

*Beyond Rock. Social commitment and political conscience through Popular  
Music in Australia 1976 - 2002. The case of Midnight Oil*

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**Abstract:** The work and career of Midnight Oil illustrate a case of interaction between culture and politics in Australia. Furthermore they represent an example of social commitment from the sphere of urban popular culture. For a quarter of a century Midnight Oil offered a critical and ideological interpretation of the Australian social and political evolution. Aware of and sensitive to changes and events happening around them, five Sydneysiders thought about Australian identity in terms of what they considered to be their national challenges from a universal perspective. Hence, they approached issues like pacifism, Indigenous rights and environmentalism and developed a social and political discourse based on the defence of human rights and a condemnation of capitalist excesses. Through more than a hundred songs and almost two thousand gigs the band urged politicians to reassess the institutions. At the same time they criticized people's apathy asking them for a deeper engagement with the development of the country's welfare. Finally, in December 2002, Peter Garrett quit his singer-activist journey to launch a political career by joining the Australian Labor Party, for which he is the current Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth in the Julia Gillard Government. It is thus that now we can make sense of the extent to which the political and social message of a rock band can actually generate enough credibility to allow for the lead singer's transition from the stage to parliament.

**Keywords:** Midnight Oil; Peter Garrett; ethnomusicology

Since emerging as a new urban expression of popular music, in the mid fifties of the last century, rock has become a cultural reality with a huge social and political dimension that should not be underestimated in order to explain and understand our society. There are plenty of examples throughout this period that allow the observation of rock's political dimension and its participation in the construction of social realities. Rock music, in the same manner as other artistic disciplines, has reflected the circumstances of its historical moment and it has taken an active part in the formation and articulation of both individual and collective identities and attitudes. It has been party to the ideological diffusion for contesting or legitimating the establishment and nowadays it is omnipresent in the so-called society of information (Martí, 2000). Over the last decades, popular music has been submitted to a series of industrial and commercial developments that have led it into an immense consumer goods market, but rock music

has kept its cultural background and its communicative potential even when it has been trivialized and manipulated (Hormigos, 2008).

Sydney's rock band Midnight Oil is a paradigm of everything above stated. Their work and career illustrate a case of interaction between culture and politics and represent an example of social commitment from the sphere of the urban popular culture. Born in the fifties, the members of Midnight Oil grew up in the suburbs of Sydney during the so-called *Golden Age*, the long period of economic prosperity and population growth that Australia experienced after the Second World War. As young students during the seventies, they shared the socio-political aspirations of their generation demonstrating against Apartheid and the Vietnam War, participating in early environmental campaigns and expressing their support for vindicating Indigenous Land Rights. From a political point of view, this generational change-over resulted in Labor's Gough Whitlam's access to government but late in 1975 his polemic dismissal frustrated the hopes of social change held by thousands of Australians, among them the members of Midnight Oil:

Then Malcolm Fraser and the Liberal Party, with the aid of Governor-General John Kerr and maybe Uncle Sam, snatched back the power they had so steadfastly held in Australia for the quarter of a century before Whitlam. As far as Midnight Oil were concerned—and many progressive Australians, too—the bad old days were with us again. Fraser became the devil incarnate for those of us who had tasted the change and progress of the Whitlam years and wanted more (Dodshon, 2004: 29-30).

In this context, the group was formed in late 1976 mustering the artistic concerns of five young musicians, whose career would last for more than a quarter of a century, until December 2002. During this time Midnight Oil wrote and recorded over 130 original songs published in sixteen albums with global sales exceeding twelve million copies, a quarter of them in Australia. Commercial success and critical acclaim were the propellers that carried them through local and international tours. At the end of their career they had appeared nearly two thousand times in concerts all over the world (McFarlane, 1999: 410-412).

On the whole, their biography can be divided into three periods: the most active took place from 1978 to 1986 during which they released seven albums and consolidated their social and political profile; between 1987 and 1993 the great success of the album *Diesel and Dust* in Europe and North America boosted their popularity, which led to the completion of three long international tours; and finally, from the mid-nineties until 2002 the band reduced the number and frequency of their activities but managed to maintain—especially in Australia—its prestige and artistic recognition until its dissolution.

During the first of these periods the group raised progressively from the surfers' bars and hotels at the northern beaches of Sydney up to the largest concert halls in the country. Urban frustration and alienation, themes of their early work, gave way to open ideological manifestations constantly sprinkled with both local and international social and political references. The great success of the album *10,9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1*—released in 1982—determined this leap forward opening up new horizons for the band. Within months the album climbed into the list of best-selling albums in Australia where it

remained for over two years. Considering its content, the songs of *10,9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1*—and subsequent albums like *Red Sails in the Sunset* and *Species Deceases*—offered a personal and critical interpretation of the historical moment: the rise of the Cold War and the ongoing nuclear threat, the progressive Americanization of Australian society, the transition from consumption to consumerism and the growing destruction of the environment

During the eighties Midnight Oil moved from songs to action, taking part in numerous charity and protest activities. After the release of their first album the band supported the Australian Antinuclear Movement: they demonstrated against the exploitation of uranium mines, organized the *Stop the Drop* pacifist concerts to finance the activities of the *People for Nuclear Disarmament* organization and travelled to London to participate in the campaign of the British Antinuclear Movement. Eventually, Peter Garrett, their lead singer, steered the pacifist *Nuclear Disarmament Party* during 1984's senate elections (Burgman, 2003). Within the conservationist struggle the band was involved in major environmental campaigns against the deforestation of Australian rainforests offering their artistic and economic support to organizations such as the *South East Forests of NSW Coalition*, the *Wilderness Society* and the *Australian Forest Action Network* in addition to *Greenpeace* and *Save the Whales*.

In August 1987 the release of the *Diesel and Dust* album heralded the beginning of a new period characterized by the already mentioned international success. The album was preceded by the *Whitefella Blackfella tour*: after writing a song to celebrate the Uluru monolith's return to its Indigenous owners, Midnight Oil was invited to tour Central Australian Aboriginal settlements with the Indigenous group The Warumpi Band. This was above all an unheard-of experience in Australian music and in the process of reconciliation between Indigenous and white Australians. It confronted five young Sydneysiders with the result of two hundred years of colonization, dispossession, discrimination and attempted genocide. It brought the band face to face with the tragic present and uncertain future of one of the oldest human communities on earth (McMillan, 1988). The *Diesel and Dust* album focused on the crimes perpetrated against the Indigenous Australians and asked support for their demands. It rose strikingly in the sales charts of the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France and Germany among others. In order to respond to the raise in demand the band dedicated two years to touring major cities throughout North America and Europe, making the Indigenous cause known to tens of thousands of people.

Although less successful, the next two albums of explicit social content—*Blue Sky Mining* and *Earth and Sun and Moon*—kept, nevertheless, international interest up in the band until 1994. Meanwhile, backed by the prestige of the band, Peter Garrett was assuming new responsibilities: he became a member of *Greenpeace International Board* and chaired the *Australian Conservation Foundation*, the most important environmental organization in the country (Hutton; Connors, 1999).

Entering the last stage of their career, during the second half of the nineties, Midnight Oil returned to the Australian context and, through the album *Redneck Wonderland* published in 1998, expressed their concern and discontent with the ultra-liberal drift of John Howard's successive governments and the rise of the right-wing party One Nation. Soon after, due to Howard's refusal to apologize for the atrocities committed against the Indigenous people and with the Reconciliation process in full involution, Midnight Oil

took another step forward during the closing ceremony of the Sydney Olympics. They appeared on stage, showing the word *Sorry* printed in large white letters over their black suits. It took still eight years for the Australian government to do the same officially. Finally, in December 2002, after more than twenty years together, Garrett left Midnight Oil in order to develop his political career fully. Since then, the group has only met for two benefit concerts: in January 2005 to raise funds for the victims of the Tsunami that devastated the coasts of Southeast Asia, and in March 2009 with the same goal for those affected by Victoria's bushfires and Queensland's floods.

In perspective there are very few articles about the records and concerts of Midnight Oil that do not echo its social and political dimension. From a quantity, and even a quality point of view, we could consider this fact as an indicator of the recognition of the group's extra-musical character. Many indeed are the quotes that can be used to sustain this. A rather explicit one was made by Jo Roberts, journalist of *The Age*. In May 2001, a little bit more than a year before Peter Garrett's leave-taking and plunging into politics, Roberts wrote:

Midnight Oil have always been more than a band. They have become part of the social and political landscape, probably providing many Australians with their first stirrings of political awareness. The music and, most pointedly, the words of singer Peter Garrett became, for many, a conduit for a nation's hopes and fears.

True, Midnight Oil went beyond the boundaries of the activity of a rock group. But which are these boundaries? Who or what marks them? The artist himself, the industry or the public? The work itself as an autonomous entity? Or maybe all of it together? Where exactly do we have to situate the works and the trajectory of Midnight Oil in order to visualize its social and political load?

In the book *From Pop to Punk to Postmodernism* Simon Steggels wrote that the songs and activism of Midnight Oil are located in the area where the interaction between politics and culture takes place, the space of social change (1992: 139-148). We could then consider its work as a source of renewal generating ideas and trends of thought, a process through which, thanks to their success, Rob Hirst, Jim Moginie, Martin Rotsey, Peter Garrett and Bones Hillman, would have brought politics closer to wide population sectors and thus participated in the formation of a critical social awareness. Without any doubt the work and trajectory of Midnight Oil, their pacifist and environmental songs, their lyrics against the excesses of capitalism, their activism for Indigenous rights calling for a true reconciliation, reflected the longings of a new generation of Australians and, at the same time, were and still are an invitation to rethinking and reconsidering those realities and situations whose persistence confers them the apparent category of unquestionable truths.

At this point one of the quotes that, in my opinion, defines the essence of Midnight Oil comes from Dave Curry, journalist of the *Canberra Times*. In March 2009, less than one year ago, he wrote:

The Oils were always described as a 'political' band, but to me their songs were powerful because they translated 'issues' into personal feelings: hope, desire, anger, and despair. It was always about passion and humanity, not

some dry polemic. Mostly they threw uncomfortable truths at you and dared you to ignore them.

Therefore, beyond whether we can label a song as political protest, the matter remains in its communicative potential and its possibilities of reception. As said before, nowadays no one can ignore the capacity of popular music as a generator of opinion and knowledge. Nobody would deny that plenty of songs by The Beatles, Bob Dylan or Bruce Springsteen, not to mention Madonna or Michael Jackson, have been more listened to and received more attention than the most eloquent political speeches of the twentieth century. In fact, bearing in mind that any presumably unpolitical music provokes reactions and behaviors of adherence or rejection, it is better not to underrate the extendibility of that *other* musical production, resulting from a deliberate will of interaction and of ideological transmission through references to circumstances, places, and events that may configure a common space for thousands of people.

With regard to this, the Midnight Oil case illustrates the investigation of these common spaces. Their work, their songs are based on establishing permanent connections between past, present and future, between individuals and collectivities, between Indigenous Australians and white Australians, between the *Outback* and the city, between Australia and the rest of the world and between the same causes that determined their activism. The band's faith in the possibilities of permanent interaction is the source of their confidence in social change. It is by no means a passive attitude waiting for things to happen, it is an active call for everybody's accountability and commitment. This is when the group's work becomes political and social: political because it positions itself explicitly on how to handle collective conflicts, and social because of its will of interpellation, the constant search for communal bonds.

Their sixteen records, all of them full of specific references and critical assessments, reflect 25 years of Australian history, the last quarter of the twentieth century. From their frustration caused by Gough Whitlam's resignation up to their call for an apology to the Indigenous people during the closing ceremony of Sydney's Olympic Games, the career of Midnight Oil has become an alternative document for observing such processes as the consolidation of the Australian environmental movement, antinuclear protests, the increasing North-Americanization of the Australian society and the first steps towards national reconciliation (Bonastre, 2007: 139-211). All of those are characteristic elements of Australia's political and social challenges during last century's eighties and nineties. As a matter of fact, theirs was a call aimed to rethink and redefine the country from new angles and perspectives throughout a period that the historian Stuart Macintyre named *Reinventing Australia* (2004: 242-289). In this sense, Marcus Breen, in his book *Rock Dogs, Politics and the Australian Music Industry*, considers Midnight Oil as identity agents, identity creators (2006: 54-74). This is a fact that the journalist Mark Dodshon highlights as the great difference between the Sydney group and the vast majority of other rock bands, including those with an overt social conscience:

There are still musicians expressing social opinions but very few of them exist as part of mainstream culture, and none are part of the public discourse of a country in the way that Midnight Oil were in Australia (2004: 53).

Overall, this brings us to consider another element of the social and political dimension of Midnight Oil: its credibility, an attribute that can never be forced and that in order to be achieved needs something else than rhythms and attractive melodies. For Midnight Oil their credibility became a crucial factor for reaching an audience of millions, at local and international level, by means of songs with explicit political and social subjects, during more than two decades. Many are the elements that have intervened in the process of conferring prestige and credibility to the group's ideological message. Amongst them we may consider the ideological coherence between the band's songs and their extra-musical activism; another element is the transversality of their political message, clearly associated with the left ideological sphere but rather from a humanistic than a maximalistic perspective, sometimes belligerent but never dogmatic; and last but not least, the space and time connections with their followers—there are actually very few songs where the group does not address a reference frame common to all the population.

Obviously, we should not forget other factors as the natural independence of being a rock group; their genuine conviction for transmitting the message based on their charisma and especially on Peter Garrett's speech ability; and finally their perseverance through time. From his uninhibited admiration of the group, Tim Winton went as far as setting them up against politicians when he wrote:

I'm grateful Midnight Oil did become something of an institution as they raged against corporate greed and environmental vandalism. Because so few of our public leaders represent us with any imagination or honesty. (...) And not only that they put their money where their mouth was. They did things, provided help and money to community causes while the political parties concentrated on maintaining power. While the suits were talking the talk, the Oils were walking the walk. It's wonderfully ironic that a rock n roll band should be such a civic light in the darkness (1997).

When we then consider Garrett's political career it seems reasonable to assume that as well as his charisma, the recognition and credibility of the group were the elements that conferred him the necessary conditions for assuming commitments outside of the music sphere. In fact, without underestimating Garrett's contribution, we should be aware that most songs were written by Rob Hirst and Jim Moginie.

Thus, when in June 2004 Garrett disclosed having joined the Labor Party and became shortly thereafter a member of parliament, we can assume that in the eyes of the population Garrett's biography was better known and transparent than the trajectory of most politicians. Perhaps some Australians already knew about him through his senate candidature while heading the Nuclear Disarmament Party in late 1984, or through his presidency of the Australian Conservation Foundation or even for his explicit positioning in favor of the Indigenous Australians. However as said by Mark Latham, who at that time was the opposition leader, the immense majority of people knew about him because of Midnight Oil. They knew that Garrett came from a small collective that had dedicated a quarter of a century to express their longings, worries and aspirations for Australia. In fact quite a few Australians regretted Garrett's becoming a member of the Labor Party because they considered that his role in a political party weakened his value as a social activist.

Another element that highlights Midnight Oil's extra-musical dimension can be found in the criticisms received: their albums were often examined under the harsh light of political terms and they were accused of exercising demagoguery, of making profit through protest and of appropriating the Indigenous tragedy. The criticisms were significant because they also showed up to which level the band was able to raise awareness in a society often branded as hedonistic and self-satisfied. In this sense Midnight Oil took risks and became polemic, sometimes due to a mixture of audacity and naivety, which some would call arrogance. In any case this is the path chosen by those that do not accept spaces with pre-determined borders, by those that believe in perseverance, in converting utopias into aspirations worth fighting for. Backed by more than one hundred songs, nearly two thousand concerts and dozens of acts of vindication and solidarity, Midnight Oil offered a critical and ideological interpretation, at times even radical but rarely nihilistic, about the political and social evolution of Australia. They addressed themselves to political representatives demanding a re-evaluation of the institutions. But at the same time they condemned the apathy and indifference of the ordinary citizen asking for a greater involvement in Australia's social and political life.

Put into perspective, the career of Midnight Oil throws light on the extent to which a social and political speech vertebrated from the sphere of urban popular culture in an advanced capitalist society. In fact, through a critical surveillance of public management, they visualized the possibilities of rock music as an instrument and a vehicle for participating in politics, as a means of resistance and dissidence. By summoning their fans to step ahead and become something more than an audience, Midnight Oil offered as much as it demanded, and more than most.

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*Coolabah, No.5, 2011, ISSN 1988-5946, Observatori: Centre d'Estudis Australians, Australian Studies Centre, Universitat de Barcelona*

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