

## Locating *The Sapphires*: transnational and cross-cultural dimensions of an Australian Indigenous musical film

Therese Davis\*

*Film and Screen Studies, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia*

This essay discusses transnational dimensions of the Indigenous musical film *The Sapphires*, based on the true story of an Aboriginal all-girls soul band that entertained American troops in the Vietnam War. It suggests that there are strong resonances between the film's story of four young Indigenous women who affirm their Indigenous identity while negotiating their way across national and cultural borders and contemporary Indigenous filmmakers operating in Australia's rapidly internationalizing mainstream screen industry. It argues that while the original Sapphires' adopted the American musical genre of soul as a means of breaking free from colonial forms of social restriction and racism, *The Sapphires* appropriates the film genre of the musical to tell the story of this all-girls group in ways that transpose the musical into an Indigenous cultural realm.

Four Aboriginal women taking centre stage on the big screen *is* political.

Tony Briggs, Co-writer and Associate Producer, *The Sapphires* (2012)<sup>1</sup>

This article looks at the 'offshore processes' of *The Sapphires* (Wayne Blair, 2012), an Indigenous musical loosely based on a true story of an Aboriginal all-girl group who entertained US troops during the Vietnam war. In addition to considering the transnationalism of its story – set in Australia and Vietnam – I want to take *The Sapphires* as a case study of the ways in which Indigenous film-makers are also taking centre stage by negotiating new transnational film policies, financing arrangements and markets in Australia's rapidly internationalizing screen industry.<sup>2</sup> I draw on Sukhmani Khorana's conceptualization of crossover cinema to analyse *The Sapphires* as an Indigenous musical that brings this popular genre into a new cultural realm. By adopting this approach, I am not arguing that all Indigenous film-making is crossover cinema, and I am certainly not trying to make a case that it should be. But I do want to suggest that close attention to the crossover work performed in and by *The Sapphires* as a musical provides an opportunity for us to reflect on the place of Indigenous film-making in the contemporary media landscape and the questions it raises about Indigenous strategic use of film. *The Sapphires*' drama centres on four young Aboriginal women from the late 1960s whose survival depends upon their ability to negotiate their way across borders, national and cultural, by appropriating a global cultural genre – soul music – while simultaneously reaffirming their Indigenous identity. So too, I argue, the strategic power and economic sustainability of Australian Indigenous film-making in the twenty-first century – 'the Indigenous brand' as Rachel Perkins' says – involves the assertion of Indigenous identity through the adoption and 'Indigenization' of international genres (Gibbs 2013, 38).

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\*Email: [Therese.Davis@monash.edu](mailto:Therese.Davis@monash.edu)