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By putting music first, Riebl uses song to highlight issues of climate change, land justice, and Indigenous rights

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Spinifex Gum released its cover of “No Longer There,” to coincide with the climate change summit, COP26, in 2021. The single calls on the Australian government to take further climate action and work collaboratively to reverse the effects of climate change before it is too late.

A strong vein of activism runs through the work of the Melbourne-based singer, songwriter, and composer, [Felix Riebl](#). He is the leader and co-founder of the band [The Cat Empire](#), whose song “[No Longer There](#)” speaks to the ongoing climate crisis. He also helps lead the mainly Indigenous youth choir project [Spinifex Gum](#), which sings about Indigenous rights and land issues. Despite the recognition his work has garnered as a force for change, activism has never been the driving force of Riebl’s music.

“The intent of any musician has to be about the music first and foremost, and about the substance of the music, before any politics or activism or [social statements come out of it]”, said Riebl. His approach to integrating political topics in music draws inspiration from artists like Peter Garret, Paul Kelly, and Archie Roach, who he describes as “legends of Australian music” and who all use song as a vehicle for political speech.



Riebl (left of center) with Spinifex Gum choir members. Photo: Lyn Williams

“[Miss Dhu](#)” were each the result of his emotions surrounding derisive topics. “These came from very very [powerful internal] reactions in myself,” he said. Still, nobody will stream a song that is not, first, pleasurable to listen to. He is careful not to let his eagerness to articulate a certain message compromise the integrity of his art. “Musicians have their small role to play in these broader issues. But we have to do what we can do well, which is to move people in a more unexplainable way before the message hits.”

“No Longer There” was inspired by a book Riebl was gifted back in 2005. [Tim Flannery’s “Weather Makers”](#) discusses the history and future of climate change as well as potential solutions. When he read the book, Riebl said there was still a strong societal lean toward climate-change denial, but the narrative struck him. “I was very worried after having read that and I think at that point I became very committed, internally, to believing in [and responding to] climate change.”

Other media was also emerging to stimulate climate-change discussions at the time. Davis Guggenheim’s 2006 documentary film “[An Inconvenient Truth](#)” follows former United States Vice President Al Gore’s campaign to raise awareness for the climate crisis and also moved Riebl. As he became more involved in climate activism, Riebl said “No Longer There” came to him naturally. Today, the words still ring true, and the piece has been [covered](#) and rerecorded by Spinifex Gum.

The theme of the song becomes even stronger when sung by the youth choir. The impact of climate change on the Torres Strait Islands, where many of the singers are from, is striking. Where other regions of the world are experiencing incremental changes and are privileged to see the most disastrous effects of a warming climate as future issues, the Australian island region is already being swallowed by rising seas. “This is one of the places in the world where you can say climate change is [a present] reality,” said Riebl.

Spinifex Gum—a youth choir composed of female Aboriginal and Torres Strait singers—has been credited for its political activism in a number of spaces. When working with the youth, Riebl’s goals orbit around the quality of the art. “How do we make this [choir of young people](#) sound absolutely world class? How do we move people first and foremost, before there’s any messaging at all?” With these questions as a guide, the group naturally produces something politically moving.

“That doesn’t mean that you don’t feel outraged about certain things,” Riebl said. His songs “No Longer There” and

Thousands of years of Torres Strait history and culture, including burial grounds, are being washed away by rising tides. “It’s not a hypothetical at all in the context of those young singers’ lives,” said Riebl. As such, the project emphasizes values of sustainability and uses the beauty of music to remind people of what is occurring and what is being lost.

In “No Longer There”, the choir sings the line, “to deny or despair. It’s really just the same.” Riebl says this speaks to the reaction he sees among people who find certain topics unbearable to think about. People shield themselves either by turning away from the issue or declaring that there is nothing to be done. “Not much action comes from either of those two positions,” said Riebl. “There’s a sort of certainty to denial and there’s a certainty to despair, I suppose, that actually protects people from what is just something very very difficult to see.”

The same reactions arise from discussions of the historical treatment of First Nations people, especially those who died in custody after being imprisoned at disproportionate rates. “The truth is very clear. It’s here. There’s not much ambiguity about what’s going on here,” said Riebl, but people turn away from that truth to avoid difficult emotions.

Riebl said that music has the power to pierce the walls people build around themselves. Through their art, singers can guide people to recognize the most difficult truths society faces. When Spinifex Gum performs, there is something powerful about the raw presentation of these topics that breaks through audiences’ denial. Riebl described the choir’s voices as a “moving sonic wave” that hits listeners who may have previously hidden from past, present, and future horrors. “All of a sudden, they are disarmed by 20 young, beautiful, female voices coming at them, choreographed ... and at that point you see tears.”

While he emphasizes the difference between on-the-ground activism and the role of music in political spaces, Riel said both yield change in their own way. Change created through art is more incremental. It is not inking new legislation; it is facilitating reconciliation through vulnerability. “That is the role of what art can do in this space ... it can disarm people out of their natural denial, despair model of looking at something and it being too rational.”.

Riebl has noticed cultural shifts in discussions surrounding climate, Indigenous, and land-based issues since he first began to integrate social and political topics in his work. “We’re seeing an undercurrent of change”, he said. And while he sees there being a long road ahead as society grapples with its past treatment of people, land, and environment, he recognizes the gains that have been made and the role that art has played in that movement. Moving forward, he said, “it’s a genuinely new time coming up.”