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ence we've had and to uplift people, as well as give them a bit of an insight into our own country. There was a desire of the writers to make it quite sweet, not so harsh, and to get that atmosphere of space and silence, and the earth and world that we found when we went out in the bush."

The latest single 'Beds are Burning' discusses Aboriginal land rights: "*The time has come / a fact's a fact / it belongs to them / let's give it back.*" Do you think your audience are taking it on board?

"I hope so. I think it's very difficult to judge or draw any accurate conclusions about what your audience does or doesn't take on. It's clear to me there's a part of our audience that takes it on and cares about it and responds to it. And there's a certain amount of the audience that doesn't respond to it, and has their old attitudes intact. I'm not sure. But I can only comment from the mail we get, and the amount of requests for school projects."

### Declaration

'The Dead Heart' is a song that's central to the album. Sung from an Aboriginal's point of view, it's a declaration of Aboriginal independence: "*We don't serve your country / serve your king / know your custom, don't speak your tongue.*"

"We thought we were on fairly treacherous

ground, writing from their point of view. So we sent of a rough demo of it to the people who were doing the film. We got word back that they thought it was fine and that they thought it was a terrific song, and what were we worrying about, just get on with it. You've gotta take risks, and that's what 'The Dead Heart' was, and I think it works for it."

The person in the song seems to want a completely separate existence from white Australia. Last century in New Zealand, there were thought to be three approaches to bicultural society: assimilation, isolation, and annihilation. Garrett thinks it's arrogant to even talk about "answers" to the problems faced by Aboriginals.

He makes three points, first that you can't talk about development of a race, if they're disadvantaged from day one. Unlike our Treaty of Waitangi, for what it's worth, there was never a treaty made with the Aboriginal people — the only former British colony without one with the indigenous race. "The country was settled on a legal fiction — the fiction that there was nobody living there, that the land was empty." So there was no compensation, which is now needed, plus an awareness that the land was taken by force. "Until they get a portion of it back, which would give them the ability to be economically independent, then any other question is irrelevant."

Cultural groups can exist side by side, with tolerance, encouragement and commitment by the society for it to work. "I'm convinced that it can work because Australia is a society that in part reflects the multi-cultural aspect now," says Garrett. "I don't believe in separatism but I think the Aboriginal people have a right to exist separately if they choose."

### Cross Culture

Also, says Garrett, "Aboriginal society and culture has a great deal to offer Australians. Our culture is a second hand, inherited culture, primarily from empires which are in decline. And theirs is a culture that has endured longer than any other. They have some values which we could very badly do with. Until we've got some kind of awareness by people of that third fact, we won't be able to co-exist easily."

Some Aboriginal communities, such as those in the northern Arnhem Land the Oils visited, didn't have their land taken off them. They've continued living off the land and now have mineral exploration projects happening that ensure they're in charge of their own destiny. "Those people are quite happy. They take the bits of white they like, and leave the bits they don't."

But in other communities where the land was taken away, the Aboriginals were rounded up and placed in what were essentially

concentration camps for 10 to 15 years, as part of the post-war assimilation policy. "Those people have only just gone out to their land for the first time, and most of them have been quite badly affected by living in a camp environment where there's been alcohol, where they haven't been able to move about and live the way they have in the past. It's very difficult for them to re-establish that lifestyle and preserve the sacred values and the family way and the whole aspect of what is Aboriginal to them, from the white fast-moving society — the televisions, the guitars, the petrol, the grog, the videos. It poses enormous difficulties for them, and it's an open question as to whether they'll survive it or not."

### Warning

'Bullroarer' is quite a terrifying song, like a warning, but pleading "*Take me back to my homeland.*"

"The song is really just evoking the whole feeling out there. The way the landscape and the enormous space and brutality of the land impinges on you. The bullroarer itself is a traditional instrument you scare people aware with. When we went to Kintore near the Simpson Desert, we stayed out there for some time with a group of people called Pintupi who have only just returned and are the most 'primitive' group in Australia — the most traditional.

"Those people gave us the very great and rare privilege of actually sighting some of their sacred objects, particularly their lore sticks and other objects, which they've been carrying in their possession for some thousands of years. They're very concerned they're going to be poached, because they'd be absolutely priceless. But they took us to see these objects, and I'm not allowed to mention anything more about that, we're sworn to secrecy.

"These people walk through the land and live on the land, and they know Australia so well. They've got dreaming maps and dreaming paths — everyone has some kind of internal spiritual road map of Australia, so old blokes can go walking back to their ancestral country, and they've never been there before, and yet they'll know all the physical features of the land from the stories that have been told, from their dreams, from the enormous amount of legend and sacred history they absorb."

### Eviction

While in the outback, Garrett visited an American intelligence base near Alice Springs, delivering a "termination of lease" from the Australian people. He was invited in for a chat, whereas when an Australian senator visited recently he was arrested. Garrett's public profile means he's in a powerful position, but also in danger of being used by politicians — remember how David Lange made sure he got his photo taken with Billy Bragg — though Garrett thinks it's unlikely: "No one's endorsed me, and I've endorsed no one, let me tell you!

"You've gotta remember that I've been a stringer critic of the Labor Party here. Never mind the Liberals, I can't even think of anything decent to say about them. So the perspective of the people in this country is that the Oils are pretty extreme, with a hard line, radical view. But that just shows you how conservative Australia is."

Garrett was recently a "token youth representative" on the Individual and Democratic Rights Committee set up by Australia's federal government to examine changes to their constitution. "It made me aware that a lot of people don't know much about our constitution. They probably know more about the Fifth Amendment from *Miami Vice*."

### Abuse

Towards the end of their career, the Clash got abused for a "rent-a-cause" approach to politics. But such cynicism doesn't bother Garrett. "It's much harder to do something positive. We say no to many issues. You can't take them all on, but you can see good in all of them. The bottom line for us is simply, we've always had a very strong view about our country and the dignity of our people and the kind of lives and opportunities they should lead and have.

"The sad fact is there aren't that many bands around — there are *some*, we're not the only ones by any means, we try not to wave the flag too much — who are prepared to go out to bat. But at the end of the day, these aren't causes at all but attitudes. And as well as that, Midnight Oil is a rock band — of its time, from its environment, with its own beliefs, performances and songs. Those things still remain very important to the band. This other stuff, it's good to be able to do some of it and we don't do it for publicity, but because we think it's important. But it's not the core of what we do. At the core is our own attitude, our own feelings and motivations, our commitment to one another, the music and the performances."

So the Oils rock on and they intend coming over this way in March. But the talkfest isn't completely over. Garrett has a book of his newspaper columns out soon: *Political Blues*.

Chris Bourke



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