into a cacophony of frantic riffing and vocal howls. The crowd returns to causing ourselves irreversible neck-damage as if nothing had happened. One can only hope the message sunk in, and wasn't lost in a drunken haze of indifference. Their final song collapses under its own weight as the final chords are struck and distortion rings out before being abruptly cut off, and the band walk off stage without a second thought. They don't need to say anymore, they've already cemented their place as the most vital metal band in Australia.

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