Music and dance flow through every part of Aboriginal life. People believe that these art forms close the time gap between past and present. Music and dance also draw the singers and dancers into harmony with the spirits of their ancestors. Aboriginal music was originally used to help in birth and healing, comfort the grieving, and help the spirits of the dead depart. People also performed songs and ceremonies in exchange for goods. In modern times, Aboriginal music is used to teach lessons, tell stories, perform ceremonies, and record history.

Below: Singing and chanting accompany an Aboriginal dance.
Songs and Dances

Aboriginal songs described and told the locations of land formations and water sources. Many modern Aboriginal people accurately sing the old songs, with little or no change in form, words, pitch, rhythm, or length. Other singers combine traditional songs and instruments with modern music.

In the past, Aboriginal people danced to tell stories and as part of rituals. Dancers often imitated the movements of animals, such as kangaroos and emus. Many modern dance companies have brought back the old dances. Dances might tell about ancient legends or about more recent events such as World War II. Some groups combine new dance styles with Aboriginal styles that date back thousands of years.

Musical Instruments

The main instrument of Aboriginal music is the human voice, but people use other instruments, too. They use clap sticks (two sticks rhythmically clapped together), including boomerangs. The rasp is a saw-toothed stick that produces musical sounds when rubbed across another stick. The Torres Strait Islanders make a drum from a long hollow piece of wood with snakeskin stretched across one end. People also clap hands, slap their thighs or buttocks, and make various kinds of voice calls to accompany singers. In recent years, modern musicians have added guitars and leaf whistles to traditional musical sounds.

THE DIDJERIDU

The didjeridu (right), a kind of trumpet or horn, was originally played in northwestern parts of Australia. The instrument is still popular among modern musicians. The typical didjeridu was 40 to 60 inches (102 to 152 centimeters) long. It was made from a piece of a bamboo or a tree trunk hollowed out by termites or fire. A mouthpiece was made from wax or resin. The didjeridu player blew into the mouthpiece, vibrating the lips and tapping the instrument rhythmically with one hand.