



## Clear Blue Soundscapes from the West

by David Beniuk

There's something in the clear blue Western Australian water. The Waifs and John Butler have been drinking it and the well of roots talent from the spacious state doesn't dry up there. From the spectacular bluster of the south-west corner to the snaking fertility of the Fitzroy River, inspirational landscapes are being turned into soundscapes by the likes of composer, producer and multi-instrumentalist David Hyams. Tim Winton, another to have caught the bug, calls him 'a new voice for Irish music in Australia'. David Hyams is flattered but hopes he and his Miles To Go band can build on the respect they've earned as composers and performers of contemporary Australian celtic music, 'among other things'.

**T&N:** Do you have a favourite instrument to play? Does a particular sound speak to you more than the others?

Guitar has been the instrument I am most comfortable with and the one that I always come back to. In recent years, I've been playing a lot of fingerstyle guitar in dadgad tuning. After many years of being an ensemble player and a lead player, the concept of being able to be complete within one instrument was new to me and very appealing. I'm still working on that one. Another sound that really appeals is the sound of slide guitar and dobro - although I don't play these live very much, I use them often as a texture in recordings. It's probably still that screaming or wailing thing - these days it's just a lot further back in the mix.

**T&N:** What's the process you go through when you're composing?

I don't really have any set process. I often get inspired to write from traveling and by places that have touched me in some way. But then sometimes a melody pops into my head at the strangest of times, inexplicably. I usually have a recording walkman handy in the car, just in case and the times when I haven't, my message bank has proved very handy.

When I'm writing for an album I will try to seclude myself for at least a few days at a time somewhere out of the city and come back to ideas tapes that I've accumulated, to develop what is usually a basic idea into a completed piece. After a few days of being in that space, the ideas begin to flow a lot easier.

I try to mix it up and write on keyboards sometimes. While I'm not a piano player this actually helps as it tends to bring my focus completely back to the melody, unlike guitar where my hands are familiar with the fretboard and know where to go - often they tend to go to the same places and

pieces end up sounding "samey". Also, I think sweet sounding noises from the guitar can distract you from the realisation that a strong melodic idea is just not there. The best ideas often seem to come when I don't have an instrument to hand.

With more Celtic oriented pieces, in the early stages I would usually run them past Dougal (Adams) and Ormonde (Waters), the wind players from the Miles To Go band, to firstly make sure that I haven't been subconsciously borrowing from trad tunes. Then, they will often help to develop the tune or its ornamentation, to adapt it for pipes, flute or concertina.

**T&N:** What do you think attracted you to Celtic sounds? Is it your family background or something else?

I think sometimes music just reaches out and grabs you and you don't have any say in it at all. Its certainly not from my family background - which is Jewish, originally from Eastern Europe on my father's side and Iraq on my mother's. I wasn't strongly attracted to Celtic sounds until I traveled in Europe around 15 years ago and it was actually a cassette tape left with me by an Australian traveler in Greece that became a big catalyst for my interest. I'd landed a job as the resident musician in a bar on the island of Paros and coming up to Anzac Day, the homesick Aussie asked if I could learn - 'And the band played Waltzing Matilda' for the occasion, giving me an unlabelled tape which had on it a recorded version of the song. He left the island soon after, leaving his tape with me. When I set off traveling again, I started listening to the other songs and tunes on the tape, which were obviously Irish and was drawn in by the haunting sounds and strong melodies. I started meeting and playing with Irish musicians in other parts of Europe and this eventually

took me to Ireland, which was an incredibly inspirational experience musically. Once back in Australia, I gravitated towards bands that had that Celtic influence - particularly Devils on Horseback and the Press Gang - and it has remained strong ever since.

It wasn't until I'd gotten to Ireland and played one of my hosts the tape, that I found I had been listening to the Dubliners on one side and Planxty on the other.

**T&N:** Are you happy to be placed in the 'Celtic' category or do you prefer the emphasis to be on the new directions your music takes?

I think "Celtic influenced" is a pretty apt description of the music from the "Miles To Go" album and what I do with the Miles To Go band - though a major part of it also comes from my experiences of living and traveling in this land, so I would hope that there is an "australiness" about it. Playing and developing the music with a band where the melody instruments are often highland and uilleann pipes, wood flute, concertina and cittern, all played by musicians with a very strong background in traditional celtic music, has inevitably resulted in the music having a strong celtic sound, but there are other strong influences in there as well, like blues and country, which tend to be less obvious. Then there's the various influences brought by other band members, some of who are starting to write for the band as well. It's a fantastic line up of players and people who work together really well and that has been another reason that we've continued on in this direction.

**T&N:** Have you found connections between your WA outback journeys and those through the Celtic lands?

I think there are some very strong connections. To me the wide expanses of the WA landscape have a similar resonance to some of the stark landscapes I have visited in places like Ireland and Scotland. Aside from the Pilbara and Kimberley regions, which each have their own unique character, I find one of WA's (and the Planc's) most inspirational places is on the south coast, around Albany. In some ways it has a very similar feel to areas where I have stayed in the west of Ireland, particular on a blustery winter day. This is a place where I often go to write and I think that comes out in the music.

Having worked closely with Aboriginal people and traveled with them to many remote areas of WA, I have also developed a pretty strong understanding of their connection to this country and this has strongly coloured my own feelings about it. This is echoed in my experiences of Ireland and the sense that the people have of belonging to their land and of course, this also holds true for a great many cultures and countries, especially once you start getting out of the cities.

**T&N:** After spending a year in Sydney, what similarities and differences did you discover about the music scenes in Sydney and WA?

I'm not going to moan about the isolation of WA, as it brings with it many advantages as well, but I have to say that touring a seven piece band from here has certainly presented one of my life's greater challenges. From my

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