

Playing Music of Fences: The Sound of Politics, Social Control, Economic Exploitation, and History by Jon Rose.

The International Mosse-Lecture, Humboldt University, Berlin 2011

A Few Neuro Fence Posts.

Descartes articulated the fence *formidable* with his irreducible separation of mind from matter, subject from object, self from other, and in doing so, arguably set up the major concerns for the Enlightenment. The *thinking* homo was going to have to spend a lot of energy working through the checks and balances of separation and hierarchy; cementing the consequences of all Abrahamic religions into proof of superiority – us, lording it above, beyond, and over the riff-raff of the evolutionary also-rans, the environmental rest of (Genesis 1:26). Cartesian duality has recently been debunked by a number of philosophers such as John Searle. He argues that consciousness exists in the physical and chemical reality and we should just get on with it. For the irreligious amongst us (and I count myself in), the brain is the bastard child of the body, of all living things from all times – get over it! God the father is not going to help.

But try as some of our species may, duality maintains its grip through a plethora of human perception - scientific method versus artistic practice, heterosexual stereotypes, yin and yang, black and white, the two-sided battle metaphor of team sports, and despite Westminster parliamentary systems, politicians preferring to sit on the fence of public discourse.

Paul Hegarty (2007, 144) shows that although duality is trashed by philosophers, it still maintains its power in everyday thought and action. It is the basis for social structures, hierarchies, and relationships through all historical political and social trajectories. The rational mind demands "mind over matter," human control over all flora and fauna. In relevance to this piece of writing, duality demands distinctions between the personal and the public space, the theirs and ours of ownership; it demands the physical defining of friend or foe, the enforcing of the domestic and the foreign, the reciprocity of the certain and the uncertain, and the separation of the wild from the tamed.

Iain McGilchrist goes further, suggesting that the divided brain (the two physically separate hemispheres) is the root cause of the duality problem; it is, in fact, the species problem – the filter through which we perceive and create most artefacts, including the millions of miles of fences erected in the last 150 years. As he points out in the introduction to his book *The Master and his Emissary* (Yale University Press, 2009), neurologists have yet to understand why the brain evolved in two distinct hemispheres, whether in the bird, beast, or human bastard. The fence, then, is a classic metaphor for all those working at the final frontier – how the brain works and the big question, "What is consciousness?". It's also a great musical instrument.

Hold these thoughts.

The Road to the Fence.

I'm a violinist, have been for 54 years. Gave up my classical education when I was 15 and then, after 10 years of assorted musical activities, went to work creating a *Gesamtkunstwerk* for the instrument. To put it simply, creating a body of work that would include everything on, with, and about the instrument that my imagination and skill could come up with. Part of this story included building string instruments and some radical hacking of dozens of cheap Chinese violins (The Relative Violins¹). One investigation led to the creation of a violin that could define a piece of music in terms of distance as well as duration – with help from the inventors of the wheel (The Double Piston Triple Neck Wheeling Violin²). Another particular line of inquiry led me to consider what happens to the sound of strings when they get long – and even a lot longer. In the sense that Paul Klee described the process of drawing as "taking a line for a walk," so it was for me with a string. Violins appeared with very long necks, violins appeared with many necks and many strings; a number of mechanisms for string excitation were tested. By 1983 I was using fence wire to string up whole gallery spaces. Two years later, the penny dropped. Why was I making string installations when the continent that I was living on was covered with strings? That became the conceit: Australia was not mapped out with millions of miles of fences; it was hooked up to millions of miles of string instruments.

Unlike the USA where barbed wire is the ubiquitous material of choice, the fence men of Australia in general go for a more economical five-wire fence, of which only one strand is barbed wire; the rest are plain wire of varying gauges and quality (the amount of carbon steel hardened in manufacture determining the resonance and purity of tone). For years, I bowed the accessible plain wire, thinking that the barbed wire was beyond excitation, indeed beyond any musical worth. Wrong³. In the inspirational words of T. S. Eliot, "Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go." Barbed wire (in good condition) turned out to be a broadband noise modulator of dangerous intensity. It also turned in exponential stepwise ascending scales (with the health imperative to be accurate) never considered in any musical language that I've come across. Barbed wire is certainly hard to control – laterally challenging, you might say. The looser the barbs, the more rattle and roll (is this *Klangfarbenmelodie* or what?). Non-violin-playing people have often suggested that the violin is a tough instrument to play because, unlike the piano, you can't see where the notes are. With the barbed wire, it becomes quickly clear where the "notes" are – and if you miss 'em, quite painful.

It's an extraordinary invention dating back to the 1860s – the French and Americans still argue as to who was first. Over six hundred patented designs are registered. As a basic principle, barbed wire utilises two strands of wire instead of one and automatically adjusts itself to changes in temperature. When heat expands the wires, the twist simply loosens, and when cold contracts them, the twist tightens, while barely altering the overall length of the wire. Quite an idea,

almost beautiful. Brahms was still trying to finish his first symphony when the genius of barbed wire construction entered the history of string music.

More life threatening danger?

Other unexpected sonic wonders revealed themselves over the years of fence playing. For example, some outback fences are electrified by primitive DC batteries, the power often produced by a large plastic bucket full of rotting grapefruits strategically placed by a corner post. By engaging contact microphones and amplifying these specialised hazards, the snap-crackle-pop of DC becomes audible – the ghosts of Edison and Westinghouse haunting the Australian outback.

Most improvisers have at some time had to deal with an unsympathetic audience, or even a darn right violently aggressive one. But even a propelled beer bottle (Nickelsdorf Konfrontationen, 1988) or tossed firecracker (Exiles Gallery, Sydney, 1982) mid-performance is nothing compared to the malevolent onslaught of the Australian bush. This continent takes out a significant number in the world top ten of life threatening snakes and spiders, let alone the unrelenting wind, heat, sand, and flies that wish to inhabit any available orifice. Let us also not forget the possibility of encounters with a "salty" when on fence expeditions in the crocodile-infested northern reaches of the "Territory." The American violinist, composer, and ornithologist Hollis Taylor has been my collaborator on most of the fence expeditions since 2002. Her book *Post Impressions: A Travel Book for Tragic Intellectuals* lays bare the full implications of empirical research in the Australian bush⁴. Altercations and direct conflict with the young military men who patrol the border fences of the world's hot spots and in so doing wish to shorten your life are beyond the scope of this essay, but reports of these fence encounters are available at: https://www.jonroseweb.com/archive/f_projects_israel_fences.html or http://www.jonroseweb.com/archive/f_projects_mexico-usa.html).

Rabbit Stew

Ordinarily the why questions are not useful and lead to that existential barrier beyond which it is extremely time wasting to proceed. Probably like Everest, once discovered, it's difficult to avoid the challenge of fence music. But there are other more demanding types of why when the curious start to investigate the short, violent, cockeyed colonial history that is Australia. The how, where, and when lead us to the bunny rabbits.

Thomas Austin had grown tired of shooting kangaroos on his Barwon Park property in Victoria, Australia; he wished to shoot something that would remind him of home sweet home – England. In 1886, he imported a dozen pairs of rabbits into SE Australia and thought no more about it. The rabbits did what they do so well and by 1900, millions of them were to be found thousands of miles away on the borders of Western Australia, eating their way through native flora

that the white colonials had earmarked for other imported species – sheep and cattle.

The rabbits would have to be physically stopped in their tracks; government officials declared war on *Oryctolagus cuniculus*. And so it was that in 1901, four hundred men set forth from the glumly named Starvation Bay on the south coast of Western Australia. Their mission: to survey and then build a 1,200 mile long rabbit-proof fence through the outback and desert to an equally bleak place on the northern coast – Cape Keraudren. As they wired up their fence posts, they could see across the denuded plains, that it was already too late. Labouring under the humourless sun, the rabbits were happily springing into Western Australia before the fence could be finished. But this (may I remind you) was the British Empire, and so despite the hopeless, useless, pointless action plan, the project had to be completed for crown and country. And it was, in 1907. Since the rabbits were already at home inside the fence, two other rabbit-proof fences were built to contain the invader. But a total of 2,050 miles of fencing couldn't contain bunny. More distance warping fences were built, eight in all. That's a lot of fences for a state the size of Western Europe and a then population of a few hundred thousand.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, fence mania was well under way in Australia (even after the gold rush, the population was still only three and a half million). *Fence-ologist* Dr. John Pickard has estimated that by 1892 there were over two million miles of fences just in the state of New South Wales, and that did not include the now famous Dingo Fence. Conceived in the 1880s to keep the wild native dog away from the sheep flocks of South East Australia, The Dingo (or Dog) Fence, at 3,500 miles long, is probably the longest fence in the world; maybe even the longest man-made anything, being twice as long as the Great Wall of China. And then between these mega fence constructions are all the station (ranch) fences – countless miles upon miles of musical instrument.

One of my favourite points on this map of insanity is Cameron Corner. It is the Mecca of fence lines in Australia. In 1880 John Brewer Cameron started walking west in a straight line along the 29th parallel, at the 141st meridian, for no really sane reason, he turned left, and kept going for an awful long time. Actually, he stuck the corner post in the wrong place, but what's a few yards in the middle of a desert? Three state border fences meet here and combine with the Dingo Fence. Cameron Corner is psychic territory that gives agency to anyone who hears voices or who doesn't believe their map. The thermometer is regularly stuck at 120 Fahrenheit in the summer months.

Quality Control

Not all fences are created sonically equal or even interesting. But as most improvising percussionists will tell you, any object that makes a sound can become musically relevant. And so it is with fences; they are sonic resources. A brand new or recently restored, fully tensioned fence will reveal a pure, almost comprehensive, accessible harmonic series when bowed – complete with 1960s style spring reverb unit. At the other end of the musical spectrum comes a rusty, rattling, collection of transient envelopes that defy category – just hit the thing! The double bass bow, with its slip-hold-slip methodology is the weapon of

choice, capable of building and manipulating complex structures over time⁵. Sometimes a tapping screwdriver is the required tool from box; sometimes a primeval clutch of stones will do the simple trick. But it remains a conundrum to me just what massive amounts of tough metal a wad of tightened horsehair can excite. Unlike short strings designed to trigger a response through a resonator (e.g. violin), the plain wires of a fence become both trigger and resonator, audible sometimes for up to a mile on a well-tensioned straight section.

Barbed wire does not have the same distance reaching resonance, but a sharp clip of a *col legno* bow stroke can set in whip-like motion dozens of loose fitting barbs, like so many miniature, independently sprung tambourines. Our species has come up with a plethora of fence design, not all of it so obviously musically user-friendly, but all of it capable of *sonification*.

Technique

Fence music in general is not loud (about the level of a muted violin), and the experienced use of amplification reveals yet more jingle jangle songs. I have utilized both contact microphones and electro-magnetic pickups to lift fence sound to reinforced volume levels, or on to levels of howling feedback. Cheap contact mics (bought or homemade) present the possibility of amplifying the resonating properties of wood and metal fence posts as well as the fence wires themselves, providing the piezo is kept under as much pressure as possible via the use of G-clamps and/or the weight of the fence wire, all without breaking the crystal. The main problem with using electro-magnetic pickups is that the resulting sound tends to the reductive timbral characteristics of the electric guitar – definitely not the sound of a fence.

Pretty well the whole gamut of bowing strokes can be brought into play on a fence. The traditional *détaché*, *martelé*, *portato*, *collé*, *legato*, *louré*, *staccato*, *flying staccato*, *ricochet*, *jeté* are all useful on the fence. *Tremolo* is arguably less so, as the bow needs time to snatch the wire for excitation – but still it always looks good! Over the years, a grab bag of non-legit techniques have offered themselves, some directly taken from my work on the violin. In classical pedagogy, the assumption is that the left hand (the pitch controller) and the right bowing arm (the tone generator) are brought together in synchronous harmony. With my autodidactic re-education, however, I set about creating independence between these two basic components of string technique. One set of chops was a kind of *on-the-spot-spiccato*, developing rhythmic patterns more akin to a drummer's training than a string player's. This area of technique lends itself well to fence music, especially when armed with a bow in each hand and the accessibility of polyrhythmic bowing.

The notion of dividing a string into two sounding parts has attracted me since a harpsichord maker lent me a clavichord to hack around on in the early 1970s (the first thing I did was take out the damping cloth which dampens the "non-sounding" part of the string that the tangent has split). Two tones for the price of one action is very appealing in string music, where it can be a lot of work, as a novice, just to get one decent sounding bowed event. This line of investigation led eventually to two quite versatile instruments, a 10string double violin with

double bow to match, and a two-string pedal board designed to be played with the feet at the same time as *musicking* on the violin.⁶

In fact, using the feet gives the fence player the option of pitch bend by applying foot pressure to the bottom cable; wide vibrato can also be accessed by this means. A fence set up in a gallery or factory space with the bottom cable set only an inch above the floor can give new meaning to the "walking bass" as a literal incarnation (foot as hammer-on dividing the wire). And if you wish to be paid an adult fee for your fence work, reconstructing a fence in the urban space is probably the only option; the chattering classes in general don't like to get their feet dirty in the outback.

Lateral bowing between fence posts (in effect bridges) maximises the potential for longitudinal vibrations within the fence wire over distances of up to thirty feet, causing phasing-like effects from the bow hair and the upper partial of a twelfth (or higher octave equivalent) to ring out like a ferry horn. At times, I have substituted the lateral bow with an upside-down violin. If the violin is fitted with a flat cut bridge rather than the normal concave shape, all four or five violin strings can be engaged in scordatura chord mode on the fence wire.

The sheer size of the fence as a musical instrument allows not only the finger to split the wire on a harmonic or stopped tone, but the grabbing hand, arm, knee, or body can be brought into action for stopping and muting the wires or allowing access to both parts of the divided wire. The scale of the physical components also enables a vast sonic pool of harmonic resources, unleashing piled up partials and sub-harmonic modulations through *sul ponticello* (close to fence post) and *sul tasto* (away from post) positioning of the bow(s). On some fence wires of a certain tension and length, I have witnessed phenomena that interfere with the very hold-slip-hold-slip process of the bow stroke: a kind of macro hold-slip-hold-slip superimposes itself on the fundamental bow hair action, two sawtooth wave patterns for the price of one. It's the investigative equivalent of slowing down a recording to half speed, except this is all in real time.

Fences come with such a host of impure noise-making faults and attached buzzing, pulsating, clattering, muting artefacts (brittle degraded plastic bags, cigarette packets, tires, hub caps, tin cans, dingo bones, underpants, condoms, spider webs, sign boards, stabilizing droppers, and even the remains of previous fence posts swinging in the wind); the notion of a "prepared" fence (as in the "prepared" piano) seems self-defeating and anathema to me. Humans or weather have already prepared most fences.

Pick a fence – chances are no one has played it before; never ask permission. It is significant that in all the hours or miles of fence playing, no one in Australia has approached with an aggressive posture. On the contrary, even the police know the captivating Aeolian qualities of wind-on-fence, and on one occasion at the Dog Fence near the mining town of Coober Pedy, they suggested a better sounding fence one hundred miles down the road at a vacated former US military base. Warning: discussing fence music aesthetics at international border fences is asking for trouble.

Fences, Football, and Painting

The Aboriginal town of Naiyu, about 200 miles S SE of Darwin, presented my fence-playing partner Hollis Taylor and me with another kind of quality control. Here, half the year is "The Wet." Naiyu is cut off, surrounded by water and crocs. In a historical paradox (one of many that pass in Australia as normality), we were invited to perform fence music at the town's annual Merrepen Arts Festival (in "The Dry"). At this Festival, the women sell their paintings and the men have a football (Australian Rules) tournament, with teams driving in from similar towns. Now the fence is one technique by which much of Australia was stolen from the Aboriginal peoples, so to be asked to perform on a specially erected fence in the middle of an Aboriginal town, was, to invite a few white nerves.

As the three fence posts were lowered into their holes in the centre of town, a group of women assembled with very troubled looks. When I asked what was wrong, they explained that the fence posts were dead and that we couldn't possibly make music with dead fence posts. Not quite up with their logic, and fearing interracial meltdown, I asked how we might solve the problem. "Them posts dead ones. Them dead posts gotta be painted up – bring 'em back to life." Everyone nodded heads in solemn agreement. We couldn't believe our luck. This seemed less like a problem and more like an intercultural bonus scheme. Tjingling, Yambeing, and Diyini took it upon themselves to bring the fence posts back to life by painting them with seasonally appropriate motives. The next day we played the scheduled concert. Then the local children played their hands-on fence music, after which the fence posts were auctioned off as art works to a commercial gallery and the cash from the sale added to the town coffers. Not a bad day's music, I thought to myself.

Mapping

A fence line is not a *songline*; it doesn't come close, as the imposed superstructure of European ownership makes little reference to the geographical features – maybe a river will be noticed and incorporated into the grand plan of conquest, but little else. In Aboriginal terms, land cannot be owned; the tribe belongs to the land, and they are the land's guardians through a network of kinship and totems – it's not negotiable. With that comes the function of music in the nurturing and reciprocity of the complex aural mapping. These sentient relationships have to be "sung up" to bring each and every part of the network, the massive memory bank, into existence – the continuum that verifies the mystic ancestors, the cross-species kin, the signifying stones of the perceived universe that are indelibly linked to the human component, all kept through music and dance in a living sustainable present tense. (Music without dance, or dance without music, is inconceivable). It's a tough gig, but this genealogical and aural mapping is key to knowledge. If the elder no longer knows the right song for a particular species or geographical feature, the people have not only lost that connection, but the feature/animal/ancestor no longer exists on all the necessary levels necessary for the people's survival. The *songline* is broken. For just over 200 years, we have stumbled and blundered around (intentionally to exploit and sometimes simply without thought), destroying these ontological links – these are the first principles of music: music embedded in sound, time, and place.

Fence music only exists as a spin-off from the industrial revolution – the mass production of steel wire and cable. You would think that industrial process would have little luck in summoning up sonic images and psycho-history of outback Australia, but you'd be wrong. Everyone gets it. No explanation is required when fence music is heard – it's the sound of the fifth continent. We are there, and it's vast ... unfathomable. It's also the sound image of Australia's internment camps where "illegal" immigrants are locked up behind barbed wire, often in remote locations. The epistemic evocations of fence music can transport you to any wide-angle panorama: to sci-fi moonscapes, to the trenches of the First World War, to the gates of Auschwitz, and even to edgy items of fashion.

Redeeming Moments

There are compensating features in the practice of fence music, apart from getting unhealthy musos (musicians) more out and about. It may not ever attain the spiritual connection to land that indigenous Australians developed over more than 40,000 years; that's unlikely to happen again, short of the de-invention of electricity, but here are some thoughts. First, revealing beauty in inherently ugly structures does find a function for music that could be considered worthy. Secondly, the notion of instrument as conduit to the land might have some currency.

Performing on fences places the musician in an area where terrain, map, score, and instrument are physically connected and signified, if not interchangeable – the map of the fence marks out (on a scale of 1:1) the geographical entity of itself. The distance and regularity of fence posts determine pitch fundamentals, although sometimes these underlying frequencies are at the edge of our hearing range – a slow, earth-bound, sub-harmonic rumble. The audible degree of harmonic series that is available indicates condition and state of tension within the instrument. The nodes on a fence wire correspond proportionally to any string instrument. The midpoint between the posts (the bridges of this chordophone) give the performer the octave; split that distance in half and you have the second octave, and so on in true Pythagorean proportional logic, on through all the scientifically proven partials – into the world of just intonation⁷. My personal aesthetic is predisposed to leaving any fence in its initial condition – I never consider tuning (in the broadest sense of tuning - for function as well as pitch) – so it's the sonically unknown *objet trouvé* that attracts. This music can only be conjured into existence (can only be produced) by standing on that piece of the land on which the instrument exists. As the real estate man says, "location, location, location."

Despite the ruthless inevitability of fence posts positioned across the plains, temporality will remain a feature of fence music. A well-built fence will give you ten years of optimum musical instrument and at least thirty years of a standing although sonically failing artefact; after that, gravity eventually wins. Even if fence post entropy takes its time, the wire is the first thing to go, eaten by the countless salt lakes that colourfully pockmark the continent's surface. Geography determines history. It is now illegal in Australia to build a fence using wooden posts. Quite simply, the colonial fence-building spree ripped the eucalyptus forests asunder, and they have never recovered. New fences with metal posts will

survive Australian conditions for even shorter durations than the harvest from the pioneer's folly. However, the original hardwood posts are made of stern stuff, and all across Australia the casual observer can note the wireless, silent ghosts of fences on salt pans, the traces of white man spooking the horizon.

According to some *Homo sapiens*, our present demise (or overwhelming global triumph!) is due to the domination of the grasping, language-based left hemisphere of the brain over the holistic right hemisphere. Why do we have a divided brain anyway? We find ourselves now in a situation, maybe too late, where we are trying to reconnect with an animate planet full of beings, whether flora or fauna, that we have treated as "not us" and trashed to the edge of extinction. OK, it's time to get away from the misanthropic tendency, or is it?

More Struggles

Assuming you have a well designed and inaugurated musical instrument strung up, is that all the maintenance required? Unfortunately not. The Dingo Fence employs over 200 men to keep the construction in top condition. It's an impossible task as fences move – a lot. On the stretch south from Cameron Corner, the Dingo Fence lines up with huge red sand hills. The fence is always in a state of being pushed over and buried, and needing to be dug out; or the wind is blowing away the sand in which the fence is footed, leaving said fence waving around rather forlornly in mid air and requiring a forced gravitational lowering back to *terra* (less than) *firma*. In conversation with Len in 2004, the district manager and fence runner responsible for this section, he spoke of the eternal struggle against the dunes, in heroic terms of last-ditch stands, man versus nature. Len's voice was dry, as if sand had permanently lodged in his throat, as he described the drought conditions - "bloody hell!" he gasped between every sentence.

Maintaining this musical instrument is an expensive proposition, but still considered a worthwhile one. Floods send debris against the Fence, which takes a toll. The enemy can have a detrimental effect. Despite the ur-utility of many Australian fences, rabbits burrow straight under, weakening the wooden posts and causing soil erosion. Emus, in their desperate search for water, fracture the bottom wires with their iron toes. Kangaroos and feral camels travelling at full speed can fail to see the rabbit-proof mesh, punching huge holes as they crash into it. Wild pigs and dingoes push and squeeze their way through the barest of openings. There's plenty of punishment for the fence: wear and tear as compositional structure.

The violin is an awkward and perverse instrument to play in terms of its physically demanding contortions. The fence by comparison can be plain exhausting. Apart from *Musca Vetustissima's* interest in fresh flesh⁸, the fence's sheer bulk requires some getting around, climbing over, exploratory walks up and down, and schlepping of PA gear if a human audience is expected. Post outback performances often witness the musicians heading back to the truck in quite a wrecked state, seeking neutral sanctuary.

The Fence is an open system instrument. Unlike a contained system like a violin, where there is a high degree of reliability in the sense – that if you repeat an

action exactly, the resulting sonic event should sound much the same on each repetition – the fence is just not like that. Once interfered with (i.e. played, excited), the fence does not return to its former state of equilibrium. In fact, it exists in a state of continuous transformation. Nodes have a habit of moving incrementally up and down the wires as the posts are disturbed, impurities in the cheap fence wire declare their authenticity at irregular intervals, "droppers" beat to their own tune and can be relied upon not to do "that thing that worked so well in rehearsal," and if your colleague starts bowing the same wire as you, there *will be* issues.

Community Music

"In the best of all possible worlds, art would be unnecessary ...the audience would be the artist and their life would be art."—Glen Gould⁹.

Well, in our only possible world, we have already reached the time where the professional musician has lost his function (as indicated by worth) in western society; the eradication of specialised roles is not so much the prerogative of art as it is a result of technology and hard-assed economics. Everyone these days can slip past quality control and invent themselves as a filmmaker, a journalist, or a composer through the mixing, cutting, and matching of sound files – all positions vacant, only the unskilled need apply. But I suspect that online communities cannot really replace the close proximity of an integrated social group (as you might find in a small town in outback Australia), anymore than improvising musicians are totally satisfied with an intercontinental Skype concert – it might be of passing sonic interest, but in the final analysis, the animal requisites of physical proximity are missing.

In many non-western societies, there is no word for music – the vital integral *content* of its transmission deemed more important - the antithesis of Marshall McLuhan and his medium as message. Our current take-it-or-leave-it music culture might be comfortable and palatable to consume, but its transformative power compares unfavourably to earlier (pre-enlightenment?) praxis.

Fence music does lend itself to the visceral and the community. In fact, I have often suggested that fence playing should be a national pastime, if not the official music of the modern state of Australia – outside of the indigenous traditions, pretty well everything in the mainstream is an import. Normally there is a long pause after this suggestion, followed by an unsure laugh as to my sanity.

It's very rare after a fence performance in front of a small group of *Homo sapiens* (other species are always present although not necessarily engaged with the art) when someone doesn't come up at the end and reminisce about a time in childhood when they tapped out rhythms on the fences around the homestead. Fence playing can be that simple, or can incorporate the kinds of chops picked up from a lifetime of avant-violin playing. There is, however, a big jump from the fringe to the unmotivated community. Let's face it, outside of the Arab Spring, a community event normally means people standing around shooting video on their iPhones.

Later this year, I will attempt to get the inhabitants of White Cliffs, New South Wales (population currently 84, according to the town postmistress) to play a particularly sonorous fence on their approach road. We'll see what happens. Significant is the fact that the nearest town of any size to White Cliffs is the former mining rush of Broken Hill. In 1912, it was home to no less than 13 brass bands and a town orchestra. Broken Hill, as with many other regional towns, was historically alive with homemade, do-it-yourself music until quite recently. These days, there is just a single brass band, one with a depleted line up. When I worked with them on a piece for the Melbourne Festival a few years back, a senior tuba player remarked to me that it used to be a "professional outfit." I think he may have been referring to the attitude of the musicians, because I'm sure all the bands used to be staffed by union members who worked for their living in the mines; to belong to the union band, as well as ensuring a functional *Gebrauchsmusik*, was a privilege and honour. I'm not sure that writers on music such as Attali really get this; I hear it as both sides of the paradigm that was colonial society¹⁰.

I started this section with a quote from a pianist. Here's something from another pianist, Oscar Commettant:

I do not believe there is a country in the world where music is more widespread than in Australia. Certainly there is none that has more grand pianos per head of population. 700,000 instruments have been sent from Europe to Australia since the vast territory became a centre of white settlement. Everywhere here the piano is considered to be a necessary piece of furniture. Rather than not have one of these sonorous instruments in the drawing room ...they would go without a bed.

...Custom demands that there be at least one piano in every Australian home; even in the most distant shacks, away from the centre of population, the humblest farmer will have the inescapable pianos. Way out in the country they are not very expert in music, and the piano that adorns the humble dwellings will be cheap and nasty... constantly going wrong, but the main thing is that they look like a piano, with vulgar moulding and ostentatious double candle-brackets; they make a noise when you strike the keyboard, and often that is all that is required¹¹.

The figure of 700,000 imported pianos by 1890 is unsubstantiated, but musicologist and researcher Alison Rabinovici has sent me the records of piano imports from just the Port of Melbourne Authority, and it is certainly several hundreds of thousands of imported and locally manufactured pianos by the first decade of the twentieth century.

Otherness along the fence

Although the fence is a recognised force of negation, well over 30,000 miles of exploration have led me to exciting domains of *musicking*, including chance meetings with original artists whose work almost guarantees omission in any book on Australian music. They play what could loosely be described as folk

music, but folk music is accepted as part of the mainstream culture, so it can't be that. I'll relate just two examples, one from our species and one from another.

Auntie Roseina Boston is a Gumbayungirr elder from the Nambucca Valley. She was born under a lantana bush on Stewart Island. Her Aboriginal name is Wanangaa, which was given to her by an Aboriginal elder and means "stop" (she's still hyper at 77 years old). Due to an early demonstration of facility, she was given by her uncles a special dispensation to play the gumleaf, which is traditionally a male preserve. Her grandfather's brother Uncle George Possum Davis was well known for his Burnt Bridge Gumleaf Band in the late 1800s to the early 1900s.

So how does Auntie Roseina sound on her gumleaf? With that wide vibrato, this free reed instrument reminds me of the soprano saxophone of Sydney Bechet. Her repertoire consists of an impressive range of birdcall mimicry, popular songs, and hymns.

Gumleaf playing may well go back thousands of years. According to musicologist Robyn Ryan¹², it was documented first by pastoralists in 1877 in The Channel country of Western Queensland. The gumleaf was used by Aborigines in Christian Church services by the beginning of the twentieth century and reached popularity in the Great Depression of the 1930s when the desperately unemployed formed 20-piece Aboriginal gumleaf bands like Wallaga Lake, Burnt Bridge, and Lake Tyers and, armed with a big Kangaroo skin bass drum, marched up and down the eastern seaboard demonstrating a defiance in the face of the whitefella and his disastrous economic hegemony. The Wallaga Lake Band played for the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1932. This is the New Orleans jazz of Australia, and it has completely vanished or been "disappeared."

As is common with Aboriginal peoples, Auntie Roseina is a polymath and all-around artist. You cannot enter her world without taking on her total continuum – her storytelling, dreamings, dog, gumleaf, copious collection of shells and badges, and paintings – punctuated by her constant refrain: "It's beautiful!". (For a transcription of one of Auntie's stream of consciousness raves, go to The Australia Ad Lib Site¹³.)

My further example of "other" belongs to the species *Canis lupus*, although Aboriginal peoples have many names for the dingo, depending on what action the dog is actually doing (before white settlement in 1788, it is estimated that there were over 600 Aboriginal languages and distinct dialects, now there may be 50, of which only a few dozen are in first language use). The dingo is a relatively recent immigrant in Australia and has probably only lived here for 6,000 years.

Dinky¹⁴ could be the envy of most struggling musicians that I know: he works 5-7 nights a week. At Jim Cotterill's Roadhouse, just south of Alice Springs, Dinky packs 'em in, entertaining bus and carloads of tourists from around the world. The hardline view might be that Dinky is yet another exploited species, while the anthropomorphic view frames the dingo as cute pet. My examination of Dinky is that he is neither; music is his primary means of communication and expression.

He is a fellow musician (albeit from another species) making the most of what fate has served him up. Dinky's parents were exterminated, not by the Dingo fence, but by the particularly heinous and widely distributed poison sodium monofluoroacetate (known popularly as 1080) – banned in most countries except Australia.

An entry in Wikipedia describes how the poison works on the carnivore's last 21 hours:

...excessive salivation; abrupt bouts of vocalisation; and finally sudden bursts of violent activity. All affected animals then fall to the ground in tetanic seizure, with hind limbs or all four limbs and sometimes the tail extended rigidly from their arched bodies. At other times the front feet are clasped together, clenched or used to scratch ...This tonic phase is then followed by a clonic phase in which the animals lie and kick or 'paddle' with the front legs and sometimes squeal, crawl around and bite at objects. During this phase the tongue and penis may be extruded, their eyes rolled back so that only the whites show and the teeth ground together. Breathing is rapid but laboured, with some animals partly choking on their saliva. xx url

Dinky's sonic vocabulary is based on melismatic contours spanning about one and half octaves. He is extremely *loud*, with a projection that today's batch of over-boiled opera singers would do well to study. Dinky has an intuitive understanding of phrasing. It's uniquely his thing. My partner Hollis Taylor and I accompanied him in two quite different genres of music to see what he would make of the material. One piece was a Lutheran hymn (quite common to Central Australia). The dog placed his lazy glissandi firmly in the cracks between the black and whites of the piano and phrased impeccably. Dinky had decoded the diatonic nature of the music immediately – easy stuff. Then I tried some free improvisation. The canine coloratura was a little suspicious at first, but within a minute he got the idea and by the end of the session, he was trading phrases like an old paw (sorry). Like all those performing in an oral tradition, Dinky has the odd cliché – he ends every piece with a little endearing sigh – it seems that he has to have the last word. Dinky also likes to be physically connected in his art form, hence his preferred position actually standing on the keys of the piano. It's his territory. This does reduce the comfortable options for the pianist, but how often do you get the chance to immerse yourself in interspecies music? (Taken from The Australia Ad Lib web Site¹⁵).

Final Post

What began as an occasional diversion and deviation from improvising on the violin has led me to out of the way geographical places and metaphysical spaces of contemplation. The fence project started simply as conversion of material into sound. It was a few years before I looked up and glimpsed the ramifications of what I was tangling with. The contemporary world of culture is all flotsam and jetsam; our lost tribes have created a rootless mega-culture – some of it very seductive, even brilliant. I relish cultural collision too. But our brains still demand to function within basic ancient principles of duality and hierarchy that are corporally and environmentally based. Seems to be no way to climb over that.

Gary Scott owns a sheep station that butts up against the Rabbit Proof Fence in Western Australia. One day after he'd heard me play the fence, we stood looking at the red sand on both sides of the fence - irreducibly the same material we agreed, beyond argument. Then Gary said:

All of a sudden, you're stepping over this line, and it's a little bit more remote or something, there's bad things out here - that's what this Fence is about, you can feel it as you go through the gate, you're sort of stepping into somewhere different, crossing over; a fence can change your feeling, where it's actually not my lease and I'm outside the Fence, it really feels like you're in the middle of nowhere.

Endnotes:

¹ The Relative Violins:

http://www.jonroseweb.com/d_picts_relviolins_describe.html

In the late 1970s, I discovered that my instrument hacking had a genetic precedent. In a Japanese POW camp, my father had built a two-string cello and had started, optimistically, to build a piano at the request of a concert pianist. After several months' work, he had two keys and strings functioning, but then the camp was ordered to move. The beginnings of the upright piano were lashed onto the underbelly of one of the trucks after bribing the guard with a box of Red Cross cigarettes. The piano fell off en route to the new hell.

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Whjml-it4lg>.

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUARc6ufZAk>

⁴ Taylor, Hollis. *Post Impressions: A Travel Book for Tragic Intellectuals*, Twisted Fiddle, 2007. A book/DVD of 40 fence performances, 88 color plates, notation.

⁵ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_1V5zFGZnGo

⁶ http://www.jonroseweb.com/g_rosenberg_double_violin.html
http://www.jonroseweb.com/d_picts_10_string.html

⁷ Colleague and friend Ellen Fulman has spent decades exploring just intonation systems and relationships with her Long String Instruments. <http://www.ellenfullman.com/>

⁸ Along with music, the origins of dance tend to be lost in the mists of time. But we can surmise that dance punctuated the various critical parts of our ancestors' lives such as birth, death, marriage, the arrival of something good to eat, the return of the warriors, etc. I would like to add to this list of fundamentals that dancing is a time-honoured method of keeping the flies at bay, hence the expression "no flies on him" for someone who can dance fast enough. It seems clear to me that here in outback Australia the Aborigines have been dancing for over 40,000 years not only for religious ceremony or because it keeps you fit but because of the flies.

Bogged down for two days as we are in our less than hermetically sealed four-wheel-drive, we pass the time killing as many flies as possible—mostly using the splat technique. But eventually one is forced outside the defensive ramparts to attend to the calls of nature (becoming more frequent, I'm afraid, the longer we are trapped here).

Leaving the car is not a major problem. The manoeuvre is carried out with precision and with an element of surprise. They are just not ready for that car door to suddenly swing open and a fly-netted warrior to leap forth with an angry cry. As the door slams shut, perhaps ten flies in the front line get in, more by accident than battle campaign design. Getting back in, however, presents a formidable problem. After a matter of seconds beyond the keep, one is covered with hundreds of flies. Looking at my arm, I see there is no landing space left on my airport; the next wave circles above in a holding pattern, genetically programmed to know that wherever their mates are, there must they also be.

How to get back into the castle without bringing a battalion of them with me? Dance. I'm not at this stage suggesting a waltz or foxtrot—I'm recommending something post-Sarah Bernhardt, post-Martha Graham, post-Pina Bausch, post-contact improvisation, first-past-the-post dance. No, I'm indicating here total unrestrained free form, maximum waving around of arms, jumping up and down, running this way and that, and the occasional loud scream. Don't worry, the flies are fast learners, they pick up on your moves quickly. You have to invent new moves all the time, or it gets boring for them. However, flies are never bored to death – they like death, the smell of death, the smell we will all have one day when we buy the farm. By creating total confusion you get one chance, when you are about two feet ahead of the pursuing army, to open the door and jump in. This must be done in one move; otherwise, all is lost, and you have a carful of flies.

The dance-and-in method works about 65-70 percent, which means you will spend the next two hours hunting down 200–300 flies. Oh, I nearly forgot the prisoners. The fly net is never 100 percent fly-proof, not if you want to breathe and see without choking to death. So, carefully take off the net, sealing the hole quickly. You have perhaps 20 to 30 prisoners caught while infiltrating your perimeter. Slowly screw up the fly net and place it on the dashboard; a pleasure as old as life itself wells up inside you as the entrapped little shits make their last twitching free-form gestures (Taylor, *ibid.*, 160).

⁹ Gould, Glenn. "The Prospects of Recording" in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, Continuum, 2007.

¹⁰ Attali, J. Noise. *The Political Economy of Music*, Manchester University Press 1985.

¹¹ Commettant, Oscar (1890/1980) *In The Land of The Kangaroos and Goldmines*, Adelaide: Rigby, 136-137.

¹²Ryan, Robin *A Spiritual Sound, A Lonely Sound: Leaf Music of Southeastern Aboriginal Australians*, 1890s-1990s. PhD thesis, Monash University, Clayton, 1999.

¹³ <http://www.abc.net.au/arts/adlib/stories/s914726.htm>

¹⁴ Dinky and Jon Rose improvising together at Jim's Place.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mr0SGd4qChY>

¹⁵ http://www.jonroseweb.com/f_projects_australia_ad_lib.html