INTRODUCTION:
WHEN AURAL MAPS COLLIDE:

It is no minor anecdote in the history of metaphors that when Jon Rose set out with a violin bow to make music from the longest stringed instruments on Earth, he discovered that they are fences in Australia. The dingo fence alone is approximately twice the length of the Great Wall of China. Before that, Australia’s Rabbit Proof Fence was arguably the longest thing of any kind ever made. After the Australian government made it their official policy in 1931 to separate children of half-Aborigine/half-white parentage from their tribe to raise them in camps as domestic laborers for whites, three young girls famously escaped and realized that they could find their way home by walking for nine weeks along the Rabbit Proof Fence which stretched nearly 2,000 kilometers across the continent. It was one of the longest walks in the history of the southern hemisphere, and they succeeded. To keep such massive physical objects standing and functional, individuals known as “fence runners” are made responsible for patrolling their own relatively “small” 150-mile section of such fences in some of the most remote and hostile locations on the planet. Some can’t handle the loneliness: fence maintenance in Australia has a history of suicides, murders, and lonely graves.
When considering the gargantuan labor and loss of life required to build such enormous musical instruments, it is a fantastic irony that their engineers had no idea they were constructing them all the way across the only continent whose entire landscape had already been transposed into a musical score. The original custodians of the land believed that nothing existed unless it had a song which could be sung. By knowing the song of every rock, tree and lump of dirt, Aborigines not only possessed a sonic map which allowed them to navigate their way through the unforgiving landscape, but also to experience the spiritual significance of every topographical detail in their path as musical notes scattered by their totemic ancestors. “In theory, at least, the whole of Australia could be read as a musical score,” Bruce Chatwin once wrote. “There was hardly a rock or creek in the country that could not or had not been sung. One should perhaps visualize the Songlines as a spaghetti of Iliads and Odysseys, writhing this way and that, in which every ‘episode’ was readable in terms of geology...a featureless stretch of gravel was the musical equivalent of Beethoven’s Opus III.”
By being just insane enough to “go bush” for over four years, conjuring music from 25,000 miles of Australia’s fences and the Songlines they arbitrarily cross, Jon Rose and his partner Hollis Taylor understood that they had stumbled upon a continent-wide musical spy hole into how the human mind invests dreams in its surroundings for the dividends of meaning they may return. What the Aborigines saw as a gigantic spiritual web of living musical vibration, the Europeans saw as a blank canvas on which to project the sanctity of private property (sound like the music industry?). Where the Aborigines saw a desert that could only sporadically support a few dozen people over an area the size of a major county, the Europeans saw a perfect place to plant two million head of cattle to materialize their nostalgia for home. To calculate the amount of fencing the Europeans constructed to falsely convince themselves they could stabilize the colossal consequences of such quixotic fantasies, you’d need a measuring stick that stretches from the Earth to the moon. Looking further back, the invention of barbed
wire in the nineteenth century coincided almost perfectly with the start of the modern state of Australia, where it was erected ad nauseam to the tune of millions of kilometers, transforming the continent into a prison colony for England. This theme park of suffering was primarily reserved for impoverished homeless people who received lifelong banishment for violating laws protecting private property. At the time, this was a worse offense than attempted murder, which was classed as a misdemeanor until 1803. As historian Robert Hughes put it, “Such lives confirmed [that] the worst offense against property was to have none.”

But, in one of history’s fantastic ironies, these prisoners had been banished to a land whose native inhabitants had no concept of private property whatsoever. The Aborigines had over 40,000 years experience knowing that to make one place as your home in that environment was suicide, so “to feel ‘at home’ in that country depended on being able to leave it” (Chatwin). They saved nothing, routinely set fire to several square miles of territory just to catch the handful of goannas or marsupial rats that hid in bushes, and kept on the move while they did so. For them, surviving required such boundless creativity and fluid movement, that “ownership” of the land equated to understanding it, and knowing it's inner song.
Each individual inherited some fragment of the landscape in its musical form, and by adding up the individuals and the music they were entrusted with, you’d have a sonic map of the continent. This was needed not only to navigate through it, but to preserve it: for them, nothing existed unless it was sung into existence, and to stop singing would cause it to disappear. Knowing the music incorrectly could result in the death penalty. It would not only unravel creation, it could cause one to stray off the Dreaming Tracks of their ancestors.

So in the Australian outback, Rose found himself at the intersection of two very different musics, arising from two cultures projecting their own dreams upon the vast landscape when they gazed upon it. Fences and Songlines were each unique sonic articulations of ownership, giving voice to how these cultures related to their surroundings: one defined by a physical material that divides and the other by a cross-cultural transmission that connects. “The outback fence, that iconic divider and protector, is a metaphor for the duality with which the human mind analyzes and copes with situations,” Jon once said, “All human beings have this in common. There’s the unknown and stepping into it or stepping away from it. The difference in culture is that European man decided to make it a physical barrier...At the same time, fences also mark...the notion of belonging to lands and cultures and political systems...fence construction has inadvertently given us a means of expressing musically, with a direct physical connection, the whole range of intense emotion tied up with the ownership of the land.”

All of this puts quite a spin on the observations of French economist Jacques Attali: “Music, as a mirror of society...is more than an object of study: it is a way of perceiving the world. A tool of understanding...Music, the organization of noise...reflects the manufacture of society; it constitutes the audible waveband of the vibrations and signs that make up a society. An instrument of understanding, it prompts us to decipher a sound form of knowledge.”
Perhaps in the sonic map Jon Rose has made of Australia's fences, we have a clue, a picture, of why music affects all of us so deeply. Perhaps our personal distinctions between music and noise reflects (and affects) our internal map of the borders we cultivate within ourselves and then project back upon the world we experience. Perhaps music is not just a movement of air that triggers emotional reactions in us, but a magnifying glass which makes us stand in relation to our notions of “self” and “other,” value and worthlessness, transcendence and the mundane, and re-evaluate them. Perhaps music compels us to rethink the maps our lives make out of the complex phenomena of the world around us.

And this is one of the reasons why I see, in Jon’s Australian odysseys, a picture of what can happen when music goes to work as an active ingredient within us. It is a realization of something John Luther Adams once said, “All my life I’ve believed in the possibility that one person can change the world, and in the imperative to do so. Yet it’s not really the world that needs to change. It’s the quality of our attention to the world.” By setting out to make a sonic map of the fences that divide Australia, Rose wound up with an additional map, of the people who live on both sides of these fences. Many of them were musicians and instrument builders living in remote locations across the continent without any infrastructure to catapult their unique musical voices out of their geographical isolation. They had to rely on the impetus that Rose has described as “the do-it-yourself nature of music in this country,” and the good fortune of finding themselves in the path of someone like him who cared enough to pay attention to these people and places that most would rather ignore. Jon compiled the musicians he met from both sides of Australia’s fences into a giant chamber orchestra at the 2005 Melbourne Festival. They performed together on the same stage as if to suggest precisely what fences cannot contain.

By following his own Songline through the Australian desert, Jon was able to give voice to an inner life of Australia that had never been heard before (at least not in unison). It’s one of the reasons I traveled halfway...
around the world to Australia twice in 2009, retracing Jon's footsteps. It's why I found myself in a punk club in Sydney watching Lucas Abela scream into amplified glass before we discussed the music he makes on electro-acoustic trampolines, destroying CDs with amplified skewers, and the race tracks he was making out of vinyl records to be played by modified remote control cars with styli attached to their undercarriages. It's why I rode a bus 12 hours north the next day to hear one of the last Aborigine gum leaf players pull a branch of her backyard gum tree to her lips and make the leaves sing like Caruso. It's why I journeyed to Australia's central red deserts to find an Aborigine women's choir and a singing dog, and listen to the only air in the world where Mass is breathed in the language of the Western Arrernte.

It's why I made sure to get to know everyone helping Jon construct his chamber orchestra of bicycle-powered instruments, because I was sure they would each turn out to be a musical cosmology of their own. Sure enough, that's how I met Rod Cooper, who was building a full-size sailboat in which every part (well over a hundred) is to be bowed or plucked as a musical instrument; Garth Paine who was placing bio-sensors on dancers to make music directly from their body movements; and Robin Fox who was using lasers and cathode ray oscillators to make the underlying geometry of music visible to listeners as they hear it, while writing music for people with cochlear ear implants, so that they can once again enjoy the sound of music without technological distortion.

Then of course, there's Jon's friend Stelios Arcadiou, known as Stelarc, who had a cell-cultivated third ear implanted into his arm, and has allowed his body to be controlled remotely by electronic muscle stimulators connected to the internet. But there are other Australians who don't view their own bodies as such obsolete musical technology. The Tasmanian guitarist Greg Kingston has turned his physical disability of Tourette Syndrome into musical ability, deliberately harnessing the sporadic and explosive short-circuiting in his basal
Feature  An Aural Map of Australia

Stelios Arcadiou (Stelarc)  photo credit: Nina Sellars
ganglia into an entirely original style packed with such alarmingly speedy energy, humor, sadness, stupidity, and wisdom that it makes him cry (along with the audience). David Harvey has a severe form of autism in which almost every action, including conducting trees, graves, people, and the city as his own giant musical composition, is, according to Jon Rose, “making sense of his world through music. I’m not suggesting that we all go round conducting trees or traffic, although I’d be the first to sign my name up to such a project, but I find David’s perception of a holistic musical environment much more compelling than the last performance I heard at the Opera House.” Multiple sclerosis couldn’t stop John Blades from becoming a major figure in Australia’s alternative music scene, and he told Jon that his condition had actually reversed through his involvement with music.

Jon documented over 200 artists across Australia, each with something valuable to contribute to our understanding of what music is and can be. Before Jon, some of them had never been given a stage, let alone a place in any “official” or “approved” histories of how our species uses sound to engage with our surroundings. “My point is that you can and should research and write your own history,” Jon has said, “if it has content, it will ring true. It might also provide the materials with which to challenge the future...a desire and passion for experimentation in the face of official mediocrity.”

Jon has argued that the history of modern Australia can be seen as running parallel to the history of its fences. But his aural map of the country reminds us that this does not have to remain its legacy. Creative music is the sound of our struggles against the limitations of our bodies, our technology, our language, and our geography. It is the imprint we leave on our social confines. It can transport us to a height where we look down and see how impotent such fences really are. At that altitude, those on all sides of fences may experience music as a celebration that we “own” nothing, but share much.

Steve Elkins
PART II: AN AURAL MAP OF AUSTRALIA

The following is a transcription from the 13 minute film “An Aural Map of Australia.” See the film at www.cadencemagazine.com or youtube: keywords: Aural Map of Australia

Jon Rose: Australia...it's a frustrating place. It's a disaster, culturally. Australia is this country which remains hopelessly in...what they call here a “cringe,” it has a a cultural cringe, and it's unable to believe that anything good ever happened here, that it's all happening somewhere else and we have to import it, which is complete nonsense. Just take the didgeridoo, circular breathing, I mean its been going on here 40 thousand years, so you don't have to look very far to find things which have been developed here.

Hollis and I, my partner and I, we've made a number of trips around the country, playing the fences—I think it was a total of forty thousand kilometers in four or five years—basically getting an audio-visual map of the country through the fences. It brings you in direct contact with really the real people of Australia. Various things came from this, and certainly research into the history of music here. Everybody knows about the didgeridoo. The fact is, it wasn't played very much in Australia by Aboriginal people. It was an instrument that really was only played in the north, in Arnhem Land in particular. But there are other instruments that Aborigines played.

Roseina Boston: I planted this tree myself, about nine years ago, so I can always have a gum leaf handy when I want it. (Roseina blows on the edge of the gum leaf and plays the ‘Happy Birthday’ tune with a horn-like vibrato).

Jon Rose: We met Roseina Boston, who is a Gumbayngirr elder.

Roseina Boston: In the bush when the old people used to go hunting, they'd sit down behind a bush with their spear and boomerang, the old men, and they'd play [the
gum leaf]. They’d probably mimic birds, like...
[Roseina mimics native bird sounds on the gum leaf, and her dogs start barking]. Then the animals would get inquisitive and look up to see what’s making that strange sound, and the old fellas would kill them with their boomerang or spear, and that was their tucker (bush food). That was our culture.

Jon Rose: “The gum leaf was used by Aborigines in Christian church services by the beginning of the 20th century, and reached popularity in the 1930s when the desperately unemployed formed 20-piece Aboriginal gum leaf bands. Armed with a big Kangaroo skin bass drum, they would march up and down the eastern seaboard—demonstrating a defiance in the face of the whitefella and his economic methodology. The Wallanga Lake Gumleaf Band played for the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1932. Why isn’t there a 20-piece gum leaf band marching down George street on Australia day? This is the New Orleans trad jazz of Australia.
Roseina is the only Aboriginal woman today who plays the gum leaf. She’s an amazing person. Like most polymaths, she paints, she dreams, she sings, she plays gum leaf. There’s no barrier to her creativity. If she dreams a dream, she will go and find out where the dream happened. So she’ll get in the truck with her husband, and go off driving until they find where the dream took place. So she dreamt one dream that she was sitting in a pool of water and there were black snakes swimming around her. And then she went off and it happened. So this notion of the Dreamtime is alive and well in a lot of peoples brains in this country. It’s not just in some mystic Past. And like a lot of Aboriginal people, she’s really into country and western music.” (Footage of Roseina playing the gum leaf in a “country/western” band.)

Roseina: “The gum leaf is not heard so much as the didgeridoo and clapsticks, because not too many people can play the gum leaf. It’s a dying heart, and I’m trying to keep it alive.”

Jon Rose: There were hundreds of thousands of pianos in Australia in the nineteenth century, and they weren’t just in Sydney and Melbourne, they were taken all over the country by bullock dray or on the backs of camels. A good friend and colleague, Ross Bolleter, makes this sort of specialist art form out of playing ruined pianos - not prepared pianos, that’s somebody else’s issue, but pianos which have been basically trashed by the climate, or cultural neglect, or a combination of both. Through his work we can hear what the continent of Australia has had to say about these bastions of western culture: the climate has simply destroyed the vast majority that were ever sent here. So Ross started the World Association For Ruined Piano Studies (WARPS), which includes a ruined piano sanctuary at Wambyn Olive Farm in Western Australia, where they are collected from all over the country, in various states of entropy, then scattered around the landscape, crumbling out their final days to the tune of gravity and the odd cyclone coming in off the Indian Ocean. Bolleter’s use of history to make new and poignant music is exemplary.
Feature An Aural Map of Australia

Ross Bolleter Ruined Piano Sanctuary

64  |  CADENCE  |  JULY  AUG  SEPT  2012
Feature

An Aural Map of Australia

Ross Bolleter Ruined Piano Sanctuary

Rod Cooper’s Boat Instrument, photo credit: Jesse Boreham
Right in the center of Australia, we encountered the Ntaria Aboriginal Women’s Choir, whose music sounds like nothing you’ll hear anywhere else in the world. It exists only because of the local collision of two extremely different cultures busy converting the material world into the spiritual (but in the opposite order from each other): the Aborigines and Lutheran missionaries that arrived in the nineteenth century. The women sing the Chorales of J.S. Bach in their own Arrernte language, with their own culture’s articulation and timbre. Neither Bach, nor the native music of the Western Arrernte, have ever sounded this way before.
We met some extraordinary people, extraordinary musicians, most of whom Australia has never heard of, let alone the rest of the world, and so I wanted to somehow bring together a good diversity of these musicians under one roof.

One of the first trips I ever made to Western Australia, there was the West Australian Chainsaw Orchestra (WACO). The chainsaw orchestra was formed as an ironic demonstration against old growth forest logging. They cut all the trees down to make fences, and in Australia the trees don’t grow back. And I thought, hell, this is more than just sort of a demo’, this is actually musically very interesting.

And then later on in the piece, we actually played saw. Long saws that they used to make for cutting down big trees. Nobody makes them anymore, because everybody’s got a chainsaw, so the only people who make really long saws are people who make them for musical saw playing.

Sue Harding had collected dozens and dozens of dot matrix printers and set them up in the most beautiful rhythmic counterpoint.

Sue: When I printed things with my computer, it actually seemed like music to me. I just wanted to make it so that other people could see that.

Jon Rose: We met Lucas Abela who specializes in screaming into amplified glass. Normally he breaks glass, and blood pours out of his mouth. I first met him when he was still a DJ. And instead of records on his turntable he’d have lumps of concrete, and metal, and glass, and he’d attack them with a samurai sword.

Dinky is probably the most in-demand musician in the Northern Territory, if not Australia. Dinky packs in fans and admirers every night. Dinky is a dingo. He performs at Stuart’s Well Roadhouse, 80 kilometers south of Alice Springs, where every night he jumps on the piano and sings. And he’ll often accompany himself by walking up and down the piano. The people who come to see him have to be careful though, because he sometimes bites their arms.
Feature
An Aural Map of Australia

Lucas Abela: photo credit Steve Elkins
Vinyl record race track, modified remote control cars with styli by Lucas Abela: photo credit Lucas Abela
Dingos used to be your average, happy-go-lucky wild dog, but now they're like this sort of crazed pathological killer, because they've all interbred with other species, due to all the white people bringing their other kinds of foreign dogs into this country. To stop them from eating all the cattle and sheep the Europeans likewise foolishly imported, we built the largest artifact anywhere in the world: The Dingo Fence, which, before it was shortened around 1980, was nearly 10,000 kilometers long. And they spend millions of dollars every year keeping it upright, trying to get it to work, but you go there and you can find huge holes, literally a dingo freeway through the fence.

So while the Australian taxpayers take a bite out of their ass to keep the fence going, the reality is that methods like aerial baiting programs are used, in which chunks of kangaroo injected with poison are dropped from planes, so that when the dingoes eat them, it speeds up their hearts, causing them to run frantically until they collapse. It's long overdue that dingoes be allowed a voice in the musical history of this country, given the critical role they've played in its development. My partner Hollis played some harmonically structured Lutheran hymns on the piano and Dinky sang along quite clearly in phrasing and pitch. He knows what he's doing.

Jim Cotterill (Dinky's owner): Jon called me over and said, did you know Dinky is changing his harmonic range to suit the piano playing? Jon later sent me an extract from a book called "Man and Wolves," and it talked about wolves changing harmonic ranges when they travel. They found ways to use different harmonic ranges as a defense mechanism to make them sound like bigger packs of animals than they are. Now, the fact that dingoes separated from wolves thousands of years ago, there's nothing to say that this skill is not still somewhere in their evolutionary memory. Dinky sings. There's no doubt about that.
Feature
An Aural Map of Australia

Dinky, the singing Dingo: photo credit Jon Rose

Playing saws: uncredited
Feature   An Aural Map of Australia

West Australian Chainsaw Orchestra (WACO)

West Australian Chainsaw Orchestra (WACO)
Feature An Aural Map of Australia

Jon Rose: We met John Traeger in a drunken night in Milparinka, in a pub. Round about midnight, this guy got on top of a table and started auctioneering off stuff, all kinds of odd articles of underwear for charity. Brilliant repartee. I started talking to this bloke about auctioneering and he opened up this whole aural world halfway between singing and halfway between speaking; essentially a Sprechstimme, what Schoenberg thought he invented at the beginning of the 20th century. In Australia, each state has a completely different style of auctioneering, the tone, the language, the speed, the inflections of pitch. It’s the most definable state-by-state Australian musical resource I can think of. Queensland is really the place for it. In Victoria, they tend to be a bit slow. In South Australia, they’re sort of somewhere between the two. Talk about projects waiting to be done, I have a bunch of pieces I’m writing just for auctioneer and string quartet.

There’s the whip-cracking tradition in Australia. It’s a huge thing. When we incorporated a whip player into the Pannikin orchestra, the musicians had to wear goggles, since the health and safety people weren’t exactly thrilled about a whip whizzing around the musicians’ faces. (CAPTION: Ashley Brophy)

There was a mechanic in Perth who dropped a spanner one day and heard it made a very nice sound on the concrete floor, so he started playing spanners, you know, like a sort of xylophone. And that was his creation, which is just wonderful that people would, in this day and age, do that. Mostly they’re too lazy to even pick up a spanner, let alone drop one, let alone hear music from one, so you know he’s already about four or five stages down the track, this guy.

COL-E-FLOWER makes music from homemade vegetable instruments such as his carrot bagpipes and celery-sweet potato trombone. The Roadkill Drummers make their musical instruments out of dead animal parts found on the roads of Tasmania. Jodi Rose turned Sydney’s Anzac Bridge into a musical instrument, then
made a global symphony of over fifty singing bridges. Greg Jenkins plays digitally processed cactus spines. Andreas Hadjisavvas has been singing “Thank You Very Much” almost non-stop for 27 years.

Michael A. Greene can whistle and hum different tunes at the same time, or he can hum the same tune in the canonic form. He can, let’s say for example, whistle the tune the right way up and then he’ll hum the tune at an inversion, in other words the upside down version.

Leslie Clark, he used to just go around with a placard on his front: “The Man Who Plays Music With His Fingers.” Pretty well everything from Frank Sinatra to the Beatles, and sell cassettes for two dollars and fifty cents each at the campuses of Melbourne University, and then give the money away to charity. (Leslie snaps the tune ‘Jesus love me this I know’) And this was a kind of signaling he’d learned to do with his brother, as kids.

Michael Hope is probably the last of the great department store pianists, maybe in the world. This guy has a staggering repertoire of maybe three thousand tunes, and he can modulate, cut them up, and bridge from one tune to another without any hesitation at all. He basically also performs this amazing social function. I mean, people who are desperate, I mean desperately lonely, fucked up people who go, you know, for retail therapy...he’s there for them. Women just dote on him, of all age groups.

Ron West runs the oldest continual running silent cinema in the world, it’s been going since 1921. He plays the organ. He’s also been running the same movie for the last 17 years. “Son of the Sheik” from 1926, starring Rudolph Valentino.
Feature  An Aural Map of Australia

It's worth having a music of location. This is what keeps me in this country; there's not much else. And I'm interested also in the notions of “collision-cultures,” sort of the opposite of world music, you know, instead of becoming a gooey porridge, they actually collide and sparks come off them, and they make something different which is unimaginable.

Most Australians don't know anything about their own country, they've never visited it. Often you feel that the people living here don't understand what they're doing here. They're more likely go to Indonesia for holiday than visit Alice Springs. The gatekeepers of culture in Australia would rather there was no history until about the 1960's because they're embarrassed by what went on in the music halls, in the vaudeville, in the do-it-yourself nature of music in this country. But I find that quite an extraordinary and rich, vibrant history that is to be investigated and celebrated.