

# TRAVERSING THE WAVES

## Bridging Cultures Through Music

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Movement between countries can be difficult, if not daunting, for those trying to adapt and create a new life. One of the primary issues facing immigrants is how to become functioning members of their new countries and communities. This includes learning how to access services and facilities, how to manage education and training differences, how to meet people and handle social assumptions that are accepted without question in the new culture, and how to overcome language differences. Simultaneously, migrants must also negotiate how much of the original culture to retain, and what methods and processes facilitate this maintenance, a process that Adelaida Reyes has described as migrancy.<sup>[1]</sup> This paper presents a case study of one group of young Seychellois people, currently living in Perth, who have consciously sought to address these issues of home, origin and belonging through music.<sup>[2]</sup> The band they formed is called Seychelles Rhythms. I met the founder and original manager, Giovana Neves, through working with her at an Employment Service and subsequently made a short documentary about the group, *A Seychelles Rhythm*, as part of a Murdoch University undergraduate assignment in 2001. Throughout subsequent years, I have maintained my connection with the group, interviewing them for different projects and purposes. This paper aligns these studies.

I begin with a brief history and geography of the Seychelles as its music is bound to this environment and colonial context. Like the young islanders who move to Perth in Western Australia, I trace the movement of music from the islands to Perth. Through following the triumphs and frustrations of this group, this paper explores the challenges for migrants in retaining place, space and self while simultaneously embracing Australian citizenry and citizenship because, although each group and individual has unique experiences, these can resonate for others, enabling self-awareness and collective insight.

The Seychelles is an archipelago of 115 islands in the Indian Ocean covering an area of approximately 450 square kilometres, just 4 degrees south of the equator. The islands are still covered in lush, tropical vegetation and surrounded by broad, white, sandy beaches. The islands, with a current population of approximately 81,000, were uninhabited until the French landed there in 1742, formally claiming them in 1756. The

population grew from the original French colonists, deportees from France and large numbers of African slaves who were initially brought in to work the land. After the Napoleonic wars, the colony was ceded to the British, remaining under their influence until granted independence in 1976. The following year, a coup d'état formed a republic that continues to this day. Through the years, Asian influences arrived with migrants from India, China and Malaysia. Widespread intermarriage has resulted in a people of mixed descent with a unique language. This is evidenced by the islands' official languages, which are Creole, French and English. This diversity flows into the music that permeates all aspects of life for the Seychellois. While it has roots in the rhythms of Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, the music also incorporates European influences, particularly French. These elements continue to shape the music which spans traditional, hip hop, electronica, jazz, blues and pop.

While there are Seychellois communities in Melbourne and Sydney, many immigrants from the Seychelles end up in Perth, which hosts two Seychelles clubs. A number of the Seychelles polytechnic teachers were educated in Perth and pass on their love and knowledge of the city to students who, in turn, come to the city to complete their education. After finishing study, many of the students return to live permanently, creating a growing network of friends and family which encourages more Seychellois people to move to Perth than other parts of Australia.

A similar path was followed by Giovana Neves when she came to live in Perth to attend university and then stayed for ten years, although she returned to the Seychelles in 2005. Giovana became concerned that Seychellois youth were not attending social functions held within Perth's Seychelles community, and would thereby lose their cultural heritage and identity. Combining her love of her culture, dance and music, she formed the Seychelles Cultural Troupe in 1997 as a means of engaging and involving young Seychellois people. As Giovana explains:

*I feel that it is important that you don't lose your roots, your sense of grounding, because it does give you a sense of identity and 'being' as well. But also, it gives you something where it acts as your springboard so that you can actually acquire other cultures and get also a sense of respect for others and also be able to share what you already have.<sup>[3]</sup>*

The original members, Giovana, Grace and Joelle Barbe, and Jacqueline Anacoura, began performing traditional dances to a tape and guitar while they saved for a drum set and other band equipment. In 1999, the group incorporated as the Seychelles Cultural Troupe WA Inc. Remaining under this banner, the band evolved into a distinct identity, naming itself Seychelles Rhythms in 2000. Members have changed and numbers fluctuated over the intervening time. At present, the band consists of Grace and Joelle Barbe, Jacques L'Etourdie, Jemmy Louange and Michael Laporte, who are all Seychellois. Throughout its history, the band has incorporated people from England, Australia and Samoa, although the majority hail from the Seychelles. One band member explained that although he had been born in Australia, being a member of the band had provided an avenue for him to access and appreciate his Seychellois heritage.<sup>[4]</sup>

When Seychelles Rhythms perform, they draw on African, Caribbean, Indian and European influences. The group uses keyboards to reproduce the French influenced sounds of accordion and violins. They mobilise the African soukous and the moutya. Soukous is dance music that originated in central Africa in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, its name being derived from the French word for ‘shake’. Recent forms include high energy dance music due to the work of Kanda Bongo Man. The moutya is a traditional song originating with the African slaves in the Seychelles. The song constitutes a dialogue between a man and a woman: the man calls out and the woman answers. The accompanying dance is highly sexualised, incorporating slow, accentuated hip movements.

After the eroticism of moutya, the band can segue into the sega, an up-tempo rhythm that evolved from a combination of Mauritian and Réunionnais folk music. Both the sega and the moutya have been translated into a contemporary context and instrumentation, with the use of electric instruments. The band also plays seggae, where sega is blended into reggae, softening it into a mellow, lilting sound. Similar to the sega, but with an even faster pace, is a Caribbean zouk, which is Creole-based.<sup>[5]</sup> Lead singer, Grace, clarifies the rationale for this diversity: “if it’s catchy and creates a good vibe, a good mood, a good beat, we take that new idea. Beat is very important because what we play is to let people dance to it and feel the music”.<sup>[6]</sup>

The band calls on various people from within the community to perform traditional Seychellois dances at some of their performances and works closely with a Seychellois DJ, who plays ‘island vibes’ music during the breaks. The DJ plays music which is vibrant and with a strong beat that demands dancing rather than attentive sitting and listening. The playlist includes old island songs, as well as the latest in club music that he brings in from the Seychelles, and also music from America or Aotearoa/New Zealand, displaying an openness to cultural diversity that history and geography have encouraged in the Seychelles.

The enthusiasm and commitment of these young people was evident from the outset; when the Seychelles Cultural Troupe incorporated, it instigated a five-year strategic plan that included specified goals. These were aimed at promoting Seychelles culture, providing an awareness and understanding of the social, cultural and economic contributions made by Seychellois to the wider Australian Society, creating a platform for social and cultural interactions and sharing of ideas with other cultural groups and businesses, and providing a total Seychelles experience through ways of life, arts, music, literature, cuisine and cultural exchange. Seychelles Rhythms sought to achieve these aims. In 1999 and 2001, the band played at the Minnawarra Festival, a celebration of multiculturalism held in Armadale, a suburb of Perth. They have also taken part in the multicultural Festival of Light at Murdoch University, and the Perth Youth Festival.

In March 2001, as part of Harmony week, the group organised the Gosnells Multicultural Festival, which attracted large numbers of people. In the weeks leading up to the festival, they undertook workshops in collaboration with other artists, including an African band and a South American dance instructor. This series of free workshops taught 150 people dances from South America, Africa and the Seychelles. On the day of

the festival, many of the 500 people attending were dancing the salsa and the sega on the podium and around the stage. Interest generated by the event led to a six-month series of dance workshops. It energised the band, giving them a higher profile and spreading knowledge of Seychelles culture.

It was later in that year that I made the documentary about the group, which involved interviewing the band members. They all enthused about what they had accomplished and were looking forward to furthering the goals in their strategic plan. Together with their desire to bring Seychelles culture out into the wider community and to work with other cultural groups, the members of Seychelles Rhythms also showed a strong desire to establish themselves as part of Australia, not an excluded community. This desire to translate, build and create dialogue has a powerful social and political energy and importance. In 2001, this goal led to the band taking part in the Centenary of Federation celebrations. In Giovana's words:

*We wanted to be part of the moment and be Australian. . . . We've a different culture, a different background but yet we are people living in Australia, who have embraced the culture. And it is very significant in that it is the same process of embracing the culture and being accepted as well.*<sup>[7]</sup>

The band successfully applied for a Gosnells City Council grant to write an appropriate song and perform it at the Gosnells Centenary Fayre (sic). They brought in Alan Webster, a professional musician, to mentor and workshop with them. The group decided on sega but also included elements of jazz and rock. *Federation Song* incorporates sega in the drumbeat, a reggae rhythm through the keyboards and a rock bass line. Overlaying this hybridity is a potent melody and, as Grace suggests, "the most important thing: a catchy chorus for people to pick up and sing".<sup>[8]</sup> The group's belief in the song was vindicated when they played it on the day when people danced and sang along to the chorus.

The performance of this song at the Gosnells Centenary of Federation celebrations contains both irony and hope. The irony stems from this group of young people of colour writing and performing a song that celebrates Australian Federation. This is the same Federation that, through the 1901 Commonwealth Immigration Restriction Act instigated the White Australia Policy that would have effectively barred their immigration to Australia. However, there is also hope because the vestiges of this policy were finally abolished under the Whitlam government in 1973 (Tavan, 2005).

In early 2005, a book on the Perth music scene was published: *Liverpool of the South Seas: Perth and its Popular Music* (Brabazon, 2005), which included my chapter on the Seychelles Rhythms. At that time, when discussing the *Federation Song*, I wrote, "even when barriers and exclusions are resurrected through government policy, a popular multiculturalism has changed Australia and Australians" (Shave, 2005:169). While it is just over two years ago that I wrote those words, I have less faith in the force of this change as neo-conservative Australia furthers its move away from multiculturalism.<sup>[9]</sup> However, I do retain some hope because this band of Seychellois people, singing a song about a unified Australia, with English lyrics accompanied by music influenced not

only by rock and jazz, but also Caribbean and Indian rhythms, actualises the multicultural project.<sup>[10]</sup>

Until the end of 2004, the band continued to hold four or five dances throughout the year—the most important being held on New Year’s Eve. This night was a direct link to the most festive occasion in the Seychelles where, over a week, families that might be spread throughout the islands for the rest of the year come together in order to celebrate the past year and welcome in the next. The band has forged links with other Perth cultural communities, including the East Timorese and Samoan communities. Indeed, Seychelles Rhythms was invited to play at the Perth welcome for the Samoan Team who played in Perth for the 2003 Rugby World Cup.

In October 2003, when I interviewed Giovana prior to writing my chapter, the group’s efforts appeared to have more than met the goals set out in their strategic plan. I was, therefore, surprised when Giovana described the last four years as a “long and frustrating journey. It is full of disappointments and, I would say, some despair”.<sup>[11]</sup> This attitude developed through the group finding itself at the mercy of institutions that were neither supportive nor understanding of the group’s goals. Local councils, trying to maximise income, insist on charging high fees for venues despite the group actively promoting multiculturalism and better understanding between communities. This problem was exacerbated by the cost of both equipment and practice venues. When band members are either studying or on low wages, the cost of putting on an event can seem overwhelming.

At that time, Giovana described multiculturalism as something that is talked about by the federal government, but which is not a lived experience for Australians. While some councils do try to promote and encourage diverse music, there has often been a lack of consultation and communication. These systematic and institutional concerns indicate a lack of value placed on creative development. This lack of support from local organisations can be exacerbated by internal competition within communities.

When I interviewed her in late 2003, it had reached the stage where Giovana was seriously questioning whether it was worth the effort and the disappointments, despite her love for her country, her music and the young people in her community. Giovana returned to the Seychelles to live early last year. Unfortunately, despite trying a number of avenues, I have been unable to contact Giovana to discover whether concerns about Australian multiculturalism contributed to her decision.

Despite Giovana being the main motivating force behind the Seychelles Cultural Troupe and Seychelles Rhythms, her leaving has not led to their demise. The band continues, with Grace Barbe taking over the role of manager while retaining her roles of bass player and lead singer. When I interviewed Grace in January this year, I was encouraged to hear that the band remains dedicated to ensuring that Seychellois culture will flourish in Perth. Grace still maintains the commitment as evidenced when I interviewed her in 2001:

*It's so sad to see some cultures dying. And I don't want to see that happening to my culture. So, we want to be able to pass on what we have to the next generation. And, looking at people like my sister Joelle, and Navim, the younger ones, coming in and playing the music—the guitar and the drums and writing music. And speaking the language and all. It's a good sign. So we'll know that they can pass it on to the next generations as well. So, I think that's really, really important.<sup>[12]</sup>*

These words demonstrate Grace's understanding of the importance of intergenerational linkage in cultural continuity.

The band is currently assessing how to achieve its aims of encouraging young people to have an interest in their culture and to also bring that culture to the awareness of the wider community. One of the difficulties is that three of the members of Seychelles Rhythms are now also members of a successful Perth reggae band, *Raggabeats*. Their music is mainstream and popular. The band has two or three gigs per week. As the members are unable to focus their attention on both areas while keeping up daytime jobs and study, the commercial opportunity has gained increasing importance. However, Grace wants to incorporate some of the more traditional Seychelles elements into *Raggabeats*, fusing them with the reggae rhythms. As people often approach the band members after the gigs to ask questions about their culture and music, she hopes that this will create a pathway enabling greater access to the more traditional Seychelles music.

As Grace Barbe explains:

*There's a diversity of cultures in Australia, here, and I'm thinking why can't we expose our culture and we've got the potential, we've got the capacity as much as all the other cultures to expose ourselves. And it's a beautiful culture—beautiful rhythms, beautiful people—and I think we can do it.<sup>[13]</sup>*

Unfortunately, there is a discrepancy between government policy and lived multiculturalism. The New Agenda for Multicultural Australia, tabled in Federal Parliament in December 1999, aimed at making multiculturalism relevant to all Australians, and ensuring that the social, cultural and economic benefits of diversity were maximised. It refers to strategies, policies and programmes designed to make Australia's administrative, social and economic infrastructure more responsive to the rights, obligations and needs of its culturally diverse population. They are also intended to promote social harmony among the different cultural groups and to optimise the benefits of cultural diversity for all Australians. This strategy does not work for Seychelles Rhythms. While Perth and, indeed, Australia, contain the fabric and rhythms of multiculturalism, there must be structural change and political commitment if we are to recognise, encourage and celebrate diversity. Seychelles Rhythms is one group of dedicated people that is transferring and translating their small island culture into that of Australia. Cultural and creative development should be taken seriously so that cultural groups such as this can be resourced—and not just financially. It remains to be seen whether current policy manages to fulfil its promise and assist groups such as Seychelles Rhythms. The Western Australian Government's Department of Culture and

the Arts' report, *Championing Creativity: An Arts Development Policy Framework for Western Australia 2004-2007*, proposes to support creative activity in Western Australia, with "Young people and the Arts" and "Multicultural Arts" being two of its four priority areas (ArtsWA, 2004:9). This would initially appear to augur well for Seychelles Rhythms. However, *Championing Creativity* is based on the cultural industries model, which focuses on funding arts organisations, rather than individuals and groups.

Further difficulties that Seychelles Rhythms face when trying to access government funding become apparent through examination of ArtsWA's definitions. 'Commercial music' is incorporated into creative industries while 'music' is included in the creative arts sector. While Kulcha Multicultural Arts of Western Australia received triennially based funding as of 2004, the majority of music represented in the funding recipients is primarily classical, jazz and experimental (ArtsWA, 2004:15), or what may be considered high art. The music of Seychelles Rhythms does not fit into this category; rather, it is quotidian music that encompasses their culture, or music to dance to, instead of an intellectual engagement. Neither is their music currently commercially viable. Seychelles Rhythms slips through the definitional gaps of this policy.

There are other models available. Through developing partnerships between industry, business, universities, the professions and government, creative industries has the potential to assist in endeavours such as those undertaken by this group of young people through its linking of the economic and the artistic. Indeed, it could be of great benefit for Seychelles Rhythms by enabling corporatisation and loans for further equipment. Setting up a supportive infrastructure under the aegis of creative industries could also assist with recordings and venue hire. Enabling groups such as Seychelles Rhythms is vital, not only to assist small island groups retain their origins and identity, but to ensure that all Australia's citizens have the opportunity to learn the steps of difference, diversity and social change.

## Endnotes

[1] Adelaida Reyes utilises this concept to designate the social dynamics that result from the movement from one place to another. It focuses on the emotional, psychological and creative behaviours that are produced by the move, rather than the physical locations (Reyes, 1999:206).

[2] This paper examines the response of a particular group to migrancy and the band they formed. For an alternative approach that overviews a migrant population, see Cathy Falk's work on Hmong living in Australia, which includes aspects of musical practice (Falk, 1993,1994).

[3] Giovana Neves, original Manager of Seychelles Rhythms, videotaped interview 15 October 2001.

[4] Band member, Seychelles Rhythms, videotaped interview, 15 October 2001. This participant gave permission for me to draw from the interview for the original documentary. However, as I am unable to contact the person I am reluctant to use their name or pseudonym in this paper.

[5] Samples of soukous and zouk are available at Pan African Allstars <<http://www.panafricanallstars.com/default.asp>>.

[6] Grace Barbe, lead singer and current manager, Seychelles Rhythms, videotaped interview 15 October 2001.

[7] Giovana Neves, videotaped interview 15 October 2001.

[8] Grace Barbe, videotaped interview 15 October 2001.

[9] As Richard McGregor has noted, in John Howard's first term of government he "almost single-handedly wiped the word multiculturalism from the mainstream political lexicon". (McGregor, 1999:163). Howard's negative attitude towards multiculturalism continues, as evidenced in his 2006 Australia Day Speech:

*We've drawn back from being too obsessed with diversity to a point where Australians are now better able to appreciate the enduring values of the national character that we proudly celebrate and preserve . . . that dominant pattern comprises Judeo-Christian ethics, the progressive spirit of the Enlightenment and the institutions and values of British political culture.* (Howard, 2006).

[10] The optimism of *The Federation Song* is evidenced in its chorus:

*Centenary of Federation,  
That's the reason for our nation.  
And as we all now just work together . . .  
Oooh, a future so bright.*

[11] Giovana Neves, audiotaped interview 20 October 2003.

[12] Grace Barbe, videotaped interview 15 October 2001.

[13] Grace Barbe, videotaped interview 15 October 2001.

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