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Music in the Tropics

Looking from Townsville to the Pacific through Arts Festivals

Abstract: This article examines Townsville's distinctiveness as a site for festivals which looked to the Pacific region in presenting arts and culture. Two festivals – the Townsville Pacific Festival (1970-1991), a ten-day celebration of arts and culture in northern Australia that ran for over two decades, and the fifth Festival of Pacific Arts (1988) – made their home in Townsville. In placing these two very different festivals side by side, we draw attention to the distinctive flavour of engagement with arts and culture prosecuted in Townsville in the 1970s and 1980s. Leading from the north, the celebration of “high art” alongside Indigenous cultural heritage of the region points to the role of Australia's north in reorienting the focus of Australian cultural life. In this article, we introduce the two festivals, which, while being independent of one another, demonstrate a shared aspiration for defining far north Queensland as a site of diverse cultural practice. Each festival negotiated the Australian arts landscape represented by government departments and arts bodies including the Australia Council for the Arts and Musica Viva, but also created a distinctly localised leadership that guided the priorities of the Townsville Pacific Festival and the 5th Festival of Pacific Arts.

The Townsville Pacific Festival (TPF) was repeatedly described by local council officials as a “mirror of our way of life”.¹ From the first festival in 1970 through to the last festival in 1991, the TPF presented a diverse program of events, from sporting events to fashion parades, displays of art, ceramics, gems and handi-crafts, cultural exhibits, open-air concerts, and the iconic mardi gras and street parade. Among this broad view of what was included in the festival, its planning and programming nevertheless emphasised that “first and foremost [this] was designed to be an international arts festival”.² Early festival organisers aimed at putting Townsville ‘on show’ and – in common with other arts festivals of the era – counteracting cultural isolation.³ The early TPFs reached out to national and international arts networks as well as neighbouring Pacific countries for content and collaboration. In the early years, Townsville wanted the TPF to be for Townsville what the Adelaide Festival of Arts was for Adelaide. Later festivals, however, looked inwards to the local community and were remembered as “really grassroots”.⁴ John Wright, the festival's president in 1978 explained:

There is nothing which identifies a city more than a successful Festival. Adelaide would be merely a pleasant city nestling rather inconspicuously at the base of its rolling picturesque foothills if it had not been identified throughout Australia and much of the world through its Festival of Arts. The image of Edinburgh in Scotland would still revolve around its castle rock if it had not achieved instant recognition and renown through its own outstanding Festival. There is no doubt whatever that the shortest cut to national recognition for Townsville would be a

- 1 Percy Tucker: Message from His Worship the Mayor – 1978 Festival Program Book; Entertainment for Everyone – Festival Program Book 1979.
- 2 Tony Raggatt: The Day the Festival Died, p. 21.
- 3 See Harold Phillips: Greetings From His Worship the Mayor – 1978 Festival Program Book, PAFA; also Rose Gaby: An Australian Stratford, p. 167.
- 4 Julia Russoniello: Interview with Mike Reynolds, 26 February 2025.

Festival of such calibre and quality that it would identify not only this city but the whole of North Queensland and its attendant the Great Barrier Reef.⁵

The 5th Festival of Pacific Arts (FOPA), hosted in Townsville in 1988, was similarly ambitious in scope. Arising out of international diplomatic negotiations among colonial nations in an age of decolonization, the first festival had been proposed through the South Pacific Commission by Fiji, while it was still an external territory of Britain, and took place in Suva Fiji in 1972 – two years after Fijian independence (and two years after the first TPF).⁶ Involving delegations from 26 nations from the Pacific region, including Australia, the first festival had been directed by Australian singer and producer Victor Carell. The fifth festival saw Townsville host these delegations with significant leadership from local Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal cultural and arts leaders, as well as institutional representatives from Australia's major arts bodies outside of Townsville. The 1988 festival coincided with the bicentenary of the establishment of Australia as a British colony, and the original idea for the festival had come from a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts and Crafts Workshop proposal for a Townsville-hosted FOPA to be part of Bicentenary Celebrations.⁷ However, as 1988 approached, the organisers persistently asserted that the two events were unrelated. Thus as Aboriginal activists contested the widespread celebrations of the bicentenary in Sydney and at the Brisbane Expo '88, in Townsville negotiations focused on looking towards the Indigenous practices of the Pacific region and distancing these efforts from the colonial bicentenary milestone altogether.

This article analyses the evolution of the two festivals and their negotiation of local, national and international cultural priorities. We situate the various foci of the festival that flared and faded over the twenty years within wider constellations of culture, celebration and arts practice. This article contributes to a field of scholarship on regional festivals and the cultural and political work they have done, examining, in particular, the aspirations for cultural enrichment that drove regional festivals in the 20th century.⁸

The Townsville Pacific Festival

The idea of the Pacific Festival was brought to Townsville by a man named John Raggatt. Raggatt was appointed to the role of Public Relations Officer for the

5 President's Message – 1978 Festival Program Book. Interestingly the first Perth Festival in 1953 went ahead on the organising Adult Education Board's proviso that it "kept to the higher cultural level, following more or less the Edinburgh Festival", John Birman: Festival of Perth, p. 17.

6 See SPC Savingram South Pacific Commission to Commissioners and Routine Distribution Territorial Administrations 3 November 1965.

7 Clyde Holding, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs to Prime Minister Bob Hawke, 26 June 1984.

8 See Kay Dreyfus: The South Street Eisteddfod, pp. 99-121; Rob Edwards: Birthday Parties and Flower Shows, Musters and Multiculturalism, pp. 136-154; Kate Darian Smith: Histories of Agricultural Shows and Rural Festivals in Australia, p. 39; John Birman: Festival of Perth, pp. 10-32.

Townsville City Council in 1967, a position he held until his retirement in 1975.⁹ Raggatt's son Tony wrote in the 'Townsville Bulletin' some twenty-five years after the first festival that his father had written "the blueprint for the festival, gave it its name and its symbol the Brolga".¹⁰

In 1967, John Raggatt was well placed to inspire the idea of an arts festival for Townsville. After serving in the Royal Australian Airforce during the WWII years, Raggatt worked in the English theatre with Sir Donald Wolfit's Shakespeare company touring Italy, Yugoslavia and Austria. In 1956 he returned to Australia to work as a freelance writer and went on to become the Director of Publicity, Concerts and TV Time for the ABC in Melbourne and Adelaide.¹¹ Raggatt was involved with the organisation of the Adelaide Festival of Arts in the 1960s as well as the Moomba Festival in Melbourne.¹²

The idea for the Townsville Pacific Festival reportedly came to Raggatt on the plane on his way to take up his appointment with the Townsville City Council.¹³ The proposal for a festival for Townsville, which followed, emphasised that a Pacific festival – one that encouraged closer relations with Townsville's northern and Pacific neighbours – would give the suggested festival the best chance of success. Raggatt went on to highlight that such a festival would be in line with Australia's current policy and needs, and had the potential to be "an event of some importance to the country".¹⁴ In 1967, as Raggatt flew north to take up the role, major cultural transformations were underway that would lead to the establishment of new arts funding through the Australia Council, and new Indigenous companies such as the Aboriginal Theatre Foundation, Black Theatre and Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre, driven by the self-determination agenda of the era after the 1967 referendum for constitutional change.¹⁵ Just as the TPF was in formation, the Australia Council's new funding model that centralised federal grants and built on the work of earlier arts bodies including the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, Musica Viva and the ABC, would transform the cultural sphere of the late 1960s and early 1970s.¹⁶ Raggatt explained that in contrast to most of the celebrations along the eastern coast, which are "little more than parades or carnivals through the streets", a festival for Townsville should "aim high".¹⁷ In an address to the Townsville Chamber of Commerce in 1969 Raggatt emphasised:

9 See Pam Raggatt, John Raggatt: The Bull Dancers of Knossos, p. 631; Festival President Retires.

10 Tony Raggatt: The Day the Festival Died, p. 21.

11 See Local Man Wins Major Art Award, Local Collection Newspaper File; Port Lincoln Times, 27 February 1964, p. 1 (Famous Artists for EP Concerts).

12 See Tony Raggatt: The Day the Festival Died, p. 21.

13 See His Idea for Festival Here – 1974 news clipping.

14 Raggatt also wrote that "A festival of this nature would also have the advantage of being the first, and I believe only, large scale event of its kind to be presented in Australia". John Raggatt: A Festival for Townsville.

15 See Amanda Harris, Representing Australian Aboriginal Music and Dance 1930-1970, p. 114.

16 See Richard Waterhouse: Lola Montez and High Culture; Katya Johanson, Ruth Rentschler: The New Arts Leader; Amanda Harris, Representing Australian Aboriginal Music and Dance 1930-1970, p. 114.

17 John Raggatt: A Festival for Townsville.

We make no apologies whatever for our hopes that this festival will be a major event in Australia, and that it will have an impact on Townsville's stature as a progressive Australian city – an impact on Australia's relationship with overseas peoples, on the standards of artistic expression in our region, on our civic pride and economic growth, and on important aspects of our way of life both now and in the future.¹⁸

In June 1970, Townsville presented its first Pacific Festival. Raggatt's aims for the festival, which were, for many years, repeated in festival publicity and programs were to:

- Promote greater understanding and friendship between peoples in the neighbouring countries of the Pacific region.
- Assist local and regional organisations, cultural groups and participating bodies to advance their own aims and raise performance standards and
- Create greater interest among Australians and others in Townsville and North Queensland.¹⁹

The accompanying symbol of the Brolga depicted looking up captured a sense of place and a spirit of aspiration.

The inaugural festival opened with an outdoor gala concert, which brought together the Queensland Symphony Orchestra, a 400 Voice Festival Choir and the Royal Australian Infantry Band. The presentation culminated in a performance of Tchaikovsky's '1812 Overture' which was repeated in 1972 augmented by the guns of the 4 Field Battery Royal Australian Regiment.²⁰ Such large-scale musical spectacles were a feature of the festival and an example of one of the ways in which the TPF encouraged Australians to look up.²¹

Large-scale concerts

Impactful open-air musical displays were an ongoing drawcard of the TPF. The first festival promised readers of the 'Sydney Morning Herald Holiday and Travel Survey' jazz concerts, symphony, art exhibitions and a film festival.²² From 1970 to 1976, the gala opening concerts were performed by the Queensland Symphony Orchestra. By 1978, however, this tradition had shifted toward a more contemporary approach, featuring the rock 'n' roll band Ol' 55 alongside the Royal Australian Air Force (R. A. A. F.) Band.²³

18 John Raggatt: Address to the Townsville Chamber of Commerce Meeting.

19 J. Raggatt to A. Hull, 8 May 1974, Townsville Pacific Festival – Arts Activities 1970-1974; It's Festival Time Again.

20 See 1970 Festival Program Book, p. 6; 1972 Festival Program Book, p. 9; Tony Raggatt: The Day the Festival Died, p. 21.

21 This article originated from two presentations developed for a panel at the Australian Historical Association's conference 'Looking Up', hosted by James Cook University in Townsville. We are indebted to the conference organisers for the prompt that their thematization of the conference provided for our thinking in this article.

22 See Alan Goodall: Everyone Invited to Cook's Fiesta, p. 6.

23 In 1977 the Royal Australian Air Force band played the TPF's opening concert and the QSO performed at the Lavarack Barracks on the following Monday. See 1977 Festival Program Book, p. 8.

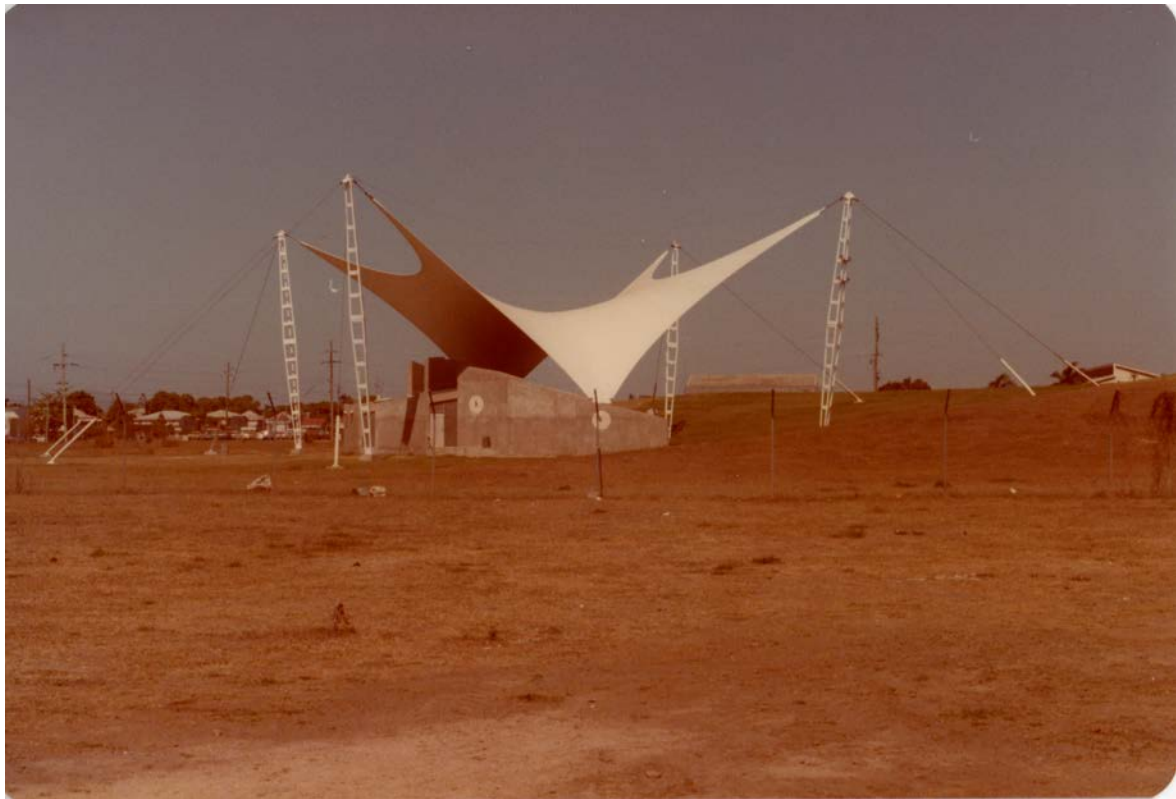


Fig. 1: Sound shell, Dean Park, Townsville, (n.d.)

Military bands were an ongoing musical and visual centrepiece of the festivals. In 1972, in addition to partnering with the QSO in the opening concert, the army staged an entertainment day at the Lavarack Barracks. This event included displays of equipment and aircraft, artillery and mortar demonstrations, a helicopter assault landing, parachutists, a band concert, a cross country run and fair-ground activities.²⁴ In subsequent years, both local and interstate military bands continued to feature prominently.²⁵ In the 1980 festival, the North Queensland Army Band played the opening concert and later enacted a “Beating the retreat ceremony” as well as Tchaikovsky’s ‘1812 Overture’ with gunners, howitzers and fireworks.²⁶ Other openair displays over the years included parades, massed band concerts and a “musical tableau” of the Battle of Waterloo.²⁷ This musical “battle”, complete with rifle and artillery fire, was staged at several festivals and was described by Sydney wine and food personality Johnnie Walker in 1977 as “undoubtedly the most memorable event for me”.²⁸

Popular music also had a significant presence at the festivals and revolved around the Dean Park ‘Sound shell’ – a blue polyweave structure contemporaneously likened to Melbourne’s Myer Music Bowl (see Fig. 1).²⁹ Beginning as an earthen amphitheatre in 1969, the venue was upgraded in 1975 with a concrete

24 See 1972 Festival Program Book, p. 27.

25 See *Busy in Townsville*, p. 8; *Festival Ends on a High Note*.

26 1980 Festival Program Book, p. 2 and p. 21.

27 *On Show in Townsville*, p. 10.

28 Johnnie Walker: *Fun in the Townsville Sun*, s.p.; *Townsville Army Show*, p. 1; *Busy in Townsville*, p. 8.

29 On the proliferation of sound shells in the mid-century for open air concerts see Kate Darian Smith: *Histories of Agricultural Shows and Rural Festivals in Australia*, p. 39.

stage and dressing rooms.³⁰ Across the two decades of Pacific Festivals the Sound shell hosted many leading Australian artists, including Sherbet, Daryl Braithwaite, Ross Ryan, Lee Conway, Skyhooks and John Paul Young, among others.³¹

The appearance of the Supremes at the 1974 festival was seen as a “tremendous coup”.³² A local article highlighted that “Townsville can be justly proud of the fact that it is listed with Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane on this exclusive six-day Australian itinerary”.³³ Similarly, the 1974 program proclaimed; “The Supremes will only give six shows in Australia. The performance at the Townsville Pacific Festival is their only provincial date in this country”.³⁴

Pacific Content

The TPF was the first festival of its kind with a Pacific focus in Australia and predated the first Festival of Pacific Arts (FOPA) by two years. Cultural exchange, both within Australia and with overseas nations was from the earliest planning stages, a priority for the festival. A press release for the first TPF lead with:

BIG INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL FOR TOWNSVILLE. A major international festival, the first of its kind ever presented in Australia, will be held in Townsville June 6-15, 1970. The mayor of Townsville, Alderman Harold Phillips announced this to-day. The event aimed at promoting closer ties with Australia's neighbouring countries in the Pacific and south-east region will be known as the Pacific Festival.³⁵

Raggatt's original aim – that the festival would promote greater understanding and friendship between peoples in the region – was reflected in the programming of the early festivals. As noted in one article entitled “City's March to Cultural Maturity”, the author states, “nowhere has the city's striving for cultural maturity been so amply demonstrated as in the emergence of the Townsville Pacific Festival”.³⁶

The inclusion of international culture in the first festival was modest, with the only items in the program listed as: Tongan crafts, exhibitions by a number of Pacific countries and Eastern countries display.³⁷ However, by 1972 this dimension of the festival had expanded to include international displays from Canada, Taiwan, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Thailand, and the United States.³⁸ Baranggay Dancers from the Philippines performed on the opening night and travel films featuring the Pacific region were shown at lunchtime sessions.³⁹ In 1974, invitations to participate in the TPF were issued to twenty Pacific countries and the following years saw performances by

30 See Ian Frazer: Sound Shell Rocked, But Soon Rolled Over.

31 See 1976 Festival Program Book, p. 23; 1978 Festival Program Book, p. 35 and p. 49; Sunday Concert – 1978 news clipping.

32 Tony Raggatt: The Day the Festival Died, p. 21.

33 The Supremes Here Sunday – 1974 news clipping.

34 1974 Festival Program Book, p. 34.

35 Press Release – 12 April 1970.

36 City's March to Cultural Maturity.

37 See 1970 Festival Program Book, pp. 7f.

38 See 1972 Festival Program Book, p. 5.

39 See *ibid.*, p. 13.

the NEMIL Dance Group from Papua New Guinea, the Dance Concert Company, and a Fijian delegation.⁴⁰ The Murray Island Dancers also represented the Torres Strait Islands. Reflecting on the Papua New Guinean and Fijian festival acts, John Wright, the festival's director in 1978, wrote "it is only in this way and through the interest and dedication of us all that the Townsville Pacific Festival will grow into an event that will lift this city from some obscurity into the international limelight".⁴¹ The 'Townsville Bulletin' printed that the involvement of the groups from Papua New Guinea and Fiji was "achieving the festival's principal aim to foster good relations between south Pacific people".⁴²

Australian Arts Networks

The TPF was seen by the Council as an important moment for Townsville to connect with national arts networks, as Townsville often missed out on the artistic influences available in the major cities, due to its geographical isolation.⁴³ The problem of distance was recognised by locals and outsiders. John Raggatt emphasised in 1976, "there is a terrific problem Townsville has of isolation, being so far from the main centres where the major entertainments are produced".⁴⁴ On the opening of the Townsville Civic Theatre in 1978 a local Councillor explained "we've been so isolated that we've been starved of this sort of entertainment".⁴⁵ Townsville had only recently been added to the touring schedules of arts organisations, with Musica Viva's annual "Outback Tours" beginning in October 1970 and including a stop in Townsville sponsored by the local Chamber Music Society alongside the other towns on the route – Mt Isa, Port Moresby, Cairns, Gove, Darwin and Alice Springs – with a school concert and evening concert in each town.⁴⁶ The performance of the Adelaide Wind Quintet in 1970 was described in one newspaper report "as the beginning of a Musica Viva plan to send concerts to places where musicians do not go in the course of a normal concert tour".⁴⁷

Despite these challenges, from the very outset, Raggatt envisioned the co-operation of national arts organisations. Subsequently, partnerships with the ABC, the Arts Council of Australia, the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust and Musica Viva among many others were forged. Artists that had appeared at the Adelaide Festival of the Arts such as the Baranggay Dancers, Theatre 62 and the Adelaide Wind Quintet appeared later in Townsville.⁴⁸ In 1972 the TPF

40 See 1977 Festival Program Book, Local Collection Pamphlets, p. 61; 1974 Festival Program Book, s.p.

41 1978 Festival Program Book; Festival has Something for Everyone.

42 Festival has Something for Everyone.

43 John Makepiece said in 1981: "Not unlike remote regions of Australia, Townsville suffers from many of the problems of isolation and distance; a feeling of, perhaps, being left out of the mainstream of Australia", A Submission Directed to QANTAS.

44 Plenty to See and Do – 1974 news clipping.

45 Townsville's Civic Theatre Now a 'Goer', p. 71.

46 See Adelaide Wind Quintet – Outback Tour, 1970.

47 Ibid.

48 The Adelaide Festival of Arts, Souvenir Program 1968; The Adelaide Festival of Arts, Souvenir Program 1970; MVAR.

secured funding from the Arts Council of Australia to present a recital by the Sydney-based tenor David Parker – although the board only projected an audience of between 300-400 they expressed to the Arts Council “we are anxious to include this performance in an effort to raise artistic standards in this region”.⁴⁹ Approaching the 1974 Festival, board member A. E. Bracey reached out personally to the executive director of the Arts Council of Australia, Jean Battersby to ascertain what “international or national theatre companies or personalities would be in Australia during that period and perhaps available to visit Townsville to add weight to the ‘arts’ section of the Festival”.⁵⁰ The TPF programme book in 1974 asserted the festival’s parity with capital city events by including images of the TPF-programmed Dance Concert Company in front of iconic locations: the Sydney Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Additionally, the marionette show, ‘Tales from Noonamena’ – presented by the Festival board and Elizabethan Opera Trust – was touted as “recently presented by the Marionette Theatre at the Sydney Opera House”.⁵¹

Similarly, the securing of the No. 1 R. A. A. F. Band from Richmond NSW which had “appeared at many functions and ceremonies in the eastern states” was a source of pride in the 1972 and 1974 festivals.⁵² It was also noted in 1977, following an appearance of the R. A. A. F. band in 1977 at the Pacific Festival Gala night “Townsville is the only other provincial city to be visited on the tour. All other concerts will be staged in capital cities”.⁵³

The Aboriginal and Islander Festival and the Later Years

From its inception, the Townsville Pacific Festival (TPF) placed importance on local community involvement, yet the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples remained notably limited throughout the 1970s. Despite the festival’s inclusion of performers from Pacific nations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in this festival was minimal – with the festival committee’s own report on the first Aboriginal and Islander Special Performance Day observing that local Indigenous people had been either prevented or reluctant to play a prominent role in public life.⁵⁴ This report further stated that “the level of racism in Townsville and indeed in North Queensland generally is a crucial factor in this”.⁵⁵ This absence of Indigenous content in the 1970s, mirrored patterns seen in other regional festivals. Mickey Dewar observes that the Darwin festivals before 1974 and later ones, after 1989, included Aboriginal content however the was an

49 John Raggatt to J. Battersby, 13 March 1972, p. 2.

50 A. E. Bracey to J. Battersby, 14 February 1974.

51 See 1974 Festival Program Book, p. 23.

52 R. A. A. F. Band for Festival; Full Programme of Entertainment, 7 June 1972, TPFA; R. A. A. F. Band Show – 1974.

53 R. A. A. F. Band on Whirlwind Tour, p. 3.

54 See Letter of Agreement No. SP QLD 80162 to Mr. Ian McDonnell.

55 Ibid. Letters between the Community Action Group Against Racism (CAGAR) and the Townsville Pacific Festival Committee in 1982 highlight racial tensions within the Townsville community at this time. See for example, Letter from Rowan Silva (CAGAR) to Sheila Nichols (TPF Committee).

observable absence in the intervening years.⁵⁶ Adrian Franklin et al. argue that the Adelaide Festival did not look to its own community for arts content, and the Kurna community were not involved until 1976.⁵⁷ The Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council had been established in 1972 and provided centralised funding for all kinds of Indigenous performing and visual arts endeavours by individuals and ensembles alike. However, the Council's efforts to encourage new Indigenous-led companies to flourish also meant that non-Indigenous directors and producers seeking to program Indigenous content often found their requests unmet, while resources were directed towards Indigenous-led initiatives. For example, the TPF's request to include in their own festival the Aboriginal dancers who had been funded by a \$13 500 Australia Council grant to travel to the South Pacific Festival in Fiji seems to have been declined.⁵⁸

A significant change in the TPF however occurred in 1980 with the introduction of an Islander Night – the success of which prompted a dedicated evening in the 1981 festival for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Festival within the festival. The Townsville Council's Cultural Director and Co-Community Arts Officer described the event as "the first community festival in Australia to feature Indigenous Australians as a major and integral component of the Festival".⁵⁹ The event reportedly drew 3 500 Indigenous and 800 non-Indigenous attendees.⁶⁰ By 1984, a dedicated community committee was formed to organise the Aboriginal and Islanders festival which, by this time, ran for several days and estimated an attendance of 10 000 people.⁶¹ Presentations included music, dance, displays and storytelling and included performers from the Torres Strait Islands, Palm Island, Mackay, Alice Springs and New South Wales.⁶² The renewed emphasis on Aboriginal arts and crafts at the TPF in the 1980s during this period may also have supported Townsville's bid to host the 1988 Festival of Pacific Arts (FOPA).⁶³ In the 1984 program the President's Message explained: "the enlarged Aboriginal and Islander Festival is an exciting step towards our hosting the 1988 South Pacific Festival".⁶⁴ A planning document for the 1984 Aboriginal and Islanders Festival concluded:

It is vital that this Festival is a tremendous success as the decision of the location of the 1988 Festival [of Pacific Arts], to be made in Noumea, will be based on

56 See Mickey Dewar: *A Festival Event*, pp. 33-49; Amanda Harris: *Representing Australian Aboriginal Music and Dance 1930-1970*, pp. 143 f.

57 See Adrian Franklin, Boram Lee, Ruth Rentschler: *The Adelaide Festival and the Development of Arts in Adelaide*, pp. 588-613.

58 See S.J. Douglass to A. Weinrauch, 15 May 1972. This was also the case with other non-Indigenous producers, such as Beth Dean and Victor Carell, who were rebuffed in their attempts to access the Aboriginal performers supported by Coombs' Australia Council and the Aboriginal Theatre Foundation. See 1969 letters between Coombs and Dean, in Victor Carell: *Proposed Ballet of the South Pacific*.

59 Chips Mackinolty to Grahame Steel.

60 See Alycia Watson: *Townsville's Pacific Festival*.

61 See *Aboriginal and Islander Festival*.

62 See Alycia Watson: *Townsville's Pacific Festival; Aboriginal and Islander Festival Program 1984*.

63 See Anne Duke: *Report on Planning and Staging the 5th Festival of Pacific Arts held in Townsville Australia, 14-27 August 1988*; and *South Pacific Festival Promises Big Boost to City's Economy*.

64 *Presidents Message – Festival Program Book 1984*, p. 7.

the ability of the local Aboriginal and Islander community to host and administer such a large event. This annual Festival must show that it is moving in that direction.⁶⁵

Hosting the fifth Festival of Pacific Arts in Townsville, 1988

Co-ordinator of the 1984 TPF, Florence Smallwood was elected by the Townsville Aboriginal Community to go as representative to the 4th Festival of Pacific Arts in Tahiti in 1985.⁶⁶ Emphasising the importance of local control of the planned 5th festival, Smallwood asserted that it would be essential to have Aboriginal involvement in all stages of the festival planning. Indeed, this Festival of Pacific Arts (Fig. 2) was an altogether different kind of festival to the TPF's more than a decade of bi-annual festivals, a fact that would have been evident to Smallwood while in Tahiti. The FOPA would bring performers in delegations from 26 island nations, including Palau, The Northern Marianas, Guam, the Federated States of Micronesia, The Marshall Islands, Nauru, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, New Caledonia, Norfolk Island, New Zealand, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Wallis and Futuna, Fiji, Tonga, Niue, American Samoa, Western Samoa, Cook Islands, The Tokelaus, The Marquesas, French Polynesia, Pitcairn Island, and Hawai'i.⁶⁷ Australia would be represented by a number of groups from different Aboriginal nations and the Torres Strait. In contrast to the first (1972) Festival of Pacific Arts (originally called South Pacific Festival), in which a non-Indigenous theatre company had been included, this time preference would "be given scripts/works written by Aboriginal/Islander authors depicting Aboriginal/Islander issues with the majority of cast members being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander".⁶⁸

Key Indigenous arts leaders became involved with scoping Townsville's hosting of the festival from 1985 including Chicka Dixon (as head of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council), Leila Rankin (a leader of the Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music (CASM) in Adelaide), Charles Perkins (in his role at the time as Director, Department of Aboriginal Affairs) and Shireen Malamoo (as a Townsville representative), along with non-Indigenous leaders such as Anthony Steel (who ran the Aboriginal Arts Agency at the time), Prof Eric Willmot from James Cook University, and the Townsville Mayor Mike Reynolds. As the festival approached, a planning committee was formed, led by director Greg Stewart, but also including the new head of the Aboriginal Arts Board, Bob Merritt, the mayor, Perkins, and now Eddie Mabo and Josephine Sailor as local representatives.

65 Planning document, 1985. A submission for a grant also explained "in view of Townsville's application to host the 1988 South Pacific Festival and the success of last year, it is proposed to extend the Festival over a three day period". Submission for Grant – Aboriginal Development Commission.

66 See Proposal to Department of Arts, Heritage and Environment for Consultancy, Festival of Pacific Arts by Nicholas Clark and Associates, 25 September 1985.

67 See Program of Fifth Festival of Pacific Arts.

68 Advocate, 10 February 1988, n.p. (Dorothy Grimm: Board Wants Festival Input).



Fig. 2. Festivals and celebrations – Queensland – Papua New Guinea dancers at Festival of Pacific Arts, Townsville

The copious archival records of the 1988 Townsville festival in the collections of Mike Reynolds and Eddie Mabo document the intensity with which this Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander local community control was argued for in the lead up to the festival. These disputes took the foreground in part because the planned 1988 festival would be contiguous with wider bicentenary celebrations taking place across Australia. As interim festival director Greg Stewart told 'The Australian' in November 1987:

Where the politics perhaps come into it is that it is a difficult year next year for Aboriginal and Islander people, but this is a cultural event, a way of showing that the culture has survived. It will show Aboriginal and Islander people that there are other blacks who are proud and they will perform on equal terms. It's a source of strength for them.⁶⁹

Discussions within the Foreign Affairs department at the beginning of the decade suggest that Australia was discussed as a potential host of the festival in 1988, precisely because it would be the bicentennial year.⁷⁰ Later, the direct organisers were insistent that the disconnect between the two events be widely publicised in promoting the festival, and a leaflet to invite proposals to the festival, opened with the bolded phrase "The Festival is not part of Australia's Bicentennial program".⁷¹

However, even more than anxiety about the bicentennial year, the contestations over leadership of the festival reflect the new ground that the festival aimed

69 The Australian, 5 November 1987, n.p. (Andrew L. Urban: Political Benefits of Pacific Festival Outweigh the Cost)

70 See Foreign Affairs report by Anthony Wallis.

71 See Papers of Edward Koiki Mabo 1936-1992.

to traverse. This was not a Pacific Festival in name only, but was “an International Festival for Indigenous peoples”. This description, included in a statement from the local community meeting, was articulated by the largely Torres Strait Islander membership, who asked the festival board:

If this is an International Festival for Indigenous peoples, then why hasn't the indigenous peoples of Australia, more to the point why hasn't the Aboriginal and Islander Community of North Queensland had more input?⁷²

At the Townsville Festival of Pacific Arts, Australian international engagements looked towards connections across the Pacific ocean, and away from metropolitan centres that were the usual political and cultural points of reference, seeking to articulate this as a festival that would be aspirational not only in its aims for quality performers, but also in the political and cultural work that would be done through hosting it. One document that sits among Eddie Mabo's papers relating to the 1988 Townsville festival in the National Library of Australia – and that evidently was considered by the 1988 festival planning committee in their deliberations about what would be important in guiding the 5th festival of Pacific Arts – captures the reflections of Moi Awei on the third Festival of Pacific Arts, in Papua New Guinea in 1980. Awei, then Chairman of the National Cultural Council of Papua New Guinea, and later PNG Deputy Prime Minister, suggested,

In giving the third Festival of South Pacific Arts the theme 'Celebration of Pacific Awareness' we are lifting our eyes beyond the narrow artistic confines of an Arts Festival.

The aesthetic value of the art presented at the Festival remains important – the Festival should demonstrate the richness, the best, and the most creative elements of Pacific culture.

But we beg you to explore other dimensions of such an event [...] The period of repressive attitudes to indigenous culture is past, so now is the time to examine [those] old ways for guidelines to living which may have been discarded prematurely.⁷³

This rethinking of what Awei called “guidelines for living” was evidenced in organisers' approach to implementing Pacific ways through the festival. One key initiative proposed by Jimmy Little and Anthony Steel during the course of their scoping study (and likely inspired by the travels by canoe of some participants in the 1980 PNG festival)⁷⁴ was the arrival of delegations to the festival by water – an initiative that remains a key part of Festivals of Pacific Arts in the present day.

The format that has been adopted for opening and closing ceremonies at previous Festivals should be changed. We find the Olympic-style parade in an arena to be foreign to the spirit of the Festival, with its sporting and competitive connotations. [...] the participants could arrive at the Strand from Magnetic Island in a flotilla of small craft, parade along and perform on the Strand, finishing up in the rock pool venue where the VIPs would be seated.⁷⁵

72 Community Meeting – Pacific Festival 17 July 1987.

73 Festival Theme: “Celebration of Pacific Awareness”, see Papers of Edward Koiki Mabo 1936-1992.

74 The armada of canoes from different parts of Papua New Guinea as far away as Manus Island to Port Moresby is described in Arnold Zable: *Operation Armada*.

75 Anthony Steel, Jimmy Little: Preliminary report to the Board from the Joint Artistic Advisors.

Another was the introduction of welcome protocols, proposed by the Indigenous advisory group to be formally implemented on arrival of all delegates from the Pacific at the airport. In 1988, the Townsville festival committee planned that the welcome protocols would proceed with groups of Indigenous people from Australia greeting all delegates at the airport, using a formalised text that included the welcome "On behalf of all the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of my country I give you and the people of ____ permission to enter our country to share in our culture and tradition during this gathering".⁷⁶

Eventual Festival Director, Pat Turner, also recalled her initiative to recognise the Christian beliefs of the majority of participants by including an ecumenical service in the program. However, even in the inclusion of Christian rituals, Turner wanted the particularities of Pacific ways to be kept in frame:

[B]ecause this is about the preservation of Indigenous culture and the promotion of Indigenous culture, this ecumenical service means that every country that participates will have to sing in language. They'll have to sing a hymn in language. So I made that rule.⁷⁷

After some negotiations at planning meetings where the originally-planned theme for the 1988 festival was changed from "Pacific Achievement" to "Pacific Survival",⁷⁸ the final theme became "Pacific Interchange", a concept that hints at the reorientation towards the cultural reference points of the Indigenous Pacific, rather than those of metropolitan, colonial Australia.

Though some of the new protocols developed through the planning of the 1988 festival are perhaps unsurprising today, their reorientation towards Indigenous and Oceanic worldviews and ways becomes more remarkable when we consider the origins of the festival in the South Pacific Commission. A founding member of the Commission and the largest contributor, Australia had worked with other colonial powers in the region (UK, USA, France, Netherlands, NZ) to set up the South Pacific Commission in 1947. The 30 per cent of the SPC budget that Australia contributed reflected their stake in the region and an awareness of "not necessarily favourable" attention from the United Nations towards colonial control of the Pacific.⁷⁹

The 1957 Australian representatives to the commission recognised that

The peoples of the region are awakening and many of them tend to look to Australia as the most developed neighbouring country for guidance and assistance.

76 Festival Director's Report to the Board. It is not clear which individuals delivered the 1988 welcome, but the choice of representatives likely followed the practice at the time of someone from both local Aboriginal and local Torres Strait Islander Townsville communities being chosen as representatives of the community. This is an early instance of Welcome to Country protocols that only became formal official practice through the initiative of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and Reconciliation Australia at the very end of the 20th century, although Ernie Dingo and Richard Walley recalled performing a Welcome in response to the request of visiting Māori performers earlier still in 1976. Mark McKenna: *Tokenism or Belated Recognition*.

77 Pat Turner interviewed by Nikki Henningham.

78 Two motions from the 6 November 1987 meeting of the Festival Advisory Committee, Papers of Edward Koiki Mabo 1936-1992.

79 "Australia's large contribution reflects not only the greatest number of native peoples under her care but her role as leading initiator of the commission", Confidential Notes on the Political Importance of the South Pacific Commission.

They are also nowadays seeking associations with other island people and the Commission through its triennial South Pacific Conference [which] affords opportunity for these tendencies to develop fruitfully under guidance.⁸⁰

Australia also worried that “Since there are already some signs of communist interest in some of these islands this work is clearly necessary and of positive value”. In the early decade of the commission, a document marked “Confidential” outlined the commission’s strategy to support activities including “social welfare”, a category that would soon include cultural festivals, because this would “tend to forestall the subversive activity which thrives on conditions of under-development and feelings of neglect”.⁸¹

A year out from the festival, in August 1987, major protests were mobilised by the local community against the lack of input invited from local Aboriginal and Islander people. Though the festival committee reassured that there would be plenty of jobs for local Indigenous people at the time of the festival, the community were not assuaged, insisting not just on temporary jobs, but rather on a major role in the planning and design.

A highly successful protest from the point of view of community mobilisation, the community achieved close to the level of representation they demanded – with Eddie Mabo and Josephine Sailor sitting both on the festival organising board and the local community meetings and communicating between the two, and perhaps also because of the interventions of Perkins as Director of Aboriginal Affairs. Several new members were added to the board, Perkins stepped down from the festival organising team, new salaried roles were created for local people with artistic and production oversight, and a new Indigenous advisory board was established. The demands also led to the appointment of key artistic advisors including Bob Maza and Jimmy Little, with Pat Turner taking over as festival Director in the final year, after acting for Perkins when he was unavailable for meetings.

One of the more overtly political programmed features of the Townsville festival in 1988 – The Cultural Forum – arrived at a number of proposals over the course of the festival, one of which was that Australian Aboriginal people should seek independent membership of the South Pacific Forum – the colonial body in which FOPA had its origins.⁸² The negotiation of rights and political agency persisted alongside the plans for cultural programming throughout the organisation of the festival. As Charles Perkins asserted in a speech he gave at the opening of the Cultural Forum attached to the festival, the arts was a medium for both political struggle and cultural expression:

Recent Government initiatives and the cautious optimism which many Aboriginal people presently share have not occurred without great struggle.

That struggle is increasingly being portrayed in the artistic expression of our people.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

82 As reported in ‘The Cairns Post’, 27 August 1988, n.p., membership would be sought “in a bid to win Federal government and international recognition as Australia’s aboriginal landowners”, quoted in Rosita Henry, Jenny Pilot: Politics in the Pacific, p. 206.

In this way our arts are both reflecting the struggle which is our present position as well as playing their own part in that struggle.

Such is the nature of our culture that the arts cannot be separated from the political process [...]

Each bark painting can be seen as an argument for landrights – an acknowledgement of prior Aboriginal ownership of this land. Culture and the arts enrich and give direction to our lives as Aboriginal people.⁸³

Conclusion

The dissolution of the Townsville Pacific Festival (TPF) in 1991 came just a few years after the city hosted the fifth FOPA. What had started out as a festival with high aims – combining Pacific cultural content and European high arts, over time changed markedly in tone. Over its two-decade lifespan the festival's priorities shifted. While music and the arts remained present, the emphasis moved increasingly toward community participation and the promotion of a tropical lifestyle over cross-cultural or high-art engagement. In 1983 John Raggatt was interviewed for an article printed in the festival program, entitled "Looking at the Past". While the article focused on the points of continuity over the 13 years of the festival, Raggatt pointed out that the TPF was established with the aim of a festival for the Pacific area which "hasn't been emphasised as much in recent years".⁸⁴

The later shift in focus of the TPF coincided with the planning and staging of the 1988 FOPA as well as with an expansion of cultural infrastructure in Townsville: for example, in 1975, the Sound Shell was upgraded; in 1978, the Townsville Civic Theatre opened; and in 1981, the Perc Tucker Regional Gallery was inaugurated. The first Australian Festival of Chamber Music in 1991, which remained in Townsville until 2025, provided a significant access point for an international standard of musical performance for the region of North Queensland. Similarly Townsville's Australian Concerto and Vocal Competition (originally the North Queensland Piano Competition) provided valuable performing opportunities for young musicians between 1980 and 2024.⁸⁵ Rather than viewing this reduction of arts and cultural content in the TPF as a backward step, this shift may be viewed in the context of an expansion of artistic and cultural agency within the region in these years.

Indeed, Raggatt's Townsville Pacific Festival may have laid the groundwork for both a serious engagement with the performing and visual arts of Indigenous Australia and the wider Pacific through the 5th Festival of Pacific Arts in 1988 as well as an expansion of arts engagement throughout the community. By

83 Opening Address Charles Perkins to the Cultural Forum, Records (1988) of Festival of Pacific Arts.

84 Looking at the Past – 1983 Festival Program.

85 We are grateful to members of the local Townsville community including Heidi Streiner, Bryony Barnett, Helen Lucas, Andrew Ryder and Lyndon Megarrity who attended the conference at which this panel was originally presented and who drew our attention to the Australian Festival of Chamber Music and the North Queensland Piano Competition and shared their fond recollections of festivals of the 1970s and 1980s.

placing the arts of the Indigenous Pacific alongside the “high arts” of Europe and Australians of European descent, the festival introduced a progressive vision for its time.

Raggatt’s approach aligned with significant institutional changes during the 1970s, especially those of the Australian Council for the Arts (later Australia Council). Driven by H. C. Coombs, the Council would seek to invigorate the performing arts broadly in Australia, while, for the first time, providing targeted support to Indigenous performing and visual artists. In bridging artistic lineages at that time seen as separate, Raggatt was highly attuned to contemporary political and arts priorities. His vision of Townsville as a cultural and artistic centre was initially embodied in the efforts of the Townsville Pacific Festival but has since continued to resonate in the city’s cultural landscape.

Acknowledgments

Julia Russoniello’s research for this paper was assisted by a Northern Australia Fellowship provided by the Australian Historical Association. Amanda Harris’ research for this paper was supported by an ARC Future Fellowship - FT220100115.

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- Fig. 2: Festivals and celebrations – Queensland – Papua New Guinea dancers at Festival of Pacific Arts, Townsville. Image courtesy of the National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA). NAA: A6135, K8/9/88/108

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