



*Photograph courtesy of the University of New England*

**Catherine Ellis**

## *Catherine Ellis (1935–1996)*

I first met Cath Ellis (née Caughie) in the late 1960s when she was working as a Research Fellow for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies at the Elder Conservatorium, University of Adelaide. At the time she and her husband Max were making field trips to Ernabella and other areas of northern South Australia where the Pitjantjara people lived. It was largely her interest in the area that inspired my own interest, field trip and subsequent publications on Pitjantjara children's music at Yalata. For this I thank her. Cath touched the lives of many people, not only ethnomusicologists but also many students of Aboriginal culture and music educators around Australia and overseas.

For me the most remarkable aspect of her approach to her work was her concern for Aborigines as people, the social problems and injustices they faced in White-dominated Australian institutions and communities, and her explanations of the magically liberating impact of music in their lives. She acted on her convictions. For example, in the early 1970s she worked through the Port Adelaide Aboriginal Friendship Club to bridge the gap between tribal and urban people through music, and to inject an awareness in them that they had a culture which was as important as any other. That was just the beginning. Cath's husband Max Ellis also worked with her on many projects and served as conductor of the Adelaide Aboriginal Orchestra. In 1974 they co-founded the Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music (CASM) at the University of Adelaide which enrolled Aboriginal students in both Aboriginal and Western popular and classical music classes. From the outset CASM combined the traditional master-disciple system of teaching with Western methods in a multicultural environment where students could see that the Pitjantjara Elders had the status of senior lecturers. They produced remarkable creative work. Following the success of *The Indulkana Suite* (a forty minute expression in music of the Aboriginal past, present and future), staff and students combined to produce a similar jazz-rock suite called *Urban Corroboree* (1987). Some of the first Aboriginal rock bands were also nurtured at CASM. Indeed, over the years, hundreds of Aboriginal musicians from CASM deepened their knowledge and practical ability in the field of music.

Born in Birregurra, in 1935, Cath Ellis began her career as a graduate of the University of Melbourne in 1956 with a Bachelor of

Music degree, specialising in bassoon and piano. She carried out her first work on Aboriginal music at the University of Adelaide in 1957–58 as a research assistant to Professor Ted Strehlow. In 1961 she completed a PhD at the University of Glasgow with a thesis entitled ‘Aboriginal Music Making: A Study of Central Australian Music’ based on Strehlow’s field collection from that area (Ellis 1964). She began to carry out her own field work in south-eastern South Australia in the early 1960s, in part on an Australian Research Grant. Moving to northern South Australia, she worked among the Pitjantjara and Antikirinya, studying both men’s and women’s music but concentrating on the women’s ceremonies, in so doing collaborating with the linguist, Luise Hercus, the anthropologist I.M. (Sally) White, the social psychologist Lynda Perry, and the photographer Rhonda Toussaint. Most of Cath’s deep knowledge of Aboriginal music was gleaned from fieldwork; for example between 1962 and 1977 she made extensive field recordings in South Australia and along the Murray in Victoria and New South Wales.

Cath’s contribution to the literature on Australian Aboriginal music comprised numerous analyses of the rhythmic, melodic and other aspects of central and southern traditional tribal music. Along with Marylouise Brunton and Linda Barwick, Cath was also one of the first scholars to research detribalised Aboriginal music forms. Her major contributions include an entry entitled *Aboriginal Music and Dance in Southern Australia* in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, and a book entitled *Aboriginal Music: Education for Living* (1985), in which she explored the educational possibilities of the medium by comparing and contrasting Western methods of music education and music therapy with traditional tribal methods. She proposed that the problems of people living in an alien culture and of parents and children living with different cultural frameworks can in part be restored through a system of music education that derives from traditional concepts. Amongst other things Cath studied the time consciousness of Aboriginal performers, and towards the end of her career she collaborated with Udo Will to analyse frequency performance in Australian Aboriginal vocal music.

From 1957 Cath held various appointments at the University of Adelaide which culminated in a readership in 1984 when she became Dean of the former Faculty of Music. In 1985 she became the inaugural Professor of Music at Armidale’s University of New England,

where she aimed to implement her ideas for an integrated music education. In 1988–89 she served as President of the Musicological Society of Australia. In 1991 she was awarded the Order of Australia. She retired in 1994; and in 1995 was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters at the University of New England. Only recently was she elected a Fellow of this Academy and her early death is particularly regretted in light of the further contributions she would have made in this capacity.

When Cath died on 30 May 1996 after an illness of some eighteen months, Australian ethnomusicology lost one of its most original and productive scholars. Author of seven books and scores of scholarly articles, she also bequeathed upon us her extensive collection of field materials, which is now housed in the National Library of Australia. Her many contributions secured a place for herself in the national and international scholarly area as the leading ethnomusicologist of southern Australian Aboriginal music and one of Australia's most original and imaginative scholars.

A memorial service was held in Adelaide on June 5 1996.

*Margaret Kartomi*