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Renditions from the Inside: *Prison Songs*, documusical and performative documentary

Lesley Speed, Federation University Australia

Produced for SBS Television, Kelrick Martin's *Prison Songs* (2015) is unusual as a documentary in which the participants convey their stories through songs that were written for the film. Centring on inmates of Darwin Correctional Centre, known as Berrimah Prison, and described in its press kit as 'Australia's first ever documentary musical' (2014, 3), *Prison Songs* involved a collaborative production process in which inmates contributed to writing the musical numbers. As a documusical, the film belongs to a documentary subgenre that originated in the United Kingdom and forms part of a wider landscape of convergence between non-fiction and fictional television. *Prison Songs* expands Australian documentary, contemporary Indigenous film-making, and stories about incarceration. The film's presentation of participants' experiences through music, story, dance and humour can be situated within the performative documentary mode, in which orthodox screen discourses of sobriety are supplanted by poetic expression. Its use of songs and musical performance as partial alternatives to interviews and narration traverses boundaries between avant-garde and television forms, expression and information, and prison and the wider society.

Keywords: documentary; prison; Indigenous; music; Australia

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Produced for SBS Television, Kelrick Martin's *Prison Songs* (2015) is unusual as a documentary in which the participants convey their stories through songs that were written for the film. Centring on inmates of Darwin Correctional Centre, known as Berrimah Prison, and described in its press kit as 'Australia's first ever documentary musical' (2014, 3), *Prison Songs* involved a collaborative production process in which inmates contributed to writing the musical numbers. As a documentary musical, or 'documusical', the film belongs to a subgenre that originated in the United Kingdom and forms part of a wider landscape of convergence between non-fiction and fictional television. *Prison Songs* thus expands Australian documentary, contemporary Indigenous film-making, and stories about incarceration. The film's presentation of participants' experiences through music, story, dance and humour can be situated within the performative documentary mode, in which orthodox screen discourses of sobriety are supplanted by poetic expression. Its use of songs and musical performance as partial alternatives to interviews and narration traverses boundaries between avant-garde and television forms, expression and information, and prison and the wider society.

The documentary musical

The association between *Prison Songs* and the documusical was initiated by British documentary maker Brian Hill and Australian producer Harry Bardwell, who previously collaborated on the television series *Sylvania Waters* (1992, Australia/UK). *Prison Songs* has direct precursors in several films that Hill directed for television: *Drinking for England* (1998, UK), *Feltham Sings* (2002, UK), *Pornography: The Musical* (2003,

UK) and *Songbirds* (2007, UK). These films established the documentary musical, a subgenre that Hill and the writer Simon Armitage are credited with initiating in *Drinking for England* (Watts 2002). The documusical is defined by Derek Paget and Jane Roscoe as a work that uses ‘*purpose-composed* verse, music and song within a documentary setting’ (2006; italics in original). For example, *Feltham Sings* and *Songbirds* are set in London prisons and intersperse interviews with music-video-style sequences in which inmates perform songs about their experiences. While arguing that documusicals should be taken seriously as documentaries, Paget and Roscoe distinguish the subgenre from mockumentaries and docudramas, in relation to which they assert that the documusical is ‘more provocative’ in how it combines non-fiction content with performance. The documusical is symptomatic, and extends the possibilities, of what John Corner termed the ‘the “post-documentary” era’ (2000, 687–8). In this period, observes Paget, the “intermateability” of factual and imaginative ways of seeing [...] has become almost *de rigueur*, and fact-based approaches have been evident across the performing and expressive arts’ (2016, 2).

Documusicals are distinct from ‘musical documentaries’, in which music is central to ‘the diegesis or narrative’ (Paget and Roscoe, 2006). Having music or musical performance as a topic, musical documentaries are far more common and include such Australian examples as the festival rockumentary *Sunbury ’72* (Wagstaff and Dixon 1972) and the biographical films *Paul Kelly: Stories of Me* (Darling 2012) and *Gurrumul* (Williams 2017). The documusical also differs from documentaries about social programs that involve music, such as *Music and Murder* (Cordell 2003) and the television series *The Choir of Hard Knocks* (2007) and *The Logan Project* (2016). Whereas these works use orthodox documentary approaches to depict music programs

that respectively involve prisoners, homeless people and residents of a disadvantaged geographic region, the documusical eschews the social intervention as subject matter and instead uses musical performance at a formal level to express non-fiction stories.¹ Music is not the topic of *Prison Songs* but the central means of conveying participants' perspectives. The documusical defies the notion that performance necessarily involves a stage and backstage (Beattie 2016, 119) by positioning musical performances by ordinary people as the central means of expression.

Prison Songs involved a collaborative production process that is characteristic of documusicals and exemplified in Brian Hill's work. As Paget and Roscoe (2006) explain, the development of Hill's films commences with interviewing participants, whose words are then used by professional writers to develop songs. The participants record the songs and later mime them for the film. For *Prison Songs*, the press kit reveals, the music was developed by Kelrick Martin's team in consultation with prison support staff and management (2014, 6, 9–10). Seven prisoners are central participants in the film, which also includes dozens of other inmates and prison employees, some of whom are de-identified by having their faces blurred. Professional songwriters Shellie Morris and Casey Bennetto developed the music from themes that emerged in interviews, incorporating interviewees' words, but the inmates had final approval of the lyrics (Davidson 2015). Bennetto reveals in the press kit (2014, 6) that the song 'In the Middle' was almost entirely rewritten by Max and Dale, the inmates who perform this rap about having mixed racial background.

While alluding to Brian Hill's work, however, the *Prison Songs* press kit reveals that his influence was primarily in the early stages and that the production was left to

Martin's team (2014, 5). Indeed, differences between *Prison Songs* and Hill's documusicals are readily apparent. Whereas Hill's prison films include inmates of various ethnic backgrounds, *Prison Songs* centres on Indigenous people. Whereas prison employees are among the musical performers in *Feltham Sings* and *Songbirds*, and *Songbirds* includes an interviewer's voice, *Prison Songs* excludes such manifestations of correctional or discursive authority. Hill's prison documusicals depict single-sex prisons, but *Prison Songs* includes male and female inmates of Berrimah. As will be seen, the use of settings in *Prison Songs* also differs from the exteriors in Hill's prison films, where the colder climate and urban environments are far removed from the subtropical outback of the Northern Territory.

Prison Songs challenges orthodox ideas about performance and non-fiction representation by exploring ways of engaging these with lived experience. The documusical subgenre has been compared to verbatim theatre (Holdsworth 2013, 2), in which interviews with people in a region, or in connection with a topic or event, are developed into 'a text' that is 'acted, usually by the performers who collected the material in the first place' (Paget 1987, 317). The verbatim play is 'then *fed* back' through performance in the community, which has 'in a real sense, created' it (Paget 1987, 317; italics in original). Although the documusical's focus on untrained performers differs from most verbatim plays, these forms have in common an emphasis on specificity of experience and a capacity to convey the potential grandeur of otherwise anonymous lives. Amy Holdsworth argues that the documusical reveals affinities between poetry, with its 'rhymes, refrains and repetitions', and television, with its 'patterns of segmentation and flow, part and whole' (2013, 1–2). The documusical exhibits a 'poetic structure', she observes, that is central to the privileging of stories and

individual expression over didacticism (2013, 4). ‘Rather than offering a linear argument or a cause-and-effect structure’, the documusical employs ‘rhymes, parallels, repetitions and refrains, which utilise [sic] imagery, music, sound and voice’ (Holdsworth 2013, 4).

In *Prison Songs*, for example, the songs form a thematic and emotional, rather than linear, progression. Five male and two female inmates are introduced during the film, which uses brief captions to provide us with each participant’s name, age and the term of their sentence. The participants tell their stories through masked interviews, in which questions are neither seen nor heard. The film intercuts these interviews with musical performances that position each inmate’s story as giving rise to a song. Some songs involve more than one participant, creating an intertwining of stories and performances. The progression of songs extends from the explicatory functions of the first numbers, ‘Waking up in Berrimah’ and ‘The Berrimah Hilton’, to songs that explore themes of the disjunction between non-Indigenous and Indigenous law enforcement, experiences of having mixed ethnic background, relationships with alcohol, and domestic violence. The final song, Bernadine’s gospel number ‘God has a Reason’, forms the film’s emotional peak and has the most abstract focus in its theme of a quest for spiritual meaning and redemption. Presenting an inclusive view of the presence of spirituality in the prison, the song brings together participants’ reflections on their aspirations and goals, including the possibility of life after prison.

Prison stories

The institutional setting of *Prison Songs* expands the subject matter of Australian documentaries. As Bardwell states in the press kit, it ‘is extremely unusual for a film crew to get access to an Australian prison and for prisoners to have interviews aired without their faces being blurred.’ (2014, 9) After the Western Australian government refused to allow this documentary to be filmed in its correctional facilities, gaining access to Berrimah involved years of negotiations with authorities (Davidson 2015). These types of difficulties can be linked to a general scarcity of Australian prisoners’ own voices on screen. In a study of decommissioned prisons that are now tourist sites, Jacqueline Z. Wilson observes that many narratives are ‘obscured, neglected or outright hidden’, particularly those of inmates, who are “‘othered” by society’, not only through incarceration but also by institutional discourses and structures (2008, 1). The experiences of Indigenous inmates, in particular, have traditionally been underrepresented in prison tourism (Anderson et al. 2017, 611–616; Hibberd and Stasiuk 2017; Rodgers 2017, 804; Stasiuk and Hibberd 2017). In Australian film and television, too, a scarcity of perspectives of ordinary prisoners (as opposed to high-profile or celebrity criminals) is also generally apparent. Yet Wilson advocates attempting to imagine ‘what goes on in a prison’, in order to ‘acknowledge the essential humanity’ of the incarcerated ‘and in the process to further our own societal understanding’ (2008, 215). This does not require being ‘sympathetic to all prisoners’, she argues, ‘nor does it signify approval of their crimes’, but fosters willingness ‘to make distinctions between persons among the population of the jail’ that are comparable to distinctions we ‘make among citizens outside it’ (2008, 215).

The significance of inmates’ stories in *Prison Songs* is highlighted by contrast with prominent media reporting of subsequent events at the facility. Intertitles at the end

of *Prison Songs* reveal that Berrimah was decommissioned after filming and the adult prisoners were moved to a new facility in 2014. The original premises became the Don Dale Youth Detention Centre, which in July 2016 was the subject of a disturbing report on the ABC current affairs television program *Four Corners*. An episode entitled 'Australia's Shame' revealed that male detainees at the facility known formerly as Berrimah Prison were subjected to forms of mistreatment that included use of restraint chairs, covering inmates' heads with spit masks, solitary confinement for extended periods, and physical violence. Consequences of the report included criticism of the facility by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and a Royal Commission into the Protection and Detention of Children in the Northern Territory.

While *Prison Songs* refers in intertitles to the over-representation of Indigenous people in Australian prisons, it depicts a facility that was distinct from Don Dale both in name and in Berrimah's purpose to house adult prisoners. In contrast to the dehumanization of prisoners at Don Dale that was criticized by the *Four Corners* report, *Prison Songs* aims to counteract simplistic social categories (Press Kit 2014, 8). Whereas *Four Corners* exemplifies investigative journalism's capacity to provoke political change through adversarial exposure of injustice, in *Prison Songs* the privileging of inmates' voices and stories enacts a distance from both the institutional dehumanization of prisoners and from journalistic discourse. Although *Prison Songs* refers to substance abuse, domestic violence and suicide, it does not dwell on the participants' offences or primarily on their problems. 'I'm certainly not endorsing their crimes', says Kelrick Martin, 'but seeing them [...] reflect on their lives through music is a way of showing their humanity' (Press Kit 2014, 5). By demonstrating that 'everyone has creativity and is perhaps more complicated and talented than we

imagine', as Hill comments, the film has potential to attract a new audience to prison stories (Press Kit 2014, 8).

In ironic contrast to controversial media reports about Indigenous incarceration, *Prison Songs* made an unassuming debut on SBS in January 2015 and received a modest quantity of favourable and uncontentious publicity (Davidson 2015; Molloy 2015). The film's reception highlights the quest for a hitherto unknown audience for the Australian documusical. On the one hand, the film was ardently promoted by philanthropic organizations, such as Documentary Australia Foundation and Pro Bono Australia, of which the latter arranged screenings for members of human rights and judicial organisations (Cooper 2016). Indeed, the film's propensity to attract middle-class audiences and those educated about social issues is consistent with the fact that *Prison Songs* was made for a partly-public-funded television broadcaster, echoing Hill's documusicals for the BBC and Channel Four. In drawing attention for its depiction of disadvantage and not only for its music, *Prison Songs* has broad affinities with *Choir of Hard Knocks* and *The Logan Project* (Cable 2007; Brammer 2016).

On the other hand, as entertainment *Prison Songs* attracted strong interest in the Northern Territory, where the film was adapted as a stage musical that sold out its five performances at the Darwin Festival in 2015. Directed by Jo Turner, the stage show was acclaimed as the 'heart of the festival' and the latter's 'greatest success story' (Poulsen 2015), prompting hopes that it would also be produced interstate (Aikman 2016). The success of *Prison Songs* in its home city reveals a regional audience that embraced a theatrical experience. This audience can be compared to that for *Bran Nue Dae*, the 1990 stage show that Rachel Perkins adapted to the screen in 2009. Unusual as a stage

musical adapted from a documentary, the theatre version of *Prison Songs* also departed from the latter genre by combining personnel linked to the film with professional performers in roles derived from the original participants. In particular, the stage version included performances by songwriter Shellie Morris, former Berrimah inmate Renato, actor Ernie Dingo and artist Kamahi Djordan King. The *Prison Songs* franchise also includes the release of the film's soundtrack by CAAMA Music, a form of merchandising that it has in common with *Choir of Hard Knocks*. The reception of *Prison Songs* thus spans a range of audiences by combining interest in the film's social themes with an embrace of its music as a celebration of inmates' perspectives.

Prison Songs extends the use of music and voice in Australian documentary television. Traditionally, write Paget and Roscoe, music in documentary 'has a linking/commentating function' that drives narrative and provides 'emotional texture', but is relegated to the background; by contrast, speech and graphics, including intertitles, are privileged through television documentary's 'bias towards intelligibility' (Paget and Roscoe 2006). The documusical departs from these conventions by enacting a 'provocative shift in spectator-position' when participants 'shift from documentary interviewee to musical performer' (Paget and Roscoe, 2006). The documusical challenges the view of documentary as a discourse of 'sobriety' that 'mimics the canons of expository argument' (Nichols 1991, 3–4). As a sober discourse, documentary has a propensity to constrain participants' points of view within conventional forms of narration, argument and interviews. Yet Bill Nichols writes that even in its traditional forms, documentary 'has never been accepted as a full equal' of instrumental discourses of sobriety, such as science, economics, politics and welfare, because documentaries are inevitably linked to the 'image-based, illusionistic medium of entertainment' (1991, 3–

4). Unconcerned by non-fiction film's awkward proximity to fictional works, the documusical embraces and develops from this closeness. Participants in the documusical 'enact' through performance another 'version' of themselves that they seem more 'comfortable to own', write Paget and Roscoe, while more conventional elements, particularly interviews, are 'lifted to a new level of overt performance' (2006).

The shift from interviewee to performer, from sobriety to frivolity, is exemplified in *Prison Songs* by Phil's song, 'The Berrimah Hilton'. Having spent twenty-seven years in prison, Phil explains that 'It's like this is my home', a refuge from finding a job and from health problems associated with heroin. With Phil's comment that 'the only place that saved me is this Berrimah Hilton', laid-back lounge music and slow-motion images of young people playing sport signal the film's transition to a satirical, performative mode. Much of Phil's song is spoken directly to the audience: 'Nestled in the outskirts of Darwin, this tropical retreat will offer you all the time for reflection you could possibly desire. Welcome to the Berrimah Hilton.' As he proceeds to provide a guided tour of the facility, the film parodies advertisements for resort lifestyles. At a reception area, for example, he assures us that 'Checking in is all too easy'. The sequence mimics television infomercials when Phil demonstrates the attractions of a cell with its bunk bed and stainless-steel toilet: 'Our stylish yet cosy guest rooms are equipped with all modern conveniences, including a personal en suite'. Moreover, Phil offers his 'personal guarantee' that 'you'll find it hard to leave'. The song has a precursor in *Feltham Sings*, where an announcer on the prison's radio station provides a satirical monologue about the facility's attractions. However, 'The Berrimah Hilton' is distinguished by its languid pace, retro music and images of low-lying

architecture that vividly evoke Darwin's tropical climate. Whereas Feltham Prison is a male facility, in *Prison Songs* a chorus of five women dances alluringly while singing the refrain: 'At the Berrimah Hilton / Freedom is a state of mind'. *Prison Songs* uses music to position participants as commentators who are knowingly ironic and brazenly colloquial, traits often inhibited in other types of documentaries.

The performative mode

Prison Songs can be situated within the performative mode of documentary representation. As defined by Bill Nichols, performative documentary centres on the 'expressive, poetic, and rhetorical' in its form and address (1994, 94). The centrality of musical expression in *Prison Songs* exemplifies this emphasis on the poetic. Whereas other documentaries place 'emphasis on the referent' and on 'classically objective' forms of non-fiction representation, such as narration and interviews, a performative documentary 'may speak less about the historical world than serve to evoke or poetically engage this world.' (Nichols 1994, 95–98). Nichols argues that the performative mode came to prominence in the 1980s in avant-garde documentaries, such as *A Song of Ceylon* (Jayamanne 1985, UK), *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (Minh-ha 1989, USA), *Looking for Langston* (Julien 1989, UK) and *I'm British But ...* (Chadha 1990, UK) (Nichols 1994, 93–94). However, the definition of the performative mode has since been expanded to include films in which 'the intrusive presence of the filmmaker' constitutes a type of performance, such as in the films of Nick Broomfield and Michael Moore (Bruzzi 2006, 187–8). Stella Bruzzi positions this expanded definition of performative documentary as a corrective to Nichols' 'latent wariness' of performative documentary (Bruzzi 2006, 186), which he describes as being

‘precariously close to incomprehensible within the institutional framework of documentary’ (Nichols 1994, 97).

As a television documentary, *Prison Songs* is both consistent and contemporaneous with the expansion of the performative mode beyond addressing rarefied audiences. However, the documusical form of *Prison Songs* has more in common with avant-garde works than with those in which the film-maker’s presence is intrusive. In documusicals, as in the performative mode, knowledge is performed and ‘embodied’, meaning is ‘subjective’ and ‘affect-laden’ (Nichols 2010, 201). While enabling non-fiction subject matter to be explored outside conventions of argument, however, these traits of performative documentary can also be susceptible to circularity and ambiguity. Documentaries in this mode have a propensity to position performance as its own justification, potentially drawing attention away from the existing world. Anne Jerslev observes that ‘[d]ocumentation and action’ may be ‘one and the same thing’ in performative documentaries (2005, 95). The performative documentary does not necessarily seek to provide answers to problems, but implicitly challenges the viewer to engage differently with non-fictional subject matter in encounters with the poetic and the subjective.

Prison Songs exemplifies how many performative documentaries centre on people belonging to historically oppressed social groups. Nichols writes that the ‘emotional intensities and social subjectivity’ in these films are often those ‘of the underrepresented or misrepresented, of women and ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians’ (2010, 205). For example, themes of post-colonial experience and ethnic identity are central to *A Song of Ceylon*, *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, *Looking for Langston* and

I'm British But ... . Performative documentaries that eschew conventions of narration and interviews can be understood in relation to a history of non-fiction representation in which these elements reinforced the unequal power relationship between film-maker and participants, whose voices were thereby marginalized. Nichols observes that the performative mode 'shares a rebalancing and corrective tendency with autoethnography', including that of 'tapes made by the Kayapo people of the Amazon River basin and by the Aboriginal people of Australia' (2010: 205). Indeed, the performative mode in Indigenous productions is broadly consistent with cultural traditions that 'do not depend on the oppositional and hierarchical nature of Cartesian dualisms between myth and history or fiction and fact' (Pearson 2015, 170). Yet the subject matter of performative documentaries also extends beyond traditional cultures to include contemporary groups that are commonly stereotyped. For example, Brian Hill's *Drinking for England* avoids labelling its participants as alcoholics, instead centring on their use of poetry and song to express relationships to drinking.

These ideas are echoed in *Prison Songs* in 'Alcohol', a song issuing from the story of Malcolm, a young man who describes drinking to 'have fun' and escape the boredom of the 'sober life'. Although intertitles inform us that 'most' of Berrimah's inmates were under the influence of alcohol or drugs when they committed their crimes, *Prison Songs* emphasizes the universal attractions of drinking. Malcolm's comment that 'I wouldn't say I'm a ladies' man' but 'I'd love to have five or six wives' becomes the cue for the opening lines of the song, which presents an extended metaphor of drink as an irresistible seducer. In the laundry with a chorus of male inmates, Malcolm sings, 'Alcohol / I never had a chance at all / You had me from the start / You pour into my heart / And brighten up my day'. The song is intercut with an interview with Molly,

who sings the second verse with a female chorus. The song's pop melody and buoyant tone, reminiscent of calypso, fuel a tragi-comic view of drinking as a dysfunctional relationship. For example, the lyrics invoke language of love and betrayal by likening alcohol to a 'sweetheart' and a 'lover' that 'makes a party out of every crowd', but is also 'a devil in disguise' that cuts people 'down to size'. To extend Paget and Roscoe's (2006) analysis of *Drinking for England*, the participants' performances of 'self-mockery' in *Prison Songs* flaunt 'self-knowledge and self-confidence'. 'Alcohol' is significant for implicitly confronting a stereotype associated with Indigenous Australians. The inmates in *Prison Songs* express in candid and affable ways their helplessness in relation to a widely-used addictive substance. Yet this stereotype is also destabilized by the film's precedent in *Drinking for England*, which in focusing exclusively on white people refutes the association of drinking with an ethnic minority.

While the sympathy of *Prison Songs* lies firmly with its participants, they are nonetheless implicated in a power relationship. Indeed, the film's development exemplifies how the prison both imposes order and shapes inmates' opportunities, functions that influenced the production. After the producers and director initiated the project, the press kit reveals, prison staff 'from the education and music departments' called for inmates to volunteer; prison management then gave approval for about half of these volunteers to participate (2014, 9). While *Prison Songs* does not present a critical view of the prison or its staff, institutionalization is evident in the influence of prison support programs on the film and in some participants' interviews. Just as Phil refers to Berrimah as 'my home away from home', Bernadine says that 'I have nowhere else to go'. Equally, an aversion to institutionalization is implicit in Wurdankardi's vow to teach his kin after his release that 'There's no life in jail'. Underpinning the

interconnectedness of participants' lives with the facility is the relationship between Indigenous people and the wider Australian society.

As the first local documusical, *Prison Songs* lacks immediately identifiable Australian precedents. Yet the film has some affinities with earlier Australian works that merge documentary and dramatized elements. Examples are *Backroads* (Noyce 1977), which combines a simulated documentary style with a fictional story, and *Wrong Side of the Road* (Lander 1981), a docudrama about a tour by the Indigenous rock bands Us Mob and No Fixed Address. The collaborative writing process for *Prison Songs* has a precedent in *Wrong Side of the Road*, for which the screenplay was developed from the life stories of people in the film (Beattie 2016, 116). Before Lander's film, *Backroads* involved Indigenous influence in production decisions about locations, dialogue and the plot (Godfrey 2017, 101–103). *Backroads* and *Wrong Side of the Road* thus loosely prefigure *Prison Songs* in exploring production methods that modify the traditionally unequal power relationship between film-makers and people on screen. Like *Backroads* and *Wrong Side of the Road*, *Prison Songs* presents 'an "inside" view' of the world it depicts (Beattie 2016, 120). Whereas the earlier films include limited episodes in which characters are incarcerated, *Prison Songs* centres on incarceration. All three films link the inside view to Indigenous musical performance, but *Prison Songs* positions music differently. *Backroads* and *Wrong Side of the Road* use filming styles reminiscent of observational documentary to depict music as occurring naturally in situations depicted (Beattie 2016, 114), whereas the numbers in *Prison Songs* eschew documentary conventions and are reminiscent of music videos. Nevertheless, *Prison Songs* echoes the use of Indigenous music in *Wrong Side of the Road*, particularly

protest songs such as No Fixed Address's 'Black Mans Rights [sic]' and Us Mob's 'Genocide'.

The relationship between Indigenous culture and incarceration is explored in *Prison Songs* in a protest number, 'White Man's Time'. This sequence opens with a performance by One Mob Different Country, traditional dancers who are part of a government program involving low-security prisoners. One of only two songs in the film that focus explicitly on Indigeneity, 'White Man's Time' is performed by Wurdankardi, a 51-year-old Wadeye man and the only participant who gives his interview in Indigenous language. Wurdankardi expresses frustration with the Australian legal system, which he describes as dismissive of Indigenous people's versions of events: 'I'd been charged cause of blackfella business', he says, but 'when you tell your story, whitefellas throw it away'. An intertitle informs us that for many inmates the disjunction between traditional and Australian law 'means being punished twice for the same crime'. A rock song with Aboriginal percussion, 'White Man's Law' uses Indigenous and English language to express the tension encapsulated in the refrain, 'I'm not doin' nothin' but the white man's time'. While thus presenting an overt message of protest, the images of Wurdankardi's performance draw in hybrid fashion on familiar iconographies of prison films and rock videos. For example, the film frames him as an isolated, masculine figure in a desolate landscape behind a fence with razor wire. Whereas many rock musicians have adopted the persona of an outlaw, 'White Man's Time' represents the anti-authoritarianism of actual outlaws. The film juxtaposes this stance with the traditional Indigenous connection to country by intercutting images within the prison with shots of the bush. Mobile shots of a prison corridor dissolve to images of walking in the bush, where a hand holding a spear forms a graphic match

with a mop wielded by an inmate on cleaning duty. *Prison Songs* brings traditions of Indigenous protest, language and performance to the documusical.

Voices across boundaries

Prison Songs creates expressive visual and aural relationships between the participants and their spatial environment. For example, the film involves a progression from images of interiority and confinement to increased movement and use of open spaces. 'Waking up in Berrimah' emphasizes images of captivity, of prisoners starting the day in their cells and an exercise yard with a mesh roof that resembles an interior. The song is performed by Max, a young man who describes working for his father's law firm before drug debts prompted him to commit a robbery. A reggae number, 'Waking up in Berrimah' conveys the jarring transition to prison life through quotidian images. For example, the lyrics invoke a harsh introduction to prison routine in the tropical climate by referring to 'hot sun burning on the razor wire' while inmates are shown being issued with shaving implements. The next song, 'The Berrimah Hilton', departs from this insularity by imbuing Phil with the assured mobility of a tour guide who roams the facility. As the film progresses, the songs' deeper exploration of participants' experiences suggests the potential of story and music to transcend spatial limitations.

The film's juxtaposing of the correctional facility with images of motion develops a theme of the capacity for music and creative expression to communicate beyond boundaries. For example, the images accompanying the rap, 'In the Middle', consist largely of Max and Dale moving through and outside the prison buildings. Performing directly to the camera and pointing aggressively in hip hop style, their

assertiveness is affirmed by the camera's backward movement away from them, as though intimidated by the performers. Moving from room to room and from interior to exterior, Dale and Max assert their spatial dominance in implicit defiance of the facility's internal boundaries. This motif of traversing space reinforces the song's theme of the difficulties of being part of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures without belonging completely to either. Both Dale and Max speak in interviews of feeling like an outsider in non-Indigenous society while having a limited sense of connection to their Indigenous communities. 'This is for all the outcasts who feel out of place from the rest of their race', Dale raps in the song, a hybrid of Indigenous and English language.

The film's theme of traversing boundaries is also evident in speeded-up shots of clouds moving across the sky, above the prison and over its secure fences. Images in *Prison Songs* of clouds, sunrise and sunset are spectacles that are implicitly available to people within as well as outside the prison. Speeded-up shots of officials outside the facility refer to the changing world outside, forming a contrast with the prison's regimented routines. While an image of a bird flying over the prison evokes a spatial freedom that the inmates lack, however, it can also be read as emblematic of the capacity for the voice and imagination to travel beyond physical barriers. Images of a natural landscape that extends beyond the boundaries of Berrimah align the camera with freedom through its ability to encompass this wider space, but also convey the institution's relative insignificance in an environment that has been occupied for much longer by Indigenous people.

Music's capacity to cross boundaries is developed in sequences in which participants perform together. Whereas inmates of the same sex share the same space in 'In the Middle' and in choruses in 'Alcohol' and 'The Berrimah Hilton', other numbers use editing to combine performances by participants who are filmed separately. This is particularly evident in collaboration between female and male inmates in 'Alcohol' and 'Mum and Dad'. For example, 'Mum and Dad' brings together aural performances by Max, Bernadine and Molly while the accompanying visual sequence situates them in separate spaces. The song is preceded by Molly's account of an experience of physical abuse by her male partner and Dale's recounting of an episode in his childhood when his mother was beaten by her partner. Set primarily in the prison laundry, the song's images of inmates' methodical labour complement the song's subdued and reflective tone. At the same time, the setting evokes the significance of the domestic sphere and family relationships, themes reinforced by the song's refrain, 'That's what you learn from your mum and dad'. The peaceful and harmonious tone of 'Mum and Dad' serves to counterpoint the information in intertitles that more than ninety percent of Berrimah's inmates have experienced domestic violence, which for some is also the reason for their incarceration. The song's theme of social isolation is overlaid with shared understanding through the combining of voices of participants who are framed alone. In a sequence in which Bernadine and Max are heard to harmonize and alternate lines, the film combines their images on a split screen while they face away from each other in their respective spaces. In *Prison Songs*, the facility becomes a stage for performances that are both individual and collective.

Prison Songs can be viewed as an audio-visual, collaborative counterpart to prisoner literature and art. Indeed, the film refers to prison art in brief observational

sequences in which inmates are seen painting and working with sculpture. The significance of *Prison Songs* can be linked to Lily Hibberd and Glen Stasiuk's argument that 'prisoner-authored' works have a capacity to traverse 'the subjective distance' between people within and outside the institution, by privileging narratives from the inmate's 'voice and body' (2017, 327–8). Whereas their analysis of prisoner literature centres on historical trauma, however, *Prison Songs* harnesses the immediate pleasures of music. Its use of song, humour and storytelling challenges distinctions between entertainment and documentary, the popular and the avant-garde, television and innovation. Julianne Schultz argues that cultural works have a capacity to define and bring to life 'the new Australian reality', which she identifies with 'our hybrid identity' (2014). With a capacity to 'define the future' and thwart 'confusion and cultural detachment', some of the most significant contributions, she argues, are works that draw on both 'Indigenous and settler traditions' (2014). In *Prison Songs* the use of music to convey prisoners' stories is strongly infused with the hybridity of contemporary experiences, identities and voices.

Australia's first documentary musical, *Prison Songs* expands the formal and thematic diversity of non-fiction television. It is an important contribution to Indigenous documentary that exemplifies the currency of hybrid approaches in Australian screen production, a hybridity that includes participating in international developments by having a precedent in British documusicals. As a performative documentary, *Prison Songs* challenges audiences to respond differently to the genre by emphasizing the humanity of Berrimah inmates who convey their stories through song, which is here privileged over social-problem discourse. In a context in which experiences of ordinary prisoners in Australia are often absent on screen, *Prison Songs* is significant for

positioning expression through song and dance as a means of traversing spatial, subjective and geographic boundaries.

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¹ The documusical also differs from ethnodrama, in which performance is used to present research.