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Exploring Indigenous Creative Practice in Contemporary Post-Colonial Society:

An Interview with Dr. Neil Morris

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Abstract

Music continues to play an integral role for First Peoples around the world in practicing and sustaining Culture, as well as maintaining connection to spirituality. In the face of enduring colonialism and its devastating impacts on First Nations communities, music keeps stories, language, and identity alive. In the Lands of so-called "Australia," these stories sustain the longest continuing culture on the planet, stretching back at least 60–80,000 years. Yet, while these Cultures are timeless, ways of expressing them are constantly evolving, becoming infused with cultural traditions from around the world. Through interview, this article explores Indigenous creative practice in the context of contemporary post-colonial "Australia," focusing on four key topics: creative practice as an Indigenous artist in present-day society; implications for intercultural music engagement; impacts of global events like COVID-19; and Indigenous creative practice in industry contexts. The discussion further explicates the unique experiences and challenges of contemporary Indigenous artists, and implications for connections between arts, healing and social justice. Finally, some brief learnings for music therapy are offered to help the field reflect critically and honestly on the benefits and implications of combining arts and healing on Indigenous Lands, and our collective responsibilities in honouring Indigenous Culture in therapeutic spaces.

Keywords: First Nations music; Indigenous creative practice; Indigenous culture; Indigenous rights; spiritual-based practice; intercultural music engagement

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Introduction

Setting the Scene

The discussion shared here took place on Lands of the Yorta Yorta peoples, and the Lands of the Wurundjeri, Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung peoples of the eastern Kulin Nations. The authors begin here by paying respects to these Lands, as well as the elders who have cared and continue to care for the Country and the Cultures they sustain.

These Lands and people continue to suffer from the illegal occupation and ongoing settler colonialism endemic in the mainstream society of so-called "Australia." This conversation took place at a time when statistics around the incarceration, deaths in custody, and un-checked police brutality and murder of Indigenous people paint a clear picture of mainstream "Australia's" neglect, negligence, and indifference towards justice and rights for First Nations peoples.

Our conversation also took place some months into our first COVID-19 lockdowns here, in what is known as the governmental state of Victoria, a state known for having some of the strictest COVID-related social distancing restrictions in the world. For this reason, the conversation was had using the Zoom teleconferencing program.

We also talked at a time when the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was experiencing a strong resurgence in reaction to George Floyd being murdered in public by a police officer in the United States (US). As a result, discussions of race, privilege and systemic marginalisation were omnipresent in mainstream media throughout so-called "Australia."

Finally, the conversation shared below was initiated as part of a larger research project housed at the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, at the University of Melbourne, and funded by the Australian Research Council (Discovery award #: GA28982). The project and this interview were approved by the University of Melbourne Human Ethics Research Committee (Ethics ID Number: 2056692.2). As part of the project team, the second Author, Alex, approached the first Author, Neil, with the knowledge that Neil created and performed music as an expression of their own identity as a Yorta Yorta person. The original intention was to learn Neil's views on the topic of intercultural music engagement as a First Nations artist, as well as his experiences of social cohesion as an artist during COVID. And as intended, Neil's responses were combined with up to 14 other intercultural musicians from around the world, and articles were written and published on those topics (Crooke et al., 2021; Crooke et al., 2024).

Yet, it seemed clear to Alex (and the rest of his research team) that none of these articles came close to communicating the amount of knowledge sharing that occurred within Neil's interview. Further, not only was the sharing generous, but the topics discussed were incredibly relevant in a society which is only just starting to appreciate the magnitude to which colonialism and the construction of whiteness have shaped our world—and in particular, our understandings of music and culture. For this reason, the idea arose of creating a manuscript which included as much of the conversation as possible, while also allowing for some brief commentary on some of the issues raised and explored by Neil. Written by Alex, the resulting commentary seeks to draw out themes that are relevant to current discourse in music-therapy, -psychology, -education, and -sociology. In doing so, it also reflects on some of the larger questions of our time including the position of First Nations people in broader societies.

The piece has been organised into four main sections: 1) Neil's Practice, 2) Perspectives on Intercultural Music Engagement, 3) COVID-19, and 4) Indigenous Arts in Industry Contexts. These sections reflect the overall flow of the interview, and the key themes that were discussed. While much of the manuscript is presented unabridged, it has also been edited for brevity and clarity. Given Alex was paid to undertake the original interview, he

undertook the work of formatting and editing the article and checked in with Neil to ensure original language and intent were maintained throughout.

The Authors

Neil Morris is a Yorta Yorta Kaieltheban song writer, Hip Hop and Electronic artist and producer who, through projects like DRMNGNOW, uses his music to explore Culture, Community and Country.[1] Through storytelling, Neil provokes discussion and education around "Australia's" Indigenous history and future, and the constant strength and struggles of his people in post-colonial "Australia."

The second author, Alex (he/him/his), is a white settler of predominantly Scottish and Irish ancestry, who was born on Wiradjuri Country, and currently lives and works on the Lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung peoples of the eastern Kulin Nations in so-called "Australia." Alex is a transdisciplinary researcher who works across the fields of Hip Hop studies, music therapy, sociology, psychology, music education, critical cultural studies, and social policy. After completing a PhD in Music Therapy and Social Policy, his research agenda has centred on the individual and social affordances of music in community and education settings, with an emphasis on musical participation as a site for social justice work, and access to culturally responsive arts experiences. He also works internationally as a consultant in the design, implementation, and evaluation of arts programs in school and community settings.

The Interview

Neil's Practice

Contemporary Indigenous arts practice, and creating in relationship to Culture and Country

Alex: I'd love to start by you just sharing a little bit about your artistic practice.

Neil: Yeah, sure. So, right now, in terms of how it currently looks and the content released since 2018, my artistic practice would largely be defined as Hip Hop music. Before that, I was doing a project around live looping and singing in language; it would actually be really interesting to consider what that was defined as now. I know some people said it was still Hip Hop, in a certain kind of way, because of the way it was put together. Being somebody who came up on Hip Hop, I would use drum patterns that were like Hip Hop drums—like, it wasn't like New Wave or Rock drums, it was Hip Hop drum patterns. So effectively I was making live loop-based beats, singing in language.

You know, it was really interesting for me that I even landed at that point. Because it wasn't necessarily a set intention to do something like that. That's just what I was informed by in terms of the music that I was across and what really resonated with me. And it's not only Hip Hop; I'm all about music that has groove, whether that's Funk, Soul, or Electronic music or, you know, Indigenous music, like

[1] Terms such as "Culture," "Community," "Country," "Land," "Sea," and "Sky" are capitalised when associated with a First Nations groups or communities as a sign of respect and to acknowledge the centrality and importance of these concepts to First Nations' Culture. It is also common practice to capitalise such words when they are used as proper nouns (e.g., Cultural knowledge, Cultural protocols).

in simple formats. So, for me, there's definitely an impetus behind the work that is about groove.

But ultimately the impetus behind my creation is about how I can—as an Indigenous person in the now—be putting sound and story together in a way that is a continuation of Indigenous spirituality. Ultimately, it's about spirituality, I connect with work very much as ceremony, you know? So, it's been very interesting to think how my work has . . . I don't think "evolved" is the right word, because there's many arms to what I do and not all of it gets seen publicly. For example, things [i.e., live looping] that I was doing back in 2015 and 2016, I'm still doing them for myself. But now I have this project Dreaming Now [DRMNGNOW] which has taken up so much of my energy, that it looks like it's the only work that I'm doing, or that it's the full extent of it. So, I guess DRMNGNOW it's not so much an evolution of the work, but that deep healing, spiritual, ceremonial work expressed in a different kind of way. And, you know, it definitely took me a long time to come to that place. So, in essence, that's what the work is, that's what the artistic practice is, it is about honouring Ancestors, it's about honouring my connection to this Land as a First Nations person.

And it's also about a responsibility to the future; to put content out there that stimulates thinking, that leads towards conversations. Like I say: "as much as anything, it's about the full audio experience and emotive and energetic experience that people get from a song too." Like often when I'm going through the process of recording a track and deciding if I really want to use a particular beat, it's about, "what is the kind of emotions that people might draw from a beat like this?" And then, "how can I engage with that beat to further elucidate or illuminate that particular narrative?"

For me, it always starts as a spiritual narrative that is spoken in the unspoken first, which comes to me. And then a feeling about my relationship with that piece of music, and relationship to all things that I'm connected to. And then, you know, it will come out into words. Sometimes I sit with the beat for a bit and I'm like, "it's really touching my heart or my spirit, that it's wanting me to speak a certain narrative and speak that in a certain way."

Then other times, I could be just going through things at a particular moment in the face of what's going on. Like, the broader conversations around First Nation's narratives that might be going on across all of so-called "Australia," or even the world, at the moment. For example, obviously Coronavirus, everybody was thinking about that a lot. And then the Black Lives Matters things came up with the unfortunate incident around George Floyd.

Immediately, you know . . . I was traumatised from witnessing what he went through. It was not surprising to me that that would start the conversations around police brutality back up over here [in so-called "Australia"], in a way that has been as potent as ever. So, when that all came up—and I guess, generally whenever there is something that really impacts me intensely . . . like a fever pitch kind of moment like that—I do feel like I want to write something. First and foremost, for my own processing of that moment. That's always the first instinct; like, "how can I process this experience in a way that's meaningful and also empowering for myself and then, potentially, also give it an alternative to the existing narratives surrounding the experience right now as well?" So, actually, I had a beat sent to me by a producer, and when I got that beat, I was like, "yes, this beat is a beat that I can tell a story to, and that captures all of these emotions that I'm going through right now."

So, you know, my creative process doesn't necessarily have a certain set of consistency to it. It's always about a variety of factors. But again, the motivation

behind it is definitely about creating liberation for First Nations people, and about continuing the spiritual connections that we have into the now.

The name of my Hip Hop project, DRMNGNOW, encapsulates what all of my artistic output is for. Whether it's when I'm doing poetry, or whether I'm sitting on Country writing a little reflection and then posting that on social media or whatever. To me that's all about DRMNGNOW. The concept of Indigenous spirituality and Indigenous law is still as important today as it's ever been because we still live in this society, therefore that [Indigenous spirituality and law] still lives in this society as well. And that still has its capacity to shed light and to be a light, and be a beacon, ultimately to generate a society that is more just for all of us.

Like, it's really justice-based art, I guess you could say, and it's bigger than just Indigenous people. It just so happens that for me, the most important narrative around justice in this Land has Indigeneity as its central axis. It has to. Because we can't have justice in this Land without justice for Indigenous people. But if we acknowledge that we need Indigenous justice, I would like to think that it's going to lead to a society . . . like, we don't stop there: we look at all the justices, and as custodians we're about a just society on this Land.

We want everybody to have the best possible chance to have a beautiful, enriched life. So, you know, really, Indigenous sovereignty is about human justice at the end of the day, upon this Land. I can't speak for anybody outside of myself, but anybody who knows First Nations people pretty well, knows that we're generally pretty open-hearted people, if you get the right angle to engage with us.

We're not about making anyone's life miserable. We can be angry and upset about different things, but the last thing we would want to do is recreate a society that would mean that we would be doing the same things that were done to us. That would be hypocritical, so of course we don't want that.

So, in a nutshell, that's really what my art is about. It's complex, but it's for the Ancestors, and ultimately, it's for everybody at the end of the day. So, everybody can keep surviving. And it's so the planet doesn't get destructed as well.

Experience as First Nations cultural worker/ambassador in industry contexts

Alex: And you have also taken on industry roles, including working with the Victorian Music Development Office (VMDO) recently. Has there been opportunity for you to support young Indigenous artists in that role?

Neil: Definitely, to a degree. Obviously, artists are doing their own thing and have got their own management and all that kind of thing. But sometimes I would work directly with their management to help broker opportunities. For example, getting artists on to showcasing opportunities, or just helping them utilise industry networks. Ultimately the VMDO is about having an industry that is willing to put its best foot forward to help facilitate an equitable playing field for the future of the music sector. And, if there's relationships that don't currently exist, I guess it's a kind of body that can help facilitate the development of those relationships.

It's definitely played a role in some pretty powerful opportunities that have come up for First Nations people, and in a very low fanfare kind of way. It's not necessarily always publicised. As it goes when you're in these brokering positions, the work that gets done doesn't always get credited and acknowledged. But there's definitely a lot of behind-the-scenes work that's happened within that space. You could say it's been instrumental in, and definitely created some powerful opportunities for some First Nations people. And—as it goes as well—sometimes people might not even be aware of how those opportunities that have been manoeuvred for them. You know the "veiled windows" so to speak . . .

Alex: Yeah, exactly. So, from your perspective, is it important at this point in time to have that support specifically for Indigenous artists in "Australia?"

Neil: I think having trusted people in spaces that are to be able to be a touch point, both to the community and back into the sector, is incredibly valuable. I think there's big questions about where those people would be most powerfully positioned. I think it can look differently depending on the circumstances really, whether that means a person is more suited to be within community or industry. Or whether that person is based within an industry body or, like say Warner or Sony and the big players, whether they just have their own in-house First Nations roles. Which I think, there's always value in having a First Nations person no matter what the space, that's my belief.

It's more about, "is the space a healthy space for that First Nations person to be in, and what is the trade-off for that person by being in that space?" You know, again, it depends on the person and their make-up and their story and what backdrop they've come from as well. But the remuneration has got to match up with the labour that the person's investing. So, if a person is providing expertise at an executive level, they are investing executive level labour, but also emotional and spiritual labour, as well as intellectual property, but their wage level is 3 tiers down, that's something that really needs to be acknowledged. The value of these additional labours is not currently being valued.

So, I think something that will go a long way towards First Nations people feeling more comfortable in corporate spaces is paying them at the top tier. And I say this for a variety of reasons. You can get into "Pay the Rent"[2] kind of discussions. You can get into First Nations law discussions, both in terms of sovereignty, and the power of First Nations decision making to sit at all tiers of governing in all sectors of economic enterprise within this country. Like to me, there should be First Nations directors and executive staffing in every sector. That's obviously a long way off in the music sector, but yeah, it's a big factor in terms of where we [are] currently at. So having just outcomes, and then outcomes being consistent and not ad hoc.

Alex: Yeah absolutely. So just quickly, out of interest, organisations like Warner and Sony, do they have First Nation-specific roles?

Neil: No, none of these organisations have a First Nations specific role. Well, actually, my role at the VMDO was the first of its particular kind within any of these organisations [in so-called "Australia"].

Alex: Have you moved on from that position now?

Neil: I haven't moved on, but I'm actually about to go into a secondment to trial an arrangement with a First Nations organisation. So, I'll be working with Songlines Aboriginal music for three days a week. Basically, my whole job will be seconded into that organisation for the next six months to trial the ability to obtain the same outcomes as my regular role but doing it within a First Nations framework. And to see what value you get out of having someone in that position, but still working quite collaboratively and in partnership with a non-Indigenous organisation. I think it's a really exciting arrangement, and personally I would like to see more of those arrangements supported as well.

[2] "Pay The Rent" refers to a movement led by Indigenous activist, Ted Wilkes, in so-called "Australia." The movements calls for all citizens to actively reimburse and compensate First Nations peoples for the illegal occupation and use of their Lands through formats such as recurring online debits/payments.

I think sometimes it's a little bit back-to-front when you just pluck the First Nations people out of community and just plonk them all into these non-Indigenous organisations; particularly when you've done nothing to invest in building the skeletons or constructs for capacity in community. Because then you've obviously created a deficit position for the community where they don't have that expertise within community anymore and thus they're not concurrently building structures that can sit as a peer to industry—upon a level playing field and level playing terms.

I'm really interested to see what the direct investment into community constructs look like in the future. And what's that middle ground in terms of equitable relationships with the existing mainstream industry? How much is them growing off the work of First Nations artists, and how much is them building relationships that support sovereign decision-making powers of First Nations people? To me, this is not even really about us as peers, but about us really being the leading voice in music in this country. If we're to look at . . . if we really respect 60,000 plus years of Songlines, then First Nations' voice has to be the leading voice in music in this country, without a doubt.

Things like the ARIAs[3] and so on and so forth, they should sit then, in my opinion, they sit on another tier which is, it's a tier below and to me it is what it is. It's not about Indigenous domination. It's just about a structure that's equitable and it's based on historical evidence of First Nations Culture on song on this Land which is, it's all fact. It's not something that's made up and suddenly we're saying, "no, Aboriginal people are better than the rest of the industry." It's just trying to put things in an order that is based on history.

Perspectives on Intercultural Music Engagement

Exploring when and where Indigenous music is "intercultural"

Alex: So, I'd love to ask you about this: the main theme in our current study is intercultural music engagement. We're defining it as the act of engaging with a culture different from your own through music. One of the ways that I consider your work intercultural music engagement—well for me, you might see it a different way—is that, through your music you are communicating a lot of information about Indigeneity and your own First Nations Culture to listeners everywhere. In the study, we consider that a form of intercultural music engagement, putting your own music out there, and having others engage with your culture, or ideas from your culture, through your music.

Neil: Yeah, yeah.

Alex: Does that make sense?

Neil: Yeah, and it's definitely the case because if it wasn't, I probably would never have recorded my music to be honest. I would have just kept doing music and not recording it. At least, that's the case within the DRMNGNOW project.

In saying that, for sure in the future I will record music that might not necessarily be seen as Indigenous music. It might just be electronic instrumental music, in which there might be no traces of Indigeneity, so to speak, for the general listener—unless the way I brand that project has all this different Indigenous messaging in it and so on and so forth. But it may not be that.

But, yes, with the DRMNGNOW project, I would say that it definitely functions for that [intercultural music engagement] purpose. But it's like a double edge

[3] The ARIAs are the Australian Recording Industry Awards, a national awards event held annually.

sword; it can also definitely just exist for First Nations people. Although, I guess if it purely existed for First Nations people maybe the way of putting it to the world would have been different. Maybe it would be recorded but it might not be released on Spotify and all that. Maybe it would just be emailed around to different Indigenous people around the world. Or maybe it would just be on a Soundcloud link only sent around on my personal Facebook page. You know, there's a whole bunch of different ways that it could be done if it was just for Mob[4]—like, I'm sure it would be publicised in a different kind of way.

Indigenous music, Culture, and tradition in today's society

Alex: So, my next question around this idea of intercultural music relates to the way that some people have talked about "cultural music" as something that needs preserving in its traditional form. Now I've heard you talk a little bit about this before, but, if we're talking about Indigenous music or First Nations music, does that have to conform to a certain aesthetic? Or how can we define what Indigenous music is in that kind of intercultural sense?

Neil: Yeah, definitely, I think it's really an interesting and important question to ask. We touched on a little bit earlier in terms of, at what point does the music get acknowledged as Indigenous? And obviously for me it really starts with: as long as you know the artist is Indigenous, then the fact that that person is making music, whether or not they're intending to, means it's still intrinsically connected back to thousands of years of song creation that's in their bloodlines. And if they're an Indigenous person doing music on this Land, then that's Indigenous music, still, even if they don't identify. So, you go to a festival, and you watch this artist, and you really love them, and you didn't even know they were Indigenous . . . that was still Indigenous music that got played—so for me that's definitely the answer.

But when you talk about cultural Indigenous music, that's another conversation. At what point is music considered cultural Indigenous music? In one sense I would say, "you know what, same thing applies. If that person is Indigenous, then it's still cultural music because that person comes from that Culture." But then, I guess the next question is: "to what *extent* is it cultural music, and what facets of Culture is that music or artist expressing?" And that's when I feel like you can really start to get into this interesting conversation around what is or isn't First Nations cultural music. You can look at, say, my music with the DRMNGNOW project and say it could be considered cultural because it's speaking to raising awareness around the cultural value of First Nations people having sovereignty, or access to care for Country. Or having access to be able to honour Ancestors, or to be family members.

So that could be said to be cultural music, but would it then be religious Indigenous music? I suppose that is another question. And the answer for a lot of people would be: "well, it's not. Because it's not done in the religious tradition that was pre-colonisation. And you're speaking in English, you're not speaking fully in Language." So maybe it's not cultural religious First Nations music, but it could still be considered cultural First Nations music for this reason, that reason and that reason, for these other reasons: it's not a formal ceremony; it's not a rite of passage in a way that is from traditional society. But in a contemporary sense, it could be considered those things. So yeah, I guess it's . . . I think there's a lot of complexity to the conversation that is really worth exploring. I think it's important

[4] "Mob" can refer to one's own community, skin group, or the larger collective of First Nations peoples on these Lands.

for people to have those conversations. But yeah, that's my answer to your theoretical question.

Young People's access to First Nations Culture in school

Alex: Yeah, okay, thanks. I want to cycle back to this idea of intercultural music engagement for a minute. Because from my perspective, I feel I've seen you do this on several different levels. Even thinking about what you were doing with Sisters and Brothers[5] where you were going into schools and creating spaces for Culture and wellness. It seemed like a motivation behind that was sharing your Culture with any young Indigenous folk who might be in the school, but also with any young folk who might not have ready access to Indigenous Culture through any other forums. And then what you're doing with DRMNGNOW as well—massive props on the new track [Never Defeated[6]] too man—yeah . . .

Neil: Cheers.

Alex: . . . that was dope. And then there's stuff with VMDO we talked about before. So, I guess thinking about all that work, do you think that there is still a need to support First Nations people in so-called "Australia" to share and educate other people about their Culture? Is that work still important? Or is it beyond that now, do we need to be looking more at systemic stuff? Or is it both, or . . . ?

Neil: I think it's both. No, definitely, it's both, without a doubt. Typically, the stuff within educational spaces I often find more rewarding than things in other spaces because of the understanding that it is an educational space, versus a vocational space where, it's just a different way that people hold themselves. In an educational space, you've got students who sometimes they've signed up to that program, sometimes they haven't. Sometimes they're just 10-year-old kids in a primary school. It's just what they do. They don't have a choice in the matter.

But definitely, it's absolutely crucial that young people have access to First Nations Culture from as young an age as possible. For example, in kindergartens—a foundational stage of development—people aren't exposed to First Nations systems of thinking and Culture, so these things are just going to be alien to them when they do encounter it. So, the sooner you can get exposure to that experience the better. And that should be consistent right throughout their formative years so that there's never one point throughout their formatives years where they don't have that.

We know full well the impressionability of being a young person, in that you can forget something very quickly as soon as that thing is removed from your sphere of existence. It could be a matter of just a couple of months. Say, for example, if someone had a great Indigenous education all the way up until they're 16 years old, and then suddenly their school takes away Indigenous education for one term; kids might get used to not having that and then never want to go back to having it once it's gone. And that might create a sense of frustration and tension within them and their connection to "what is the value of Aboriginality, Indigeneity, in this Land?"

So, I definitely think it's crucial in the educational spaces, and definitely in the music content spaces. I believe it's absolutely crucial. I think this is where you

[5] Sisters and Brothers was a program in which community arts facilitators visited schools in Naarm (Melbourne) throughout the 201X's to run youth programs to support respectful relationships and social justice outcomes.

[6] "Never Defeated" was a single released by DRMNGOW and produced by Dizz1 in July 2020, and can be seen here: https://youtu.be/t1hhgdHKPr8?si=WpTCfZqE3tcU7Qx8

have to look at music beyond just being an entertainment tool. It's never been "just an entertainment tool," not since the origins of human existence. So, for me, if you're setting up music spaces purely as vessels for entertainment, that's very problematic. Obviously, granted, it can vary from space to space a bit, and there's certain things that just aren't going to work in a certain space.

Alex: So, what I'm picking up on is the idea that, work in the intercultural space is not just about having some kind of musical act, output, or activity, and being able to share culture through that. My sense in talking to you is that this alone could ignore some pretty important structural issues that not only impact intercultural relations, but also the possibility for First Nations and other minority cultures to participate in creative spaces in an equitable way. Does that resonate with you?

Neil: Definitely. I think you can't avoid the fact that there needs to be consideration of how the systems that we have, have put First Nations people in a position of disadvantage. Furthermore, even when we're brought to the table, that's still not "job done." It's also: "what are you putting that person at the table with?" And: "what are you giving them at the table to be able to go away with?"

Sometimes as a First Nations person you're given a budget to do a couple of little projects, but the projects themselves sit at a certain tier. And then you've got a non-First Nations person who sits at that tier who has an annual budget of $10m to do projects. And they're not handing over any of that $10m. And if they are like, "hey maybe you should have 1m of this 10m to help elevate yourself," then it's still obviously tokenism. So, for me, it's got to be looked at as an emergency. It's got to be looked at like it's a crisis predicament and it's about… you know we're still hanging on by tenterhooks to Indigenous music, even though it's starting to thrive again. It could easily fall away, because I think maybe people take for granted that, just because there's more Indigenous participation in the music sector that means that it's healthy.

But the reality is a lot of these artists, they're struggling severely. It's a challenging realm for most of these artists still. Even the largely successful ones are having their challenges. Everyone's got a different experience but just as a snapshot of the experiences that I'm across and such, it's a, it's still pushing shit uphill really. In the sense of, even when you look at a lot of the opportunities that are going out to people throughout COVID: I've seen some of the same white artists headline a number of shows throughout COVID…a number of shows. And then I've seen a lot of First Nations artists who are seen as quite well established, not being given one show at all – or they might be given *one* show.

It's like, "hang on, how does that work? Why does such and such get five shows and their bank account blow up through COVID and then this Aboriginal person does not even have one show?" And maybe they chose not to do shows. But if they were given a headline spot and then going to make $10,000 per show, and do five shows, at this point in time I don't know many people who are refusing that level of finances.

So, you know, there's still a lack of understanding and a lack of full comprehension and value of the role that First Nations play. That's an absolute . . . for me it's as plain as day. You know, just to include an emerging First Nations artist on these line-ups, if that's the norm throughout COVID, then that's really going back 10 years, even. The questions have to be asked, like "why is that the case?" And, well, it's clear that the considerations and the value of Indigenous lives are not being placed on the same tier as non-Indigenous lives.

COVID-19

Impact of COVID on First Nations artists

Alex: At some stage I need to bring the COVID thing back in again, just for the research question. And I guess the main thing that I'm interested to know right now is, what has been the impact of COVID on efforts to pursue justice through these kinds of musical pathways?

Neil: What I see is people have been protecting the nest of their key stakeholders, and because the bucket's shrunk in terms of the economics around music then they want to make sure that the people that they value the most are sustained. First Nations people are not at the top of that list. And further to that, there's been an under representation of people of colour outside of First Nations that I've also seen throughout COVID.

In a sense it looks like we've gone back 10 years or more in time, if you look at a lot of line ups that have come through, and the way things have been slapped together. The only way I can really look at it is, literally, they're protecting the nest of those that they value the most. Which are predominately white lives, and white male lives more so than anyone else.

Alex: Ok, thanks. Others I've interviewed have also talked about an inward focus creatively during COVID, and that there have been some negatives and positives from that.

Neil: I feel like it's been . . . you might have thought that it would be a good time for certain things to progress. In one sense, I kind of had a hope that when COVID hit, people would have been like, "what a perfect time to acknowledge how we've been doing so many things wrong and how this is a chance to really stop it and pause and reflect and then think of how we can trial doing things in a different way."

I had a hope. And part of that hope shifted across into me running a series called Medicine Songs for about six weeks online at the commencement of COVID. And then I did a further four-week collaboration through May as well with the Koori Music Council.

For me, Medicine Songs was about saying: "hey, where we're at right now in this stage of stupor that society has been pushed into on a spiritual level, there's medicine available right now. And part of that medicine in a musical sense is First Nations music. And this is a chance for you to put down all of your preconceptions about, does it fit into this genre, does it match the aesthetic for my event, or whatever. This is a chance to throw all rules out of the room and say, you know what, I'm just going to try and listen to First Nations artists and just soak up every bit of that goodness that is there. When I listen to that voice, I'm not going to hear the genre, I'm going to hear how this First Nations person was connected to such and such Country for thousands of years and I'm just going to be open to all that." So, for me I guess I had a hope for that.

My hope for that comes from my very real experience of how powerful it is to experience other First Nations artists. When I listen to First Nations artists, I really don't hear the genres. Like I do but I don't. I think my programming of music it's very eclectic, you know, I'll put a country artist next to Hip Hop, then I'll put a classical artist on, and then something electronic. Then I'll put a folk artist next to a DJ if they're all First Nations. That's the thread between it all.

That's the uniformity through it all and it's all just about how does that whole thing flow together. It's not about, "is there an aesthetic there?" Because there's not an aesthetic, but there's a uniformity in the fact that those people are

connected to this Land for thousands of years. For me, if you really value that, then there's something you're going to get out of that music that takes on a whole other format.

I often like to think, you know, when I listen to said First Nations music from so-called "Canada" or so-called "US," yeah I hear the genre, but I'm also like, "wow, it's just amazing how I'm tapping into those people," whether it's the Mohawk people or the Cree people or whatever those people might be. Whatever that group is, I'm automatically plugged into thousands of years of that person's culture the moment I start listening to that music, which for me—and I'm a very spiritual person—like, that's a profound spiritual experience.

Obviously not everybody is spiritual. But we live on a Land where spirituality was and still is crucial. It's part of the spiritual Culture and that stuff is all still very real to this day. For me it's all about how receptive you are: are you willing to absorb the knowledge, Culture and other elements which are around you that come from First Nations? That's not to downplay other people's spirituality that comes within their music whatsoever. Because I think when you adopt this spiritual mentality of viewing music, it means you're adopting it to how you view, then potentially, all music. And to appreciate the depth of—you know, even if it's a white person whose ancestry is England 100%, then you can look at that person and be like, it's not just them on that stage, it's also looking back in England, looking back into whatever culture and history that person went through as well.

For me its linked to the laws around the permissions to share song on Aboriginal Land, which means every artist then also gets to present in a way that's more meaningful and more purposeful and justice based. Everyone can then have opportunity to step on that stage in a way that's driven by some sort of axis around justice as well.

So, COVID has definitely been an opportunity for everybody to tap into the enormity of it. But through our COVID year, when Medicine Songs didn't necessarily get the traction of some other things going at the same time, such as Isolaide Festival and others, for me that was . . . I would say it's pretty disappointing. Because I just felt that more people were ready to go on this journey and to really resonate with the concept around Medicine Songs.

But the reality is that people, those who knew that this was going on and had the power to influence the promotion of it, didn't promote it. There were conscious choices from people not to back that. And it's not just been Medicine Songs, there's been other things that I think haven't been backed to the fullest. I think the NAIDOC[7] week concert was done really well in Melbourne. Kudos to everyone involved in that. But it's the same story of: the way that First Nations people were valued in that is how our First Nations people should have been valued throughout all of COVID.

You've got concerts like that on every single week of COVID, and a couple of series that had been going on. Now you've got this one on the ABC. There's been a few things that have ran every week. We could deliver a live series. And for people to feel that a NAIDOC concert was enough and they're going to replay that for the next month. That's not justice.

[7] NAIDOC stands for National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee, which is a committee based in so-called "Australia." Every year the nation observes a week of remembrance and celebration of First Nations people from so-called "Australia" and the neighbouring Torres Strait islands. NAIDOC week starts on the first Sunday of July.

You know you don't want to be harsh and be like, "it doesn't even deserve a pat on the back because it's still less than enough." But that was one organisation that joined in to support that, being the Arts Centre Melbourne. They got involved in that and kudos to them for doing one of them. But how many other centres have done nothing through this span of time? How many of the new series that have run in this time span not even done anything special? It didn't have to be a NAIDOC week or Reconciliation Week special. It could just be like, "we're having a bit of a special because this is something we should be doing, any week of the year."

So, the people aren't mind readers, and that . . . you could say that more conversations need to still be had to raise awareness. But it's just that, I guess, you felt like people were getting to a point where they might just go on and do the work by themselves, do good shit for First Nations people. And it just hasn't happened. Like I'm tempted to say it hasn't happened at all. I think it's a bit harsh for me to say it hasn't happened at all, because there's still good people who have been pushing for it. I think they've had the odds stacked against them and that's just . . . yeah. It's a real shame but that's how it's panned out for me.

And I know that it's been precious times and there's only been so many peoples' lives that have been able to be looked after, and if the First Nations people were looked after in these times it would mean somebody else's life was not getting looked after. Versus: when we had hundreds of gigs per week in Melbourne and on any one given night there's a few hundred shows or a couple of thousand shows across all of "Australia." Now that bucket is so small.

I found it even concerning from the perspective of, like, if you're not a major label artist or you're not with a cool hip Indy label, you've more or less missed out during COVID. Unless you've got a grant or something like that. Or unless you've got a manager that's got great connections and things like that. So, there's a lot of people, like white artists, who have missed out too during COVID because they're not connected into this whole other network of things.

And I think that's really unfortunate as well and my condolences to those people who are struggling as well. But yeah, it kind of . . . at some point, you start to question yourself and think, "do I want too much for our Mob?" And then I'm like, "well, hell no. I don't want too much. All I want is for us to have our rights acknowledged—to a powerful extent—as the original song keepers of this Land. Which is something that should always be prioritised." And it's just a shame we're still the people who have to lead that conversation to this day. So, I'm pretty disappointed really.

Alex: A question just came up for me that I feel like a lot of people might ask in this situation: "okay, but what's happening at the grass roots level?" But I'm hesitant to do so because its sounds like we need to be looking across all levels.

Neil: I think work at the grass roots level, that's always vital. For me, always vital. I think it's a matter of who's doing the work in different spaces, and again how they're remunerated to be able to do that work. Like, for example my own work, switching over to being seconded into an Aboriginal organisation, that's amazing, that's grass roots and systemic in a way which will influence the corporate sector in the long run. Which is important because these kinds of structures, they're very powerful and definitely behind the scenes.

So yeah, on a grass roots level there is a lot of things happening. Of course, it was definitely a shame that it took the Black Lives Matter movement for a real, strong, conversation to kick off, you know in terms of First Nations and also Black people generally within this Land. Granted that conversation has fallen off quite a bit, but there's definitely been a lot of people working at a grass roots level.

Here's the hard part about being in COVID and isolation, especially with this Black Lives Matters thing: we are so isolated that a lot of conversations that would be really good to be having in person right now haven't occurred. And a lot of people have become "Zoomed out" as well. A lot of people aren't trying to have the "how we remodel the system at a grass roots level" conversation on a Zoom when they just can't wait for this whole experience to be over. And there's likely a lot of people who are thinking that the real action or change, particularly at a grass roots level, will happen once we get out of COVID.

I sense we might be coming back around to a point where people are like, "alright, suddenly we're stuck in this and we have to find some better strategies within while were still stuck," knowing that it may or may not go for a solid period. So, I feel like, there's been some grass roots stuff. There could be a lot more, but you can kind of understand why at the grass roots, people aren't resourced to do the work. That it makes it much harder to do, I think.

One thing I do like is that, at a grass roots level, it seems people are supporting Indigenous rights causes at a higher level than previously. It's been a lot of people—like Mutual Aid, which has been a thing with certain, at least left leaning people, even some conservative people. Particularly under a Liberal government that leaves a lot of people short, Mutual Aid has been something that helps their needs get met, for example raising funds for deaths in custody for Aboriginal people.

That's been a big priority for me at the moment, like don't support me, don't even necessarily support every Black business that people are sharing on Instagram. But if you got a little bit of money, support Aboriginal families who've had deaths in custody, or if you got a bit more money then maybe support other causes. So, I think there's been a great sense of appreciation across the board for different First Nations causes that people need to be investing into.

And maybe First Nations music at that grassroots level hasn't necessarily been something there's been an ask for people to invest in. And definitely a large element of that is, as First Nations people in the First Nations arts sector, we don't want to necessarily demand things for the arts, as when we know there's people with greater need in our community.

But if we look at say corporate wealth that is within our own sector, "well, like, hang on. You're within our sector, you need to build up the First Nations part of our sector, maybe instead of thinking about this other cause or whatever."

And when I'm talking about corporate, I'm thinking about your multimillion dollar plus per annum corporations. They operate within the music sector. I absolutely feel they should be looking at Pay the Rent schemes to support the growth of the First Nations music sector. And if they're not doing that, if they don't have that scheme in place, then for me they're still making a choice to position themselves as of higher value than First Nations music within this Land. But further to that, I think those organisations should be, wherever possible, supporting a diversity of Aboriginal causes.

On a community-based level, if people aren't investing in the First Nations music, I don't blame them. Because it's a different playing field when it comes to their capacity to contribute. And if they just share Indigenous artists' posts on social media, I think that's a positive because they're increasing the visibility of that artist and in turn that will generate momentum which might lead to a more equitable situation for First Nations music.

Like artist to artist, for example. I think this is where known artists can obviously have a big influence. Like if Tame Impala shared my shit, then my following would go through the roof. I'm not saying they have to do that for me, but I just think

that it's things like that which artists can do at the moment to really bolster the First Nations music sector.

Alex: Some of the artists that I've spoken to have said their more localised networks have fractured a bit because they just can't go and see them face to face. And because they're used to seeing them face to face, they're not even bothering to make the effort to either catch up with them on Zoom or to try to find a way around it. But those same artists are connecting with people from all over the world and having different kinds of conversations with people all over the world and building these more international or global sort of networks. Have you seen that at all in your experience?

Neil: Definitely felt that, and maybe that's like a pulse of the times, that that's something we should be doing in these times of great global precariousness for humanity, so to speak. I feel like there's an instinct around that and so it's only natural that people . . . you know there's something deep within the intrinsic make up of humans that when the whole world is under some sort of sense of siege, that we be checking in on them and further weaving that fabric about connectively.

Like I feel that, definitely. And I'm definitely experiencing that. And there's been some galvanising of certain relationships globally. And I think this is where it is so different to the localised relationships, because your in-person connection with those people is such a powerful part of that relationship, and you know that over a Zoom you're not getting the full extent of that relationship that you would ordinarily be able to have. Something on a cognitive level where your brain's like, "you can't trick me into thinking this is as valuable versus someone on the other side of the world who you ordinarily you might be lucky if you ever meet them once, or at best, catch up with them once per year if you or them travels to the other side of the world to connect."

So, I think there's a very real thing in terms of how we respond to this circumstance cognitively. It's interesting that you say there's been a commonality in that because I definitely feel that that's real. Because like, going back to the spiritual overlay, like my cousin lives two kms down the road but I can't jump in my car and drive down there and go and have dinner. And then there's something really awful about that, it's painful. You feel that very real sense of the actuality of the restriction, versus the person on the other side of the world where this is actually a blessing: "I'm working from home, you're working from home, let's have a Zoom."

Like before you couldn't just you know, I'd be sitting in my office, you'd be sitting in your office, your people all around you. You're not Zooming to the other side of the world in that same kind of way. Maybe you did before, but chances are you didn't as much, maybe didn't at all. So definitely, I really feel that and there's that sense of First Nations to First Nations relationship factor also.

Country has to be considered as well, the role Country plays in maintaining our relationships. The way that we connect with one another on Country, that embeds the relationships with a whole another layer and value and essence that there's absolutely no other way you can obtain that aspect of those connections as well. So definitely, and I found it really interesting you said the word fracture because I feel like relationships are going to need a lot of replenishing after we come out of COVID. It's going to be, I feel, a lot of replenishment-based activities and certainly for First Nations people. You know it might influence the way we do a lot of things to replenish, as well, those connections.

Alex: Yeah, I mean I know that I personally after the first hard lockdown and then when they started easing the restrictions up, I know after that I was really, I've got to remember how to be around people, because I've just been that long that I'm just

like, yeah, having other people around, face to face, being around people is almost seems foreign to me now so . . .

Neil: Yeah, I relate to that.

Alex: Yeah, I can see that that would be on a whole lot of levels. So, this kind of connection that is more global or worldwide, as we've been talking about it's very different to the connection that you would have in person and on Country—is there value in those kinds of more distant relationships do you think? I guess to bring it back to the idea of able to talk about culture, express culture, share culture, is there value in those connections long term, even if only online relationships?

Neil: Yeah, definitely as a long term and even it sounds, I don't know how this sounds, but I find it very fascinating for example, like at the peak of when the live streaming was really, felt like there was a peak, where just every night people were watching some livestreaming content, I was definitely doing that. It dropped off, I'm not watching a lot of livestreaming content like DMX and Snoop Dog battle on Instagram yesterday and that got me back on there and some other First Nations stuff that's been going on but the [Erykah Badu] one, did you see that?

Alex: No, I missed it.

Neil: Well, Erykah Badu and Jill Scott did an Instagram, that was phenomenal and then Erykah Badu went on to her website and did this amazing thing where she was doing live shows within her house which was just this amazing space and it was just crazy. That was next level. I really value those kind of viewing experiences with these artists in real time, I'd never seen Erykah Badu live before. Suddenly it's like I'm watching her in her house performance, it's freaky.

But so, I think definitely in terms of even that, in terms of not just First Nations but just artists, I really appreciate being able to watch them do their thing in real time, ongoing—that's just an amazing thing. I think if I feel on a personal level that the full power of that still won't come forward until we're well out of COVID. And then we see what stands the test of time and what's still valued and how do you integrate that with, for example, when people are back in their work places, getting in a hub like three or four people Zooming in on all parts of the world and suddenly we're going to normalise the globalisation of what we do, what you know, like it's just, it won't be foreign to us. It will be easy to do. It will be like, I've got that person on Zoom whereas before it wasn't up to that point for a lot of people, so I think that's going to be really powerful as a thing moving forward. Definitely from a First Nations perspective there's so much in terms of the, I guess for me, the healing of First Nations people and so in the peak of a lot of this there was this real good thing going on Facebook which was the digital Pow Wow going on across "Canada" and the "US" and obviously people would book in for their slot with the curator of that and then they'd have a little, they'd go live for however long, whether it was 10 mins or whether it was half hour, whether it was an hour so all these different Mobs from First Nations communities over there would be on there and some of them would dance; some would do song; some of them in their backyards; some in their lounge rooms; some were out on Country next to like amazing lakes or rivers and it was really soulclectic. It was just wherever people were. That's where they were doing their thing. People in their regalia, like their outfits and all of that and just Pow Wowing in the lounge room as I am right now. For me that was really powerful to witness that connection to Culture digitally from the other side of the world in real time and especially some of those ones when they were out on Country when they were dancing next to this big, amazing lake backdrop and there's like fog coming through or whatever the weather was.

I think that's just remarkable really when you think about it, to be able to be connected into that kind of experience from the other side of the world and it is accelerating your connection to that person and their culture and from a music sense, it's charging up the musical songlines I guess through those relationships that you're building within doing that, so definitely I believe that moving forward, I feel like ongoing stuff with that would be great. Obviously, people sitting up every single night watching some stuff [would be a lot], but if you did some say once a month, those really well done and powerful. I feel like that's a no brainer because there's value in those connections that you make out of that, you know if that's a really well produced experience, like the ones that were done in Arnhem Land, did you see any of those?

Alex: Actually, I think I saw one of them, yeah.

Neil: Right out on Country . . .

Alex: Yeah, I saw some clips from those. I didn't see the whole thing, but I saw from clips from it, yeah.

Neil: Because the main thing was the quality of that experience. If it's done well the quality is not much different to watching a film. If you hired a high-end film crew to do that then you really tap into a high-quality experience which is similar to the experience people get from watching movies and that experience of vicariously living through connections. Film has always been a great thing for that so looking at the power of film and as time goes, bringing in 3D technology and things like that to make it the most powerful experience possible and given, even if COVID goes away, there's always going to be the risk of it or a variation of it or something else altogether coming forward and we might be in pandemic mode again and we might not ever get out of the next pandemic.

We've still got to get out of COVID. We might not even get out of this. Who knows? We don't really know. None of us know. Some [other] people might know. But I like to look at it like that in that sense, that now we've seen such strong impacts about how the world can look in certain circumstances, there's certain things that we'll be like, "okay, we might need this for the future and we'll appreciate what value it does provide, even if it's not to the fullest extent of value that you obviously have with in-person connection, but take it for what it is I suppose."

Alex: Exactly. Exactly. Yeah, I guess at some level we have to make the most of what's available to us at the time. A lot of people have talked about the importance of maintaining their own artistry or artistic practice during this time. Are you finding time to be able to still practice music yourself during COVID?

Neil: In the first few months of it I did a stack, and I think then I went into the process of doing the recent track that I did. I was kind of more so just in song writing mode and just getting my lyrics and everything right and the recording of that and all of that. That took about a month of my time, I guess, and I just stopped creating my own music through that period. I just focused on that one piece.

But definitely, I made a stack of music throughout this period of time. Within the last three or four years it's probably the most music that I've done, and it's been a welcome opportunity to do more music, at least in terms of creating music. I definitely miss performing, no doubt about it, but it's just been a big reminder of how much I just love creating music. Just for the sake of creation, like, nothing has to come of it, just create.

It's been a big reminder of why I really came to music in the first place which was, I guess, a love for music, but the reason I got hooked on music was because of the healing and the peace and the tranquillity and the bliss that I got out of playing music. I got that level of something out of music that I never got out of

anything else in my life in that kind of a way. And I knew that, or at least I felt, I'd be prone to having these sprees of being highly addicted to creating music and whenever I tap back into it, that happens and before I know it, I'm up every night to 3am because I don't want to go to bed because I'm having too much fun making new music. Which is that childlike joy that so many musicians talk about that is, I don't know if it's unique to music or not, but at least in my experience as a human it's definitely been unique within music, it reminds me of the experience of, say like, making things out of Lego as a child or play dough. It's a pretty similar feeling. Playing tiggy or whatever, it's my child experience for my so-called adult.

Alex: I love that description so much, man, it really resonates with me as well.

Neil: Yeah, yeah. I've definitely been doing a lot of that, and I think the sensitivity around the COVID period has pushed me to make more music. That's definitely been a factor that produced more creation. Without a doubt, particularly in the first couple of months of the first strict lockdown period—it was like, "I need to do something that's really breaking out of this." You know, working from home, it's been a blessing as well, because during my lunchtime I can just make a couple of beats. Or like, I'm having that afternoon fade out, and I'm just not feeling it and I'm like, "alright, I'm going to just play music for 15 minutes and then come back and going to be good for another couple of hours."

Alex: Do you make it back after 15 minutes?

Neil: Sometimes half an hour [laughter over talking] cos if I know that half an hour is going to help me finish the day strong, then it just makes sense to [keep going] . . . and I look at it like, "well I work within music so if I'm using music to fuel me to do work within the music sector . . ." I kind of feel like a lot more people who work in the music space hopefully do that as well and if they don't then I'm really curious about how their mind works in relation to music and how that really gears them up to do things. We're all different as well.

Indigenous Arts in Industry Contexts

The need for First Nations focused frameworks and resources

Alex: You talked earlier about the idea of First Nations-specific frameworks. Are there any networks either at the industry level that exist already, or ways of sharing things just for Mob through email and stuff like that?

Neil: No, I wouldn't say like it's a full-fledged systemic thing. I still think it's largely based on the relationships that people have so it's not a conduit per se. There's definitely a lot of talk around what things like that could look like and what the best model would be to do that. Like, would it be a phone app? And then, would that be a private thing? Like, is it just for artists and First Nations people to share over, or would it be a public thing, or would it possibly be a blend of both of those things?

I think, there's obviously things like indigiTUBE (www.indigitube.com.au) as an example of a Mob that's been developing something that is a hub for First Nations music. There's obviously even radio shows that I still hear are on that are doing things around the place. But in terms of one hub for that that's strictly just got that focus, there isn't that in particular at the moment. And I guess when you start to think about First Nations people, how do you bring all your people together to be able to even have those discussions in a way that's thorough enough to make sure that everybody is on side to support that thing?

I guess I often think, "how do we unite First Nations music's sector let alone the rest of the music sector?" The sad reality is you look at the divide and conquer

messages of colonisation and how they've divided our people so far. A good way to look at it, as well, is that there is no First Nations political party that represents across this whole Land, like entirely. It's definitely the way divide and conquer has traumatised and injured our people on many levels. And an important one of those levels is related to the fragility that's induced around one's capacity to trust, and to trust in a way that is far reaching, I suppose. So, I guess there is still a lot of tenderness there, obviously, for our people in all walks of life.

And so, in terms of moving forward with some real . . . I guess solid First Nations thing such as that, I think we're still a bit of a way off—like, I hate to keep saying it, but you look at all the non-Indigenous music sector executives who have the money to throw around and get them together and go to all these different conferences, go to Sydney once a month for big meetings, when they're all there. Things like that, we don't even get to do once a year as leading First Nations people within the music arena.

The bottom line there needs to be investment from somewhere to bring people together to create these robust structures. So, they're not there at the moment but there are some pretty clear reasons as to why they are currently not there for sure. There's definitely a lot of aspiration and thought around those things, and about how that could really just drive a different trajectory for First Nations music.

First Nations representation in music industry line ups

Alex: You were talking before about First Nations representation on festival and other industry line ups, and that it's not as simple as just putting an Indigenous artist on a stage – you need to consider the context. Can you talk some more about that?

Neil: Like a DRMNGNOW set isn't going to work at a folk music festival, I'm talking a purely acoustic, sitting by a river type thing. Or it might, but not as amplified Hip Hop music. So, to some degree you've obviously got to consider plugging the right thing into the right space. For me, you also do need to think about the educational value of the content that you're presenting and platforming and ultimately endorsing as a valuable aspect of society. If you platform something, it means you see it as valuable and a reasonable face of society to be supported.

So, for me in this age of reckoning—as a lot of people are saying—particularly in this Land where Indigenous discussions have been hot topics, solidly for at least the past five to 10 years. Really, going back to when Kevin Rudd got in in 2007. I feel the Indigenous subject matter has been quite visible in the media, whether or not Indigenous issues have been supported to the greatest extent.

Those things aren't going away, and what's also not going away is the fact that tonnes of Aboriginal people were massacred and there's been nothing done to create some sort of justice in relation to that. Which is why we're still coming to the table on so many other factors as well. So, for me, in order for a country such as so-called "Australia" to obtain a just society, every sector has a role to play. And the music sector has a big role to play because the way the youth amplify certain faces of so-called "Australian" society when you put them on a music stage.

So, you normalise the fact that there are First Nations voices and First Nations voices talking to the heart of issues. Like, you need to give space to First Nations artists who just want to do music—but for me you've got to prioritise First Nations artists that are speaking to the heart of the injustices of societies upon this Land. For me, that's the level of the work that needs to be done. And there's going to be First Nations artists with a justice-based paradigm in their music for as long as we don't have some sort of equitable situation relating to genocidal impacts on our people.

Alex: So, it sounds almost like, for you, one of the primary roles of First Nations people in so-called "Australia" at the moment is to carry that message and initiate those kinds of conversations or keep those kinds of conversations going. Is that . . . ?

Neil: Definitely. Absolutely. For example, when I hypothesise or imagine this space, things are very different if you take out that kind of First Nations artist and then put in First Nations artists that might be just like any other artist. You might not even know that they're First Nations. And there's a number of First Nations artists out there that present in that kind of way. People don't even know if they're Mob or not because there's nothing in their music or in the way that they identify publicly that lets people know that they're First Nations. I'm not saying they're denying their Indigeneity, but that's just how they present and that's their choice, that's fine.

And let's say you've got another First Nations artist on the line-up that might be doing "cultural stuff." Which is great, it's fantastic. To me the issue is when people look at that and say, "we're doing enough, and you can forget about the injustices and you can look at that and bathe in the power and the magic of this First Nations cultural performer."

So suddenly you're at this point of, "I'm allowed to have that, I'm entitled to receive that, and I don't have to do anything to consider: is there justice in that? And is the First Nations position in this country at a point where justice is being obtained for First Nations people?" It's like going to a zoo for me, it's not much different, you know there, like, the animals are trapped. They've got no way out of it, and you look at them. It looks pretty and beautiful and you go away and you feel warm and fuzzy but it's likely that animal's welfare is still not liberated when you walk away, and then you're not contributing to the liberation of that animal . . .

Alex: I guess you're also supporting the system behind that, which is taking those animals and encaging them and putting them up there to . . . so it's not addressing all the stuff that's happening in the background either.

Neil: Yeah, and I still feel like there was an era when that was definitely seen as fine because representation was enough. But that was at a time when our voices as people were so silenced, like, everybody was happy with that. Because First Nations people have never stopped calling for justice, it's just their voices have obviously been minimised and silenced at certain points in history.

But I think obviously where we are at now, when you look at the content that people have put on stages in recent years, it [forefronting First Nations artists] means you know what's up, and if you didn't address it and respect it in your line up, you're blatantly sidelining it. Because you know it exists, so if you choose to not engage it, that is a conscious decision to sideline it.

Why representation matters in the intercultural space

Alex: So, if we were to bring it back to the theme of intercultural music engagement—getting people to engage with and understand different cultures through music—does it matter what kind of Indigenous music it is? Can it be any music an Indigenous person does, or does it need to be Indigenous cultural music or Indigenous cultural religious music? Would any of those be more powerful or of more value than the others in that intercultural music engagement space?

Neil: I think there has to be the knowledge that the person is a First Nations person, that's pretty key. Say hypothetically you got somebody who's like an Indy rock artist, like Triple J[8] Indy rock, but they're an Indigenous artist. And then you've

[8] Triple J is the longest and only national youth-focused radio program, and is supported by public

got the equivalent kind of artist from "Canada," and you put them together to do a collaboration, to the naked ear the tangibility of that being an intercultural experience might not be there.

To me then, this is a large part of the branding and public relations work that an artist does. They can then expand upon that, so that their PR campaigning really opens up that understanding of the cultural roots of this individual, and that provides a narrative that those two artists can weave together, which is rooted in their identities as First Nations people. For me, I don't feel like anyone has a right to say that's an appropriate intercultural collaboration versus a yidaki player and a First Nations drum player from "Canada" doing something together.

I wouldn't say one of them is more intercultural than the other, but it is about "what is the value?" The same could be said—it could be a yidaki player who has no knowledge of so-called "Culture." It could be somebody who grew up in the stolen generation[9], or their parents might have been stolen generation, and they might not ever live on their Country. But they're an amazing yidaki player who lived on the other side of Country from their own homelands. Versus, there could be someone who's an Indy rock artist who grew up full law[10] way, so you've got to ask the question. Someone might say, "well, alright. The one considered as more cultural music is that Indy rock artist because that person is a so-called cultural person."

Alex: From your perspective, is it important or useful to be able to make those distinctions? Or is that a distraction from a bigger conversation?

Neil: I think it's important to see things for what they are and in the wholeness of what they are and what they represent. I think looking at the music that's on the stage without the context of what it's attached to in terms of that person's identity—I think particularly within the First Nations space—that's a very problematic thing to do. And it's not valuable to look at it purely as "what's the music that's on the stage," because the music on the stage is never just the music on the stage.

Also, if we're reflecting upon Indigenous law systems and even, say, the right to perform music on a certain part of Country, well, you know you need to know, "who's that person on the stage?" If someone's performing music on your Country, the biggest question is "who are you, and why do you come here to perform music on my Country?" And if you can't tell me those things, then you don't have right, you know, in a law sense, to perform music on this Country.

So, for me it is important to think about the backdrop of the person. But in terms of what's more fit for intercultural opportunity, a lot of it just comes back to the respect and the integrity of the artist's work and the respect and integrity they have around their own respects for Culture and their own . . . sorry, if you've got no respect for your First Nations Culture as a First Nations person, then for me, well, there's got to be question marks around the legitimacy of what you're doing. If you're exploiting it purely for commercial gain then no, you're not deserving of that opportunity versus someone who respects that in the same way.

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funds.

[9] The Stolen Generation refers a generation (or more) of Indigenous peoples in so-called "Australia" who were forcibly removed from their homes and families to be assimilated into white Australian society by government services. These practices were carried from 1910 into the 1970s, and were sanctioned by the state as part of the White Australia Policy. Many Indigenous people are still discovering their cultural heritage.

[10] "Full law" refers to closely observing the Indigenous laws of one's own Mob and Country.

So, for me, it's more about the integrity the person comes forward with that gives them the right to have certain opportunities. And that also comes into, if the person is say, stolen generation who's never lived on their own Country and doesn't know anything about their Mob, like just being honest about that is really important. Then that means there's more chance for people to connect to what their true essence is, and what that's really connected into. No, honesty is really important about those artists as well.

At the same time, I guess there is a lot of "right time at the right place." And in a fractured post-colonial society, a lot of things will be "this is the right artist at the right time to have this opportunity" and all we can hope for in the best-case scenario is that they respect that opportunity that they've been given and that they acknowledge the privilege, as well, of having the particular opportunity and being mindful that we're really in a state of flux.

As long as we're in a particular colonial constructed society, a colonial "dictated to" society, First Nations roles and responsibilities for ourselves will be unstable. So, we can just do the best we can at the moment. And the best we can at the moment is to come as respectfully—and even ourselves constantly acknowledge that we're all still learning things. None of us have anything perfected because we don't operate as an island of ourselves. We still have to connect into other relationships and it's not even about us being imperfect. It's about we exist in imperfect times so that means nothing can be perfect. And these are imperfect times for me, the earth and the Ancestor's blessings that come down upon us.

Summing up

Alex: So, I've got two more questions for you. One we've already talked about a bit, but it's a question that I've finished all my interviews with, and that is: what would be helpful, or useful to support artists in this time who are wanting to engage in the kind of intercultural music engagement we've talked about?

Neil: Definitely. There's obviously line-ups inclusion, and that being done within a respectful way. There's obviously supporting First Nations-led initiatives as well, economically. Also, a sharing and redistribution of power or platform that many people have. There's obviously been the pass the mic thing, that's taken place in certain shapes and forms. There's still a lot more work that can happen with that. A lot more. There needs to be significant resourcing into the private-based activity as well, for the exchange and the connection of First Nations and then, reaching out into other spaces as well.

But just being put in a position of empowerment to be able to do the work. For example, I feel like, to be honest—this is how much I value First Nations musicians—I think First Nations musicians should automatically be in a position of having a set income. All First Nations people, if you want to be a musician, you should have an employment income and that it gives you something to do to give your gift to the Songlines that everybody benefits from. You should be on a wage, like you're really a medicine person of song ultimately, for me.

So, then people who are in those positions are already in a position of empowerment and a position of advantage to be able to then lead different initiatives. And the kind of different initiatives that may come out of that could be quite powerful and be quite remarkable. So, I guess it does come back to valuing of the First Nations artists. And I believe in our artists because a lot of our artists are visionaries, but as in the type of visionary capacity which allows First Nations artists to dream of new things and structures, and so on, in a way that,

that is so incredibly unique. Obviously not all First Nations artists are within this mind state but a lot of them are.

They are dreaming of a better world for our people and they're dreaming of how they're using their music and their skills to contribute to that. So, resourcing all of those people adequately, that's one of the biggest pieces of work that you could do. And, also, to facilitate the kind of organisational support necessary for the First Nations music sector. I look at it like, there should be a First Nations youth sector that is so robust that it can exist independently of anything else, without even having to give a forethought to anything else that's going on.

There should be resourcing, so the communities have touring artists coming to them regularly, across Victoria for example. No artist should be struggling to find work, there should be enough work for artists to connect them to gigs around home, let alone doing a bunch of other different shows. So, I think it needs to be part of the economy of so-called "Australia" just the same way you pay teachers to be teachers. The same way you pay any other fundamental aspects of the normal day to day running of society. I know it's a tough one to get over the line and it probably may not ever get over the line until we potentially have so-called treaty or agreement arrangements that encompass that. And I think it's going to have to be First Nations people who make that decision to say, "these are the things we value in our community, and these are the people we're going to ensure have an ongoing income." I don't see it happening outside of that kind of arrangement.

That's the ideal kind of arrangement anyway: that we resource ourselves and make these decisions and empower those people. And then those people have endorsement by their community, which is actually more powerful anyways than the music industry saying "we endorse that artist and we endorse that artist" where it's the white taste buds determining what First Nations talent should get invested in. And I have a whole bunch of different problems with the nature of that, and how that sets the chains on what is appropriate of First Nations music. So, there's definitely a couple of ways, and those are some.

Alex: Yeah awesome thank you, thank you. And my final question is, is there anything you would like to say that we haven't already touched on?

Neil: Probably on closing, the things I've really touched on throughout this is that you just can't get the best outcome from music in this country without acknowledging colonisation and its impact to this Land. And the inequitable Euro-patriarchal-centric structures. And gladly that language is becoming common speak, and people are acknowledging that. So, I guess acknowledging the full depth to that and really being able to… I think having the average person within the music sector or whoever engages with music, be fully across that and cognisant of that and to me that's really crucial. And it does mean that people have to keep doing the educational work in their own time as part of their self-growth work and we're not excluded from that.

I guess that's the thing I like to remind people is that we've got to keep growing as well as First Nations people. We don't rest on our laurels either, in terms of upholding our best way of behaving within our own communities. And trauma has inflicted itself, within our communities. None of us are perfect either but we're striving for a state of equitability for our people, and I think the industry has to understand that it's about equity not equality. It's really important, the equality conversation versus the equity conversation.

So really, I think it's crucial that people keep having these discussions to the point where it's really reinforced that equity is what we need to be working towards and that everybody needs to have action plans based around that. And

> that action plan, it can't sidestep the fact that it needs some sort of remuneration, and you can't sidestep the fact that the power dynamic has to change. You can't say Black Lives Matter and then the power dynamic stays the same then you really . . . and I don't even know who said Black Lives Matter. You didn't really say it, you just regurgitated it . . . probably my takeaway or closing words.

Discussion

Neil's Practice

Contemporary Indigenous arts practice, and creating in relationship to Culture and Country

From a western academic perspective, Neil's descriptions of his work position him as a recording artist, community musician, and activist whose practice is dedicated to social justice outcomes for his community and First Nations peoples everywhere. Yet, his responses indicate a practice that is so much more than that. It is a practice for the Ancestors, for future generations, for the Land. Ultimately, it is guided by connection to Culture, Country, and spirituality—all of these being things white or western cultures have long struggled to both understand and possess. The fluidity of these very such constructs have also long been the chagrin of western scientific disciplines (Baldwin et al., 2006; de Brito Sena et al., 2021; Jastrzębski, 2022; Mironenko & Sorokin, 2018; Reisinger, 2025), leaving us within the academy with few coherent theories with which to attach or authentically explain the depth of Neil's work.

Thankfully, a growing league of thinkers are integrating Indigenous Knowledges (Bennett & Menzel, 2025) and postcolonial concepts (Castillo et al., 2019; Hutchings, 2021) into mainstream academia, offering some language to signify the value of Neil's practice as a contemporary First Nations arts practitioner. For example, as Neil describes, his creative work is ultimately a spiritual and cultural practice. At the core are ritual and healing elements, and a commitment to honouring Ancestors and Country. As similarly described by Robinson (2020) these ideas can be seen to connect Neil's work to constructs of Indigenous Knowledge, sound, and creativity—similarly reflected in other First Nations arts practices elsewhere in the world—rather than colonialised notions of musical excellence, or individualistic understandings of artistic vision.

Neil also describes his practice as evolving over time, and links it to several elements of contemporary music culture like Hip Hop, groove, and loop-based production. These links signal an important departure from romanticised notions of Indigenous music, which often represent a desire from the white community for static, essentialist, "ethnic" cultures (Proulx, 2010). Rather, the links Neil describes contribute to a nuanced understanding of how Indigenous arts practice has evolved in the context of post-colonial settings to better speak to contemporary Indigenous experiences, also described elsewhere (Proulx, 2010; Robinson, 2020).

In both cases, we can see Neil building and inhabiting a space in the postcolonial world which is not defined by the same narratives and false binaries which are often used to organise, define and arguably control cultural production and participation. Yes, Neil is an artist who plays "Indigenous" music. But he is also a cultural ambassador, a spiritual practitioner, a human rights activist, a Hip Hop artist, electronic music artist, acoustic artist, teacher, and above all, a healer.

Experience as First Nations cultural worker/ambassador in industry contexts

Neil's work in industry contexts can be seen as an extension of his artistic practice. The description of his role within industry organisation, the Victorian Music Development Office, further demonstrates a clear commitment to First Nations Culture and artists, with a more directed goal of helping them thrive in a contemporary industry framework. Specifically, Neil expresses a desire to see First Nations artists take their place as story tellers and Culture holders within the mainstream contemporary society that has come to exist—through genocide and colonisation—on their Ancestral Lands.

Neil's experience and work in this space speaks to many issues that still mar First Nations and people of colour in creative and industry spaces. As scholars have long recognised, in the west these spaces continue to be shaped by systems of colonialism and white supremacy (Burnett et al., 2023; Capitain, 2017). Therefore, as Neil argues, it is critical for First Nations people to have trusted networks and agents within the industry infrastructure to support them. There is also a significant amount of behind the scenes work necessary to ensure, for example, that working spaces are culturally and emotionally safe for First Nations peoples to inhabit.

The importance of providing culturally safe workspaces is becoming increasingly apparent, as it is revealed as a sticking point for organisational change. In the wake of George Floyd's murder in 2020, and the subsequent resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, many organisations across the world have hastened to add "Diversity and Inclusion" agendas to corporate responsibility portfolios. In practice, however, these efforts are often mired by a lack of work and preparation on the part of the organisation to prepare for the significant shifts necessary to support inclusive participation (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024; Friedman & Hirakubo, 2025). In contrast, it is often the people of colour brought in for representation that are left to manage resistant or ignorant attitudes towards change from senior staff (Crooke et al., 2025). As Neil shares, there is a real need not only to acknowledge the extra cultural and spiritual labour First Nations peoples are doing in these spaces, but also to provide them appropriate support.

Reflecting on my own position as a white settler regarding this point, I couldn't help but think about Neil's comments later in the interview: that we all have a role to play in supporting Indigenous artists. The work of making industry and institutional settings safe for First Nations artists need not be the work of First Nations folk only. In fact, Bird (2021) and others have argued members of the cultural majority (ostensibly, white people) should take on most of the labour in reshaping our institutions as more inclusive.

Yet, while there is a clear need for cultural and emotional labour from white and non-Indigenous people, Neil also expressed the value for First Nations-only spaces and the need for infrastructure developed for and by First Nations communities. This aligns with a larger need for Indigenous sovereignty in so-called "Australia" and elsewhere and echoes existing literature which states the importance of Indigenous-owned/led arts spaces and initiatives for asserting and affirming identity, and thus enacting sovereignty in public space (Robinson, 2017).

Perspectives on Intercultural Music Engagement

Exploring when and where Indigenous music is "intercultural"

The idea of intercultural music engagement (ICME) was explored several times throughout the interview given it was central to the larger research project (for information on this topic, see Crooke et al., 2024; Crooke et al., 2025). When asked if our conceptualisation of ICME resonated with Neil, and how he positioned his practice, Neil shared that it is a driving motivation behind his DRMNGNOW project—continuing that educating others

about his Culture through his music was a major goal.

Again, however, Neil shared that not everything needs to be "intercultural," and there is great value in having practices, music, and spaces just for "Mob" (local First Nations people). This idea further supports appeals for Indigenous sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). It also offers a timely reminder for those of us who are—again—members of the cultural majority: the value of Indigenous and minority cultures is not found in their ability to serve the needs of the cultural majority.

Indigenous music, Culture, and tradition in today's society

Neil's view on what constitutes "Indigenous music" in an intercultural context offers some invaluable insight into the contemporary landscape of First Nations music and Culture. First, he shares his belief that all music carries with it some remnants of the musician's cultural roots. In other words, the essence of an artist's identity informs their art by default, meaning any music created by an Indigenous musician is Indigenous music. This, then, offers two provocations. The first is whether mainstream society's predilection for static, romanticised cultural tropes has only ever been a function of whiteness—in that it maintains clear civilised/uncivilised dichotomies—rather than respect and understanding of people from minorities (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). The second, perhaps more challenging question is: if descendants of white Europeans were able to connect to their own ancient, pre-enlightenment ways of knowing, could our music also be considered Indigenous?

Neil extends his idea further, adding that if an Indigenous person is doing music on these Lands, then it's Indigenous music whether they identify or not. However, he goes on to suggest that discussions around the "cultural" aspect of Indigenous music, shifts the conversation again given there's not a clear definitive threshold between what is considered truly "cultural" and what is not. And, lastly, when it comes to Indigenous cultural religious music, one may argue it needs to be done in pre-colonial ways to be considered authentic. These examples show that there is no monolith of Indigenous music, and that it can be understood as existing in concert with other music cultures, or as something completely different. This aligns with recent arguments that there is a tendency to essentialise indigeneity in academia, and that this ultimately serves to promulgate colonial discourses and power structures (De, 2025).

Young People's access to First Nation's Culture in school

Neil raises an important point in his observation that young people should have access to First Nations Culture and systems of thinking from early childhood. First and foremost, this imperative rests on the understanding that these are the traditional Cultures and systems of the Land and exist in unison with it. In the global context, organisations such as the United Nations have long argued that a young person's access to culture (including their own) is a basic human right (United Nations, 1959). Further, music educators have argued that access to diverse knowledge systems and cultural identities through school music is a matter of social justice (Ladson-Billings, 2015, 2023; Lai, 2012). In this case, access would seem necessary for both young First Nations people to experience their own Culture, as well as non-First Nations people in order to learn how to relate to the Lands and space in which they find themselves.

As has been argued elsewhere, access to culture (including music) is critical in the socialisation and identity formation processes in young people (Eaude, 2024; Ward & Szabó, 2023). This aligns with Neil's argument that access should be consistent throughout schooling to promote a sufficient level of immersion for it to become part of young people's core understanding. Lastly, Neil shares that being an artist who releases content can be a

good way of creating that immersion by making it a part of the fabric of omnipresent popular culture. One way of thinking about this is making music and culture a part of the habitus of young people in their earlier stages of development.

COVID-19

Impact of COVID on First Nations artists

Neil also reminds that the lack of resources and opportunities during the COVID crisis has amplified inequity in the sector. For example, he suggests we have seen a 10-year regression in terms of how First Nations and people of colour more generally are included in the scene, which in some ways resembles a return to tokenism—a trend also reported in places like the "US" (Cuyler et al., 2022). Further, while COVID did offer potential for reflection and connection with First Nations Culture and practice, that potential was not realised.

The impact has been particularly felt in grass roots areas, where in-person collaboration and mobilising have been important. There also seems to be a lack of corporate responsibility in the sector, at a time when it is needed most. Neil also offers several important ways that we can all support First Nations artists in times like this.

Lastly, while there was an undoubted loss of in-person connection at a difficult time, there were benefits of online connections with other artists. In particular, Neil highlights the potential for connecting people to/between First Nations Cultures across the globe

Indigenous Arts in Industry Contexts

The need for First Nations focused frameworks and resources

In commenting on industry contexts, Neil extends the idea of First Nations networks by arguing infrastructure which enables Mob to share resources among themselves. This can also be seen from a human rights perspective, in which a society built around equality affords First Nations peoples the same chances that those in the mainstream of white supremacy receive. There is also a need to acknowledge the value and importance of First Nations people and Culture on the Country we're on and take a lead from them in fostering inclusive communities on this Land.

Learnings for the Music Therapy Profession

While it is hoped this manuscript offers learnings to all who engage with it, there are several things which emerge as particularly relevant for those in the practice of music therapy, or practices like it. These are outlined below in the hope that music therapists can develop an engaged, honest relationship with traditional custodians of any Lands they find themselves upon and critically reflect on the responsibilities of any artistic practice in these spaces.

- As a matter of human rights, people working with the arts on colonised Lands should consider how their practice is positioned in relation to the Country they are on, including the people and Culture of that Country.
- When it comes to inclusion in any setting, there is a need to go beyond tokenistic representation, and crucially, to consider whether the space is safe for the person coming in, i.e., what is the existing level of cross-cultural understanding among people in the space? Are there support structures in place?
- In recognition of the continuing structural discrimination against First Nations peoples,

practitioners and educators may consider brokering real, genuine, collaborations.

- These need to start with relationships, and people need to recognise there is work First Nations communities in places like so-called "Australia" need to prioritise for themselves before they can start engaging other cultures.

Summing up

Through presenting a conversation with First Nations artist and custodian of Culture, Neil Morris, and music and health researcher, Alex Crooke, this paper offers unique insight into the issues faced by contemporary Indigenous artists. While the paper covers a range of topics, from working in industry contexts, to access to Culture in schools, there is a clear message which underpins all of the discussion, and one that is of central relevance to any practitioners working at the intersection of music and health: it is necessary to recognise and authentically engage with First Nations Culture, and related traditions around music. An understanding of these things is not only necessary as a matter of respect, but also for any person or practice that hopes to get the most benefits of any music practice on these Lands.

About the Authors

Neil Morris is a Yorta Yorta Kaieltheban song writer, Hip Hop and Electronic artist and producer who, through projects like DRMNGNOW, uses his music to explore Culture, Community and Country. Through storytelling, Neil provokes discussion and education around "Australia's" Indigenous history and future, and the constant strength and struggles of his people in post-colonial "Australia."

Alexander Hew Dale Crooke is a white settler of predominantly Scottish and Irish ancestry, who was born on Wiradjuri Country, and currently lives and works on the Lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung peoples of the eastern Kulin Nations in so-called "Australia." Alex is a transdisciplinary researcher who works across the fields of Hip Hop studies, music therapy, sociology, psychology, music education, critical cultural studies, and social policy. After completing a PhD in Music Therapy and Social Policy, his research agenda has centred on the individual and social affordances of music in community and education settings, with an emphasis on musical participation as a site for social justice work, and access to culturally responsive arts experiences. He also works internationally as a consultant in the design, implementation, and evaluation of arts programs in school and community settings.

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