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**Yodelling Boundary Riders:  
Country Music In Australia, 1936-2010**

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# Abstract

## **Yodelling Boundary Riders: Country Music In Australia, 1936-2010**

Country music has been recorded, performed and listened to in Australia since the early 1930s. It has proven to be a musical form with considerable longevity, popularity and resonance. For two decades, from the mid 1930s to the mid 1950s, country music (commonly known then as hillbilly music) matched, or in some cases, outsold other forms of popular music, attracted large audiences in cities, suburbs and rural towns and galvanised a burgeoning, youthful audience into hillbilly fans.

Much of the historiography of country music in Australia has tended to see it in the context of the 'Americanisation' of popular culture or as an example of an Australian folkloric tradition. Both approaches assume that cultural significance is synonymous with Australianness. This thesis will move beyond nationalistic readings and will instead place country music in its historical context.

It will argue that country music in Australia can be understood as a response to and a critique of modernity. On the one hand, hillbilly music in the 1930s was an exciting, modern form with glamorous American origins; on the other, its songs sounded nostalgic and were often arcadian visions of the bush. Country music in Australia has frequently communicated a sense of sentimental authenticity. Increasingly, this has been combined with patriotic sentiment, to the degree that country music's self-image in the early twenty-first century is of a uniquely Australian cultural form.

## Introduction

### **'Lights On The Hill': Slim Dusty and the Canterbury-Hurlstone Park RSL**

The suburb of Canterbury lies on the outer edge of Sydney's inner west. It's the area that marks the beginning of the city or, depending on your point of view, the beginning of the western suburbs. Heading west, it's the place where the terraced houses start to peter out, to be replaced by free-standing Californian bungalows, back yards, bowling clubs, 'village-style' shopping centres and Catholic schools. Beyond Canterbury, out west, the rest of Sydney spreads for some 100 kilometres - the flat plains of chicken wire, freeways, empty blocks, the place where the city hasn't quite got to yet, but the country's 'up and gone' <sup>1</sup> - all the way to the hazy climb of the Blue Mountains.

Canterbury is also the place where the city comes to the country. The Canterbury-Hurlstone Park Returned Services League (RSL) Club claims to be 'one of Sydney's premier entertainment venues', <sup>2</sup> hosting cabaret, comedy, professional wrestling, ABBA covers bands and country artists. Indeed, in 2010, it is as close to the inner city of Sydney that most country singers get when on tour. In the 1930s, 40s and 50s, it was possible to see country music - hillbilly or cowboy music as it was called then - in the clubs, town halls and showgrounds of Australian inner cities. From the 1960s onwards, the country music touring circuit retreated to coastal, hinterland and rural towns, fulfilling its destiny as 'country music'. For inner-city dwellers who crave a bit of country, in 2010 the Canterbury-Hurlstone Park RSL is one of the few places to find it.

In April 2002 a 'living legend' of Australian country, Slim Dusty, performed at the Canterbury-Hurlstone Park RSL. Dusty's achievements are notable: he has been recording and touring since the 1940s; in 1957 he had an international hit song with 'The Pub With No Beer'; he is Australia's highest-selling recording artist; he has spent a large part of his professional life touring remote parts of the country and collecting songs from

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<sup>1</sup> David Foster, *Mates Of Mars*, Penguin, 1991, p 4.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.chprsl.com.au/> 10/10/08

amateur songwriters in these areas; and he was closely involved with the development and popularity of the Tamworth country music festival. Dusty has become synonymous, not just with Australian country music, but with Australian culture in general, as his appearance at the 2000 Sydney Olympic closing ceremony demonstrates. As it turned out, 2002 would be Dusty's last tour as he passed away seventeen months later.

In many ways, Slim Dusty's concert was a performance of history. Even when it was not re-creating a historical detail, it *felt* old-fashioned. Several elements - including the physical environment, Dusty's persona, the stories he told, the sense of family and tradition and the structure of the show - all contributed to this sense of re-enactment.

Firstly, there was the theatre itself. The 'Starlight Auditorium' was an expansive, low-roofed, softly-lit theatre. Its semi-circular wooden stage and velvet curtains seemed to be from a different era to the rest of the club. Its atmosphere of a wood-panelled 1940s was contrasted with the 1980s concrete spray and glass of the building's exterior. It appeared as if the theatre was built in another era and the exterior shell wrapped around it recently, almost as if to protect it.

Secondly, there was Slim Dusty's persona. This was most clearly expressed in the sound of his voice. It belied his age. It was strong, direct, laconic, warm and humorous. He sang as if he was speaking, yet never sounded out of tune. The conversational style of his delivery immediately drew in the audience, seemingly unmediated by technique or style. The stories sounded like they really happened to him. Its feeling of authenticity immediately distinguished him from the popular clichés of showbusiness. Further, he was dressed in his 'real' clothes - a waistcoat and Akubra hat (an iconic symbol of Australia) that, as photographs and film footage would suggest, he wore offstage as well as on. Of course the sense of realness was itself a performance style that contributed to the sense of historic timelessness.

On the other hand, the performance style of Dusty's band was slick. They played an electrified honky-tonk style – bass, drums, guitar, steel guitar. It was a minimal style of country rock, providing plenty of space for Dusty's voice to sit in the mix. They were dressed in matching red country shirts and black pants, a cowboy image that contrasted in complex ways with Slim's iconic Australian dress. The presentation of Dusty and his band was part of a process – as ethno-musicologist Aaron Fox would have it – of 'denaturalising and renaturalising'.<sup>3</sup> In this case, reality was denaturalised via the flashy, overtly cowboy clothing of the band and the clearly honky-tonk style of their musical performance, and renaturalised by Slim's voice, clothes and conversational stage persona. He was the comforting, reassuringly human part of the professional show.

Dusty's actual conversation also focussed on the past. Much of his stage banter was made up of stories about his early life on the touring circuit of circuses and rodeos; about his love of 1920s blue yodeller Jimmie Rodgers; about seeing early Australian hillbilly singers like Tex Morton; about working with rough-riding families like the Gills and the Skuthorpes. It was both a personal history and a history of a part of Australian popular culture that has been largely unrecorded.

Fourthly, a sense of family and tradition permeated the performance. Part of this came from the fact that there was actual family on stage. Dusty's wife Joy McKean and his daughter Anne Kirkpatrick regularly joined him at the microphone to sing songs on their own, or as a family. Joy has been Slim's musical collaborator since the early 1950s and has written several of his best-known songs. An accomplished piano-accordion player, she provided a strong musical presence on stage. In the middle of the show Joy McKean was joined by her sister Heather and together they sang several numbers from their pre-Slim Dusty Show days when they performed as a singing cowgirl duo known as The McKean Sisters. Their closely harmonised, cowgirl yodels were a particular historical curio and brought the house down as a result of their heritage value and virtuosity. Anne Kirkpatrick had a successful career of her own, but often came back to sing with her

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<sup>3</sup> Aaron Fox, 'The Jukebox of History: Narratives of Loss and Desire in the Discourse of Country Music', *Popular Music*, 11/1, 1992, p 55.

father, both in concert and on album. Her songs were a little more reflective, a little less boisterous, than some of the rest of the material and provide a nice counterpoint. One of her songs, 'Travellin' Still, Always Will' was about Slim and Joy's personal history as musical and touring partners. As the title suggested, it was a song about continuing traditions.

The other performers were treated as an extended family - there was an on-stage bonhomie that belied their professionalism - as were the audience members. Predominantly over the age of sixty, the audience appeared to have attended many Slim Dusty shows in the past and there was a consequent sense of intimacy between them and the performers. This relationship was made explicit when Joy called out to some 'old friends' during the concert, wished several people happy birthday and congratulated others on a recent wedding anniversary. The idea of fans as family was memorialised in Joy's song 'The Front Row'<sup>4</sup> which celebrated the loyalty of their audience. The audience had become part of the show - part of the family - to such a degree that they have been integrated into the music itself. This intimacy has been a defining feature of Dusty's attitude. Throughout his two autobiographies Dusty consistently reiterated the intimate relationship he has with his audience and the way in which this, in turn, feeds back into his music. Indeed, many of his songs were written by audience members at gigs who approached him after the shows, with song literally in hand. In the world of Slim Dusty, the roles of 'amateur' and 'professional' became blurred into one universal, continuing culture.

Lastly, the show had a historic structure. Rather than have one or two 'support acts' followed by the main act - as has become standard for rock, pop and country concerts - other artists were interspersed between brackets of Dusty's songs. Thus, Dusty performed three or four songs in a row, Anne a couple, Joy and Heather yodelled together and one of the musicians also stepped up to the microphone for some comedy numbers. After the interval this all happened again. This structure was inherited from variety and vaudeville styles and was the performative norm in the travelling tent shows in the mid twentieth

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<sup>4</sup> The Slim Dusty Family, *Live Across Australia*, EMI, Sydney, 1986.

century. It was a performance style that was, in its own way, as developed and ritualistic as the 'support act' one, yet it functioned to de-emphasise Dusty's positioning as 'star' of the show. Dusty was merely part of the entertainment. He was part of the Slim Dusty show; part of the family. Or, more specifically, he was the elder of the family and was both passing something on and making way, literally, for the next generation of performers.

There was a strong sense of a shared history in the Starlight Auditorium. Dusty's show functioned as both a museum of past country music practices and as a focus of memory for the audience who may have been to such a show. It was a history lesson – at times self-consciously so, such as when Slim told stories about the rodeo circuit – to a class that already knew the story. However, making something how it used to be is an inescapably contemporary activity – this act alone makes the present completely unlike the past. Nostalgia for its own past has become a key feature of country music in the 2000s. The period it is nostalgic for – the 1930s, 40s and 50s - was a period in which country music was youthful and modern.

### **Country Music In Australia**

What follows is a history of hillbilly, cowboy and country and western music in Australia from 1936 to 2010. Since the 1970s, this style has commonly been known as country music. Country music was, for a period, one of the most popular forms of locally produced music in Australia. From the mid 1930s to the mid 1950s, country music (commonly known then as hillbilly music) matched or, in some cases, outsold other forms of popular music, attracted large audiences in cities, suburbs and rural towns and galvanised a burgeoning, youthful audience into (hillbilly) fans. Furthermore, it did so in the face of considerable middle-class snobbery and hostility. Country was the rock 'n' roll of its day. It anticipated the rock craze of the late 1950s through its adoption of new cultural forms with glamorous American origins, its appeal to a youthful audience, especially the 'teenager', and its widespread notoriety as distasteful and low-class. After

hillbilly music was replaced by rock 'n' roll as the dominant youth music, it was reborn as country - with an appeal to an older, predominantly rural, fanbase - in the 1970s.

This thesis is primarily concerned with what was popular. As such, many of the fascinating, but less mainstream, variants of country music (such as Koori country, bluegrass, country rock, alternative country) ebb and flow around it, but are not its primary focus. When such forms are brought into the discussion, it is commonly with the question: why were these styles not so popular? Or, further, why was it that one style - musically minimal, narratively direct and popularised by solo male performers such as Tex Morton, Buddy Williams, Slim Dusty and Lee Kernaghan - came to dominate the mainstream. Since the 1970s, this style has become known as the 'bush ballad'. This thesis will unpick the bush ballad's lyrical and musical features and its continuing resonance with Australian audiences.

This thesis is not a comprehensive or linear history of country music in Australia. Rather, it will draw out the key themes of country music's history - authenticity, modernity and nation - where they appear at their most revealing. Consequently, it has as its main focus the first twenty years of locally produced country music. This is when country music was at its most popular, its engagement with these issues at their most vivid and the era in which the rules that country music played by were made.

This thesis will argue that the overriding feature of country music in Australia was a sense of authenticity. Primacy of lived experience was the message of country music and the way that was communicated by the singers and interpreted by their audience will serve as the basis for the following chapters. In the case of country music in Australia, the primacy of lived experience meant, specifically, a rural experience. This thesis will ask why rural authenticity was, and continues to be, so important to country music.

It will also ask why national authenticity has become so important to country music. Since the 1970s in particular, country music in Australia has become popularly known as a quintessential Australian musical expression - it has sought to address an, almost

wholly, Australian audience in an Australian vernacular. In its development in the final decades of the twentieth century, country music has become a genre that has been designated, seemingly instinctively, along national lines, that is *Australian* country music and *American* country music. This thesis will attempt to see how this occurred and will use the term 'country music in Australia' as one way of avoiding the tendencies of country music commentators to delineate along national lines. (Even if the majority of the music discussed was produced in Australia, rather than American-produced music that was popular in Australia - although that would also make a fascinating basis for a history).

The following chapters will also examine country's sense of authenticity as a response to modernity and post-modernity. Australian country music's era of greatest popularity and mainstream relevance - the mid 1930s to the mid 1950s - coincided with rapid industrialisation, globalisation and urbanisation. Did country music participate in these changes or did it provide a respite from it? Or both? Further, the revival of country music's popularity occurred in the 1990s - a period marked by debates about what constituted a national culture and a national story. Once again, did country music engage with post-modern ideas of authenticity and nation, or provide alternatives to them?

Country music in Australia has been a neglected area of rigorous academic study, and yet is an appealing area of historical research for several reasons: firstly, because of its popularity; secondly because of its longevity and sense of tradition; and thirdly because it asserts a position as a quintessentially authentic Australian cultural expression.

Country music also has much to tell us about broader aspects of Australian cultural history. The message of country music - and the way that message has been received - has implications for Australian history in general. As such, this thesis, as well as being an inquiry into a particular cultural practice, is also an examination of what that practice tells us about Australia in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Country music has reflected and propagated many of the critical discourses that have characterised Australian culture. It enables us to better understand, for instance, a sense of

'countrymindedness', engagement with and anxiety about modernity, national identity, Americanisation, respectability and class, masculinity, ideas of 'centres' and 'peripheries', memory and nostalgia, secular pilgrimages, ways of seeing the landscape, patriotism and national historical narratives. Ultimately, country music traces a history of 'realness' in Australia - how what it has meant to be really 'country', really 'Australian' and really 'heartfelt' have changed over sixty years.

## Sources

This thesis is an analysis of music and its message. As such, the majority of its primary sources are sound recordings. Little early country music is accessible in its original format (which is 78rpm records with one or two tracks on each side; the 'album' and 45rpm 'single' being a development of the late 1950s) but rather is often presented in the form of compilations. Several compilations have been central to this thesis, particularly the *Tex Morton Regal Zonophone Collection 1936-1943* held in the National Film and Sound Archives in Canberra. This thesis will attempt to take a comprehensive approach to the songs on such compilations - looking not just at what the lyrics were saying, but also at the sound of the singers' voices and the style and manner of the instrumentation.

The message of country music was delivered through the image of the artists as well as their music. As such, this thesis also relies on a range of promotional material such as photographs, illustrations on sheet music and comic books. Many country stars also appeared on radio and television and, in many cases, hosted their own country music and variety shows. There was, for instance, *The Adventures of Smoky Dawson* and Tex Morton's *All Set and Saddled* (on radio) and *Reg Lindsay Country Hour* and *The Le Garde Twins' Country Style* (on television). The archives of such broadcasts have enabled me to gain a better understanding of the historical performance of country music and the ways in which country singers spoke to their audience.

The popular and critical reception of country music is also important to this discussion. Many of the sources are, therefore, periodicals; both specialised hillbilly and country

magazines such as *Spurs* and *Country and Western Spotlight*, mainstream music media such as *Music Maker* and trade magazines like *Australian Phonograph Monthly*. In the last two chapters, broader interest papers - metropolitan and rural; Australian and American - are used as sources too. Such periodicals are useful not just for the articles of journalists, but also for the letters from country music fans. Such letters are one of the few places the historical archive provides us with an indication of the thoughts of the audience.

Outside the archive, Chapter Four draws on an interview with Australian expatriate performers the Le Garde Twins, in Nashville. Personal experience has also provided material and points of reference for this thesis. I have been an audience member at concerts, a traveller to festivals, a visitor to halls of fame and a participant in conversations - all of which have helped me understand the broader world of country music and its relationship to culture in Australia.

Country music remains a relatively under-researched area of Australian popular culture. Two published works - Graeme Smith's *Singing Australian* (2003) and Eric Watson's *Country Music In Australia Volumes I&II* (1975 and 1983) are the only full-length books on its history. A handful of articles, two collections of papers from the *Australian Institute of Country Music* conference and some scattered references in broader histories of Australian popular culture - such as Philip and Roger Bell's *Implicated: The United States In Australia* and Michelle Arrow's *Friday On Our Minds* - make up the rest of the library.

This thesis will build on the existing scholarship by asking different questions of the primary material. Secondary sources have tended to focus on the Australianness of Australian country music, though they frame this focus through different questions. Eric Watson and the Bells have asked 'How Australian is Australian country music?' and have sought to answer this question through an analysis of the subject matter of the songs and country music's mode of address. Graeme Smith has asked a related, but more nuanced question, 'How has country music made the claim to being an authentically

Australian form?' The question of this thesis is, 'What does country music tell us about culture in Australia?' In answering this, it will draw on and refer to the existing scholarship in numerous ways.

Eric Watson's *Country Music In Australia Volumes I & II* were written from within the country music business - Watson has been both a journalist, record label owner and songwriter - and his books were structured as a series of potted biographies on popular Australian artists. Woven into these biographies was a vigorous cultural nationalist argument. Watson argued that 'real' Australian country music continued a nineteenth-century tradition of folk song and verse that described Australian rural life in an Australian vernacular. These songs and poems were known as 'bush ballads', and Watson adopted the term to describe country music in Australia.

In the 1930s and 40s the term 'bush ballad' was applied to the verse of poets such as Adam Lindsay Gordon and Banjo Paterson and folk songs that had found their way into the national consciousness by the early twentieth century. However, in relation to country music, the term 'bush ballad' was constructed by writers and commentators such as Watson in the 1960s and applied retrospectively to earlier hillbilly music. Watson made distinctions between artists that he saw as continuing an indigenous folk tradition - 'bush balladeers' - and those that imitated American hillbilly and cowboy performers.

Watson's argument extended the work done by folk music collectors and historians working in the 1950s such as John Manifold, John Meredith and Russel Ward who saw Australian folk songs as an expression of an authentic, working-class, Australian identity. However, these researchers tended to see the folk tradition as dying out. Watson applied their concept of a folk tradition to commercially recorded, youthful, professional country music. This was, he argued, the folk music of the day.

In *Implicated: The United States in Australia*, Philip and Roger Bell still viewed the cultural significance of Australian hillbilly music to be its degree of Australian musical and para-musical references. While they gave more credence to American cultural forms

they see as 'American' (indeed, it was the primary focus of their research), their conclusion was that hillbilly singer Tex Morton was 'dressing up' Australian songs in American cowboy clothes.

These approaches to Australian country music were both factually and conceptually flawed. Both Watson and the Bells misrepresented and simplified the sources in making their cases. While some early Australian country music drew on 'bush ballads', they were absorbed into hillbilly musical and performance models. Further, while Tex Morton did indeed wear American cowboy clothes and sing about the Australian outback, he also wore Australian stockman clothes and sung about Texan prairies.

More problematically than factual details, however, was that both the Bells and Watson assumed that historical and cultural significance was to be found in culture's innate Australianness. An impulse to locate national authenticity is flawed for at least two reasons. Firstly, we are entitled to ask, what exactly *is* Australian? After all, to larger or lesser degrees, all our cultural forms are imported and shared with other places in the world. Eric Watson may claim that Australian country music is the inheritor of a nineteenth-century ballad tradition, however the melodies for such ballads themselves came from the British Isles. How old does something need to be before it is called 'Australian'? For Watson and the Bells, it seems, twenty years is not enough but sixty is. Further, what criteria do we use to determine national authenticity? Is simply inserting local place names and characters into international song forms enough? Or do the forms themselves need to be locally derived? Rather than try to determine how Australian country music in Australia is, it may be more revealing to examine the specificity of its development and receptions in Australia and what that tells us about culture and cultural difference.

Secondly, such assumptions are ahistorical. They illuminate the past with the searchlight of the present. While Australian content may have been a highly valued commodity when Watson and the Bells were writing - in the 1970s, 80s and 90s - in the 1930s, 40s and 50s it didn't have the equivalent cultural cachet. Indeed, the contemporary audience

enjoyed local hillbilly and cowboy music for a variety of reasons, not just for its Australian flavour. This thesis will, in part, attempt to bring the audience into the story of country music.

Thinking about 'the audience', French sociologist Michel De Certeau has asserted that the 'reader' is as valid an area of academic study as the 'writer'. De Certeau's shifting of emphasis from producer to audience enables this discussion to move beyond simply questioning the relative Australianness of Australian country music. Further, De Certeau's suggestion that 'fringe cultures' adapt central cultures and make them 'function in another register'<sup>5</sup> finds expression in the way in which Australian country music functioned differently to its progenitor – American hillbilly music. Being a 'boundary rider' was a job, it was the *nom-de-plume* of Tex Morton 'The Yodelling Boundary Rider' and it is also a metaphor for the way in which artists and audiences in 'fringe' cultures – like Australia's – function. Also, De Certeau's concept will enable this thesis to examine assumptions about the concepts of 'fringe' and 'central' cultures.

In a number of publications, most notably *Singing Australian: A History of Folk and Country Music*, Graeme Smith has traced and unpicked country's claims to being a uniquely Australian expression. Smith's approach is comparative - often contrasting country with other forms of popular, yet not entirely mainstream, cultures such as folk and multicultural music - and cross-disciplinary, bridging the gaps between ethno-musicology, history and popular music studies. Smith's work has been complemented by a range of work undertaken by other musicologists such as Philip Hayward, John Whiteoak and Aline Scott-Maxwell who, often publishing with the Australian Institute of Country Music, have provided an understanding of the diversity of Australian music - such as early cowboy music, hillbilly comedy, yodelling and square dancing.

This thesis will build on Smith's work in both the sources it uses and the questions it asks of those sources. With regards to the primary material, as a history of popular culture,

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<sup>5</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988, p 32.

this thesis is as interested in the culture surrounding country music as the music itself. Thus, it will focus on the written record of country music - letters to the editor; newspaper and magazine articles - as much as it will on the music. With regards to approach, the aim of this thesis is to discover not just what the music and the culture surrounding it were saying, but what they saying about society and cultural practice in Australia in general.

The particular historical force that this thesis will examine in detail is modernity. In particular, it will interrogate Philip Hayward's claim that early hillbilly music was a modern form and expressed a 'bustling modernity'.<sup>6</sup> Hayward's argument is made in response to the common assumption that country music has always been a rural and nostalgic form. The history of Australian country music has, at its heart, a paradox. On the one hand it was a modern form: as a commercial product, it was an invention of the 1920s; it relied on new technologies such as radio, records and cinema for its propagation; and it provided audiences with a contemporary set of engagements and identities. On the other, the subject matter and the sound of country music was overwhelmingly sentimental and nostalgic. This thesis will attempt to unravel that paradox.

In doing so, this thesis will turn to scholarship on the relationship between authenticity and culture generally. For instance, Lionel Trilling has argued that the privileging of authenticity is the result of anxiety about a lack of reality in the modern, western world. This thesis will ask whether country music reflects such an anxiety and what it has to tell us about notions of 'real' and 'artificial', 'traditional' and 'modern', in the twentieth century.

Patrick Huber has argued that much early hillbilly music in America was created by factory workers of the Piedmont South (the American region taking in the Carolinas and Georgia), themselves first or second generation urban dwellers. "These musicians"

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Hayward, 'From Folk To Country: The Localisation of Hillbilly and Country Music on Lord Howe Island', in Hayward and Walden (eds), *Roots and Crossovers: Australian Country Music*, AICM Press, Gympie, 2004, p 69.

Huber writes, 'lived at the precise historical moment that allowed them to combine the collective memories of the rural countryside with the upheavels of urban-industrial life to create a distinctive American music that spoke to the changing realities of working-class life in the early twentieth-century South.'<sup>7</sup> Such a description will be in the background of this thesis. It will ask, can musicians and audiences in Australia be regarded similarly – spanning the worlds of tradition and modernity.

This thesis will draw on the work of Huber and other scholars on hillbilly, cowboy and country music in America. Hillbilly music, as a discrete, marketed genre, was invented in America in the 1920s and found immediate popularity. The American experience provides a precursor and a parallel to the Australian experience, although with differences that illuminate much about what was distinct about the Australian experience of hillbilly. Further, the sound, repertoire and marketing of Australian hillbilly artists was largely based on models already tested in America. In particular, ways of seeing performers as 'real' people (particularly, 'real country' people) had been established as a successful and resonant strategy before Tex Morton employed it in the mid 1930s.

There is a considerable body of work on the American experience. This thesis will draw on two in particular: Richard Peterson's *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* and Diane Pecknold's *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry*. Peterson has argued that hillbilly artists were marketed as unschooled rural amateurs, whereas in reality they were often professional musicians able to play a variety of styles. His argument has implications for the presentation of Australian artists. However, while Peterson saw the manufacturing of authenticity primarily through the lens of economic gain, this thesis will take a more layered approach. It will examine the audience's desire for authenticity that, perhaps, was not just created by marketing but by the currents of history and change.

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2008, p 41.

Pecknold has also examined country music from the point of view of its business, although she asked different questions of it and reached different conclusions. The particular economics of country music, she argued, particularly its marginalisation, have affected the music's development. For instance, country music was able to become a more respectable genre in the 1950s, according to Pecknold's research, because of its growing selling power. Pecknold also observed the contradictions between the nostalgic message of country music and its modern modes of communication. This thesis will examine whether the Australian experience of these issues reflected or provided an alternative to the American ones.

There is a small, but developing, library on Australian Aboriginal country music, most notably Clinton Walker's *Buried Country*, which takes the same 'potted biography' approach as Watson, and Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson's *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places* which combines an ethno-musicologist approach with human geography. Such work has provided invaluable context, particularly with regards to understanding what mainstream country *is* by what it *excludes*. In particular, the final chapter of this thesis, on the development of the Tamworth Country Music Festival looks at how Aboriginal voices have been integrated, or excluded as the case may be, in the Festival.

Ultimately, this thesis will attempt to insert country music into a broader understanding of Australian popular culture in the twentieth century. As I noted earlier, broader historical interest has been minimal. In Michelle Arrow's *Friday On Our Minds: Popular Culture in Australia Since 1945*, country music is seen, and justifiably so given the book's focus on the post-World War Two Year, as being a local precursor to and preparation for rock. Jill Julius Matthews, in *Dance Hall and Picture Palace*, argues that urban Australians', particularly Sydneysiders, experienced a romance with modernity in the 1920s and 1930s. Although devoting much attention to jazz, Matthews does not consider whether the appetite for hillbilly music also constituted a romance with modernity, or whether, in fact, it was evidence of anxiety about modernity. Even if country music has been imagined as a rural phenomenon, social and cultural histories of

country Australia such as Richard Waterhouse's *Vision Splendid* have no mention of country music at all.<sup>8</sup>

### Theorising Authenticities

Throughout its history, country music has performed authenticity. The songs of Australian country performers have been presented as true expressions of self, true expressions of the country and, increasingly, true expressions of Australia.

Authenticity is a word that has become almost ubiquitous in academic discussion and is perhaps one of those words, like 'love' or 'irony' to paraphrase Lionel Trilling, that threatens to mean less the more one uses it.<sup>9</sup> There is a correspondingly vast literature on authenticity, some of which I will attempt to survey here and employ throughout my thesis.

The origins of much theorising of authenticity in popular music is to be found in the fields of ethnography and literary criticism. Both areas have reached broadly similar conclusions: that the twentieth-century obsession with authenticity was the result of a perceived lack of meaning in modern culture. James Clifford in *The Predicament Of Culture* noted that the 1920s were marked by an interest in 'authentic' cultures that existed outside the influence of modern, western cities - 'a feeling of lost authenticity, of modernity ruining some essence of source.'<sup>10</sup> Richard Handler, too, has argued that the anthropological interest in authentic culture is the result of anxiety about modern life's lack of reality.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Arrow, Michelle, *Friday On Our Minds: Popular Culture in Australia Since 1945*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2009; Jill Julius Matthews, *Dance Hall and Picture Palace: Sydney's Romance With Modernity*, Currency Press, Sydney, 2005; Richard Waterhouse, *The Vision Splendid: A Social History of Rural Australia*, Curtin University Books, Fremantle, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, University of Oxford Press, London, 1972, p 190.

<sup>10</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) and London, 1998. p 4.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Handler, 'Authenticity', *Anthropology Today*, 2 (1), 1986, p 3.

Taking this critique of ethnography and anthropology into the field of popular culture, particularly tourism studies, Erik Cohen has suggested that twentieth-century western tourism was marked by a desire to experience a different and authentic culture.<sup>12</sup> Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco have pursued the idea that such a fascination with authenticity leads to reality being heightened into a state of 'hyperreality'.<sup>13</sup> Baudrillard has written that there exists, in contemporary popular culture, an ideology of the primacy of 'lived experience – exhumation of the real in its fundamental banality, in its radical authenticity' as well as a 'pleasure of an excess of meaning...pleasure in the microscopic simulation that allows the real to pass into the hyperreal.'<sup>14</sup>

For historians of literature and philosophy such as Lionel Trilling, authenticity has meant being true to oneself, rather than true to a communal culture. Trilling argued that the Enlightenment privileging of sincerity was replaced by the modernist fascination with authenticity around the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> Raymond Williams has traced a history of literary constructions of the English countryside and cities from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Williams found that while the city tended to be characterised as dirty and immoral, the country was a place of purity and authentic life.<sup>16</sup>

Just as the age of modernity has a contingent and contested time period, so too does its accompanying anxiety over authenticity. Raymond Williams, for instance, has traced a fascination with authenticity to as far back as the sixteenth century. However, much of the literature that this thesis will engage with – particularly Trilling, Clifford and Handler – indicates that there was a particular type of western fascination with authenticity that can be located at the turn of the twentieth century and was a fascination born from a deep-rooted displeasure with the conditions of modernity. This displeasure tended to

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<sup>12</sup> Erik Cohen, 'Authenticity and Commoditization', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 15/1988

<sup>13</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1994; Umberto Eco, *Travels In Hyperreality*, Picador, London, 1987.

<sup>14</sup> Baudrillard, *op cit.*, pp 27-28.

<sup>15</sup> Trilling, *op cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1973.

manifest itself in academic and popular interest in ethnic or rural communities, their estrangement from the modern world and their supposed authenticity. Ironically, this anxiety about modernity was, itself, a hallmark of the modern era.

In Australia, looking to rural cultures for a sense of authenticity was a feature of late nineteenth-century literature. Bohemian writers associated with Sydney's *Bulletin* magazine in the 1890s, such as Banjo Paterson, contrasted the wide-open space and the health of the country with the crowding and illness of the city.<sup>17</sup> Don Aitken has shown how the idea of 'countrymindedness' developed between 1890 and 1920. Key to the sense of countrymindedness was that the city and country were radically, almost combatively, different. It was characterised by a sense that: 'Farming and grazing, and rural pursuits generally, are virtuous, enobling and co-operative: they bring out the best in people' while in contrast 'city life is competitive, nasty, as well as parasitical.'<sup>18</sup> Aitken concluded that this attitude derived from the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries, partly because this period was marked by significant migration from country to city areas and a consequent sense of fondness, romance and nostalgia encouraged by geographic distance.

Nationalist sentiment has had a particularly important role in constructing rural authenticity in Australia. As Aitken observed, a key element of countrymindedness was that: 'The characteristic Australian is a countryman, and the core elements of national character come from the struggles of country people to tame their environment and make it productive. City people are much the same the world over.'<sup>19</sup> Popular belief in the rural origin of national character was given academic weight by historians such as Russel Ward who, in the 1950s and 60s, argued that the Australian character derived from the socialist, anti-authoritarian rural working class in the mid nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See, for instance: AB Paterson, 'Clancy of the Overflow' in *The Man From Snowy River and Other Verses*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1995

<sup>18</sup> Don Aitken, 'Countrymindedness: The Spread of an Idea', *Australian Cultural History*, no. 4, 1985, p 35.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p 35.

<sup>20</sup> Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Oxford University Press, London, 1965 (2nd Edition).

Ethnomusicologists have been interested in how authenticity has been performed, either through the musical performance, the sound of the voice, or through para-musical signifiers such as clothing and promotional material. Simon Frith has written colourfully about rock music in the second half of the twentieth century. He has argued that, with regards to rock and particularly punk rock, 'The idea of musical 'authenticity' is certainly a suburban idea.'<sup>21</sup> Once again, interest in authenticity is located in displeasure with the supposed inauthentic life around the audience/critic, in this case located in suburbia. This suburban interest in authenticity in rock has tended to manifest itself in the assumption of 'autobiographicalness' – the singer has experienced what they are singing about personally. Their songs are, therefore, 'real' and they are indistinguishable from their art.<sup>22</sup> An essential part of rock music's authenticity is reality. In particular, the way in which it underlines the primacy of reality rather than beauty. In Lionel Trillings' words, authenticity 'questions the view that beauty is the highest quality art can aspire to.'<sup>23</sup> David Groenewegen has observed that rock singers 'must seem to mean what they say.'<sup>24</sup>

*Seeming* to mean or *sounding* like you mean what you say and *meaning* what you say are, of course, different things. In this sense, the authenticity of popular music derives from what the music signifies. Indeed, Eric Watson has demanded that to fulfil the requirements of the genre, country music must have 'vocalists who sound like country people'.<sup>25</sup> In his essay 'The Real Thing', Frith discussed the various ways in which perennial American rock singer and songwriter Bruce Springsteen performed his

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<sup>21</sup> Simon Frith, *Music For Pleasure: Essays In the Sociology of Pop*, Polity Press, London, 1998, p 4.

<sup>22</sup> This impulse is illustrated in the controversy that surrounded American rapper Eminem's 2001 tour to Australia. Many conservative groups objected to his presence in this country because his violent and homophobic lyrics may incite such behaviour. Behind these claims is the idea that Eminem and his lyrics are indistinguishable. In his own defence Eminem claimed he was writing from a character's viewpoint, rather than his own. Would the same criticisms be aimed at a playwright or a novelist? he asked.

<sup>23</sup> Trilling, *op cit*, p 94.

<sup>24</sup> David Groenewegen, *The Real Thing? The Rock Music Industry and the Creation of Australian Images, 1958-1987*, Moonlight Publications, Golden Square, 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Watson, *op cit.*, p 2.

authenticity - particularly his clothing and subject matter of his songs which projected a blue-collar, masculine sensibility. For Frith, what mattered was 'not whether Bruce Springsteen *is* the real thing, but how he sustains the belief that there are, somehow, somewhere, real things to believe in.'<sup>26</sup> Frith concludes that 'music cannot *be* true or false, it can only refer to *conditions* of truth and falsity.'<sup>27</sup> Aaron Fox, writing about country music in America, has echoed Frith's conclusions, stating that 'country compels a reading which asks not 'where's the real thing here?' but rather asks what these complex practices are saying about the real itself.'<sup>28</sup>

Country music has valued an equivalent sense of reality and autobiographical-ness, but has situated its source in a specific geographic and psychic region: the country. An essential aspect to the sense of reality asserted by country music has been that the real is the country and the country performer is, therefore, a real country person. Richard Peterson has argued that the images and public personas of early hillbilly and cowboy performers as authentic relied on 'deliberately constructed images'.<sup>29</sup> Such images were of a 'misremembered 'rural past largely in response to modernity. As Cecilia Tichi has argued, country music has continued to state that 'The rural life...is the authentic life'.<sup>30</sup>

In Australia, such images of rural authenticity had significant power in the 1930s and 40s and, as we shall see, performers such as Tex Morton and Buddy Williams invoked ideas of the authentic rural life in their music and image: sleepy valleys, familial life, hearth and home. Judith Brett and Graeme Smith have explored ways in which Australian country music has expressed ideas of national authenticity.<sup>31</sup> Smith has paid particular

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<sup>26</sup> Frith, *op cit.*, p 95. Emphasis in original.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p 100. Emphasis in original.

<sup>28</sup> Aaron Fox, *op cit.*, p 69.

<sup>29</sup> Richard A Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1997, p 68.

<sup>30</sup> Cecilia Tichi, *High Lonesome: The American Culture of Country Music*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, p 24.

<sup>31</sup> Brett and Smith, 'Nation, Authenticity and Social Difference in Australian Popular Music: Folk, Country and Multicultural', *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 58, 1998, p 4.

attention to the ways in which the voices of Australian country singers have expressed rural and national authenticities.<sup>32</sup>

Linking rurality with authenticity is not a phenomenon exclusive to country music. For instance, European nationalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries privileged rural roots. In particular, the peasantry took on a role of an authentic national type. Totalitarian regimes of the mid-twentieth century, too, looked to the rural working class as pure expression of the national character.<sup>33</sup> Throughout this thesis, the way in which country music in Australia has privileged rurality will be understood in the context of these broader historical phenomena.

Much of the relevant literature convincingly demonstrates that authenticity, like nationalism, is shifting, amorphous and historically-contingent. Throughout this thesis I will use such literature to interrogate the established view of country music in Australia – as expressed by Watson, the Bells and others – that authenticity is fixed and linked to national distinctiveness. This thesis will show how the construction of authenticity in country music is a response to a variety of historical developments that can loosely be termed ‘modernity’.

## Structure

This thesis will focus primarily on the 1930s, 40s and 50s. It will analyse what the message of country music was in this era and will ask what that message adds to our understanding of culture in Australia. Therefore, the majority of the thesis – the first three chapters – will look at this period in detail. The final two chapters will branch out and look at how country music operated in two other arenas: overseas and in the recent past, from 1973 to 2010.

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<sup>32</sup> For instance, Graeme Smith, *Singing Australian: A History of Folk and Country Music*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 2005, pp 119-142

<sup>33</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London and New York, 1991

Chapter One will look at Australia's first hillbilly star, Tex Morton, from the mid 1930s to the early 1940s. In particular, it will ask why has Morton been regarded as Australia's first commercially successful country singer? What was it that distinguished him from the music that came before him? In answering these questions it will examine Morton's musical style, his image as a 'real country person' and the way in which his exclusively hillbilly repertoire differentiated him from the variety and vaudeville approach of preceding recording artists. It will also examine the implications of the way in which Morton used, interchangeably, associations with American cowboys and Australian stockmen. Chapter One's examination of Morton's aura of authenticity will establish a way of seeing Australian country music that will resonate throughout the following chapters.

Chapter Two – 'Sleepy Valleys and Lonesome Plains' – will analyse the ways in which the Australian landscape was described by Morton and other cowboys and cowgirls in the 1930s and 40s. In particular, it will ask how being a Yodelling Boundary Rider defined the landscape and how it referenced a literary tradition of boundary riders in the outback. It will do so by way of an examination of the lyrics of hillbilly songs and the voices of hillbilly singers. This chapter will also ask whether such invocations of landscape – sleepy valleys and lonesome plains – reflected an excitement or anxiety about modernity.

Chapter Three will trace the battle for respectability that elements of the country music community fought in the 1950s. This struggle coalesced around the specialist magazines *Spurs* and *Spotlight*. Their primary aim was to change the music's popular name from 'hillbilly' to 'country and western'. This chapter will ask why respectability was so important in this period and what was it about hillbilly music that made it unrespectable.

In Chapter Four – 'From NSW To Nashville' – the thesis will leave Australia and consider the experience of performers in America from the 1950s to the 1990s. It will examine how Australian country artists performed their Australianness for an audience who assumed that country music was a uniquely American form. It will use two acts as particular examples – the Le Garde Twins and Reg Lindsay – who have realised long-

term careers in the USA and have played up to outsider's perceptions of Australian country music in a variety of ways. The second part of this chapter will examine the journeys of Australian country performers and fans to the 'centre' of country music, Nashville, Tennessee. It will ask to what degree these journeys can be conceptualised as secular pilgrimages and will examine the paradox of a rural, self-consciously de-centralised genre identifying itself so strongly with a metropolitan centre.

Continuing the discussion of centre and periphery, the final chapter will look at the development of Australia's 'Country Music Capital' – Tamworth, New South Wales. It will trace the development of Country Music Capital, its accompanying annual music festival and awards ceremony, from 1973 to 2010 – a period in which it claimed for itself a central role in the country music industry and culture. A major part of this role has been to celebrate and protect the heritage of country music – in particular those songs that have become known as 'bush ballads' by artists such as Tex Morton which the thesis uses at its starting point – and, by extension, Australian culture. This chapter will ask: whose and what heritage does Tamworth protect?

## Chapter One

# Tex Morton: The Sentimental Cowboy

### Introduction

In 1935 a young, middle-class Sydneysider might have heard a range of new American popular music. On a Saturday afternoon, for instance, she could have seen *Tumbling Tumbleweeds* starring Gene Autry or *The Kentucky Minstrels of 1935* at the New Mayfair Deluxe cinema. Afterwards she could have bought the latest 78 record by a Hawaiian guitar band or a hillbilly singer like Jimmie Rodgers from Nicholson & Co on George Street. If she was musical, and inspired enough by the music around her, she could have also bought the sheet music to 'Tumbling Tumbleweeds' by the Sons of the Pioneers and the Spanish guitar on which to play it. In the evening, on the wireless or perhaps in a city dance hall or club, she might have heard local performers such as crooner Art Leonard or big band leader Jim Davidson include 'hillbillies' in their repertoire, or seen a vaudeville show featuring a riotous cowboy act.

Increasingly over several decades preceding 1935, Australians had been favouring popular culture with American origins, instead of that imported from Britain. While colonial influence still remained strong in the fields of sport and popular literature, 'the Empire had surrendered in the cinemas and dance halls.'<sup>1</sup> In addition to the enduring popularity of minstrelsy and a range of Tin Pan Alley popular songs, around the end of the First World War Australia caught the jazz craze. By the early 1930s this had manifested itself in swing music, often performed by large orchestras in dance halls, or 'palais', or broadcast over the radio. The 1920s also saw a rise in other exotic forms such as Hawaiian guitar music, which was popular not just on record but was also played by large amateur groups. Hillbilly music from America began to appear in the late 1920s, and the latest 78s from artists such as Vernon Dalhart, Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter

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<sup>1</sup> Richard White and Hsu-Ming Teo, 'Popular Culture', in Deryck M. Schreuder and Stuart Ward (eds) *Australia's Empire*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008, p 355.

Family were becoming increasingly popular. In the mid 1930s, a cinematic variant of hillbilly music played by 'singing cowboys' such as Gene Autry found a large audience.

This period also witnessed the enduring popularity of the variety style of performance known as vaudeville. Vaudeville nights featured a succession of unrelated acts – light opera, comedy song, blackface minstrel songs, crooning and, increasingly, singing cowboys. It was a performance style that valued novelty and a sense of role-playing.

The hillbilly sound and the cowboy image were a familiar part of popular culture to many young Australians by the mid 1930s. Within this context, Australia's first local hillbilly star - Tex Morton - rode onto the popular stage, lasso and guitar in hand. Morton was not the first singer to make commercial recordings of hillbilly songs in Australia. However, unlike those who preceded him, who clearly acted the role of the cowboy and sang and played hillbilly songs within the context of a variety of other musical styles, Morton was a 'real' cowboy who sang from an exclusively hillbilly repertoire. Furthermore, he added local place names and generalised references to 'the outback' to pre-existing hillbilly songs and song structures and recorded some nineteenth-century Australian folk songs.

This chapter will examine three ways in which Tex Morton performed his apparent realness: the specialisation of his repertoire; his sincere sound; and his authentic image. In looking at these three elements, this chapter will seek to understand why Morton's sense of being 'for real' was so resonant, and what its resonance has to say about Australian culture in the 1930s.

## **Repertoire**

Morton's real name was, in fact, Robert Lane and he was born in New Zealand in 1916. Moving to Australia at the age of 16, Lane worked in various jobs - including that of a busker - throughout New South Wales and Queensland. Exposure to a wider audience came when he won a talent quest put on by Sydney radio station 2KY in 1936. That win earned him an audition with Columbia Regal Zonophone – an offshoot of EMI which held

a virtual monopoly in the Australian record industry at the time – and a subsequent recording contract. Between 1936 and 1943 Morton recorded ninety-two songs, or ‘sides’, for the Regal Zonophone label. (Two sides made up one 78rpm release.)

In the mid to late 1930s, Morton performed as part of vaudeville shows in Sydney as well as lending a hillbilly element to the otherwise light jazz and swing of Jim Davidson’s touring ABC big band. He also performed some shows alongside musical theatre star Gladys Moncrieff. In 1940, Morton begun touring in his own right, launching a series of ‘Wild West’ and rodeo shows that featured, in addition to hillbilly singing, sharp-shooting, whip-cracking and demonstrations by ‘champion roughriders’ such as Stan and Jack Gill.

Morton was one of the best-selling recording artists in Australia in the late 1930s. Music magazine *Wireless Weekly* reported that he was selling an average of 10,000 records a month between 1937 and 1940.<sup>2</sup> Such reports may be influenced by promotional spin, but figures do indicate that Morton was a relatively high seller for EMI. In 1938, for instance, the 78 which featured ‘There are Tear-Stains on your Letter Mother Dear’ as side one and ‘Rockin’ Alone’ as side two sold 6,794 copies, whereas popular Canadian cowboy singer Wilf Carter’s bestseller of the same year - ‘My Little Grey-Haired Mother of Mine/Little Log Shack’ - sold approximately half as many in Australia. In terms of numbers, Morton matched the levels of American blue yodeller Jimmie Rodgers’ Australian sides from the early 1930s. Further, Morton sustained similar figures over most of his 41 releases.<sup>3</sup>

Morton had a certain media profile too which complemented his sales successes. He was written about regularly in such publications as Sydney’s *Wireless Weekly*, articles that tended to focus on his outlandish cowboy dress and riding and whip-cracking skills (an interest we shall examine later in this chapter). His inclusion on Jim Davidson’s

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<sup>2</sup> *Wireless Weekly*, 3/12/1937 and 23/11/1940.

<sup>3</sup> EMI Sales Cards, National Film and Sound Archive.

broadcasted ABC shows and tour with musical theatre star Gladys Moncrieff also gained him a broad audience that was not necessarily buying hillbilly records.<sup>4</sup>

Hillbilly music had been recorded and released in Australia prior to Morton, although no artists reached the levels of success that Morton had with it. For instance, Queenie and David Kaili recorded 'When Its Springtime In the Rockies' in 1930 and the Hill Billy Singers did 'When I Get To The End Of The Way' in 1933.<sup>5</sup> The most notable of these nascent hillbilly performers was Len Maurice. Maurice was both a radio announcer and popular singer who, under the stage name 'Art Leonard', recorded a range of popular songs in the 1920s and 30s. Some of the more popular of these were patriotic tribute songs, such as 'Our Don Bradman', 'Kingsford Smith, Aussie Is Proud Of You' and 'O! Sydney I Love You' as well as Depression-era spirit lifters such as 'Banish The Budget Blues'.

Maurice was not 'a hillbilly'. He performed hillbilly songs as part of a broader repertoire of popular songs. Of the 120 tracks Maurice recorded for the Columbia Regal label, approximately a dozen were hillbilly-inspired.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, all of Morton's repertoire was described as hillbilly at the time and has been claimed as wholly country - indeed, the origins of the Australian genre - by historians today.<sup>7</sup>

Part of Morton's sense of real-ness derived from his specialisation in a purely hillbilly and cowboy repertoire, in contrast to variety performers such as Maurice who had merely dabbled. The 1920s and 30s were a time when established ways of presenting popular

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<sup>4</sup> According to a survey of radio listeners conducted in 1936, Gladys Moncrieff was Australia's fifth most popular radio personality and Jim Davidson the 30th. Len Maurice was the 51st. Morton - having only just started to record in 1936 - did not rate a mention. (WA McNair, *Radio Advertising In Australia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1937.)

<sup>5</sup> *Australian Hillbilly Music*, Kingfisher Casetess, Port Macquarie.

<sup>6</sup> Graeme Smith, *Singing Australian: A History of Folk and Country Music*, Pluto Press, Melbourne, 2005 p 87.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Eric Watson, *Country Music In Australia Volume I*, Rodeo Publications, Kensington (NSW), 1975, p 3.

performers were being replaced by new ones. In particular, the variety and vaudeville formats - so popular in Australia since the middle of the nineteenth century<sup>8</sup> - were beginning to be replaced by performers who specialised in particular musical areas. In this sense, Len Maurice represented past performance styles, while Morton represented the future.

Maurice was a performer who drew strongly from the variety tradition. When, as Art Leonard, Maurice sang hillbilly numbers he did it as a character, rather than a 'real' hillbilly. Many of his hillbilly songs were humorous and about cowboys, rather than from the cowboy point of view, such as 'The Gay Cabarello' which was about a gauche Brazilian cowboy.<sup>9</sup> Vaudeville and variety stars tended to play a set of stereotyped characters including the Irishman, Negro, Chinaman, Jew, Indian, cowboy, city slicker and country bumpkin.<sup>10</sup> It was recognisably acting, rather than an intrinsic part of the performer themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Other performers were able to absorb hillbilly music into a broader repertoire, without being a solely hillbilly artist. The ABC big band leader and, to many, the public face of jazz in Australia, Jim Davidson, regularly put on shows that featured hillbilly songs and jazz songs. Further, his own jazz and swing band played a variety of styles of music, including hillbilly. Indeed, 'Old Spinning Wheel', a perennial favourite of hillbilly artists and written by one Billy Hill, was advertised as the 'signature song of Jim Davidson'.<sup>12</sup> One disgruntled correspondent to *Wireless Weekly* objected to Davidson's use of such material, writing: 'Even Jim Davidson is far from satisfying, as he does not play 'hot rhythm' but all sweet music and 'hill billies'.<sup>13</sup> It is clear that although the author

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Waterhouse, *From Minstrel Show To Vaudeville*, NSW University Press, Sydney, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> Len Maurice, 'The Gay Cabarello', in *Australian Hillbilly Music*.

<sup>10</sup> Richard A Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1997, p 75.

<sup>11</sup> Nick Tosches, *Country: The Twisted Roots of Rock 'n' Roll*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1996, talks about these performers, in particular Emmet Miller who, although a blackface minstrel and jazz singer, dabbled in hillbilly and is credited with being a direct influence on Jimmie Rodgers.

<sup>12</sup> Billy Hill, *Old Spinning Wheel*, Albert and Son, Sydney, c1933, cover page.

<sup>13</sup> *Wireless Weekly*, 31/12/1937.

preferred not to hear 'hillbillies' he does not think it unusual that a jazz band should play them. They slotted easily into Davidson's broad-base repertoire.

An examination of sheet music books such as the *Alberts' Hill Billy Songster* series reveals how ambivalent the term 'hillbilly' actually was. These 'songsters' – booklets containing lyrics of popular songs and released as periodicals in the mid 1930s – contain a great range of musical styles: songs written by American hillbilly artists; songs written by professional Tin Pan Alley songwriters in a hillbilly style; traditional American and English folk songs; and contemporary light jazz numbers.<sup>14</sup>

Such an ambivalence about genres also existed in the music print media. From its emergence in the mid-1920s and into the beginning of the 1930s, recording industry trade magazines, radio guides and the general press tended to include hillbilly music within the context of other styles of popular music such as jazz, swing, old time, folk and black face minstrel music.

Within this context, Morton's specialisation in the hillbilly song selection and style was radical. Such was Morton's authenticating power, that even music with varying authorship - from the broader jazz or pop repertoire - could be hillbilly-ised. For example, 'Ragtime Cowboy Joe' was a playful piece of Tin Pan Alley songwriting. It was released in about 1912 largely as a vehicle for Gene Greene 'Emperor of Ragtime'.<sup>15</sup> It was, not surprisingly, written in a ragtime jazz style and tells the story of Cowboy Joe, an archetypal cowboy who is a 'rootin, tootin' son of a gun'. While not a satire, it is certainly comic - the joke lying in the incompatibility of the latest musical craze with a supposed historical, rural figure.

Yet, in a fascinating example of reverse appropriation, it was adopted by Tex Morton and, later, other Australian hillbilly performers. Apparently, Morton and others did it with wide-eyed ingenuousness. Smilin' Billy Blinkhorn (an expatriate Canadian) performed it

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<sup>14</sup> *Albert's Hill Billy Songster*, Nos 2-4, Albert and Son, Sydney, c1935

<sup>15</sup> Grant Clarke (words), Lewis F Muir and Maurice Abrahams (music), *Ragtime Cowboy Joe*, Albert and Sons, Sydney, c1912.

on his radio show and announced it as 'a real cowfolks ditty this one.'<sup>16</sup> It was not unusual for hillbilly performers to include comic songs in their repertoire. Indeed, Morton himself made a habit of doing caricature songs like 'Barnacle Bill the Sailor' and 'Bluey Brink the Shearer', but here was a song that poked fun at the entire cowboy culture presented as a serious song about the life of rural people.

The story of 'Ragtime Cowboy Joe' demonstrates two things: firstly, that claims of musical authenticity are dubious. Tin Pan Alley songs could become 'real hillbilly' songs, and folk songs could become popular hits. Hillbilly music was not only written by real hillbillies, even if such people actually existed. In reality, performers borrowed from other genres, mutating the sounds and presentation of the songs to fit their own tastes and personas. Secondly, it shows the way in which hillbilly performers could absorb many aspects of popular culture into their aura of authenticity: even a song which seemingly satirised the cowboy and his way of life.

Also, Morton's purely hillbilly repertoire indicated that he really meant what he sang. He was a hillbilly and the songs were of him. Lawrence Levine has written that a growing 'fragmentation of life' in the late nineteenth century saw increased professionalisation, specialisation, commercialisation, complexity and atomisation.<sup>17</sup> In the case of popular music, this meant that artists moved away from a variety approach and tended to focus on one musical form in particular. Hillbilly music was a particularly good example of this atomisation.

Undoubtedly, there were economic reasons behind this atomisation. 'The businessman', Levine argues, 'believed that an unbridgeable gap separated the tastes and predilections of the various socio-economic groups.'<sup>18</sup> However, economics only go part the way in telling the story. Such an emphasis implies that the audiences are passive consumers of whatever is offered to them. Morton was popular and different partly because he

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<sup>16</sup> Smilin' Billy Blinkhorn, *Bushland Yodel*, Kingfisher Cassettes, Port Macquarie, 1997

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Levine *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1988, p 206.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p 79.

specialised in a particular area of music. His atomisation helped to alleviate concerns about modernity. He was something real because he only played one type of music; the music that was of him.

If atomisation of culture is a phenomenon of modernity, as Levine has convincingly suggested, then country music was the first modern popular musical form. It was the first time non-classical musicians specialised in one particular genre and were marketed as a purely 'hillbilly' performers. To a large extent, this is what country means: to be real to one thing, not to experiment and not to diversify, thus losing authenticity.

The specialisation of repertoire that Morton pursued, and the way in which this differentiated him from other contemporary performers, was to have a long-lasting legacy for country music in Australia. Throughout the twentieth century, mainstream country music in Australia remained peculiarly isolated from popular musical trends. In 2010, founders of the Tamworth Country Music Festival sought to defend the purity of the country music in Australia genre against other corrupting musical influences (as we shall see in Chapter Five).

### **The Sincere Sound**

When Len Maurice did sing hillbilly songs, they did not depart radically from his established music hall style. A small orchestra comprising piano, strings and horns provided the majority of the instrumental backing. Maurice's voice had significant range, although he favoured a light, lilting tenor which made use of a vibrato on longer notes. He also sounded formal, employing, as Graeme Smith has described it, 'over-precise consonants and strait-jacket rhythmic sense'.<sup>19</sup> The hillbilly-ness of the songs derived from a limited set of signifiers: some songs employed a pick 'n' strum acoustic guitar style characteristic of recordings by American hillbilly artists such as Jimmie Rodgers

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<sup>19</sup> Graeme Smith, 'Country music in Australia and the Hillbilly Yodel', *Popular Music*, 13/3, 1994. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK, p 299.

and Vernon Dalhart while others featured stereotypical subject matter such as cowboys and hobos.

One gets the sense from listening to the records that the hillbilly flavour of Maurice's songs were a novelty not to be taken seriously. Such an impression is enhanced by the comedic nature of many of the songs. 'A Gay Cabarello', for instance is a caricature of a naive Brazilian cowboy, while 'Barnacle Bill the Sailor' tells the story of a lascivious seaman. Musically, Maurice dabbled in hillbilly and projected the sense that he was playing a part.

On the other hand, Tex Morton's recordings projected the sense that hillbilly music was intrinsic to him. He provided his own accompaniment on acoustic guitar - using the pick 'n' strum pattern. Also, every one of his ninety-two Regal Zonophone sides featured a yodel, itself alone a signifier of a hillbilly song. In contrast to Maurice's high tenor, Morton sang in a conversational register. Sometimes he would lapse into actual spoken word on key phrases or verses. This technique created a sense of familiarity with the material and an intimacy between Morton and his audience. Further, his singing was unmediated by techniques such as vibrato, a hallmark of professionalism and musical training. Ultimately, Morton sang as if he were comfortably inhabiting the song, rather than merely a visitor to it.

The difference between Morton and Maurice's singing styles can be seen most clearly in a song they both recorded, 'Big Rock Candy Mountains'. The song, written by Harry McClintock and popularised by American hillbilly artist Vernon Dalhart in 1928, was whimsical in tone. It described a rural paradise where there was no work to do, and no bosses, where 'cigarette trees' bloom, the 'hens lay soft-boiled eggs', 'the bulldogs all have rubber teeth' and 'little streams of alcohol come running down the rocks.'

Accompaniment was provided by acoustic guitar, although a lively banjo part joined it in the middle of the song aiding in the tone of gleeful abandonment.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Vernon Dalhart, 'The Big Rock Candy Mountains', in *Cowboy Hit Parade: 1928-1941*, Kingfisher Cassettes, Port Macquarie, 1997.

Both Maurice's version (1929) and Morton's (1937) abandoned the banjo but left the guitar part unchanged. Indeed, the instrumentation on both versions was virtually identical. The difference in feel derived from their voices. Maurice sounded mannered, formal and deliberate; Morton lively, informal and natural - an effect heightened by the faster tempo he employed.<sup>21</sup>

As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, a key aspect to musical authenticity is that singers sound like they are authentic. For Eric Watson, for instance, country singers must 'sound like country people', their voices must be 'essentially genuine'. Watson also considered Morton to be the first genuinely Australian country singer. It is interesting to consider how Morton could have 'sounded like a country person' in 1937. It cannot have been in accent, which, although becoming more Australian in inflection throughout the 1940s (as did his repertoire), was at this stage broadly American. Rather, it was present in the way in which it was apparently unmediated by technique. Professionalism and musical training were advantages of the city. The country performer could not help but be un-trained because he simply did not have the opportunity to be otherwise. To be 'country' implied a naturalism of sound as much as it did a geographic region.

Some of Morton's songs celebrated his untrained voice, suggesting that such a training is a product of the city. His 1940 release 'Move Along Baldy' - 'an Australian boundary rider's song' - stated: 'I've never wanted to live in your towns/Never been past Alexandria Downs' and then in the chorus distances himself from classically-trained singers: 'I'm no Caruso but I sing my song/Clover for you boy and damper for me.'<sup>22</sup>

An apparent lack of technique is itself a technique. Morton's voice was not more authentic than Maurice's. Indeed, Vernon Dalhart himself came to hillbilly music via

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<sup>21</sup> Len Maurice, 'The Big Rock Candy Mountains' in *Australian Hill Billy Music: 1926-1933*, Kingfisher Cassettes, Port Macquarie, 1992. Tex Morton, 'The Big Rock Candy Mountains', in *The Tex Morton Regal Zonophone Collection (1936-1943)*, Screensound.

<sup>22</sup> *Nicholson's Third Album of Tex Morton: Cowboy and Hillbilly Songs*, Nicholson's, Sydney, 1940, p 6.

light opera and classical music but after unexpected success in the genre, devoted himself solely to a hillbilly repertoire.<sup>23</sup> His singing on 'Big Rock Candy Mountain' showed little trace of his formal training. Morton's voice was, in effect, 'trained' and inspired by American hillbilly singers like Dalhart, Jimmie Rodgers and Goebel Reeves. Further, Morton also used a virtuosic signature - the yodel. Morton's yodel relied on technique: it was fast, controlled and could cover a large pitch range. However, it was a technique associated not with formal musical training and the rarefied confines of the concert hall, but with the natural celebration of the outdoor life, whether that be the peaks of the Swiss Alps or the midwestern American prairies.<sup>24</sup>

Morton wrote an article on the subject of yodelling in 1937. In 'Yodelling - So What' Morton describes the history and various styles of yodelling for the readership of *Australian Music Maker and Dance Band News* - an audience broadly interested in popular music rather than connoisseurs of hillbilly in particular. Morton distinguished between 'Legit. yodelling as practised in Austria and Switzerland' which is a 'high falsetto, quick changing yodel' often sung in choirs, and the 'fair dinkum' yodel, as practiced by Jimmie Rodgers, which is 'really far more entertaining' with a 'deeper, easier tone...It is far more pleasing to the ear'.<sup>25</sup> Morton placed his own yodels in the second category. Morton's article demonstrated his knowledge of technique and history, his artistic choices and his desire to sing in a 'modern' and 'entertaining' style.

In adopting a particular style of yodelling technique, Morton aligned himself clearly with a developing hillbilly performance style; a style that audiences were familiar with. As a result of their respective vocal techniques, Maurice sounded old-fashioned while Morton sounded modern.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Bill C Malone, *Country Music USA*, (Revised Edition), University of Texas Press, Austin, 1985, p 43.

<sup>24</sup> For a full analysis of the yodel in early country music in Australia see Smith, *op cit.*, 1994 pp 297-311.

<sup>25</sup> Tex Morton, 'Yodelling - So What', *Australian Music Maker and Dance Band News*, May 1937.

However, while Morton's persona as a hillbilly gave him a patina of modernity, this was tempered with a sound and subject matter that was overwhelmingly sentimental and nostalgic. Indeed, while scholarly attention to Morton has examined the sense of Australianness in his music<sup>27</sup> and its modernity,<sup>28</sup> little has been paid to its sentimentality.

The ninety-two songs that Morton recorded for Regal Zonophone between 1936 and 1945 can be categorised thematically as follows:

- Nostalgia for home, family and old friends, generally concerning aging parents and guilt for not having seen them – 20
- Love songs – 13
- Songs about cowboys in America, particularly Texas – 12
- Songs about hobos, particularly hobos on trains – 11
- Comedy or caricature numbers – 6
- Australian folk songs – 5
- Horse songs (usually revolving around the singer's ability to ride them) – 4
- Songs about death and heaven – 4
- Original Australiana – 3
- Getting into trouble/jail songs – 3
- Songs about dogs – 2
- Miscellaneous – 9<sup>29</sup>

Musically, these songs are remarkably unified. The great majority feature accompaniment on acoustic guitar only and all featured a yodel. They were not designed for an album of ten or twelve songs, but rather for releases of two songs at a time and thus had little need for variety. Each release had to be quickly identified as a Morton track in the audience's mind and consequently his style was unwavering.

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<sup>27</sup> For example, Watson, *op cit*, Bell and Bell, *op cit*.

<sup>28</sup> See, Philip Hayward, 'From Folk To Country: The Localisation of Hillbilly and Country Music on Lord Howe Island', in Philip Hayward and Geoff Walden (eds), *Roots And Crossovers: Australian Country Music Vol II*, AICM Press, Gympie, 2004, p 68.

<sup>29</sup> Tex Morton, *Tex Morton Regal Zonophone Collection*.

Emotionally, they cover some terrain from the maudlin and moralistic ('Letter Edged In Black') to the comedic ('Ragtime Cowboy Joe'). However, almost all these songs romanticised the life of the nomadic, rural-based man, whether that be a cowboy, stockman, boundary rider or hobo.

The cowboy was, at heart, a sentimental bloke. By far the most common type of song performed by the Yodelling Boundary Rider expressed a nostalgia and longing for home. These songs invariably had Morton on the road, in the remote outback, alone and thinking about home that was usually in a valley and usually contained faithfully patient parents. The lyrics of 'All Set and Saddled' sum up this genre particularly well:

Now for many years I've lived down in your city,  
Wore city clothes and seen your nightlife too.  
But soon I'll be again in Sleepy Valley  
Where the air is always pure and friends are true...  
There's a silver-haired old lady that I'm longing to see.<sup>30</sup>

Even Morton regarded this song as particularly representative as it became both the title and the theme song of Morton's 1942 radio show.

A sub-genre of these songs were those that expressed feelings of guilt arising from having left an old and loving mother. These are well represented in Morton's work through such numbers as 'Rocking Alone in an Old Rocking Chair' and 'There are Tear Stains on Your Letter Mother Dear'. This sub-genre was given a pathos-ridden twist when the mother dies. The narrative was invariably the same: the singer is informed of the tragic event by letter or through a friend; is consumed with grief and guilt at having abandoned his mother; reaches forgiveness through his father or God; and finally provides a moral to all young men never to forget their mothers. 'Letter Edged in Black' is the classic of this genre, with the key phrase: 'your mother's words, the last she ever uttered, were 'tell my boy I want him to come back.''<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Tex Morton, 'All Set and Saddled', *Tex Morton Regal Zonophone Collection*.

<sup>31</sup> Tex Morton, 'Letter Edged In Black', *Tex Morton Regal Zonophone Collection*.

Although seemingly at odds with Morton's masculine, hardy, physically-able 'Boundary Rider' figure, such songs complemented the cowboy image in interesting ways. Firstly, songs about nostalgia for home or guilt about not having visited it reiterated Morton's identity as someone who was away from home. The rambling man image was seen more explicitly in songs that dealt with a longing for home or a pain felt about it than in songs about being away from it. Secondly, Morton's sentimental and moralising songs demonstrated a melodramatic sincerity. They were about the subject closest to Morton's heart - the love of his mother and associated guilt. Such a quality stood in contrast to the overwhelmingly light-hearted tone of Maurice's recordings. Part of Morton's authenticity was located in the fact that behind the bravado of the cowboy lay a sensitive soul.

Morton's employed his spoken word technique regularly on these songs, suggesting that such subject matter was just too serious to sing about. It was also reinforced by the fact that Morton's performances were solo. Without a band to provide musical interest and dynamic changes, the narrative and moral of the song were foregrounded and the confessional tone of the song established.

Morton sounded like the real thing. His intimate, seemingly natural and easy performance style, coupled with his sincere songs and sound marked him as a real hillbilly: a performer who meant what he sang. Richard Handler, quoting Lionel Trilling, has suggested that modernity has produced 'an anxiety over the credibility of existence', things seem 'unreal', and that in response people seek out real things – authentic cultures.<sup>32</sup>

Reflecting this desire, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were marked by the search for authentic, folk, traditional cultures. English Victorians John Ruskin and William Morris valued medieval, artisanal visual art, design and construction over modern, manufactured products. In music, searches for traditional folk music were undertaken by composers such as Ralph Vaughan Williams in England and Bela Bartok

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<sup>32</sup> Richard Handler, 'Authenticity' in *Anthropology Today*, 2 (1), 1986, p 3.

in Hungary and recorded for posterity by John Lomax in America. Although recorded for commercial ends, rather than simply collected for its aesthetic merits, hillbilly music filled a similar desire for audiences: the desire for something real within a world of possible phoniness. Hillbilly and cowboy music certainly had a well-developed sense of authenticity, and it was an authenticity that relied on representations of an unchanged past.

Furthermore country music in Australia was, in an international context, particularly sentimental, nostalgic and reassuring. Music presents particular challenges for the historian. It is difficult to properly 'hear' music from the past as we filter it through the cultural contexts of our time. What may sound sentimental today may have sounded appropriately emotional to the ears of contemporary listeners. Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that country music in Australia was particularly sentimental. As this chapter has shown, Morton chose vocal techniques and lyrical content that emphasised his appeal to the sentimental feelings in his audience.

I would like to suggest three reasons here for the sentimental quality of early Australian hillbilly music: firstly, it was part of a growing sentimentality in hillbilly and cowboy music internationally; secondly, it reflected a predilection for the sentimental in Australian culture generally between the Wars; and secondly, it was the result of particular economic restrictions brought about by the Great Depression. With regards to the first explanation, early hillbilly music in America had a sentimental streak. However, it was one aspect of a complex system of sounds and reactions to modern life. For instance, while Jimmie Rodgers also sung moralistic songs, he also included a large degree of bawdier, sexually-suggestive, drinking and rabble-rousing songs in his repertoire. His singing style as a 'blue yodeller' was derived largely from styles of black and minstrel performers.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Rodgers and other early American hillbilly performers such as the Carter Family and the Sons of the Pioneers featured ensemble

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<sup>33</sup> Graeme Smith, *op cit*, 1994, p 305; Nick Tosches, *Where Dead Voices Gather*, Little Brown and Company, Boston, 2001

playing, drawing the listeners' attention to the musical development of the song as much as its message.

During the 1930s, more exclusively sentimental singers began to emerge in America. For instance, singing cowboy Gene Autry included several 'nostalgia for home' songs such as 'That Silver Haired-Daddy of Mine', in his repertoire.<sup>34</sup> This was coupled with his image as a paragon of moral virtue, befitting his role as a wholesome children's entertainer.<sup>35</sup>

The personas of women singers on barn dance radio shows in America in the 1930s were often recognisable sentimental types – 'mountain mamas' and 'girls of the golden west.' These performers had a folksy, family and home orientated flavour. This was part of the growing appeal of hillbilly music to middle-class respectability and to alleviate audience anxiety about the conditions of modernity such as the Great Depression.<sup>36</sup>

So, while there was a strong sentimental streak in American hillbilly music and culture, characterised by solo cowboys and cowgirls, this was offset by a more raucous, ensemble-based, jazzier, bluesier musical alternative. What is noticeable about the Australian experience was that those performers who achieved commercial success in the 1930s and 40s were almost exclusively of the sentimental type.

Secondly, Australian popular culture between the wars demonstrated a sort of working-class masculine sentimentality. The enormously popular movie based on the poem by CJ Dennis *The Sentimental Bloke*, for instance, was the story of the inner-most, romantic feelings of an apparently rough 'n' ready 'larrikin'.

The way in which Morton masked his sincerity with the bravado and devil-may-care attitude of the cowboy can be seen to be a continuation of this tradition of sentimental

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<sup>34</sup> Jimmy Long & Gene Autry (arr. by Nick Manoloff), *That Silver-Haired Daddy of Mine*, Albert and Sons, Sydney, 1932.

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, *Spurs*, March 1955.

<sup>36</sup> Kristine McCusker, *Lonseome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels*, University of Illinois Press, 2008, Introduction.

masculinity. As such, it suggests that hillbilly music was 'Australianised' in interesting ways. Historians such as Watson have argued that hillbilly and cowboy music was popular in Australia because it resonated with a self-image of wide-open plains and stockmen.<sup>37</sup> This is a problematic argument as it fails to take into account the popularity of country music in European countries.<sup>38</sup> Rather, perhaps, American-derived hillbilly music resonated with Australians because of the way it could be manipulated into an overtly sentimental genre.

It is interesting to consider how the particularly sentimental quality of early country music in Australia influenced the specific ways in which authenticity was negotiated. Lionel Trilling has shown the links between sincerity and authenticity. In particular, he has shown how, in the western world of art and philosophy, authenticity came to replace sincerity as the primary expression of self-hood around the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>39</sup> In very broad terms, sincerity meant to *mean* what you say, while authenticity meant to *be* what you say. Sincerity implied a belief in society, while authenticity implied a distrust of society.

Trilling was writing about literature and philosophy in Europe and North America. In the case of Australian popular culture in the first few decades of the twentieth century, sincerity and authenticity could still be combined in acceptable ways. In his moralising songs, Morton masked the subject matter of familial and social ties and sincerity of performance with the persona of the cowboy - a man who exists outside society.

With regards to the third reason for the distinctively sentimental sound of early country music in Australia, I have already argued that the sincere subject matter and performance style of Morton's songs was complemented by his minimal musical arrangements which allowed the moral message of the song to be foregrounded and the sincerity heightened through confession and intimacy. While such qualities may have partly been the result of artistic decisions, it is also true that Australian performers simply couldn't afford to

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<sup>37</sup> Watson, *op cit*, p 10

<sup>38</sup> Graeme Smith, *op cit*, 2005 pp106-107.

<sup>39</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, University of Oxford Press, London, 1972

record with a band. There is some evidence to suggest that Morton wanted to record more with his touring band the Roughriders in the 1940s but was discouraged by Regal Zonophone, and even gradually replaced by other artists who were willing to record as solo performers and thus more cheaply.<sup>40</sup> Such creative restrictions led him to explore other career avenues outside country music in Australia. The restrictions on Morton were the result of the timidity of the Australian music industry in the late 1930s, itself a result of the Great Depression.

In America, by 1921, 200 companies were manufacturing 'talking machines' and retail sales of records were US\$106.5 million, a figure not exceeded for twenty-eight years. Of this, hillbilly music accounted for one quarter of all popular music sales by 1930.<sup>41</sup> Associated with the Great Depression, there was a slump in the music business between 1927 and 1932, followed by an extended period of stasis. During this slump, record sales declined to six million and numbers of phonograph machines manufactured went from 987,000 to 40,000. One of the effects of this was the collapse of small record companies and the re-establishment of the record business as an oligopoly. Even as late 1938, two labels, RCA and Decca, manufactured three-quarters of America's records.<sup>42</sup>

In Australia, demand for wireless machines, gramophones and records grew consistently during the 1920s, particularly between 1926 and 1930. However, consumption declined significantly after 1930, even halving in the space of twelve months for some labels.<sup>43</sup> Unlike America, where the 1920s had seen the proliferation of local recording companies, the majority of record labels in Australia in the early 1930s were branches of international companies. Regal Zonophone, the label which produced all Australian

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<sup>40</sup> Watson, Eric, *Country Music in Australia*, Rodeo Publications, Kensington (NSW), 1975, p 19.

<sup>41</sup> Russell Sanjek, *American Popular Music and its Business: The First Four Hundred Years, Vol III, 1900-1984*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1988, p 64.

<sup>42</sup> Simon Frith, *Music For Pleasure: Essays In The Sociology of Pop*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988, p 16.

<sup>43</sup> David Rooney, 'The Knowledge Gap: A Perspective on Trade Industry, Technology and Policy from Pre-War Australian Music Manufacturing (1903-1930)', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 34.2 (1999); Ross Laird, 'Record Industry', in John Whiteoak and Aline Scott-Maxwell, *Currency Companion to Music and Dance in Australia*, Currency House, Sydney, 2003, p 566.

hillbilly music until 1949, was owned by EMI, a British label. While in America, hillbilly records were produced and distributed by a virtual oligopoly, in Australia Regal Zonophone had an absolute monopoly on hillbilly and cowboy music. It was not until 1949 that Regal Zonophone had a competitor in locally owned Rodeo Records.<sup>44</sup>

Given that the first Tex Morton record on Regal Zonophone was released in 1936, at the tail end of an economic slump, it is interesting to speculate on how the Great Depression affected the development of Country music in Australia. Undoubtedly it retarded the diversification of the industry. Considering Morton's fame and success and later that of his label-mate Buddy Williams', and the wealth of their imitators on amateur hours and talent quests, it is noteworthy that other companies took so long to catch on to the 'hillbilly craze'. Put simply, the mid 1930s were not the time for entrepreneurs to start small, specialist labels.<sup>45</sup> The effects of the Great Depression were only exacerbated by the outbreak of the Second World War which saw a dramatic restriction in even Morton's output. Between 1942 and 1945 only twenty-two hillbilly recordings were made by EMI.<sup>46</sup> It was not until the late 1940s and early 1950s that the hillbilly business really started to expand.

However, by this time the 'sound' of country music in Australia had already been well established. As well as restricting the development of the industry, the economic effects of the Depression and the War also retarded the diversification of the music itself. Not only was Regal Zonophone the only label to produce hillbilly recordings at this time, hillbilly was considered 'low brow' and low on the list of priorities even for them. The engineer of Morton's and Buddy Williams' sessions, Arch Kerr, has documented how Regal Zonophone desired hillbilly records to be cheaply produced and sold.<sup>47</sup> In this

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<sup>44</sup> Ross Laird, *op cit.*, p 567.

<sup>45</sup> Unlike, for example, the early 1970s when a host of independent Australian labels capitalised on the birth and boom of 'pub rock'. Jason Walker, *Billy Thorpe's Time On Earth*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2009.

<sup>46</sup> *Country Music and Tourism in Tamworth*, Report prepared by TECHON (Tamworth Tafe Consultants), October 1989.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Arch Kerr at <http://www.historyofcountrymusic.com.au/archkerr.html>. 11/03/10

case, cheap production meant simple production and the majority of Morton's and Williams' recordings featured the performer, alone, accompanying himself on 'Spanish' guitar.

Even the advent of Rodeo Records failed to make much of a difference to the minimal style that dominated early Australian recordings. Successful country singer Arthur Blanch described his experience recording with Rodeo in the early 1950s:

Just me and my guitar, one microphone and one engineer. Of course if you made a mistake or hit a dud note on your guitar you'd stop and start all over again. The engineer would have to set up a new disc, so you'd try hard not to cause any problems.<sup>48</sup>

It was cheaper for record labels to record solo artists than it was to record a band, even if the artist made the occasional mistake. This economic consideration meant that the overwhelming majority of early hillbilly music was one artist, self-accompanied. Such a minimal style highlighted the sentimental qualities of the songs and performances.

Writers such as Eric Watson have lionised what he calls the 'bush ballad' as an authentic expression of national identity. In Tamworth today, the bush ballad is an institution: seen to signify all that is native and fine about country music in Australia. However, the style that has become known as the 'bush ballad' was not simply the result of channelling an Australian folk tradition; it was also the result of the specific economic and cultural circumstances of the 1930s and 40s: circumstances which were to set a template for authentic country music in Australia.

The particularly sincere feeling of early Australian hillbilly music was partly created by its minimal and intimate performance style - one man, one guitar - unmediated by other players or distancing production techniques. Such qualities were the result of specific historic circumstances - the sentimental streak in hillbilly music originating from

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<sup>48</sup> Berice and Arthur Blanch, *Wollun One: The Story of the Blanch Family*, Tamworth Music, Palm Beach (QLD), 2004, p 18.

America combined with a taste for the sentimental in Australian popular culture and economic restrictions. They were not the organic offspring of an intrinsically Australian style or sound.

### **The Authentic Image**

While the predominant style of Morton's Regal Zonophone recordings was sentimental, his image was that of a sharp-shooting, whip-cracking, rough-riding cowboy. This was reiterated in every item of publicity that Morton received during this time: articles; promotional photos; and illustrations on the covers of his printed sheet music. His nom-de-plume was the Yodelling Boundary Rider and - as an Australian cowboy - was able to ride with seemingly unselfconscious ease between the American and Australian landscape.

Promotional photographs were a vivid medium through which Morton's identity was expressed. For the first few years of his professional career he was almost always photographed as an American-style cowboy. Studio photos, magazine and newspaper illustrations, record sleeve covers, the covers of song books, posters, programs - in every context Tex appeared in a black cowboy hat, a checked or embroidered shirt, usually black also, riding breeches, knee-high boots, and kerchief. [See Fig. 1] A horse was often by his side or between his legs as well. Some photos featured him engaged in acts of cowboyism: rolling a cigarette; aiming a gun; or holding a lasso. [See Figs. 2&3]

Increasingly, Morton added Australian elements to the cowboy costume. For instance, in photos taken to promote 'Tex Morton's Cowboy Roadshow' at Sam Hood's Pitt Street studio in Sydney in 1938 a boomerang was added.<sup>49</sup> [See Fig 4] On the cover of Tex Morton's *Australian Bush Ballads and Old Time Songs*, Morton wore an embroidered cowboy shirt but added a smaller hat, which may be the iconic Australian 'Akubra'

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<sup>49</sup> Tex Morton's Cowboy Roadshow, 1938, collection of photographs in the Sam Hood Collection, Mitchell Library.

brand.<sup>50</sup> [See Fig 5] For Morton, clothing that signified either the Australian stockman or the American cowboy could be used interchangeably and, apparently, without contradiction.<sup>51</sup>

During the 1940s, Morton began to dress increasingly in a quasi-military khaki outfit.<sup>52</sup> [See Fig 6] This new costume was partly a reflection of the considerable work he did entertaining the soldiers during World War Two, but it was also not out of keeping with the connotations of masculinity and physical ability already established by the cowboy image.

'Tex Morton's Cowboy Roadshow' was one of the many touring shows that Morton took around Australia's Eastern Seaboard during the 1940s. Others included 'Tex Morton's Australian Rodeo,'<sup>53</sup> 'Tex Morton's Wild West Show,'<sup>26</sup> and 'Tex Morton's Big Rodeo Show'<sup>54</sup> In addition to 'singing the yodels that won him fame' and hosting the event, Morton also performed whip-cracking and sharp-shooting. The more extravagant displays of rough-riding were left to Stan and Jack Gill 'champion roughriders of Australia.'<sup>55</sup> Morton positioned himself at the centre of cowboy and rough-riding culture by being the focus of the show. It was authenticity by association.

Morton was not simply wearing a costume and performing cowboy tricks, however. He was a real cowboy. Remarkably, every article written about Morton in the mid to late 1930s highlighted his alleged life story. According to press reports, his claims to being 'Australia's Yodelling Boundary Rider' or, on occasion, 'Australia's Singing Cowboy' had a grounding in reality.

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<sup>50</sup> Tex Morton, *Tex Morton's Australian Bush Ballads and Old Time Songs*, Allan & Co. Ltd., Melbourne, c1940.

<sup>51</sup> In a nice piece of historical fate, Stetson and Akubra now produce eachothers' hats: Philippa Macaskill and Margaret Maynard, 'Akubra', Richard White and Melissa Harper (eds), *Symbols of Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2010.

<sup>52</sup> *Music Maker*, October 1947.

<sup>53</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 3/11/1940.

<sup>26</sup> *Wireless Weekly*, 5/10/1940.

<sup>54</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 2/11/1940.

<sup>55</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 2/11/1940.

# TEX MORTON



Australia's Famous "Yodelling Boundary Rider," says  
"ONLY A

## Gibson

IS GOOD ENOUGH"

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Figure 1



Crack shot Tex Morton shoots the ash of a cigarette in the mouth of Stan Gill in practice for the show.

Figure 2



Tex Morton felt mighty frisky when we happened along to take this action "shot"!

Figure 3

Figure 4

# MORTON'S

AUSTRALIAN BUSH BALLADS  
AND OLD TIME SONGS





Archiving THE MORTON  
Herndon, Virginia Foundry Area

Figure 5

**"Cowboy Corner" 3rd of a New Series**



*Profiling* **TEX MORTON**  
*Australia's "Yodelling Boundary Rider"*

Figure 6

*Wireless Weekly*, a magazine devoted to the growing culture of radio, was one of the main theatres in which Morton's persona was played out. One article in particular is worth quoting in full for the way in which it encapsulated Morton's image as a real cowboy. It is titled 'Not 'Drug-Store Cowboy'' and claimed:

Tex Morton, wanderer, drover, stockman, street singer, and one of our most successful radio and vaudeville artists, is no 'drug store cowboy', but one of the real, honest-to-goodness, cow-punching, rough-riding, variety.

He has driven cattle from Normanton, on the Gulf, to Homebush, he can part a man's hair with a stockwhip at 30ft., and is a crack shot.

Tex is a New Zealander, not an American. His slight accent was acquired during 12 years in U.S.A. (sic)

When he came to Australia in 1934 he was practically penniless; to-day his record sales in Australia – 10,000 a month – are greater than those of any other artist...

He sings songs of the outback because he knows and loves the people of the country.<sup>56</sup>

Being a real cowboy was the most often repeated element of many that built up Morton's persona of a knockabout guy with a considerable range of life experience. It was an image of carefree masculinity. Prior to his professional singing career, Morton had been, according to the press, alternatively: a cowboy, a stockman, a seaman, a drover, a hobo, a boundary rider, a gold-miner, a fur-tracker, a flea circus operator, a busker, a shearer or simply 'roamed about' and 'carried his swag' taking whatever jobs 'were offering on outback stations.'<sup>57</sup>

Morton's claims to a rich life full of adventure didn't simply make entertaining reading, they were also essential in developing his image as an authentic hillbilly singer. It

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<sup>56</sup> *Wireless Weekly*, 23/11/1940.

<sup>57</sup> *Music Maker*, 20/10/47; *Australian Music Maker and Dance Band News*, 1/3/38; *Wireless Weekly*, 23/11/40.

perpetuated the notion, also expressed in his songs, that he was untrained in music, yet well trained in life. Further, given that the subject matter of his songs was about rural working life, it gave him the authority from which to sing about such a life.

Interestingly, such authority could come, almost interchangeably, from his experiences in Australia or America. *Wireless Weekly* spoke in the same breath of his work in the outback of Australia and the '12 years he spent' in the USA.<sup>58</sup> Other reports spoke of his authentic ancestry – his father had been 'an American cowboy'.<sup>59</sup> In terms of the authenticity of the cowboy singer, the prairies of Texas or the tablelands of Northern Queensland were described interchangeably and served the same purpose. Indeed, one article could claim that Morton wore 'Australian stockman clothes' next to a photograph of him wearing a flamboyantly embroidered shirt and holding a guitar with a sheriff's star attached to it.<sup>60</sup>

Such was the extent of mythologising that Morton, the contemporary media and subsequent country music historians have participated in that is difficult to determine exactly how many, if any, of these reports are true. The specific details of the places he worked are absent and many of the contemporary reports contradict each other. The *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* stated that Morton was a 'hobo' for a time, but that his father was a Telegraph Operator, not an American cowboy. The truth to Morton's life story went to the grave. The plaque that stands next to his cremated remains in Nelson, New Zealand, read 'A Millionaire in the Experience of Life'.<sup>61</sup>

More revelatory than the veracity of Morton's claims, however, is how such claims were so seductive and powerful to a 1930s audience and media. Morton's life story was, whether true or not, an image. And it was an image that rarely included descriptions of his technical or artistic ability, but rather his life experience. In this way it was a particularly modern (or post-modern?) kind of celebrity - one that emphasised his

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<sup>58</sup> *Wireless Weekly*, 23/11/40.

<sup>59</sup> *Music Maker*, 20/6/42.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> 'Tex Morton', in *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, Vol 5, Auckland University Press, 2000, pp 359-360

authenticity as a person, and therefore as a hillbilly performer, and de-emphasised his technical authority.

Jill Julius Matthews has shown that the processes of modern celebrity in the 1920s and 30s turned the famous into objects of desire for their audience (particularly the burgeoning cinema market of working-class women), a desirability enhanced and enabled by fan and romance magazines.<sup>62</sup> The creation of desirable stars required that articles investigated the stars' 'real' life rather than just their career as actor, singer or dancer– the person behind the persona. In this way, the star system feminised celebrities according to the supposed dictates of women's desire. Tex Morton, despite his well-publicised image as a cowboy, bagman, rambler, rake, whip-cracking, sharp-shooting man's man, was desirable and thus, in this way, feminised.

It is common in Australian historiography to attribute the popularity of cowboy and western cultural products to the similarities between American and Australian frontier history and subsequent national identities. In *Hollywood Downunder* Diane Collins has observed that the reason that westerns and singing cowboy films were so popular in Australia was that the myth they perpetuated was easily transplantable. The agent of civilisation, patrolling the boundaries of culture on a horse fitted neatly into an Australian self-image already established by the bush myth. As Collins put it: 'Westerns equated space and freedom with action and opportunity. Australians readily endorsed this formula – Australia's history could, after all, be seen as evidence for such a view.'<sup>63</sup>

This may have been the case for some Australians. Some country singers have described the attraction of singing cowboy movies in such terms. The Le Garde Twins, for instance, who began their singing career in the mid 1950s, commented that after seeing a

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<sup>62</sup> Jill Julius Matthews, *Dance Hall and Picture Palace: Sydney's Romance With Modernity*, Currency Press, Sydney, 2005, p 131.

<sup>63</sup> Diane, Collins *Hollywood Downunder: Australians at the Movies: 1896 to the Present Day*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1987 p 46

Hopalong Cassidy film: 'We just fell in love with the American west and we rode all over Australia. The Australian bush is so much like the American west.'<sup>64</sup> Arthur Blanch has said that 'The wide-open spaces and freedom of that early life inspired me to sing'.<sup>65</sup> However, such cases say more about the way in which biographies of country music artists emphasise the importance of an authentic rural upbringing - an upbringing that affects consumption. Hopalong Cassidy resonated with the Le Gardes because it was their real life. The Le Garde Twins were, thus, authentic fans.

Further, Collins' arguments fails to take into consideration the popularity of cowboy films and music in Europe. Western movies and singing cowboys were not only popular with large countries with a recent frontier history. Film director Wim Wenders has written about the attraction American cowboy films held for him growing up in Germany in the 1930s. In particular, Wenders took delight in their sense of freedom, compared to the sense of repression in Nazi propaganda films of the same era.<sup>66</sup> Graeme Smith, too, has shown how not only do other countries have their own localised forms of nostalgic, rural-based folk music (Japan and Brazil for example) but that some European countries are large markets for American country music (such as Ireland and the Czech Republic).<sup>67</sup> What such anecdotes demonstrate is that the equation of country music's popularity with Australia's wide-open spaces and history of stock work and rough riding is problematic. Living in a country with a 'frontier' or 'outback' has not been a prerequisite for liking country music.

Another way of conceptualising the popularity of cowboy music in Australia is as an answer to modernity. Australia was experiencing modernity and its accompanying anxieties in a similar, if not more acute, way to Europe. Such anxieties could manifest themselves in a desire for the sentimental, nostalgic evocations of hearth and home (as

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with the author, 4/4/03.

<sup>65</sup> Berice and Arthur Blanch, *Wollun One: The Story of the Blanch Family*, Tamworth Music, Palm Beach QLD, 2004, p 11.

<sup>66</sup> Wim Wenders quoted in Greil Marcus, *The Dustbin of History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1995, pp 98-102.

<sup>67</sup> Graeme Smith, *op cit*, 2005, pp 106-107.

we have seen). Add to this the sense that such evocations were of 'real' places (as opposed to the fakeness of the city) and the cowboy who sang of them as a real person.

It was no coincidence that the development and widespread availability of gramophones and wirelesses coincided with the development of 'hillbilly' as a distinct, country-based genre. This dichotomy was illustrated, literally, in *Wireless Weekly*, the magazine that accompanied the personal radio boom of the 1930s. Amongst the numerous advertisements for radios, specialised valves and transistors – advertisements which primarily use the modern technology of their products as a selling point – were pictures of ruralised, technologically bereft hillbillies and yodelling boundary riders. Amongst the signs that the world was advancing at a startling pace were reassurances that there existed pockets of traditional, or authentic, cultures.

Designs for phonographs and wirelesses also reflected an insistence that past practices remained, unchanged, in the present. Advertisements for these uniquely modern machines frequently asserted a retro impulse. They were advertised as period pieces and antiques. The Period Vocalion was an 'authentic example of the furniture designed for Dutch courtiers of the seventeenth century'<sup>68</sup>, Edison's Diamond Disc Phonographs came encased in 'period cabinets of fine craftsmanship'<sup>69</sup> while the Rexenola Prismaphonic had 'richly decorative figured doors' and a 'tall Gothic grille front.'<sup>70</sup> The modern circuitry was being hidden by the reassuring facade of historic design. Indeed, often the same advertisements would also have intricate drawings of valves and batteries or highly technical descriptions of prismaphonic amplification. At the very moment modernism and technical achievement was being celebrated it was also being rendered unthreatening. 'Yes the world was changing for the better', the ads declared, 'but some things were eternal.'

If hillbilly music offered an implicit critique of modernity, it offered an explicit refutation of the regimentation and economic rationalisation that accompanied it. These conditions of modernity were considered and rejected in Tex Morton's bagman, or hobo, song; a

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<sup>68</sup> *Australian Phonograph Monthly*, 20/12/1925, p 21.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 20/07/1927, p. 11.

<sup>70</sup> *Music in Australia*, 20/12/1928

genre that formed a significant part of his repertoire. In such songs the narrator had rejected the demands of city life, capitalist competition and resulting anxiety about employment and had sought solace, adventure and a new identity on the road. 'The Yodelling Bagman', for instance, gleefully exclaimed that the 'hobo's life is best' because there is freedom from 'hotel bills and the rent man':

I jumped rattlers in New South Wales,  
cane trains up to Cairns  
I bummed all my tucker  
and I pinched my clothes.<sup>71</sup>

In 'The Railroad Bum' Morton compares a life of regulation and bill-paying with the hobo freedom:

I've travelled everywhere  
been on every branch-line railroad  
never paid a penny of fare  
Been from Perth to Bondi Beach my friends  
Canada to Mexico.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, in the same way as hillbilly visions of an unchanged past represented a retreat from the imposing advancements of technology, visions of a romantic, rambling life represented a repudiation of the drudgery and anxiety associated with such a life.

It also provided an imaginative way of escaping one of the most difficult products of modernity: economic depression. The Great Depression struck Australia acutely and with some permanence. In 1933, at its height, unemployment in Australia was thirty percent. In 1938 it was still over ten percent.<sup>73</sup> This unemployment sent many men on the road looking for temporary work. Morton's bagman songs both sympathised with the plight of the unemployed and romanticised their nomadic lifestyle. They inverted the anxieties associated with unemployment, turning them into pleasures.

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<sup>71</sup> Tex Morton, *Tex Morton Regal Zonophone Collection*.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Bill Gammage and Peter Spearritt (eds), *Australians: 1938*, Fairfax, Syme and Weldon Associates. Sydney, 1987, p 3.

## The American Context

Tex Morton was not the first hillbilly performer to present himself as a real person first and a professional artist second. Although the vaudeville tradition of role playing and onflowing ambivalence about the distinctiveness of hillbilly music remained in Australian culture for some time, to a degree, by the early 1930s selling hillbilly acts as 'real hillbillies' and cowboy singers as 'real cowboys' was beginning to become more commonplace. This shift in presentation was due to a number of factors, not least of all the entrepreneurship of American record executive Ralph Peer.

In America many acts were marketed as being authentically rural from the late 1920s. Richard A Peterson in *Creating Country Music* showed how talent scouts, such as Ralph Peer working for the Victor Talking Machine Company, recognised a new market for rural or traditional sounding music and undertook field trips to America's south, recording hundreds of local artists in the space of a few days. These recording sessions were not the result of a folkloric interest in recording traditional music for posterity (as other contemporary recording sessions by folklorists such as John Lomax were) but were undertaken in order to find already accomplished and professional musicians to sell to a new market. These musicians were by no means amateur or folk. According to Peterson they exhibited a sort of 'nascent professionalism.'<sup>74</sup> They were then vigorously marketed as authentically rural. Indeed, it was Peer himself who coined the term 'hillbilly' to describe one of his new signings.<sup>75</sup> Peterson's underlying argument is that the authenticity of these performers wasn't innate. Rather it was manufactured and negotiated 'in an ongoing interplay between performers, diverse commercial interests, fans and the evolving image.'<sup>76</sup>

In Australia, such recordings were often marketed as the traditional folk song of a rural American people. This is evident when looking at music trade periodicals, such as *The*

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<sup>74</sup> Peterson, *op cit.*, p 74.

<sup>75</sup> Malone, *op cit.*, p 40.

<sup>76</sup> Peterson, *op cit.*, p 6.

*Australian Phonograph News* and *Australian Phonograph Monthly*. One 1930 *Phonograph News* article about the Dixie Series of recordings, released on Brunswick Records, described the recordings as:

very popular and rightly so, because it brings simple songs out of their native hills, where they have been sung from generation to generation... The Brunswick recorders had at times to make long trips into the southern hills of America to record the singers, who accompanied themselves with guitars, violins, Jews' harps and similar instruments.<sup>77</sup>

Such recordings, as Peterson showed, had rather dubious claims to being folkloric, amateur expression. Dixie artists such as Vernon Dalhart, with his background as a professional city performer,<sup>78</sup> were a far cry from the popular conception of the hillbilly as insulated from civilisation by the hills and backwoods of southern America.

Trade magazine articles like this are particularly revealing because they not only indicate what the record companies considered the best way to market their artists, but also because, to a certain extent, they dictated how they were sold at a retail level. Encouragement for certain sorts of window displays or in-store decoration, for instance, was common. The way in which the Australian music trade saw hillbilly music, therefore, influenced how the Australian public saw them.

One of the most successful artists 'discovered' and marketed by Peer was Jimmie Rodgers. Before recording for Victor, Rodgers had worked on the vaudeville and tent repertory circuit in the southeastern states of America. Most importantly, as a vaudeville performer he was already incorporating aspects of jazz and pop into his music.<sup>79</sup> In other words, by the time Victor came to record him, he was a professional performer mixing various music forms, rather than a backwoodsman playing the only type of music he knew.

However, under Peer's guidance Rodgers began to adopt various persona which emphasised his persona as a knockabout, itinerant worker. These persona went through a

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<sup>77</sup> *The Australian Phonograph News*, December 1930, p 16.

<sup>78</sup> Malone, *op cit.*, p 43.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p 6.

number of mutations. In the beginning of Rodgers' career with Victor he played upon his erstwhile life as a rail worker, calling himself 'The Singing Brakeman'. Later in his career, as his fame grew and the simple rail worker image became less plausible, Rodgers was known to appear in concerts dressed in a boater hat and bow tie under the moniker 'America's Blue Yodeller'. He also occasionally performed as a singing cowboy. These roles were different from the vaudeville ones as they were presented as real, rather than a character. Peterson writes that the Singing Brakeman character meant that he could 'appear to be a fast travelling man, a rambler, and a bit of a rake, but also seem to be a responsible working man (the kind who would send money home to his wife and family, visiting his dear old mother whenever he could get home)'.<sup>80</sup>

As well as being influenced by Rodgers' sound, Morton and Regal Zonophone were also influenced by the idea of Rodger's persona. This can be detected in Morton's nom-de-plume 'The Boundary Rider', which had debts to both Rodgers' names 'The Singing Brakeman' and 'America's Blue Yodeller' (although he supplemented the connotations with American modernity – the railway, jazz – with references to Australian rural culture). In terms of the content of Morton's image, however, he borrowed more from the phenomenon of singing cowboys such as Gene Autry than he did from hillbilly singers.

Autry was originally a Jimmie Rodgers-styled singer who went to Hollywood in 1935 to replace John Wayne as the Republic studio's 'singing cowboy'. His first film of that year was *Tumbling Tumbleweeds*, a box office success both in the USA and Australia. *Tumbling Tumbleweeds* and other singing cowboy films not only institutionalised the cowboy image in Australia, but also the idea of cowboy authenticity. It wasn't just the parts that Autry played that were cowboys, Republic marketed him as a cowboy himself. Every public appearance he made was in cowboy clothes and singing western songs.<sup>81</sup>

Autry was not the first cowboy performer to be promoted as a real cowboy. By the 1920s, at least, several recognisable cowboy stars were drawing publicity in the

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<sup>80</sup> Peterson, *op cit.*, p 48.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p 87.

Australian showbusiness magazines. These were silent films and while these cowboys didn't sing, they displayed a similar type of authenticity. Much was made of the feats of action and bravery in these films and that such stunts were performed by the actors themselves. They performed all their own stunts as they were real cowboys. Indeed, their claim to being actual cowboys was emphasised more than their claims to being good actors. Tom Mix was 'The Daredevil' or 'The Man Who Never Fakes',<sup>82</sup> Harry Carey was 'The realest Westerner on the screen', while the 'cowpunchers in the company of Buck Jones...in 'The Last Straw', are cowboys first and actors second.'<sup>83</sup> [See Figs 7 & 8] Stetsons, kerchiefs, checked shirts and horses were a ubiquitous part of the publicity photos that accompanied these blurbs and were more than just costume.

Phillip and Roger Bell have observed that 'Tex Morton was modelled on Autry'.<sup>84</sup> While Autry gave Morton the specificity of his image - a cowboy who happened to sing - the cowboy image of authenticity had been in circulation in Australian popular culture for some time before him. Indeed, the marketing of Morton's image reflected the growing trend in Australian popular culture to depict and accept professional artists as 'real people'.

Just as his purely hillbilly repertoire and sincere sound marked Morton as something real, within manufactured, professional culture, so did his image. The cowboy was a real person in the midst of the potential phony and untrustworthy products of modernity. The audience could trust the cowboy to lead them through simulations, play-acting and projected shadows to a place where things were real and true.

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<sup>82</sup> *Australian Variety and Show World*, 08/07/1920, p 11, and 05/08/1920, p 13.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, 29/07/1920, p 1.

<sup>84</sup> Philip Bell and Roger Bell, *Implicated: The United States in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1993, p 74.



**Tom  
Mix**  
Fox Film Star

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**The Man  
Who Never  
Fakes**

Figure 7



# Universal Attractions



Great Money-Making Group of Feature Pictures Released by Universal  
HARRY CAREY, the Greatest Actor on the Screen appears in this Group

## The Big Money Twelve

This Series of Pictures have Broken Every House Record where they have Appeared  
Great Pictures - Great Stars - Great Box Office Values

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*The realst  
Westerner,  
on the screen*

# HARRY CAREY

*Appearing only  
in  
UNIVERSAL  
SPECIAL  
ATTRACTONS*



RAIPAL

Figure 8

## The Cultural Significance of the Australian Cowboy

Eric Watson has argued that the cultural significance of Tex Morton was due to the Australian subject matter of his songs. As a way of explaining Morton's legacy - his influence on subsequent performers and the character of country music as it developed during the twentieth century - this has some validity. However, as a way of explaining the contemporary appeal of hillbilly music in the 1930s it fails to withstand close inspection.

Rejecting the thesis that says country music in Australia was imported directly from the American south in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Watson writes a history that places Morton and country music in Australia in an Australian folk tradition. His history states that Irish convicts and immigrants brought anti-authoritarian sentiments to Australia in the early nineteenth century and began singing what they saw in familiar airs and melodies from home; these songs were embellished and cemented by the experience of the goldrush and the romance of bushrangers; and finally, new ballads were added and old ones restored by Banjo Paterson, Henry Lawson and the 1890s cultural nationalists that were published in Sydney's *Bulletin* magazine in the late nineteenth century. These songs and their underlying spirit came out in Tex Morton's music in the 1930s.<sup>85</sup>

To support this thesis, Watson distorts the evidence. Morton did include Australian subject matter in his songs in two ways. The first was to record Australian folk songs such as 'Wrap Me Up In My Stockwhip and Blanket' and 'The Stockman's Last Bed', which, following on from Banjo Paterson's example, he called 'bush ballads'. These bush ballads made up a very small percentage of Morton's catalogue. Out of the ninety-two songs he recorded for Regal Zonophone, five were folk songs. Morton also, once again following Paterson's example, conducted a well-publicised search for 'lost' Australian bush songs to add to his repertoire.<sup>86</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that such an appeal

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<sup>85</sup> Watson, *op cit.*, p 7.

<sup>86</sup> Watson, *op cit.*, p 18.

unearthed any 'lost' songs. Certainly the bush ballads that Morton recorded were all well-known beforehand.

Furthermore, Morton was selective in his choice of bush ballads. Australian folk songs could be about a range of subjects such as the gold rush, shearing and class conflict, but Morton primarily recorded the ones that complemented the cowboy image and the rest of his repertoire of cowboy songs set in Texas. These songs were about stockmen, often stockmen about to die, such as Adam Lindsay Gordon's 'Sick Stockman'.<sup>87</sup> Both 'Wrap Me Up In My Stockwhip and Blanket' and 'The Stockman's Last Bed' were a featured part of the Tex Morton oeuvre, appearing in songbooks as well as recordings.<sup>88</sup> Both these songs are about a stockman asking to be buried in the country he loves with the trappings of his life around him. This theme is reflected in a number of American cowboy songs that Morton also performed, such as 'Carry Me Back to the Lone Prairie'.

Morton also recorded his own songs with Australian subject matter. These songs either depicted the life of the hobo - 'The Yodelling Bagman' as one Morton song had it - or the stockman. In many cases, Morton simply substituted Australian place names and themes for American ones. One Tex Morton songbook described his 1940 single 'Move Along Baldy' as 'an Australian boundary rider's song'.<sup>89</sup> It was, therefore, a statement of Morton's identity: 'I've never wanted to live in your towns/Never been past Alexandria Downs'.<sup>90</sup> 'Move Along Baldy' is basically an Australian version of the American hillbilly song 'Yip Neddy'. Morton not only imitated the theme of 'Yip Neddy' (the cowboy, alone in the wilderness, singing to his horse) he directly substituted the line 'A kiss for me boy and hay for you' with 'clover for you boy and damper for me.'<sup>91</sup> Exchanging 'a kiss' for 'damper' also has the effect of not just localising Morton,

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<sup>87</sup> Adam Lindsay Gordon, *Poems*, Massina, Melbourne, 1892

<sup>88</sup> Tex Morton, *Tex Morton's Australian Bush Ballads and Old Time Songs*, Allan and Co., Melbourne, c1940.

<sup>89</sup> *Nicholson's Third Album of Tex Morton: Cowboy and Hillbilly Songs*, Nicholson's, Sydney, 1940, p 6.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p 6.

<sup>91</sup> Carr and Ilda, 'Yip Neddy' in *Davis' Album of Famous Hill Billy Songs*, Davis and Co. Ltd., Sydney, c1935.

but also marking him as completely alone, in the outback, with just his horse for company.

Directly supplementing Australian signifiers for American ones was common in Morton's oeuvre. 'Murrumbidgee Jack' replaced a 'coo-ee' for a yodel, while the 'Wandering Stockman' was surrounded by dingoes rather than the coyotes. Even Tex Morton's *nom de plume* - 'The Yodelling Boundary Rider' - echoed the experiences and associations of the cowboy. The boundary rider was a specific figure in Australian history and folklore. It was his job to patrol the exterior fences of large outback properties, fixing holes in the fences to prevent stock escaping and wildlife getting in. Riding boundaries was a job done on horseback and alone. In this way it differed from more communal, pastoral employment like shearing or droving. Consequently, it was, along with the stockman, perhaps the closest historical figure Australia had to the American cowboy.

Neither Morton's recordings of bush ballads, nor his own compositions with local references replacing American references, were any more popular than his other styles of song: the sentimental evocations of mother and father or songs set in Texas for instance.<sup>92</sup> Cultural significance was, for Watson and others, independent of popularity.

Ultimately, Watson's argument says more about the 1970s than it does about the 1930s. Writing in 1975, Watson was backlighting history to illuminate the present. The 1970s were a time when elements of the country music industry and culture were starting to award music with Australian subject matter and flavour a higher cultural status than that with a clearer debt to America. This was reflective of broader trends in Australia popular culture at the time, as we shall see in Chapter Five.

Further, Watson is writing with the knowledge of what came after Morton. Singing about Australian places and people, within the idiom of a hillbilly song, was to be

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<sup>92</sup> EMI Sales Cards, NFSA, Canberra.

a style taken up and developed by numerous subsequent artists, most notably Slim Dusty. Graeme Smith has written that Morton's 'most important innovation was the localisation of hillbilly themes to Australian places and experiences'.<sup>93</sup> Certainly, in terms of his legacy – the ripples his songs would cause in the decades to come – it is true. But, at the time, it was only one of the reasons for his popularity.

Philip and Roger Bell provide a different explanation of Tex Morton's influences and cultural significance. Their book *Implicated: The United States and Australia* is an attempt to understand Australian cultural products in the 1920s and 30s, such as films, jazz, radio and country music, in the context of 'Americanisation'. That is, the invasion and infiltration of American cultural forms which either diluted or totally replaced the indigenous versions. They argue that Tex Morton was, in essence, an Australian version of the singing cowboy:

Tex Morton was modelled on Autry, but the Australian 'cowboy' risked a black hat and personified the masculinity of the Australian rural hero – the boundary rider – as well as the glamour of the Hollywood entertainer.<sup>94</sup>

But the Bells warn against seeing Morton merely as a wholly American product, writing that it would be a mistake:

to see Morton as an example of slavish imitation of popular, commercially successful American culture...The Australian 'singing cowboy' derived his cultural significance from the adaptation of local myths and masculine bush values, although he quite literally clothed them in the denim of Texas 'cowpokes'.<sup>95</sup>

Morton's persona was, however, more complex than this explanation suggests. Firstly, the evidence doesn't support it. As we have seen, Morton didn't only wear American cowboy clothes (and even when he did it wasn't denim) he also wore Akubra style hats, waistcoats and breeches. The Australian stockman image was virtually interchangeable

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<sup>93</sup> Smith, *op cit*, 2005 p 88.

<sup>94</sup> Bell and Bell, *op cit.*, p 74.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p 75.

with that of the American cowboy. Furthermore, even when he did wear embroidered shirts and Stetson hats, publications such as *Wireless Weekly*, as we have seen, could still describe him as wearing 'Australian stockman clothes.' The differences between national dress types were virtually erased - in fact that was Morton's peculiar ability.

Secondly, like Watson, the Bells see 'cultural significance' in terms of the prevalence of Australian subject matter. It suggests that the Australian content of Morton's songs are to be regarded as the body of history, while the international forms it was expressed in are simply history's clothing. However, this is a limited way of looking at the history of popular culture and society. While the Australian content may have influenced subsequent artists, there were more reasons for Morton's popularity and significance than simply 'local myths and masculine bush values'. Such a limitation does more to illuminate the biases of the authors than it does the past. Morton's cultural significance derived from the popularity and power of the hillbilly and cowboy idioms he used as much as it did the innovation of Australian subject matter. Morton's hillbilly-ness and cowboy-isms do not dilute his significance; they make it more complex and interesting.

How are we, then, to understand the historical significance of Morton's combination of recognisably Australian and American songs and signifiers? The key, perhaps, lies in the fact that they were virtually interchangeable: coyotes could become dingoes; prairies could become outback plains; Stetsons could become Akubras; cowboys could become stockmen; lassos could become boomerangs; yodels could become coo-ees and so on. Morton was not a folklorist. He was not interested in verisimilitude between song and historical experience. He was a nascent pop star, a celebrity, and he traded in fantasy. Morton suggested that the Australian bush was a place of fantasy, romance and adventure as much as the American prairies were. Morton, by virtue of the fact that he was real, no 'dime store cowboy', made that fantasy seem vivid and real.

Furthermore, associating the Australian stockman with American popular culture can be seen as a way of updating the Australian bush myth. The meaning of the cowboy shifted as he crossed the Pacific. While in America he was a mythic-historic national type represented on screen, record and page, in Australia distance rendered him more fully a

modern fantasy (albeit one with authentic connections to the past). In Australia, the cowboy existed primarily as a reproduction of the technology of modernity – film, radio and the phonograph. The Australian bushman, or stockman, on the other hand, was locked in the past – its recycling was always cloyed in nostalgia. By acting out bush stories in a wild west context Morton was able to contemporise it. Of course Australia's cowboys didn't actually dress in Stetsons and rhinestone jackets (probably most American cowboys did not either) but this was irrelevant. By clothing Australian heroes in this recognisably modern, internationally recognised garb, it meant Australian national identity had currency in the modern world

However, the cowboy aura did more than just clothe the Australian bush myth, it provided a way of accessing Australian identity. In particular, it accessed it through metaphor. By dressing like and behaving as an American cowboy, Morton was saying that the Australian bush myth can be understood as a cowboy myth. In this way, Tex Morton and early country music in Australia presented a more subtle and sophisticated vision of Australian identity than it has been given credit for. It conjured up a pan-national culture of cowboys and rural tradition while simultaneously being rooted in something recognisably Australian. It was both internationalist and modern as well as local and traditional. Ultimately, it authenticated Australian rural culture.

It also provided a way for Australians to be 'as good' as Americans. The middle part of the twentieth century was characterised by a sense of anxiety about what Australian national identity was - expressed as a desire that Australian culture should 'measure up' to Britain and America.<sup>96</sup> That Australia had a mythic identity that could be incorporated apparently so easily into modern, exciting cultural forms must have struck many listeners as a reason for some pride. Australian stockmen could be as good as American cowboys. In popular culture in Australia between the wars, the United States was replacing Britain as the standard to which Australia's character and culture might be judged.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> John Rickard, *Australia: A Cultural History* (2nd Edition), Addison, Wesley, Longman Ltd., Essex (UK), 1996, p 130.

<sup>97</sup> White and Teo, *op cit.*, pp 355-359

## Yank Enough for Shorty

Tex Morton's 1942 radio show 'All Set and Saddled' provided a vivid illustration of the way in which the cowboy image of authenticity was used to explore Australian identity. 'All Set and Saddled' was a half-hour show broadcast weekly, on Monday nights at 8pm, by Sydney radio station 2UW.<sup>98</sup> All Set and Saddled was, in essence, a variety show. Morton was accompanied by his sidekick Shorty Ranger, his singing partner Sister Dorrie and the Rough Riders Band. Together they provided a variety of entertainment: songs about cowboys; traditional Australian bush ballads; short radio plays; and casual comic banter.

Morton and his troupe presented the show as an informal get-together of friends. Dialogue, apart from the plays, seemed unscripted and songs were performed spontaneously. It was simply 'a few of the boys from the homestead coming over each week'.<sup>99</sup> A live audience was present but they were as much a part of the performance as the performers themselves. Joining in with whoops and hollers, they too sounded like they'd just happened to pop in. Even the regular advertisements for Guardian soap appeared to be in context, springing effortlessly from the dialogue. It was a format that bore some similarities to the Barn Dance shows in America which attempted to recreate the atmosphere of a family hootenanny or hoe-down through informal performances of hillbilly music.<sup>100</sup>

The overall effect was that this wasn't being produced for the listener at home. Rather, they were merely listening in on something that would have occurred anyway. Historians such as Lesley Johnson and Ken Inglis have shown how this atmosphere of 'listening in' was an overriding principle of radio shows produced in the 1920s and 30s.<sup>101</sup> In the case

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<sup>98</sup> *Wireless Weekly*, 5/12/1942.

<sup>99</sup> *All Set and Saddled*, Episode 1.

<sup>100</sup> Malone, *op cit*, p 33.

<sup>101</sup> Lesley Johnson, *The Unseen Voice: A Cultural Study of Early Australian Radio*, Routledge, London, 1983; Ken Inglis, *This is the ABC*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1988.

of 'All Set and Saddled' the atmosphere of an informal, spontaneous get-together aided in creating a particular aura of authenticity. These were not professional radio personalities, but rather everyday cowboys and bush people who just happened to be singing and talking near microphones.

The primary aura that surrounded the show was that of an Australian bush tradition. 'All Set and Saddled' was introduced as 'dinky-di entertainment',<sup>102</sup> 'a real Australian get-together'<sup>103</sup> and 'fair dinkum Australian entertainment: songs and poems with a breath of the outback.'<sup>104</sup> Backing up this rhetoric, Morton usually performed a recognisable Australian bush ballad, such as the 'Dying Stockman' or 'Wrap Me Up in my Stockwhip and Blanket', as the centrepiece of the show. Morton invariably introduced these songs with a few words about their origins as expressions of Australian bush culture and how he himself learnt them in that context. For instance, Morton has heard 'Wrap Me Up in my Stockwhip and Blanket' 'sung many, many times round the campfire on the outback stock-routes. It's a real Australian folk song, and one the old-timers will remember.'<sup>105</sup> There is constant reference to a mythic outback tradition and inference that Tex is part of that tradition.

This is interspersed with cowboy songs and rhetoric. Just as predictably as an Australian bush ballad is performed, so is a cowboy song such as 'When the Cactus is in Bloom' or 'Wyoming Willie'. Morton is as much a cowboy as he is a stockman. Or rather, he is an Australian version of a cowboy. The shows' introductions regularly demonstrated this interchangeable set of identities. The announcer welcomed: 'Australia's yodelling cowboy, your buckjumping, ballad-making host: Tex Morton!'<sup>106</sup> or 'Australia's favourite cowboy...that fast-ridin', straight-shootin' Robin Hood of the never-never, our singing star: Tex Morton!'<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> *All Set and Saddled*, Episode 2.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, Episode 3.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, Episode 1.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, Episode 2.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, Episode 3.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, Episode 1.

In the radio plays, Morton and his sidekick Shorty Long were featured riding or working in some remote part of the Australian outback when they stumbled across a stereotyped 'damsel in distress'. Tex and Shorty then proceed to save the day with a combination of fast riding, lassoing and resourcefulness. It is basically a well-recognised western plot, but populated by squatters, sheep farms and Australian accents.

Coupled with this pan-national identity was an underlying suspicion of America and its culture. Morton and crew delighted in sending up 'Yankees' while asserting an almost jingoistic Australian identity. One exchange between Tex, Shorty and Sister Dorrie is worth reproducing as an illustration of this:

Dorrie      Shorty decided to make a little money by challenging that new hand, you know Joe Jenkins, to a buckjumping contest. You should have seen Shorty's face when Joe stuck in that saddle like it was an easy chair.

Shorty      For a city fellah he certainly can ride Tex.

Tex          City fellah! Did Joe ever tell ya' how he came to be a cowboy?

Shorty      Too right. That's why I bet with him. It seems he won a horse in a raffle and didn't know what to do with it, so he learned to ride from a correspondence school.

Tex          He certainly had you on Shorty. Don't let him fool ya'. He's as bowlegged as you are and you don't get that way at any correspondence school.

Shorty      Why that doggone, ornery coyote! That double-dealing rattlesnake! That miserable hombre!

Tex          Hey Shorty, hold on! Where'd you learn all the language?

Dorrie     I saw Shorty reading one of those Yankee cowboy yarns the other day.  
              Perhaps that accounts for the accent.

Shorty     Yeah maam, and it was a real ripsnorter too.

Tex        How about giving him a little atmosphere for that accent he's cultivating.

Dorrie     Ok Tex. This should be yank enough for Shorty. It's called 'Deep in the  
              Heart of Texas.' [plays song]<sup>108</sup>

In this sequence we see many of the fundamental attributes of the Australian cowboy persona played out: the emphasising of traditional bush skills like horse riding that must be experienced through everyday life rather than learnt professionally; the importance of being a cowboy and the admiration for that way of life; the ease with which Morton moved between national types - an ease which audiences understood; the gentle mocking of Yankees and their accents; and a self-depreciating scorn aimed at Australians who try and act like Americans, which is perhaps partly an ironic gesture aimed at Morton himself.

Such a rivalry was perhaps made particularly acute by the well-documented presence of American servicemen on leave in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne during World War Two. Such a presence - and its accompanying economic and sexual allure - embodied in the phrase 'over-sexed, over-paid and over here'<sup>109</sup> - has been seen to undermine Australian masculine pride. Such statements may have helped to reinstate Australian claims to manliness.

What the history of hillbilly music and the cowboy image shows, however, is that such a rivalry was a continuation of a tradition. Patriotic competitiveness had been a feature of rodeo rhetoric prior to 1942. Much of the publicity generated for the 1940 Rushcutters

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, Episode 2.

<sup>109</sup> See, for example, John Hammond Moore, *Over-Sexed, Over-Paid and Over Here*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia and New York, 1981.

Bay Rodeo, for instance, constantly reiterated how much better Australian riders were than the Americans:

These lads ride under Australian rodeo rules. They sit on a four-legged volcano without stirrup-irons and with one hand clear. They ride in standard Australian stock saddles (weighing 12lb.).

They're contemptuous of the 30lb American saddles which they describe as 'rocking chairs', saying: 'You couldn't fall out of an American saddle if you tried.'

Said Morton...: 'I want to show Australians that we have rodeo riders here every bit as good as they have in America.'<sup>110</sup>

Part of showing Australians that they were just as good as Americans was dressing up like Americans. The rodeo stars all dressed as American cowboys, although one photo shows them holding a boomerang to illustrate their identity as very much 'Australian cowboys'.

Fans of Tex Morton and listeners to 'All Set and Saddled' were presented with a supple interpretation of Australian national identity. On the one hand stories of the bush and stockmen, dinky-di-ness and jingoistic anti-American sentiments were celebrated, while on the other Tex Morton was clearly a cowboy who sung about America. And he presents them as being as authentic to him as the stockmen songs. He is literally an 'Australian cowboy' – a well-known persona that is at home in Australia. Morton used this knowledge to tell stories about Australia. His cowboy was, then, an interpreter. But he didn't interpret it literally, he glamorised the rural life by equating it with the romantic image of the wild west.

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<sup>110</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 3/11/1940.

## **Conclusion**

Tex Morton represented something radical in popular culture in Australia: the manufactured personality. His repertoire, his musical style and his image communicated the sense that he was a real cowboy/stockman/boundary rider and a real hillbilly. This relationship with reality represented a break with the vaudeville and variety culture of Australian popular music; it reflected a growing interest in 'real' people in Australian culture at the time.

The sound and image of Morton also shows the pervasiveness and potency of American popular culture in Australia in the 1930s. Indeed, such was its prevalence and romance that it could be used to update and glamourise mythic ideas of Australian identity. However, while modernising aspects of Australian culture through association, the hillbilly and cowboy orientation to modernity was complicated by the fact that it also offered a critique of it. In particular, it questioned the fakeness of modern images by asserting that cowboys were real. Cowboy and hillbilly music would continue to respond to and critique the conditions of modernity throughout the 1940s and 50s. One of the ways they did this was through descriptions of the landscape, combining the American cowboy song form with Australian verse and balladry. These descriptions will be the subject of Chapter Two.

## Chapter 2

# Sleepy Valleys and Lonesome Plains: The Boundary Rider In The Landscape

### Introduction

In Australia particularly, the term country music has had a literal application. While in America, to be 'country' has, since the 1950s at least, conjured up a raft of associations - from economic struggle to emotional hardship - in Australia it has retained its rural association. In 1975, Eric Watson was able to confidently define country music as having 'A concern with the country, either in setting, subject matter, theme, attitude or viewpoint expressed. This concern will be not merely contained in it, but basic to it.'<sup>1</sup> But 'the country' is not a static, objective place, and hillbilly singers are not simply reporters of it. The hills, valleys, prairies and plains of song do not exist in the physical world; they are formed by imagination.

This chapter will look at the way in which Tex Morton and other popular cowboy and cowgirl singers of the 1930s and 40s described the landscape and their place in it. It will ask what literary, musical and cultural traditions did it draw on, and how did the resulting constructions of the country reflect the concerns of the time. In doing so, this chapter will firstly look at the history of the boundary rider figure in Australian culture, and then look at the three ways in which the Yodelling Boundary Rider, in particular, described the landscape: as lonely; as dangerous; and as a place passing by.

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Watson, *Country Music In Australia, Volume I*, Clarendon Press, Kensington (NSW), 1975, p 1

## The Boundary Rider in Australian Culture

In Chapter One we saw how 'The Yodelling Boundary Rider' was an evocative collision of recognisable American and Australian terms. Further, we saw how the image and associations of the boundary rider were interchangeable with those of the cowboy. Aspects of the Australian bush myth were updated and glamourised by association with America. However, the boundary rider was also a recurring figure in Australian literature - particularly verse - with its own way of negotiating the landscape. Morton, in many ways, updated and added to the boundary rider literary tradition by adding to it cowboy elements.

Like the cowboy in America, literature and popular culture in Australia had transformed the boundary rider from a historic to a mythic figure. He recurred frequently in turn-of-the-century poetry and verse, most often depicted as a romantic hero of struggle and physical hardship. In 'The Never-Never Country' Henry Lawson wrote of 'Wild fresh-faced boys grown gaunt and brown/Stiff-lipped and haggard-eyed/They live the Dead Past grimly down/ Where boundary riders ride.'<sup>2</sup> Thomas Heney, although better known as a journalist and newspaper editor, also wrote verse. His boundary rider was a lone, vigorously male hero - 'Firm and upright in the saddle as a solider on parade/ Yet graceful too is his seat, for nature this horseman made' - and goes on to liken him to a Titan, a superhuman figure, patrolling the fences.<sup>3</sup> Later, Vance Palmer wrote of his lonely existence in 'Song Of the Old Boundary Rider',<sup>4</sup> while Banjo Paterson took a more whimsical approach to the subject. In 1933 he published an ode to wombats called 'Weary Will': 'The boundary rider bows to fate/ Admits he made a blunder/ And rigs a little swinging gate/ To let Bill Wombat under.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Lawson, *When I Was King and Other Verses*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1906, pp 40-43.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Heney, 'The Boundary Rider' in Walter Murdoch (ed), *The Oxford Book of Australasian Verse*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1918.

<sup>4</sup> 'Song Of The Old Boundry Rider,' <http://oldpoetry.com/poetry/30409> 25/07/10

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Barton Paterson, *The Animals Noah Forgot*, University of Sydney Library, Sydney, 1998.

The figure of the boundary rider has also provided rich metaphorical imagery. For post-punk band the Go-Betweens the boundary rider was a symbol for personal suffering, singing: 'There's a boundary rider on the five mile fence/ bloodwood, bones and steers' and that 'Some days you ride it hard/to stop them getting out/ then comes the day you ride/ to stop them getting in'<sup>6</sup> In 2010 perhaps its most recognisable application is as a name given to Australian Football television commentators who roamed the boundary line of the football field reporting on the injuries of players. In this sense, the boundary was that between actor and spectator.

By the 1960s at least, the boundary rider had become such a recognisable part of Australian folklore that it could be employed as a metaphor for Australian culture as a whole. This figurative use of the boundary rider tended to focus on his place on the edge of things. Quoting Neil McInnes' 1965 *Quadrant* essay, Roger Covell, in his study of Australian classical music, described Australians as 'boundary riders of a culture' for the way in which its artists had simply been the colonial versions of their British and American counterparts.<sup>7</sup> Imitation made Australian musicians peripheral to the Anglo-American centres. Not a new view of Australian art, perhaps, but one that used a memorable metaphor to convey it.

Taking this idea, but removing its conservative, pejorative overtones, the 1993 contemporary art *Biennale* of Sydney was titled 'Boundary Rider'. In the accompanying programme the curator argued that this was a useful metaphor for the way in which artists from fringe cultures (such as Australia) take, adapt, adopt and change metropolitan cultures using ironic comment or *bricolage*. This way of working, of adapting, reverberates with Michel de Certeau's description of fringe cultures making hegemonic culture 'function in another register'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Go-Betweens, *Boundary Rider*, *Oceans Apart*, EMI, Sydney, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Roger Covell, *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1967, p ix.

<sup>8</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988, p 32.

'Functioning in another register' is a good way of characterising Tex Morton's 'Yodelling Boundary Rider' figure, as it is early Australian country music in general. As we have seen, Morton took recognisable symbols of America - the cowboy, prairies, coyotes - and gave them Australian names, settings and meanings. The boundary rider was the cowboy in another register.

In terms of the Australian literary tradition of boundary riders, Morton was certainly an admirer of nineteenth-century bush ballads, particularly Lawson and Paterson's verse.<sup>9</sup> Knowledge of this literary tradition, coupled with the popular knowledge and interest in the symbol of the boundary rider, directly informed Morton's persona and the songs he sang. The Yodelling Boundary Rider drew on this tradition and described the bush in three interrelated ways: as empty; as dangerous; and as moving by. Concurrently, the Yodelling Boundary Rider himself was alone, virile and transitory.

## **Being Lonesome**

### **Lonesome Plains**

Perhaps the most obvious condition of the boundary rider was that of loneliness. Indeed, if the boundary rider verses of the early twentieth century have a unifying factor, being alone in the landscape would be it. Palmer wrote:

Lonely is the day and lonely is the firelight  
Lonely is the heart when the trees come creeping near  
When a bobcock calls the very dogs are dumb with fright  
And when a voice starts singing it's my own voice that I hear<sup>10</sup>

while Heney's boundary rider was 'One man alone in the wilderness...always he rides alone.'

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<sup>9</sup> Graeme Smith, 'Australian Country Music and The Hillbilly Yodel', *Popular Music*, Volume 13/3, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p 300; Watson, *op cit.*, p 18.

<sup>10</sup> 'Song of the Old Boundary Rider', <http://oldpoetry.com/poetry/30409> 25/07/10

For the Yodelling Boundary Rider, this feeling of loneliness translated into 'Being Lonesome', an established mode of the hillbilly song.<sup>11</sup> This lonesome feeling was a recurring feature of many of Tex Morton's Regal Zonophone sides. Songs such as 'Carry Me Back To The Lone Prairie' and 'The Prairie Is A Lonesome Place At Night' - with its couplet, 'when the stars are above and you've lost the one you love/ the prairie is a lonesome place at night' - carried on the singing cowboy tradition of visualising loneliness on the prairie, while 'The Wandering Stockman' and 'Wrap Me Up In My Stockwhip and Blanket' placed the lonely boundary rider in the empty outback.<sup>12</sup> Being lonely, being away from home and being away from the ones you love combined the recognisable elements of the singing cowboy and the boundary rider.

Being lonesome found graphic physical representation in descriptions of the landscape. The land the boundary rider roamed was endless, barren and uninhabited; the human figure small and insignificant. Henry Lawson's boundary rider rode through a country that,

Lies beyond the farming belt  
Wide wastes of scrub and plain  
A blazing desert in the drought  
A lake-land after rain...  
A phantom land, a mystic land  
The Never Never Land.<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting to note that one's loneliness is more emphasised in a plain than it is, say, in rolling hills, as one can see that no-one else is around. It was this idea of the Never-Never land - a vast plain that lay beyond the hills and valleys of normal habitation - that directly informed Tex Morton's visions of the landscape. A significant proportion of the songs he recorded for Regal Zonophone in the 1930s and 40s described the plains the boundary rider rode as a long way from civilization, exposed and desolate - a place

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<sup>11</sup> See Cecelia Tichi, *High Lonesome: The American Culture of Country Music*, (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1994) for a discussion of the uses and occurrence of misery and pathos in American country music.

<sup>12</sup> Tex Morton, *The Tex Morton Regal Zonophone Collection: 1936-1943*, Australian Film and Sound Archive, Canberra.

<sup>13</sup> Lawson, *op cit*.

where the 'coyotes howl and the wind blows free.'<sup>14</sup> For Morton, the prairie and the outback were interchangeable. Whether the stark, arid plains of the prairies or the outback, the loneliness of the singer is brought into stark relief. The state of being lonesome required a place to be lonesome in and one established way of seeing the Australian outback provided it.

The sound of the boundary rider's voice in the landscape also emphasised its lonely expanse. Vance Palmer's phrase 'when a voice starts singing it's my own voice that I hear' had a resonance with Morton's actual singing style, particularly his yodelling. Every one of the ninety-two sides that Morton recorded for Regal Zonophone featured a yodel. In his article 'The Hillbilly Yodel', Graeme Smith explored the unique and ongoing presence of yodelling in Australian hillbilly music and looked at what the yodel's function and effect might be. Smith argued that the yodel was deliberately virtuosic. It established 'the separation which gives the performer the right to behave in a different way to the audience.'<sup>15</sup> This was in contrast to the simple chord patterns, conversational singing style and narrative directness of the core of the hillbilly song; features which removed the gap between performer and audience. In a genre that stressed musical directness and unpretentiousness, the yodel was an important virtuosic flourish.

Smith also discussed Morton's and Buddy Williams' coo-ee yodels, which, he argued, were 'trying to establish a language of natural song projection.'<sup>16</sup> Richard White has also written about the performance of coo-ees (although un-yodelled ones). He argued that coo-eeing for an audience often had a nationalistic function and that by the beginning of the twentieth century it had become a 'trade-mark' of Australian national identity.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Tex Morton, 'Carry Me Back To The Lone Prairie', *The Tex Morton Regal Zonophone Collection*.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, *op cit*, 1994 p 304.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p 306.

<sup>17</sup> Richard White, 'Cooees Across The Strand: Australian Travellers in London and the Performance of National Identity,' in *Australian Historical Studies*, 32 (116), p 110.

Yodelling could be virtuosic and, when combined with a coo-ee, jingoistic. However, it had another particular and connected function: to emphasise the loneliness of the yodeller. For Australian audiences, yodelling was popularised by American hillbillies such as Jimmie Rodgers as well as Swiss and Tyrolean folk music.<sup>18</sup> In both instances, the yodel was redolent of expansive, sparsely populated landscapes - whether they were the prairies of Texas or the European Alps. Yodelling was a way of communicating with people a long way away from you. In Australia, the coo-ee served a similar function.

Further, both the coo-ee and the yodel produced a noise that *sounded* lonely. Both yodels and coo-ees were marked by a dramatic shift in register, from chest voice to head voice, that coincided with a shift in vowel sound - the 'oo-ee' of the coo-ee and 'ay-ee' of the yodel. The more piercing 'eee' sound was left hanging, as if echoing around the plains and canyons. Thus, when Tex Morton yodelled he emphasised his position as alone in the landscape (or at least very far from anyone else). The yodel was the aural description of emptiness - the sound of the never-never land.

### **Being Lonesome and Australian Historiography**

Both the sound and the subject matter of the Yodelling Boundary Rider's songs depicted him as alone and the landscape around him as empty. How did such a depiction reflect or diverge from other contemporary constructions of the Australian outback, in particular, the place of Aboriginal people and race relations, and the existence of other workers and social interactions and class conflict?

With regards to the first issue, not only did Morton's songs describe the outback as empty of human habitation in the outback; there was also no sense of the outback ever having been inhabited by Aboriginal people, and its landscape imbued with a meaning other than emptiness. In this way, early hillbilly songs in Australia were the soundtrack to *terra*

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<sup>18</sup> Smith, *op cit.*, 1994, p 303; Tex Morton, 'Yodelling - So What', *Australian Music Maker and Dance Band News*, May 1937.

*nullius*. Latin for 'no man's land', *terra nullius* had, by the mid-nineteenth century, become a legal description for Australia before white settlement.<sup>19</sup> It was un-owned and, thus, virtually un-inhabited.

Furthermore, the 1930s were marked by a particular preoccupation with Australia's emptiness and underpopulation, especially in comparison to Europe. Australian politics and culture both expressed anxiety about the sense that Australia was vast, empty and uninhabited and contributed to the debate about whether the country needed a larger population.<sup>20</sup> Aboriginal Australians were not counted in official population figures at this time, being given the same census status as Australia's native fauna.<sup>21</sup> For Australian cowboy songs, then, Aboriginal people stood as figures similar to the dingo or coyotes - wild animals, a reminder of the human emptiness of the outback. While Morton may have been photographed holding a boomerang in publicity for his Wild West Show it remained a symbol of wildness, rather than civilization and technology.

With regards to the second issue, Morton's songs displayed little evidence of being part of the tradition of the 'Australian Legend'. Russel Ward published the *Australian Legend* in 1958. In it he argued that the Australian national character was egalitarian, itself the result of communal, pastoral working life, and thus suited to socialism. It was a culturally radical, communal vision of Australian national identity wherein bush workers such as drovers, miners and shearers worked together and, rejected authority, in order to make the land productive and build a nation.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, the boundary rider worked alone and had no sense of union with his fellow workers. His Australia was a barren, isolated place; a place of solitary struggle and survival.

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<sup>19</sup> Henry Reynolds, *Aboriginal Sovereignty: Three Nations, One Australia?*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1996, pp x-xi and p 1.

<sup>20</sup> Bill Gammage and Peter Spearritt (eds), *Australians: 1938*, Fairfax, Syme and Weldon Associates. Sydney, 1987, p 2.

<sup>21</sup> John Rickard, *Australia: A Cultural History*, (2nd Edition), Addison Wesley Longman Ltd., Essex UK, 1996, p 187.

<sup>22</sup> Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, (2nd Edition) Oxford University Press, 1978.

*Australian Legend* had a tremendous impact on left-wing cultural nationalists and academics following its publication. It was part of a general trend in Australian academic life to look for Australian character in rural working-class culture. For instance, folklorists such as John Meredith and John Manifold, as well as Ward himself, travelled the bush recording and collecting folk songs for national posterity. Graeme Smith has made the intriguing observation that 'cosmopolitan taste' found the solitary, lonely vision of Australia the 'least acceptable part of country music' because it did not fit with the *Australian Legend*'s vision of Australia as 'a landscape of social relations.'<sup>23</sup> Certainly, Manifold, Meredith and Ward did not collect hillbilly songs, although the fact that they had already been recorded for commercial purposes negated the necessity for folklorists to preserve them.

Tex Morton, as we have seen, borrowed from and was inspired by Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson. Ward has argued that these writers - and others clustered around Sydney's *Bulletin* magazine in the 1890s - did much to 'popularise the bush myth.'<sup>24</sup> What this shows is how malleable to diverging interests such writing was. Both Morton and Ward were selective in what they decided to take from Lawson and Paterson's writing. While Morton selected the 'boundary rider' and 'lonely stockman' imagery in order to fit it to the American cowboy image, Ward favoured verse which described class struggle and a sense of egalitarianism. Two different visions of the outback - romantic individualism and socialist realist mateship - could find their inspiration in similar sources.

In addition to the 'bush myth', Morton was influenced by a sense of 'Countrymindedness' that characterised the early twentieth century public imagination. 'Countrymindedness', as Don Aitken has argued, was the sense that the Australian bush was essentially different and essentially superior to Australian cities. Rural life was 'virtuous, enobling and co-operative' while in contrast city life was 'competitive, nasty, as well as parasitical.' Further, 'Countrymindedness' claimed the bush was uniquely

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<sup>23</sup> Smith, *op cit.*, 1994, p 308.

<sup>24</sup> Ward, *op cit.*, p 267.

Australian while cities were much the same the world over.<sup>25</sup> Such a feeling reached a high point in the early 1930s. Many of Morton's songs contrasted the 'city clothes and nightlife' or urban existence with the true friends and clean air of the country.<sup>26</sup> We shall look more at Morton's particular attitude to cities later in this chapter, but suffice to say here, there were other influences on his relationship to the country than merely Paterson and Lawson.

Another influence may have been what JB Hirst has described as the 'pioneer legend'. Written in 1978, in response to Ward's thesis, Hirst's article claimed that the 'pioneer legend' shares its sources with the Australian legend – rural work – yet has conservative implications. The pioneer legend 'celebrates the individual rather than collective or state enterprise' and 'it provides a classless view of society since all social and economic differences are obliterated by the generous application of the 'pioneer' label.'<sup>27</sup> Its political implications are, thus, conservative rather than socialist.

While not explicitly mentioning 'pioneers' (as country music would come to do in the late twentieth century) Morton's songs do evoke a pioneer spirit, although complicated it and conflated it with the 'bush legend' in the process. While the boundary rider worked alone, he was still a bush 'worker', rather than a property owner. Further, while the pioneer legend celebrated the individual, he still existed amongst a social group of landowners whereas Morton's Australian outback was seemingly empty of social affiliations.

### **Sleepy Valleys**

The Yodelling Boundary Rider did sing about one aspect of communal life that the pioneer held dear: the family. However, family life was not to be found on the frontier. Rather it was to be found in the already settled civilization of home. In particular, Morton

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<sup>25</sup> Don Aitken, 'Country-mindedness: The Spread of an Idea', *Australian Cultural History*, no. 4, 1985, p 35.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, 'All Set and Saddled' and 'Come Back To The Valley', Morton *op cit*

<sup>27</sup> JB Hirst, 'Pioneer Legend', *Historical Studies*, 1978, 18 (71), p 316.

contrasted the loneliness of the plain with the homeliness of the valley. The valley was sheltered while the plain was exposed; fecund instead of fallow; and populated rather than empty. In many songs, Morton contrasted his life on the plain with the family life he had left behind in his home in the valley.

These valley/outback songs formed a large and important part of Morton's oeuvre. Of the ninety-two sides that Morton recorded for Regal Zonophone between 1936 and 1943, twenty can be characterised as 'valley' songs. There was, for instance: 'Come Back To The Valley', 'Take Me Back To Dream By The Old Mill Stream', 'Red River Valley' and 'I Left My Heart In Red River Valley', all of which described home as a green, protected, familiar valley.<sup>28</sup> Being lonesome could only really be understood in contrast to being loved; and the outback could only really be understood in contrast to the valley. This was a sentimental approach to landscape that wasn't evident in the boundary rider verse of Lawson and Heney and others, but was a contrast informed by a commercial hillbilly style.

Just as Morton's yodel defined the plains as empty, other aspects of his singing style described the valleys as populated with the ones he loves. Chapter One argued that Tex Morton's music was characterised by a sentimentality that distinguished it from the harder-edged, bluesier style of American performers such as Jimmie Rodgers. Much of the geographic placement of this sentimentality was the valley, and aspects of his vocal technique emphasised his nostalgic love for it.

Most notably, Morton employed a pronounced *portamento* (that is, sliding between notes rather than pitching each one clearly and truly) on almost all his recorded work. On his valley songs in particular, *portamento* was used strategically. For instance, on the key line of the song 'All Set And Saddled' - 'we're all set and saddled for sleepy valley' - his voice rose to the highest note of the phrase, on 'saddled', quickly and purely, then slowly descended to the 'valley' by sliding languidly over the word 'sleepy', dragging them

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<sup>28</sup> Tex Morton, *op cit*, 1937.

together in a slur of pitch.<sup>29</sup> The narrative of returning home was mirrored in the melodic slide of the song. This *portamento* technique lent many of Morton's songs a dreamy, nostalgic feel, particularly when coupled with the subject matter of longing for home. The very sound of his voice evoked a soft, enveloping, homely cosiness.

The wistful, nostalgic sound of Morton's voice sounded like a reaction against modernity and an evocation of a sentimental, comforting past. There was, for instance, little syncopation or sudden vocal attacks (as, say, other popular singers of the 1920s and 30s such as Louis Armstrong, and even Jimmie Rodgers on occasion, used), but rather a mellifluous sound.

In addition to Morton, many of the singing cowgirls of the 1940s also included valley songs in their repertoire. Shirley Thoms, June Holms, Jacqueline Hall and the McKean Sisters all evoked idyllic descriptions of verdant landscapes - green valleys nestling snugly between hills. Although derided by Eric Watson in the 1970s as not fitting into the bush ballad tradition, such cowgirl singers were notably popular at the time. Thoms, for instance, sold over 12,000 copies of her 1941 recordings in Australia, compared to Bing Crosby who sold approximately 10,000 copies of *White Christmas*.<sup>30</sup>

The McKean Sisters comprised Heather McKean, who was to marry country singer Reg Lindsay, and Joy McKean, who married Slim Dusty and became one of Australian country music's most successful and celebrated songwriters, penning many of Dusty's most beloved songs. Before this, however, they were a yodelling cowgirl duo who sang the praises of the bucolic life of the valley. In 'The Valley Where The Frangipannis Grow' the McKean Sisters described returning to 'A land so warm and friendly I know that I must go':

In the old Tweed River Valley with all the friends I left behind  
I know there'll be a welcome in their hearts so kind  
Eight miles behind me and many more to go

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<sup>29</sup> Tex Morton, 'All Set And Saddled', *op cit.*

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *op cit.*, 1994, p 306.

Until I reach the valley where the frangipannis grow.<sup>31</sup>

'By The Banks of the Sunny Tweed' had the sisters dreaming wisftully of their home which remained far away:

That is where I'd like to be today

In that land I know so well

With my mother and my father

In the Tweed Valley where I love to dwell<sup>32</sup>

There was a strong sense of place in these descriptions - references to the Tweed River and frangipannis conjured up the lushness of the river valleys and rolling hills of northeastern New South Wales. Such an evocative and intimate description of the valleys contrasted with the sameness and sparseness of the outback plains - 'Eight miles behind me and many more to go'.

Although using different techniques and with different effects, the McKean Sisters also used the sound of their voices to sentimentalise valley life. Their close harmony yodelling was bouncy and energetic. The trilling sound was a shout of joy to be home - amongst friends, family and familiar landscapes. Their 'yodel-ay' was almost a 'hoo-ray!' In this, they demonstrate more of a debt to the celebratory, choral style of Swiss yodelling than they do the blue yodels of Jimmie Rodgers.

Teenage cowgirl Jacqueline Hall described valley life in similar ways. In 'My Little Green Valley' the intimacy of valley life is represented in the smallness, the innocence, of things: 'a little log cabin', 'sweet little old people so dear to me' and the 'little green valley' itself.<sup>33</sup> Hall's cowgirl character kept these things close to her heart after she left the valley 'to roam'.

The sense of woozy nostalgia and use of *portamento* common to Morton's songs was also evident in 'My Little Green Valley'. The song begins with a violin languidly sliding

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<sup>31</sup> *Rhythm In The Saddle*, Screensound Australia, Canberra, 2000.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Down The Trail of Aching Hearts: Three Australian Yodelling Cowgirls*, National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra, 1999.

between the notes of the melody. The violin is then joined by Hall's reedy, youthful sounding voice on the line, 'In a little green valley at the foot of the hill/ is a little log cabin now hushed and still'. Hall's voice slid between notes, particularly when two notes fell on the same word, such as 'little'. The two syllables were dragged over an interval of a third, emphasising the word and its sentimental qualities. This was further emphasised by Hall's pronunciation of the word. She flattened the tees, singing it as 'liddle' rather than 'little'. The effect is poignant: as if she was sadly chucking the valley under its downy chin. Hall's voice sounded broken with emotion, particularly on the word valley. She sounds as if she is on the verge of tears just thinking about her old life in the valley.

This sadness came from the sombre edge of Hall's tale. By the time the cowgirl narrator returned from her roaming there were 'no sweet old faces' to welcome her home. In their place 'two little white crosses stand straight and still.' The cowgirl had been away from the valley too long and what she held dear had disappeared in her absence. The preciousness, innocence and vulnerability of family life were made aching real through their disappearance. Loss was also imbued with guilt and regret as the roaming cowgirl was not at home when her parents died.

The sound and repertoire of women hillbilly performers in the 1930s and 40s expressed sentimental concepts of home, place, belonging and family. This was reiterated by their image as cowgirls –linked to rural life, infantilised and chaste. Women who performed on the barn dance radio shows in America in the 1930s had a similarly sentimental, nostalgic and reassuring personas.<sup>34</sup> However, in Australia, this role was not exclusive to women performers; as we have seen, cowboys such as Tex Morton also sentimentalised rural life and reassured the listener. While for men sentimental songs were offset by roaming adventuring songs, not only were these songs in the minority but also when the boundary rider roamed, his roaming was invariably seen in contrast to life back on the farm.

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<sup>34</sup> Kristine McCusker, *Lonseome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels*, University of Illinois Press, 2008, Introduction.

The Yodelling Boundary Rider was also a regretful, guilt-ridden figure. Often the valleys that Morton sung about were inhabited by aging, devoted parents, whose only wish was for their son to return home from wandering the plains. Sides such as 'Rocking Alone in an Old Rocking Chair', 'There are Tear Stains on Your Letter Mother Dear', 'I'm Dreaming Tonight Of The Old Folks', 'My Old Crippled Daddy' and 'The Day I Left Daddy Alone' were marked by an identical narrative: the boundary rider/cowboy/stockman was alone, roaming the plain, dreaming of his parents in the valley, not just nostalgically, but guiltily, a combination that produced an agonised tension. This was given musical expression by the wistful, mournful sound of many of Morton's songs. The yodel could also be a mournful cry of loss and loneliness.

These 'sob songs' as the contemporary, pejorative, nomenclature had it, were given a pathos-ridden twist when one of the parents, usually the mother, died. The story was inevitably the same: the singer was informed of the tragic event via a letter or through a friend; was consumed with grief and guilt and having abandoned his mother; reached forgiveness through his father or God; and finally provided a moral to all young men never to forget their mothers. In 'Letter Edged In Black' Morton breathed the line: 'your mother's last words, the last she ever uttered, were "Tell my boy I want him to come back."' <sup>35</sup> The effect is moralistic: a dramatic cautionary warning to wandering sons and daughters.

### **Lonesome Cities**

One way to make sense of the number and popularity<sup>36</sup> of songs that communicated a sense of guilt about not seeing one's parents in the valley is as a metaphor for a traditional way of life being eradicated by modernity. Both the outback plains and cities were anathema to the civilised life of the valley: the outback was the place where civilisation had not occurred; the city was the place where civilisation had mutated. Such an equation had some history in Australian culture. In the mid-nineteenth century,

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<sup>35</sup> Tex Morton, 'Letter Edged In Black', *op cit*.

<sup>36</sup> 'There Are Tear Stains On Your Letter Mother Dear' was Morton's best-selling song of 1938. EMI Sales Cards, *Australian Film and Sound Archive*, Canberra.

according to Richard White, 'dispersal and urbanisation were equally crimes against the Arcadian dream'.<sup>37</sup> Morton absorbed this into his hillbilly song style and updated it. The feeling of lonesomeness in the prairies was similar to the experience of alienation in the cities. Such places were not just a world away from the sleepy valleys of traditional family life, they were a threat to it.

Philip Hayward has argued that early Australian hillbilly music was essentially a modern form, not:

the quiet, ruralist, nostalgic, minimally commercialised form, that it is often represented as today (by those who know little about its history) but rather one bound up with the excitement of rodeos...; new flamboyant, dramatic fashions of clothing and 'accessories; the then relatively new technology of radio...; and, I would argue, above all - the notion of there being a modern identity (and set of empowerments) available to rural and outback Australians through engagement with the cowboy culture (and hillbilly music in particular). In this 'world vision', cattle drives, coyotes, whipoorwills and indigenous Americans were contemporary and had exotic and had an air of excitement.<sup>38</sup>

Hayward found musical example of this in Tex Morton's song 'Beautiful Queensland' which, Hayward argues, communicated a sense of 'bustling modernism' and civic pride that was the antithesis of nostalgia.

Hayward's argument is seductive as it attempts to rescue country music from revisionist histories. However, based on the evidence, it is an oversimplification. We must be careful to separate the imagery and sets of identifications of hillbilly music from its sound. Often they were saying several different things. While it is true that hillbilly music and the cowboy image were modern forms that glamourised and contemporised the Australian outback myth (as I have argued earlier), the content of early Australian

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<sup>37</sup> Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1981, p 34

<sup>38</sup> Philip Hayward, 'From Folk To Country: The Localisation of Hillbilly and Country Music on Lord Howe Island', in Philip Hayward and Geoff Walden (eds), *Roots And Crossovers: Australian Country Music Vol II*, AICM Press, Gympie, 2004, p 68.

country music was overwhelmingly sentimental, nostalgic and, superficially at least, about rural areas. As we have seen, Morton's singing style, as a rule, sounded wistful and nostalgic. 'Beautiful Queensland' was the exception that proved the rule. The relatively few songs celebrating modernity were vastly overwhelmed by the number of songs that romanticised life in the valley in contrast to the outback or city.

Often these valley songs would expressly critique the conditions of modernity by reference to direct experience. The narrator in Morton's songs did not just leave the valley for the outback; he also left it for the city. In these, as in the outback songs, the Yodelling Boundary Rider sung of his longing for the simple, honest, communal family life of the valley:

Now, for many years I've lived down in your city  
wore city clothes and seen your nightlife too  
But soon I'll be again in Sleepy Valley  
Where the air is always pure and friends are true.<sup>39</sup>

In several of Morton's songs, the true friends and pure air of the valley were contrasted with the sophisticated clothes and sleazy nightlife of the city. In 'Move Along Baldy' - promoted as 'an Australian boundary rider's song' - Morton expressed it emphatically: 'I've never wanted to live in your towns' because towns were too far removed from the simple, rural life the boundary rider grew up with.<sup>40</sup>

In these songs, the loneliness of the outback was replaced with the alienation of the city. The boundary rider's central emotional state - being lonesome - was applicable to feelings brought up by city life. Being on the plain or being away from the city were in essence the same thing because they both implied being away from family and community. Indeed, the lonesome, barren outback of Morton's songs can be seen as a metaphor for the existential emptiness of the cities. Being alone in the city, Morton sang

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<sup>39</sup> Tex Morton, *op cit.*

<sup>40</sup> Nicholson's *Third Album of Tex Morton: Cowboy and Hillbilly Songs*, Nicholson's, Sydney, 1940, p 6.

about the pull of rural, communal life, 'Come back to the valleys/ Come back to the hills/ Come back to the ones that love you still.'<sup>41</sup>

Thus, the landscape of the outback was not so much representative of a natural wilderness as of a cultural wilderness. Conversely, the valley didn't represent civilization in its modern, metropolis-centred sense, but as a form of tradition. Life in the valley was natural, family-orientated and fertile. This stood in contrast to the plain which was unknowable and dangerous: without tradition of reason. In short, the valley represented a refuge from modernity.

The valley was literally sheltered. Morton described it as green, nestled between hills and sleepy. This sense of being hidden away, protected by the mountains on either side, defined the valley as a refuge from the modern world. It was a comfort, and was comforting to just think about when in the city or on the plain.

The representation of the valley as tradition and city as modernity was explicit in the song 'Just Plain Folk'. In it, Morton described a young man who has moved away from the valley to the city. After some time away, his parents journey to the city to visit him. During their stay, however, the distance between them becomes clear: the young man is embarrassed at their backcountry ways and lack of sophistication, while his parents feel confused and alienated from their son's new life. They do not understand the city because they are 'just plain folks like our own folks used to be.'<sup>42</sup> Like many of Morton's songs, 'Just Plain Folk' had a moral: traditional family life is plain and simple and good, while modern life is confusing and alienating.

Also important was the idea of change that the song expressed. The parents had stayed the same while the son had changed in order to adapt to city life. Change is one of the defining characteristics of modernity. Modernity fetishises progress and newness. On the other hand, pre-modernity was characterised by stasis and unchanging values.

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<sup>41</sup> Tex Morton, 'Come Back To The Valley', *Tex Morton Regal Zonophone Collection*.

<sup>42</sup> Tex Morton, 'Just Plain Folk', *op cit*.

Indeed, tradition is more important than change. The way in which Morton often characterised the valley as 'sleepy' was, itself, a way of characterising the family life as pre-modern. The valley has slumbered peacefully while the world outside the valley has woken up and is getting on with business. The fact that the valley was sleepy meant that it was often presented as eternal: that it will always be there with 'two little old faces' waiting patiently for the wanderer's return.

Sometimes, however, the traditional life of the valley could disappear. As we have seen, in songs such as 'Letter Edged In Black' or 'The Day I Left Daddy Alone' a mother or father dies. One of the morals of these songs was that the traditional way of life was vulnerable and liable to fade away. There was also a sense in these songs that the departure of the young son (the narrator) and his subsumption into modern life was partly responsible for causing his parents' death. Often it was the sense of longing and loss that drove the mother or father to an early grave. Thus, modernity itself was held responsible for killing off a traditional way of life.

The Yodelling Boundary Rider's descriptions of the city were inspired by both historic literary and imaginative constructions and specific contemporary circumstances. In *The Country And The City* Raymond Williams mapped a tradition of romanticising the country in British literature from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. Ideas of rural idylls, Williams argued, were a myth that had been achieved by comparing qualities of the country with those of the city. Nature was contrasted with worldliness; purity with corruption; innocence with greed; community with individuality; and simplicity with confusion.<sup>43</sup> In short, the city had been characterised as alienating and negative to humanity and this experience ratified the country.

In Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Australian writers such as Banjo Paterson used the same dichotomy to romanticise the Australian bush. In one of Paterson's most popularly remembered poems, 'Clancy Of The Overflow' (1889), the narrator dreamt of the free, open life of the country from the prison of his desk: 'In place

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<sup>43</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1973, p 46.

of lowing cattle/I can hear the fiendish rattle/ of the tramways and the buses/ making hurry down the street.’<sup>44</sup> Paterson’s narrator contrasted the city with the ‘vision splendid of a sunlit plain extended’; Morton adopted the sentiment but replaced the plain with the valley as a result of the prevalence of the valley in hillbilly songs. As we have seen, Paterson’s critique of the city influenced Morton’s music. For instance, ‘The Stockman’s Prayer’ (1949) was a piece of spoken-word verse set to guitar accompaniment in which Morton criticised ‘those weak-eyed prisoners of Wall Street’ and their dependence on ‘whistle, clock and bell’, in contrast to those who live in the bush.<sup>45</sup> Not just the sentiment, but also the rhythm and imagery of ‘The Stockman’s Prayer’ echoed ‘Clancy Of The Overflow’, although the change of setting - from Sydney to New York - showed the inventive ways in which Morton updated and internationalised Australian traditions.

While Paterson was part of a bohemian, literary culture, concerns about the city were evident in Australian culture more broadly by the early 1930s. Such concerns were largely influenced by the fact that migration from country to city areas was occurring with unprecedented rapidity in this period. In 1888, approximately two-thirds of the Australian population lived outside capital cities.<sup>46</sup> By 1938, in New South Wales and Victoria at least, approximately half the population lived in capital cities and, in New South Wales, three-quarters in metropolitan areas in general.<sup>47</sup>

Don Aitken has argued that the cities were being increasingly populated by overseas migrants and a surplus rural population, and that both cohorts romanticised the country. The ‘drift’ of the rural population to the cities, in particular, produced a sense of ‘Countrymindedness’, which meant favourably comparing nostalgic memories of a rural childhood with the contemporary realities of an urban adulthood. Aitken vividly described these rural people as:

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<sup>44</sup> Banjo Paterson, ‘Clancy of the Overflow’ in *The Man From Snowy River and Other Verses*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1995

<sup>45</sup> Tex Morton (with Sister Dorrie), *You And My Old Guitar: The Original Tasman/Rodeo Recordings, New Zealand, 1949*, Festival Records, 1993.

<sup>46</sup> Graeme Davison, JW McCarthy and Alison McLeary (eds), *Australians: 1888*, Fairfax, Syme and Weldon Associates. Sydney, 1987, p 41

<sup>47</sup> Gammage and Spearritt, *op cit*, p 4.

the sons and daughters of farmers, rural workers and country townspeople who could not find work, or sought education, or were restless.<sup>48</sup>

These restless refugees, the sons and daughters of the country, formed a substantial part of Tex Morton's audience. These are whom his songs spoke to - with their longing for valleys and their dissatisfaction with urban life. Morton's music spoke to the many young Australians who had had to leave their homes in search of work (a condition made particularly acute by the Great Depression) and to born citysiders who nevertheless inhabited a cultural milieu that romanticised the country in contrast with the city.

That country music had a predominantly country audience is a story oft-repeated in country music histories. Undoubtedly it did resonate with young rural people in powerful ways, as reminiscences by Eric Watson, Arthur Blanch, the Le Garde Twins show, and, unlike jazz and pop artists, country singers toured regional areas. However, this is not to say that country music wasn't popular in cities as well. Indeed, it was not until the 1960s that country music received its audience predominantly from rural areas.

This can be seen in where Morton performed and where his programmes were broadcast. Tex Morton performed in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane - both with his Wild West Shows and as part of variety bills - and his radio programmes such as 'All Set and Saddled' were broadcast on metropolitan ABC and commercial stations.

Philip Hayward was accurate in his observations about hillbilly music to a degree. Tex Morton was a modern figure. As a singing cowboy he was the product of technologies such as film, radio and the gramophone and had exotic connections with America. Indeed, Tex Morton and his Yodelling Boundary Rider persona was unthinkable without the context of modernity. However, the sentimental, nostalgic, ruralist subject matter and sound of the majority of his music meant that Morton offered both an implicit and explicit critique of modernity and its discontents.

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<sup>48</sup> Don Aitken, *op cit*, p 39.

Another way of looking at hillbilly music's association with modernity is as its mode of presentation. Diane Pecknold has argued that early American hillbilly music evoked traditional, rural ways of life and had associations with 'rusticity and nostalgia' yet was covered in 'a veneer of unmistakable modernity' as a result of its dissemination on radio.<sup>49</sup> As a metaphor, the idea of a 'veneer' certainly is a useful way of looking at the way in which country music uses modernity.

Moving beyond the metaphor, Pecknold also suggested that modernity 'complicated, maybe even necessitated' hillbilly music's 'pretensions to simplicity and timelessness.'<sup>50</sup> In the case of Australian hillbilly music this can be seen to be true. Tex Morton's modern context did not preclude him from criticising aspects of modernity. In fact, being nostalgic and sentimental was a condition of modernity. Its conditions - urbanisation, technological development, international communication, economic depression - had provoked a reaction in the form of country music. The boundary rider had ridden through the modern world and found it a very lonesome place.

### **Being Virile**

As well as experiencing the modern world as lonely, the yodelling boundary rider also protected the traditional way of life from the corruptions of modernity. The key to this was his strength and virility. These qualities had been commonly associated with the boundary rider throughout his history in Australian verse. Thomas Heney described the body of the boundary rider thus:

Back from this sweat-wet hair his felt is carelessly placed,  
Handkerchief at his throat, sagging shirt round a lank, firm waist;  
True to the set of strong loins the belted moleskins are tight

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<sup>49</sup> Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound The Rise of the Country Music Industry*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2007, pp 13-14.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p 14.

Plain from the forehead to stirrup a virile vigour in sight.<sup>51</sup>

Heney was almost breathless in his erotic reverie, but the boundary rider was not just sexually desirable but virile and strong - his body reflected the hardness and danger of the job. It was a masculine beauty that had a practical application. In this way it was a very Australian beauty.

Heney was unusual in so explicitly sexualising the boundary rider, however this image suited the desirability of Morton's Yodelling Boundary Rider. As we have seen, the cowboy was, for Australian audiences, primarily an inhabitant of the silver screen. Further, as historians such as Jill Matthews have shown, Hollywood stars were rendered sexually desirable through their image in the print media.<sup>52</sup> Thus, equating the Australian bushman with the cowboy didn't just update and glamourise the bush myth; it also sexualised and romanticised it. The boundary rider as wandering stranger was already a potentially attractive masculine image but the Hollywood star ideal gave it context and a coded message of desirability that would have been understood by Morton's audience.

Morton didn't describe the male body as Heney did. Rather, masculine desirability was expressed via the singer's physical abilities. Namely, horseriding. Although eschewing the grandiose tone of Heney's verse, Tex Morton's songs also tended to emphasise the singer's physical strength and virility. In songs such as 'Aristocrat' and 'Rocky Ned (the outlaw)' Morton sung of himself as a great rider and conqueror of horses.<sup>53</sup> His experience of the life of the boundary rider had made him able to withstand the bucking and throwing of the wild horses between his legs. The actual rodeos and wild west shows were the physical demonstrations of such virility.

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<sup>51</sup> Heney, *op cit*. In this description I am reminded of nothing more than 'The Drover' character played by Hugh Jackman in the 2008 film *Australia*.

<sup>52</sup> Jill Julius Matthews, *Dance Hall and Picture Palace: Sydney's Romance With Modernity*, Currency Press, Sydney, 2005, p 131.

<sup>53</sup> Tex Morton, *Regal Zonophone Collection*.

Occasionally, declarations of physical strength turned into veiled descriptions of actual sexual prowess. 'My Sweetheart's in Love With a Swiss Mountaineer', for instance, contained the bawdy stanza:

Darling don't marry that Swiss mountaineer  
my yodel is stronger and longer and clear  
and the girls they all tell me that live around here  
I yodel better than he.

This declaration was justified by a break of particularly athletic yodelling. The second verse left the listener in no doubt as to Morton's meaning:

Now up in the canyon that Swiss mountaineer  
May climb all around without any fear  
But just try me and it soon will appear  
I yodel better than he.<sup>54</sup>

In this instance the yodel became a metaphor for sexual ability, rather than a symbol of being alone.

The self-image of virility required a landscape in which it was necessary to be virile. Therefore, the outback was not just lonely; it was also dangerous. Heney's sweating muscular boundary rider was alone in a landscape where:

He hears the infrequent cries, shrieking or hoarse and slow,  
Sheep bleating, the minah's scream, the monologue of the crow,  
Alone in a vast still tomb, cruel and loth to spare,  
Death waits for each sense and slays whilst the doomed wretch feels  
despair.<sup>55</sup>

Such descriptions were redolent of the gothic tradition in Australian literature. Writers of the 1870s and 80s often described the Australian bush as an inhuman, towering, funereal landscape. In his preface to the *Poems Of Adam Lindsay Gordon*, first published in 1884, journalist, novelist and poet Marcus Clarke stated that the dominant feature of Australian

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Heney, *op cit.*

poetry in general, and Gordon's in particular, was a sense of 'Weird Melancholy'. Clarke then went on to describe the bush as full of 'black gorges' and 'melancholy gums', where 'the mopokes burst into horrible peals of semi-human laughter' (an image that Heney was perhaps referencing when he described the 'minah's scream' and the 'monologue of the crow'). In this landscape the typical human figure was the 'lonely horseman riding between the moonlight and the day' who 'hears strange noises in the primeval forest.'<sup>56</sup>

In visual art too, mid-nineteenth century painting was grander and darker than its immediate descendants. Richard White has shown that the painting associated with the Heidelberg School at the end of nineteenth century, with its attention to space and sunlight, replaced the 'dramatic romanticism,' and 'heroic gloom' of earlier visions.<sup>57</sup> For Heney, Lawson and others, this lonely horseman became the more specific figure of the boundary rider and the weird, inhuman landscape Australia's outback plains.

The Yodelling Boundary Rider also used a tone of weird melancholy. The open expanses were barren, empty and imposing; the air was filled with the rustling of the wind, or other noises. Instead of minahs' screams and mopokes' laughter, there was the coyote or the dingo's howl. Morton's threatening, sinister, yet romantic, landscape bore more resemblance to the gothic vision of Clarke, Heney, Gordon and pre-Heidelberg School artists than it did to the socialised, intimate vision of the Australian Legend. Constructing the bush as scary, like constructing the bush as lonely, was a better fit with the cowboy myth.

Even Morton's yodel itself can be seen as one of the weird noises of the bush - its inhuman nature a product of solitude and illustrative of it. Aaron Fox has written that popular music is characterised by a process of denaturalising the natural. The country singer takes everyday language and transforms it, through singing, into a poetic, unnatural text. What makes this poetic process particularly pronounced in country music,

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<sup>56</sup> Marcus Clarke, 'Preface', in Adam Lindsay Gordon, *Poems*, Massina, Melbourne, 1892.

<sup>57</sup> Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity, 1688-1980*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1981, p 37.

Fox argued, is that country songs combined lyrics and a story that were easy to grasp on first listen with strange, imperfect vocal techniques and sounds (nasal, twangy, rough and so on).<sup>58</sup>

To Fox's list of un-real sounding vocal effects, we can add the yodel. In Australia particularly, one of the most common denaturalising sound effects has been the yodel. It has persisted in Australia, whereas in America its common use had largely disappeared by the mid twentieth century.<sup>59</sup> Further, the Australian style of hillbilly singing, as popularised by Morton and Buddy Williams and Slim Dusty was particularly conversational and natural sounding. The gargled, foreign, outlandish sound of the yodel stood in marked contrast to the rather ordinary sound and everyday language of the rest of the song. We saw earlier how the Australian hillbilly yodel emphasised loneliness, but another meaning was that of de-naturalisation. It designated the bush as weirdly melancholic and the boundary rider as on the edges of ordered civilization.

Morton turned the brooding strangeness of the bush into actual danger. During the 1940s, Morton began to produce a series of Wild West Comics. [See Fig 9]<sup>60</sup> The 'wild west' of these comics was usually the Australian outback. This Australian place with American nomenclature provided the setting for the 'Boys Own' style stories of adventure. 'Campfire Yarns', for instance, was a non-illustrated story as told by an 'old-timer'. In it, giant crabs, 'poisonous bushes' and 'ferocious snakes' populated the West Australian desert. 'Bunny Allen' told the story of a 'blond bombshell', part of a group driving cattle across outback plains. The group came across a girl who had been hypnotised by a 'white witch', losing touch with the civilised world. An undefined threat of 'native savages' also existed (and echoed Marcus Clarke's description of 'natives painted like skeletons dancing around a fire'<sup>61</sup>). The bush in these stories was mysterious. It had an enigmatic, unknowable quality which was partly created by unreal attributes: the 'native

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<sup>58</sup> Aaron Fox, 'The Jukebox of History: Narratives of Loss and Desire in the Discourse of Country Music', *Popular Music*, 11/1, 1992, pp 54-55.

<sup>59</sup> Smith, *op cit.*, 1994, p 297

<sup>60</sup> *Tex Morton's Wild West Comics*, Vol 2, No. 5, Printed by 'Truth' and 'Sportsman' Ltd for Allied Authors and Artists (75 Pitt Street Sydney), c 1949.

<sup>61</sup> Harrington, *op cit.*, p 35.

# TEX MORTON'S



WILD WEST COMICS. 6d!

Vol. 2  
No. 5



Bunny Allen

**FREE!** WORDS  
& MUSIC  
OF A TEX MORTON  
SONG!



**SMITHY**  
ANOTHER  
THRILLING  
INSTALMENT.

Alger



THE  
JACKEROO

savages' rather than an actual Aboriginal tribe; giant fauna and deadly flora; and American names for things. The Australian bush had become so weird that it wasn't recognisably Australia anymore. It was also a threatening place - particularly to beautiful white women. The bush of the comics was not just different to civilisation; it was a threat to it.

If the bush was a forbidding, dangerous place - its convicts, giants crabs, witches and natives a threat to society - then the hero of the comics was society's protector. In 'Tex Morton and the Hermit', Morton and his offsider Shorty Long, while working on a farm, captured a group of 'convicts' (escaped prisoners, not colonial transportees) who were hiding out nearby. The role of adventuring cowboy was played out in other arenas too such as the 1942 radio show 'All Set And Saddled' which we examined in Chapter One. The Wild West Comics and the radio plays were for children and teenagers. As such they were simplified adventure stories. We should be careful not to demand too much realism from them. However, what is striking is the way in which Morton conceptualised the outback in his music - weird, lonely, full of danger and adventure - could easily translate into children's stories.

Children's books that exploited a sense of the Australian bush as weird and wonderful were popular in the first half of the twentieth century. May Gibbs' *Snugglepote and Cuddlepie* (published in 1918 and quickly followed by *Little Ragged Blossom* and *Little Obelia*) anthropomorphised native Australian flora. It told of the travails of tiny babies made from the buds of flowering eucalyptus and their efforts to avoid the 'big bad Banksia men'.<sup>62</sup> Norman Lindsay's *Magic Pudding*, also published in 1918, gave Australian fauna such as koalas, possums, wombats and bandicoots human characteristics, clothing and language. A sense of surreal anarchy pervaded.<sup>63</sup> In Morton's stories, the weird and wonderful nature of the Australian bush is expressed via its collision with America. The reader/listener was never quite sure where they were.

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<sup>62</sup> May Gibbs, *The Complete Adventures of Snugglepote and Cuddlepie, Including Little Ragged Blossom and Little Obelia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Norman Lindsay, *The Magic Pudding: Being the Adventures of Bunyip Bluegum and his Friends Bill Barnacle and Sam Sawnoff*, WC Penfold, Sydney, 1918.

One of the boundary rider's roles was to protect the civilised, peaceful life of the valleys from the weird, wonderful, dangerous chaos of the outback. He, therefore, needed to be a strong, virile, masculine figure in order to do so. In this context, the boundary rider didn't just miss the traditional way of life, he was also responsible for protecting it. The actual job description of the boundary rider – fixing holes in fences to stop creatures from the wilderness getting into and disrupting the property – was a metaphor for this role as protector of valley life.

In *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity In Popular Culture* Roger Horrocks argued that one of the covert meanings of western movies was the defiance of bourgeois values. The cowboy, by being a loner and separated from family life, was the instigator of this rejection.<sup>64</sup> While family life had a great and sentimental pull, it was a pull that needed to be rejected in order for the cowboy to recognise his masculinity.

In the case of the boundary rider, it is true that one of his defining features – his physical strength and virility – was expressed in the outback, away from civilisation. Without the dangers of the bush, the boundary rider would have had no use. However, by roaming the outback, the boundary rider was protecting bourgeois life rather than rejecting it. This was clear in the way Morton framed his social relationships as being primarily familial ones that he would return to. Mothers, fathers, even girlfriends, were familial in the sense that they were always waiting at home. When the mother or father did die, then the boundary rider had failed in his role to protect the valley.

If the outback plains were representative of the wilderness of the cities, as we established earlier, then the boundary rider was, essentially, protecting the valley from the modern world. Furthermore, the valley was representative of traditional rural Australia and the outback plains as the modern world. Australia was in need of protection. Richard White has argued that post World War One Australia was characterised as a place in need of

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<sup>64</sup> Roger Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity In Popular Culture*, Macmillan, London, 1995, p 56.

protection. Australia was 'clean, chaste, young, sane and wholesome – being assailed by external evils...If anything, the depression intensified the paranoia and isolationism of the 1920s.'<sup>65</sup> Certainly this image of Australia corresponded to how Morton described the valleys in his lyrics. Sleepy Valley and Red River Valley were pure, wholesome, clean, friendly in opposition to life outside the valley.

Further, the idea of external evils was reflected in Morton's description of the dangerous outback and the alienating, corrupted city. The boundary rider's physical image as strong, virile and protecting also fitted with the policy of actual protectionism. In this period of paranoid nationalism, the boundary rider didn't just ride the boundaries; he reinforced them. He didn't just dream of returning to the valleys; he protected them.

The evils that Australia (or the valley) needed to be protected from can be characterised as 'the modern world': big business, technology, modern art, disease, immorality, communism, Americanisation. As we have seen, these external evils were represented in the landscape of Morton's songs and stories. Cities were dirty, corrupt and alienating; just as plains were lonely, hostile and hard. The crabs, poisonous snakes and haunting cry of the mopoke are the cars, office blocks and ring of the factory bell. They threatened traditional life and needed to be defeated. Tensions existed between these two worlds. On the one hand the boundary rider was uncivilised (a loner, tough, rejecting bourgeois life), while on the other he was the defender of civilisation. On the one hand he had an American persona; on the other he sought to defend Australia from Americanisation. The boundary rider existed on the cusp of these worlds; pulled between them. This informed his virility and descriptions of the landscape.

Morton's cowboy persona as virile protector had an additional tension; one of destiny. The boundary rider had a tragic destiny. He longed to return to the valley; yet his role of protector sentenced him to roam for his natural life. The boundary rider was death-obsessed. Morton's selection from the repertoire of Australian bush ballads didn't only focus on 'stockman' songs, it particularly focussed on 'dying stockman' songs, such as

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<sup>65</sup> White, *op cit.*, 1981, p 146.

'Wrap Me Up In My Stockwhip and Blanket' and 'The Stockman's Last Bed'. In such songs the stockman desired to be buried in the lonely outback because that was his home.<sup>66</sup> In his own version of the folkloric tradition - the epic, spoken-word melodrama 'A Stockman's Prayer' - Morton informed God that he has found spirituality not in churches, but in the 'dim, quiet starlight of the plains.'<sup>67</sup>

There was a tension in the boundary rider's destiny. On the one hand his home was in the valley; on the other his destiny was to ride the plains. This tension produced the longing, keening sound of his yodel; the catch in the throat a result of being on the verge of tears. If the plains also represented the wilderness of the city and the modern world, then the tension was also due to the fact that life in such a world was inevitable. Young men had to grow up and leave the valley and make a life in the city. The modern world was encroaching and its eventual subsumption was inevitable. However, the boundary rider had to live in this modern world.

### **Being Transitory**

The third characteristic that defined the boundary rider's relationship to the land was that of being always moving. The boundary rider reflected Richard White's observation that 'Australia has always been more travelled than settled.'<sup>68</sup> On horseback, patrolling the fencelines - the demands of the boundary rider's job meant that he was always moving. He travelled through the landscape rather than being connected to it. This characteristic was linked to and reinforced the other intrinsic features of the boundary rider already discussed. One of the reasons he was lonesome was that he was never in one place long enough to establish connections: and one of the reasons he was virile, sexually charged and masculine was because he hadn't been emasculated by relationships and belongings. He was a wanderer and therefore his 'own man'.

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<sup>66</sup> Tex Morton, *Tex Morton Regal Zonophone Collection*

<sup>67</sup> Tex Morton (with Sister Dorrie), *op cit.*

<sup>68</sup> Richard White, 'Travel, Writing and Australia', *Studies In Travel Writing*, 11(1), March 2007, pp1-14

The boundary rider's mode of transport was central to his title and his character. The horse was always present in the narrative - representing the boundary rider's movement. The first line of Heney's was: 'The bridle reins hang loose in the hold of his lean left hand' and then, 'He journeys from dawn to dusk, and always he rides alone'.<sup>69</sup> In Vance Palmer's account the boundary rider is always 'riding around fences' while the 'bells of bullocks chime.'<sup>70</sup>

Tex Morton also sang about his horse and the feeling of riding and travelling. Indeed, the horse became a character in some of Morton's songs. In 'Old Boko and Me' and 'Move Along Baldy' the horse was personified and sung to, reminding the listener of the constant movement of the yodelling boundary rider: 'move along Baldy' because at the end of the road there is 'clover for you boy and damper for me.'<sup>71</sup>

'Sing You Cowboy' expressed the sense of movement in Morton's work, both in its literal meaning and its musical production. Lyrically, it was a celebration of the travelling life. Morton exhorted himself and other cowboys to 'sing as you ride.'<sup>72</sup> This is reflected in the recording of the song. Unusually for a hillbilly record, the volume of the track fades in at the beginning, as well as fading out at the end. Such a gentle increase and decrease in volume served to remind the listener that that the cowboy was slowly getting closer, passing and then riding off into the distance.

Morton included many more general, offhand, references to travelling in his music. He particularly favoured verbs such as 'roving', 'droving', 'roaming' and 'wandering'. He sang of the 'Wandering Stockman', of 'The Good Old Droving Days' ('I want to ride again out on the open plain with my stockwhip in my hand'), of 'old Wyoming, where I

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<sup>69</sup> Heney, *op cit.*

<sup>70</sup> <http://oldpoetry.com/30409> 30/07/10

<sup>71</sup> Tex Morton, *Tex Morton Regal Zonophone Collection.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

started out a-roamin'' and of riding the 'Oregon Trail.'<sup>73</sup> Travel was central to the cowboy, the boundary rider and Morton's music.

The outback was not a place to stay put in, but rather a place to wander through. The land was observed, almost impartially, from the back of a horse. It moved past the boundary rider as if in a movie. Indeed, in the singing cowboy movies of Gene Autry the camera tracked the progress of Autry's journey on horseback, the landscape scrolling out behind him. The land was not a place to stay put in, put down roots and farm. Indeed, the boundary rider's attitude to the landscape was of a grand, yet ultimately alienating landscape; a beautiful place to see when 'roaming', but not a place to stay in.

In addition to the stockman/cowboy songs, a significant proportion of Morton's Regal Zonophone sides were about hobos or (using the Australian idiom) 'bagmen'. Morton used the term bagman, rather than other similar Australian terms such as 'swagman' or 'sundowner,' indicating its particular application to the itinerant unemployed of the Great Depression.<sup>74</sup> In Chapter One we saw how these bagmen songs served as a critique of modernity and a refutation of the limiting, emasculating aspects of one its products: the Great Depression. In Morton's vision, these 'bagman' expressed their freedom through freedom of movement. They were always moving. In some ways, Morton's hobo and bagman songs were a contemporary take on his boundary rider songs; the horse replaced with a train. The heroes were forced to go roaming, to be away from home, and to miss home, but they still revelled in the romance and masculinity of being alone and travelling on. Songs such as 'Just Drifting Along', 'Travel By Train', and 'In The Luggage Van Ahead' emphasised the sense of moving through the landscape.<sup>75</sup>

In this specific attitude to the land, Slim Dusty represented a radical break with Morton. As a young man embarking on a hillbilly career, Gordon Kirkpatrick took much of his inspiration from Morton and other hillbilly singers with cowboy stylings in the 1930s and 40s. He chose a name 'Slim' - 'a good cowboy name' - and wore cowboy clothes. In his

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Australian National Dictionary, <http://203.166.81.53/and/index.php>, 29/08/10

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

own words, 'In the first few years when I was trying to break into country music I wanted to wear a cowboy hat.' However, relatively quickly Dusty exchanged the cowboy hat for an 'old dip-lidded farm hat' which, in addition to keeping the 'sun off my face, felt a lot better.'<sup>76</sup>

Dusty's choice of localised clothing - and his retrospective remembrance of it - was a piece of myth-making. It served to differentiate him from the other cowboy performers of the 1940s and 50s. Dusty's particular identity as an Australian hillbilly was also reflected in his music which, relatively early in his career, began to reflect his upbringing, familiarity and habitation of the rural life. Unlike Morton, Dusty's characters and his first-person narrators were rooted to the land: they didn't move around, but stayed on their properties, attempting to make the land fertile and prosperous. It was a more domestic vision than Morton's grand adventure narratives. While there was hardship and longing in Dusty's songs it was not longing for the valley; but rather longing that the valley would do better.

Dusty's first broadly popular song, 'When The Rain Tumbles Down In July', was a good example of this feeling. Released by Regal Zonophone in 1946, it was a description of a small property threatened by rising floodwaters. It was a song that was directly inspired by Dusty's own upbringing on a farm in Nulla Nulla Creek, near Kempsey, in the central New South Wales hinterland. Dusty described the song's conception:

I wrote it one day in 1945 as I worked in the bails and watched the rain pouring down outside. The creek was coming down in flood, and I just wrote what I saw happening in front of me and around me on all the properties.<sup>77</sup>

Dusty's lyrics communicated this sense of intimacy with the land. The descriptions were evocative and detailed:

Where the logs tangle up on the creekbed  
And clouds veil the old northern sky

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<sup>76</sup> Slim Dusty and John Lapsley, *Slim Dusty: Walk A Country Mile*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1981, p 33.

<sup>77</sup> Slim Dusty and Joy McKean, *Another Day, Another Town*, Sun-Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1997, p 44.

And the cattle move back from the lowlands

When the rain tumbles down in July.

Not only did Dusty himself demonstrate a sense of connectedness with the land, he also described the same feeling in the other farmers:

The settlers with sad hearts are watching

The rise of the stream from the dawn

Their best crops are always in flood reach

If it rises much more they'll be gone.<sup>78</sup>

while the drover is shocked by the rising level of the river, 'It's been years since he's seen it so high.' The characters in the song have lived on the land for years, they have not moved away and are not travelling through. What happened on the land deeply affected them. This sense of rootedness represented a radical break from the sense of travelling-through evident in most of Morton's descriptions of the Australian landscape.

Dusty and Morton represented two different, but well-known, aspects to rural work and culture. Morton represented the droving tradition, with its nomadic work, while Dusty represented the agricultural industry, such as the dairy farmer with its rootedness and permanence.

However, Dusty left the farm to pursue his musical career and continued to spend much of his life on the move. Dusty, along with his wife and co-songwriter Joy McKean, and later their two children, toured Australia extensively either as part of travelling sideshows, rodeos and circuses or, increasingly, as their own travelling roadshow. They often spent nine or ten months of the year on the road and in that time repeatedly played halls and clubs from the Kimberly to Tasmania. Travel became a central part of Slim Dusty's life and career.

Dusty has reconciled the tensions implicit in his life as a constantly touring artist with his interest in songs that expressed a sense of connectedness to the land in an interesting way: he recorded songs by amateur songwriters who lived in isolated rural areas. In doing so it

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<sup>78</sup> Slim Dusty, *When The Rain Tumbles Down In July*, Regal Zonophone, Sydney, 1946

has led commentators such as Max Ellis to describe him as 'the chronicler of the bush.'<sup>79</sup> Dusty described it as a process of:

actively collecting lyrics and songs from people who were living out there in the bush, and writing it all down. You'd almost think they were just waiting for someone like me to come along and take the songs out to the rest of Australia.<sup>80</sup>

Like 'When The Rain Tumbles Down In July', many of these songs were concerned with the struggle and hardship of living life on the land. There was a gritty realism to these songs; a sense that the land itself made life tough. There were rewards here, but they were simple, less heroic, more nuanced than the rewards of the boundary rider's life. The land was seen in pastoral fondness or concern. For example, 'By A Fire Of Gidgee Coal' (written by Stan Coster, one of Dusty's most celebrated songwriters; indeed he went on to have a country music singing career of his own), 'the years have taken toll' yet there is still nothing the old drover finds more comforting than sitting around a campfire with his mates.<sup>81</sup>

As part of his extensive touring, Dusty also made regular visits to remote areas with large Aboriginal populations and included songs with Aboriginal subject matter in his repertoire. 'Namitjira' was written to mourn and celebrate the life of Albert Namitjira, a famous indigenous Australian landscape painter. 'King Bundawaal' described a tribal elder, aging, but still with a sense of pride and nobility, reflecting on past struggles and glories. The most traumatic of these struggles was a battle with a 'merciless band with weapons in hand' who 'once slaughtered the pick of his tribe.' Although Bundawaal achieved vengeance for this particular slaughter, he could not prevent 'an alien race without pity or grace' eradicating his people.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Max Ellis, 'Slim Dusty - Chronicler of the Bush', in *Australian Folklore*, Issue 23, University of New England, Armidale NSW, 2008.

<sup>80</sup> Dusty and McKean, *op cit*, p 100.

<sup>81</sup> Slim Dusty and Stan Coster, 'By A Fire Of Gidgee Coal', on *The Very Best Of Slim Dusty*, EMI, Sydney, 1998.

<sup>82</sup> Slim Dusty, 'King Bundawaal', *Slim Dusty Heritage Album*, EMI, Sydney, 1988. Bundawaal may be a historical figure from the Gippsland region of Victoria according to [http://www.twinrivers.com.au/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=5&Itemid=12](http://www.twinrivers.com.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5&Itemid=12) viewed 30/07/10

It is unclear in *King Bundawaal* whether Dusty is referring to warfare between Aboriginal tribes or between Aboriginal tribes and European invaders. The use of the term 'alien race' and their complete eradication of a people would lead a listener in the early twenty-first century to assume the latter: that this is a song about frontier warfare and possible genocide. 'King Bundawaal' was released by Regal Zonophone in 1956. It was, for a white performer, a radical way of looking at the landscape, history and Australia's 'frontier'. Its inclusion in a 1957 Nicholson's sheet music album of various artists indicates it may have had more popularity and influence than a cult release.<sup>83</sup>

Even if not about Aboriginal/settler conflict, 'King Bundawaal' not only reflected on Aboriginal culture, it also placed Aboriginal people within the landscape. If the Australian country and outback was empty, Dusty suggested, it was not because it had never been inhabited; but rather because its original inhabitants had been slaughtered by invaders. This was a radically different view of landscape than Tex Morton's musical *terra nullius*. The song's title also presupposes the existence of hierarchical and social structures; the supposed absence of which was one of the reasons why European settlers regarded the land was, in effect, uninhabited.<sup>84</sup>

Even when not dealing explicitly with Aboriginal subject matter, Dusty often exhibited a sense of connectedness with the land that almost felt indigenous in its intimacy. In 'Namatjira', Dusty claimed that he 'painted Australia just as it should be' and indeed, in his affection for the picturesque qualities of the landscape, Dusty reflected a Namatjira-esque sensibility. Take 'Plains of Peppimenarti', one of Dusty's most beloved and long-lived paens to the Australian landscape, for example. Peppimenarti lies on the banks of the Moyle River, a few hundred kilometres south of Darwin. In it, the land was imbued with a sense of grace and majesty, yet with a sense of intimacy that can only come from permanence, or at least repeated visits:

May the march of time never ever bring too many changes

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<sup>83</sup> Nicholson's *Bushland Song Album*, Nicholson's, Sydney, 1957

<sup>84</sup> Reynolds, *op cit*, p xi

To a way of life you people love and prize  
May the years ahead be good ones  
And you never lose your customs  
With old Peppimenarti Hill looking down so old and wise  
And the Kangaroo still bounds on that rough and rugged ground  
The ant hills and the old pandanus grow  
Yes and everyday's a Sunday if you're catching Barramundi  
By the plains of Peppimenarti, where the old Moyle River flows.<sup>85</sup>

Dusty recorded Plains of Peppimenarti in 1980. By this stage of his career a significant proportion of his audience was Aboriginal. Dusty's tours would often take him to remote Aboriginal communities, including those near Peppimenarti.<sup>86</sup> Dusty's music also owed much to Aborigines and he has acknowledged the inspiration on much of his music. Clinton Walker has written that many white artists have a sound and identity that is 'inextricably bound up with black Australians', touring with Aboriginal performers and to outback settlements and writing about them.<sup>87</sup> The historical context of songs such as Plains of Peppimenarti adds specificity to Walker's understanding: namely that an Aboriginal sense of place increasingly began to inform white country music in Australia. Interestingly, 'Plains of Peppimenarti' shows some similarities to an earlier song 'Arnhem Land Lullaby' which, although written by white man Ted Egan was given perhaps its most well-known interpretation by Aboriginal singers Wilga Williams and Auriel Andrews.<sup>88</sup> This link between these songs was made more explicit when Dusty's daughter Anne Kirkpatrick recorded 'Peppimenarti Cradle' in 2006, combining the geographic region of her father's song with the sentiment of Egan's.

If Slim Dusty's songwriting represented the maturation of the bush ballad tradition, as Graeme Smith has suggested,<sup>89</sup> then the sense of connectedness to the landscape was

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<sup>85</sup> Slim Dusty, 'Plains Of Peppimenarti', *The Very Best Of Slim Dusty*.

<sup>86</sup> Dusty and Lapsley, *op cit*.

<sup>87</sup> Clinton Walker, *Buried Country*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 2000, p 168

<sup>88</sup> Walker, *op cit*, p 168 & 211; *Buried Country*, Larrikin Records, 2000

<sup>89</sup> Graeme Smith, *Singing Australian*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 2005, p 90.

surely one of its mature features. Unlike the Yodelling Boundary Rider, Dusty wasn't just passing through the country, willing his pony on to the next point of call; rather, he was watching the view, taking it in and wondering how it connected to people.

In many ways, this represented the changing audience for country music. During the 1960s and 70s, country music found itself losing its traditional city audience base to other cultural forms such as rock n roll. The audience that remained were older and country-based. Rather than songs that necessarily romanticised the country, they were looking for music that perhaps reflected their experiences on the land and their affinity with it.

Further, Dusty's description of landscape was representative of the growth of Australian cultural pride and confidence more generally in the post-World War Two period. Developing economic impence from Britain, the popular acceptance of ideas of cultural nationalism such as the idea of distinctive national characteristics as argued in *Australian Legend* and a growing sense of Australian history and heritage - even Australia's Aboriginal heritage - all informed and provided an environment for Dusty's vision. Although Morton had been influenced by some Australian verse, he generally chose examples that fitted with the established American cowboy myth. Dusty too was selective with his Australian bush ballad influences, however his interest in Henry Lawson tended towards the sardonic, socially-realist stories of hardship and struggle.

## Conclusion

Eric Watson has argued that Australian country music should describe the country in a realistic way:

What is country music?...We would be entitled to expect that it would have its roots in country soil, be recognisable a product of the rural areas and their people, and tell us something about the life, environment and attitudes of such people.<sup>90</sup>

Such an expectation is the result of the bush ballad tradition, Watson argues, that began with Tex Morton. However, this sense of entitlement to realism is the result of the influence Slim Dusty has had on subsequent country singers and the dominant flavour of the bush ballad since the 1960s, not on the contemporary evidence. Prior to Dusty, the dominant way of describing the landscape was romantic, even gothic. Early Australian cowboys, cowgirls and hillbillies tended to describe the outback as grand, towering, dangerous and filmic and the valleys as quaint, sleepy and green. Realistic descriptions of place had little currency in these songs.

Rather, the landscape the Yodelling Boundary Rider rode through was a symbolic one. The sleepy valleys represented family, tradition and rurality; the outback represented individualism, urbanisation and capitalism - in short, modernity. The boundary rider's songs and voice spoke of the anxieties and tensions associated with the inevitability of the journey between these two worlds. The boundary rider knew he had to leave the valley, but missed it when he did. Such tensions spoke to real-life situations for much of Morton's audience.

Morton and his fellow singing cowboy and girls drew on a range of influences for their heightened, symbolic reading of the Australian landscape. Chapter One showed the importance of the cowboy image in developing early Australian country music. Chapter Two has demonstrated that the cowboy image was complicated and given local nuances by the mythic Australian personas and character that had had broad popular acceptance

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<sup>90</sup> Watson, *op cit*, p 1.

since at least the 1890s. Morton, in particular, drew on a tradition of Australian verse that emphasised the romance, adventure, desirability, solitude and mobility of the boundary rider persona as well as traditions of historical legend that located uniquely Australian characteristics in pioneering and rural work.

Despite these nuances of influence and meaning, however, the songs of the Australian cowboy and cowgirl were beginning to seem trivial and Americanised to a popular music audience after World War Two. Demands were beginning to be made that hillbilly and cowboy music should have something more serious, more intrinsically Australian, to say and that it should have a name that reflected its importance. These demands will be the subject of Chapter Three.

### Chapter Three

## 'Give It A Name': Making Hillbillies Respectable

### Introduction

In 1952, hillbilly singer Chad Morgan made a memorable appearance on *Australia's Amateur Hour*. A popular and long-running radio talent quest, *Australia's Amateur Hour* was broadcast live throughout the nation every Thursday night for much of the 1950s. Its host was Terry Dear, a man of deep and rounded vowels. In a 1952 episode, Dear announced that tonight the show was being broadcast from 'Queenslund'. He then announced one of the contestants on the show: 'Hillbilly performer, Chad Morgan!' Morgan's broad Queensland twang immediately stood in stark contrast to Dear's cultivated tones, as did their backgrounds. When asked where he was from, Morgan replied 'Duckinwilla Creek'. 'I'm sorry' said Dear. 'Duckinwilla Creek' replied Morgan, deadpan. Dear continued to humorously mention Duckinwilla Creek throughout the introduction.

Following this exchange, Morgan launched into the yodelled dog howl that signalled the beginning of his song 'The Sheik From Scrubby Creek'. 'The Sheik' chronicled the sexual escapades and misadventures of a small-town Casanova, employing Morgan's broad accent and grasp of Australian slang to great affect. For example, 'The sheilas think I'm handsome/ The fellahs think I'm mad/ The mothers think I'm a villain/ but I'm just a lovable lad' and when being chased by a shotgun-wielding father, you run quick 'or cop the full blast.' Dear's microphone remained on throughout Morgan's performance and his regular guffaws were audible, as was the laughter of the live audience.<sup>1</sup>

Morgan's comic song style was complemented by his image. He wore a battered cloth hat kept off his face with a safety pin, and sported a spectacular set of buck teeth which he drew attention to by grinning manically at the audience. Part of the humour derived

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<sup>1</sup> Chad Morgan, 'Australia's Amateur Hour', Brisbane 1952. National Film and Sound Archive, Title No. 676908.

from the disjunction between the sexual bravado of the lyrics and the ugliness of his appearance. For instance, when Morgan sang the closing line 'you can tell where I have been by the trail of broken hearts' it brought the house down.

Morgan was clearly a comic performer. The laughter of the audience and the host was both understandable and appropriate. Nevertheless, there was a sense that Dear did not quite know what to make of this hillbilly clown: he communicated amused disbelief that seemed echoed by the audience. Part of Morgan's ability to simultaneously unsettle and amuse derived from the way in which he adopted negative hillbilly stereotypes into a knowing parody. Morgan was both a real hillbilly from rural Queensland and was making fun of such hillbillies for comic effect. Such a combination could both produce superciliousness on the part of elites and undermine it.

While performers such as Morgan exploited recognisably hillbilly images, sounds and subject matter, other musicians and sections of the country music community were eager to throw off such associations. During the 1950s and 1960s, specialised country music publications *Spurs* and *Spotlight* undertook a campaign to eradicate the term 'hillbilly' in the hope that this would improve the cultural status of their music.

The country music community in the 1950s was acutely aware of the negative associations with the word 'hillbilly' and hillbilly music. This chapter will examine the various strategies used to combat the perceived low status of their music. It will begin by looking at the hierarchical stratification of culture in Australia the 1950s and the place of hillbilly music in it. It will then look at the etymology of the word hillbilly and how it developed its simultaneously pejorative and satirical overtones. This chapter will then examine the campaign by *Spurs* and *Spotlight* to change their music's name and to try to regulate the type of music country could be. It will then compare this strategy with that of overtly hillbilly performers, such as Morgan, who sought to play up to the negative associations of hillbilly for comic and musical affect. Ultimately, this chapter will show how the question of status surrounding hillbilly music adds to our understanding of Australian culture in the mid twentieth century.

## *Spurs and Spotlight*

From the early 1950s through to the mid 1960s (at least) elements of the country music community and industry undertook a campaign to eradicate the term 'hillbilly' in favour of 'country and western'. Two magazines in particular spearheaded this campaign: *Spurs* and *Country and Western Spotlight*. *Spurs* was first published by 2LM in Lismore in 1952. In 1956, Slim Dusty and Joy McKean bought it and moved its operations to Sydney, where it remained until its closure in the early 1960s. *Spurs* was aimed at the burgeoning and youthful country music audience. It featured profiles and photos of well-known artists, as well as reports on community events and clubs. *Spurs'* subtitle was *Australia's Only National Hillbilly Magazine* until March 1953, when it became *Australia's Only National Cowboy Magazine*. This name change was, in *Spurs'* words, 'the first step in the long campaign aimed at getting rid of the word 'hillbilly.''<sup>2</sup>

*Spotlight's* emphasis was different. While it published some of the same writers as *Spurs*, it was a more specialised magazine, featuring longer, more in-depth articles and no photos (unlike the illustrated, glossier style of *Spurs*). It was self-consciously a magazine for experts and record collectors in the country music field. Indeed its byline was 'The Official Magazine of the Country and Western Record Collector's Club of Australia and New Zealand'. Consequently its campaign focussed less on emotional appeals to a youthful audience to drop the use of the word hillbilly, and more on historical analysis of the term as an invention to sell records and the subsequent commercialisation of rural folk music.

The movement to eradicate the term 'hillbilly' was a part of campaign to improve the status of country music in Australia. In America in the 1950s, the same movement was occurring.<sup>3</sup> However, in Australia it was complicated by the fact that not only was 'hillbilly' a derogatory term, it was an imported one as well and therefore unfit to

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<sup>2</sup> *Spurs: Australia's Only National Cowboy Magazine*, April 1955, p 8

<sup>3</sup> Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2007, p 72.

describe local music. Before we look in detail at the reasons why *Spurs* and *Spotlight* objected to the term 'hillbilly', let us examine the etymology of the word as a description of a musical genre and the status of that genre when it first appeared in Australia.

### **Etymology of 'Hillbilly'**

The word 'hillbilly' was one of many derogatory names for rural southern whites used in America at the turn of the century. Its longevity, applicability and extension to 'hillbilly music' has been convincingly attributed to Ralph Peer.<sup>4</sup> As we saw in Chapter One, Peer travelled from Chicago to the South and recorded local musicians on a mobile recording unit. It was Peer who, in 1927, recorded Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family in the same session in Bristol, Tennessee. Prior to this, in 1924, Peer recorded a southern string band that had travelled to New York City. When Peer asked what the group called themselves, their spokesman was reported to have said, 'We're nothing but a bunch of hillbillies from North Carolina and Virginia. Call us anything.' Peer obliged and called them the Hill Billies.<sup>5</sup>

The term rapidly became associated with a particular geographic place – the Appalachian mountains and foothills of America's southeast – and moronic levels of illiteracy and ignorance. In 1926, New York's *Variety* magazine published a front-page article on 'Hill Billy Music'. *Variety* was a weekly that focussed on jazz, swing, dance, vaudeville and burlesque. This is the first time hillbilly music had been mentioned in its pages and is worth quoting almost in its entirety here as it is generally representative of the way the 'popular' music industry saw hillbillies at the time and the tone used:

The hillbilly is a North Carolina or Tennessee and adjacent mountaineer type of illiterate white whose creed and allegiance are to the Bible, the

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance: Archie Green, 'Hillbilly Music: Sources and Symbol', *Journal of American Folklore*, 78: 309, July-Sept 1965, pp 204-228; Pamela Grundy, 'We Always Tried to be Good People': Respectability, Crazy Water Crystals and Hillbilly Music on the Air, 1933-1935', *The Journal of American History*, 81:4, March 1995, pp 1591-1620; and Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Green, *op cit.*, p 210.

Chautauqua<sup>6</sup> and the phonograph...Probably 95% of them cannot read or write...Theirs is a community unto themselves.

In Knoxville is a local edict that no hillbilly song can be played in a phonograph store within earshot of the market-place. It has been found that as soon as a hill-billy hit is turned loose the market merchants lose their prospects. It attracts the natives to the source of the music like flypaper. On the other hand, in a phonograph store, if the h-b pressure becomes too great, the surest chaser is the turning on of a regular popular song record. That's the cue to the h-b's that they're no longer welcome and they disperse with alacrity.<sup>7</sup>

What is most relevant for this discussion of 'hillbilly music's' etymology is the conditions under which the phrase appeared. It was a term that was, from its very inception, defined in the negative. Not merely that it was a term of derision, but that it described a music that other forms of popular music were not. There was the popular music that already existed on phonograph – variously known as swing, jazz, dance, ragtime – and then there was the alternative. The alternative existed for those who lacked the refinement to appreciate what had been established as mainstream popular music. According to *Variety*, the extremes of taste were so great that one audience literally could not listen to the musical taste of the other. It was literal distaste. Indeed, the degree to which the communities' tastes were different implied a segregation of the market place that was so essentialist as to be almost racist.

These distinctions should not be taken purely at face value however. The editors of *Variety* were looking for, in Archie Green's words, 'what is fresh'<sup>8</sup> – new and exciting musical forms that would capture its readers' attention. They were reporting on a rural musical form for a curious city audience. Furthermore, while displaying some urban elitism, *Variety* was still aware of the ironic possibilities of hillbillies, overstating their

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<sup>6</sup> An adult education movement commonly associated with the rural working class and political populism.

<sup>7</sup> *Variety*, Vol LXXXV, No. 11, 29/12/1926. Abbreviations in original

<sup>8</sup> Green, *op cit.*, p 221.

distaste for comic effect. The characterisation of 'hillbilly music' should be seen for what it is – witty marketing – and yet it was a characterisation that was to have serious repercussions for its audience.

Further, there was the sense that hillbillies were in on the joke: happy to wear the label as economically pragmatic and as an ironic gesture. Judging from the story of its origins, the Hill Billies used the term with some degree of ironic self-depreciation. They were, after all, professional musicians looking for a record deal. Not only did the Hill Billies proffer the label self-mockingly, but also later were happy enough to dress up in the uniform of the country rube - overalls, straw hats and idiotic grins - indicating a willingness to sell themselves as hillbillies.<sup>9</sup>

The adoption of the word hillbilly was partly about wearing other people's denigration as a badge of pride.<sup>10</sup> In this way, it inverted traditional class and geographic power relations. Anthony Harkins has shown that most early country music enthusiasts had an ambivalent view about the term and, indeed, that the word's longevity and fluidity is due to this ambivalence and duality.<sup>11</sup>

The hillbilly stereotype was able not just to self-satirise, but gently mock highbrow culture as well. The term sat comfortably with a farcical tradition in early country music where fiddle bands in the 1910s and 20s had names like the 'Simp Phony Orchestra' and the 'Lick Skillet' orchestra.<sup>12</sup> Hillbilly was a performance mode that could satirise modernity and pretension.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Harkins, *op cit.*, p 74.

<sup>10</sup> In this it is similar to the journey of the terms 'fag' (to describe a homosexual man) or 'wog' (to describe people of Mediterranean descent) in Australia.

<sup>11</sup> Harkins, *op cit.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p 76.

<sup>13</sup> For a contemporary Australian equivalent, there is the CJ Dennis poem *The Sentimental Bloke* and the popular 1918 film it inspired. In it the title character sees *Romeo and Juliet* and compares his own life of larrikinism, brawling and romance to that of Romeo's. Low class mirrors high class and shows not just its ridiculousness, but also its universality. Australian hillbilly music in the 1950s and 60s would also inherit this tradition, as we shall see.

In terms of marketing, 'hillbilly' was the 'other' musical style; separate from the jazz, swing and ragtime of tin pan alley songwriting. In America, in the 1920s, catalogues included it under the same heading as blues and other black performance modes for a predominantly black audience. For instance, a common category was 'hillbilly and race' records, indicating its otherness in the eyes of the music industry and consumers.<sup>14</sup>

Musically, 'hillbilly' was a hold-all term that referred to a variety of musical styles: instrumental string bands, made up of fiddles, banjos and guitar with music played at a fast tempo intended primarily for dancing; blue yodelling (such as popularised by Jimmie Rodgers); close harmony singing; ballads that related the latest news stories; gospel; and white blues. The term represented a whole wealth and diversity of rural, southern American musical styles, mutated and hybridised over the centuries, too many and too complex to ever be sufficiently named and categorised. Nevertheless, there were a number of terms that attempted to do so. 'Songs from old Dixie', 'Old Southern Tunes', 'Old Time Singin'', 'Old Familiar Tunes', 'Native American Melodies' were just some of the classifications used by American record labels in the 1920s and early 30s.<sup>15</sup> Okeh was the first to use the term 'hillbilly' and by the mid 1930s – the time of Tex Morton's first recordings – it was the most widely used and recognised term.

The word's catchiness and its onomatopoeian flavour – like 'jazz' and 'rock 'n' roll' – along with its political and social complexity - ensured its longevity in America and Australia for the next two decades.

### **'Radio Oddities': The Place of the Hillbilly In Australian Culture**

At the moment of hillbilly music's arrival in the late 1920s, Australian culture was hierarchical and stratified. Radio broadcasters in particular made distinctions between popular and elite cultural products. Lesley Johnson has argued that 'in the 1930s the terms 'high-brow' and 'low-brow' emerged as key descriptions of the radio audience.'

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<sup>14</sup> Peterson, *op cit*, p 196

<sup>15</sup> Harkins, *op cit.*, p 74.

These two descriptions indicated two sets of cultural preferences: ‘High-brows’ loved classical or ‘serious music’ while ‘low brows’ loved jazz’ and ‘light’ music (including crooning and dance music’. ‘A Class’ stations such as the ABC offered high-brow programming, while ‘B Class’ commercial stations offered popular low-brow entertainment. These sets of distinctions were, according to Johnson, taken for granted in this period.<sup>16</sup>

How did hillbilly music and its audience fit into the categories of ‘high-brow’ and ‘low-brow’? Hillbilly performers, media and audience thought that their sort of music occupied the lowest place on the cultural ladder. They perceived their music as being even lower than low-brow. The hostility towards their music derived, so they assumed, not from cultural elites but from fans of low-brow music. Swing fans could not tolerate hillbilly music, just as opera connoisseurs could not stand swing, or so the popular music media would have it.

From their emergence in the mid 1930s, Australian hillbilly performers and their audience perceived their music as outside the boundaries of popular taste. Tex Morton himself was the first member of the country music community to write about the low status of hillbilly music. In 1937 Morton wrote an article for *Music Maker* titled ‘Yodelling –So What’. A hillbilly article in the popular music magazine *Music Maker* was, in 1937, unprecedented. Indeed, the fact that Morton wrote it demonstrated both his widespread fame, and the lack of journalists able to write about country music. This is the same article in which he elucidated for the mainstream popular music audience the technical and artistic differences between Swiss and hillbilly style yodelling. As such, the article is both educational and expositional: an introduction to country music for a largely ignorant audience, and a defence of its specific aesthetic requirements and effects for hostile swing fans.

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<sup>16</sup> Lesley Johnson, *The Unseen Voice: A Cultural Study of Early Australian Radio*, Routledge, London, 1988, p 131.

In this article, Morton also described the way in which he had been questioned about his musical choices: 'I was also asked (this gent happened to be a swing fan), why I only – I think 'persist' was the word he used – sing cowboy, hill billy and sob songs.'<sup>17</sup> 'Sob songs' was a loose category, in broad use in the 1930s, which described overly emotional, even maudlin, song styles. The subject matter of these 'sob songs' was about lost love. In the case of many crooners - such as American Art Gilham - the sobbing was done over a woman. In the case of Morton, he sobbed over the loss of his parents and life in the valley. Such sentiment, it seemed, held little value for a 'swing fan'.

Morton was well aware of the low standing hillbilly music had for swing fans and demonstrated it via a joke:

There was once a swing fan who picked up the wrong record when leaving the local shop. He took it home, and all the mob did gather round to hearken. Lo and behold! Next morning his body was seen being fed to the carrion in the misty dawn. Guess what sort of record it was?<sup>18</sup>

The quasi-religious syntax of Morton's joke served to satirise the perceived holier-than-thou attitude of the swing fan.

It should be noted that a 'swing fan' of the 1930s was not necessarily a connoisseur of a specific, marginalised form of music, but rather was a fan of the popular music of the day in general. As Bruce Johnson and John Whiteoak have observed, 'jazz', 'dance' and 'swing' were often interchangeable terms that referred to a large variety of popular music in the 1920s and 30s.<sup>19</sup> Thus, we can infer that in using the terminology 'swing fan', Morton was referring to a broad popular music audience.

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<sup>17</sup> Tex Morton, 'Yodelling - So What', *Australian Music Maker and Dance Band News*, May 1937.

<sup>18</sup> *Australian Music Maker and Dance Band News*, May 1937.

<sup>19</sup> Bruce Johnson and John Whiteoak, 'Jazz', in John Whiteoak and Aline Scott-Maxwell (eds), *Currency Companion to Music and Dance In Australia*, Currency House, Sydney, 2003, pp 374-375.

By the 1950s, hillbilly musicians, journalists, fans and members of the industry were acutely aware of the issues of class, status and taste raised by Morton. However, unlike the 1930s, when the distaste of swing fans could be used as a way of satirising other people's tastes and using it as a point of distinction, by the 1950s the perceived low status of country music was a fundamental problem. Hillbilly musicians, the industry and its commentators sought to change this status. Indeed, it was the stated policy of *Spurs* magazine to 'publicize Western and Country-style music and to lift it to the highest possible position in the public esteem.'<sup>20</sup>

In *Distinction*, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argued that: 'There is an economy of cultural goods' which 'predisposes tastes to function as markers of class.'<sup>21</sup> Further, 'the aesthetic sense' functions as 'the sense of distinction.'<sup>22</sup> This sense of distinction means that taste distinguishes between people in an essential way - between those who like something and those who don't. Taste is who you are. It means that taste both 'unites and separates' (it unites within a community and separates between communities). Taste, as a marker of distinction, is also experienced in the negative; as a sensation that what you don't like defines you. Thus, when tastes 'have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes.' Consequently, 'tastes are first and foremost distastes.'<sup>23</sup>

*Spurs* magazine was certainly aware that music could distinguish between people in an essential way. Indeed, contributors to *Spurs* perceived the derision their music received to be not merely indicative of an aesthetic difference of opinion, but of a whole range of assumptions about what kind of person would listen to hillbilly music. Many people thought, according to writer Brian Cameron, that hillbilly music appealed 'to people of 'lower intelligence' only. An appetite for hillbilly music defined the kind of person one was and suggested the other kinds of popular culture that one would like. Cameron

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<sup>20</sup> *Spurs*, April 1955.

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1984, p 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p 56.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p 56.

wrote: 'A newsagents said: 'Oh, people who like hillbillies cannot appreciate any literature except comic books.'',<sup>24</sup>

It would seem that much of these perceptions came from the comments of radio presenters and in conversation. For instance, Cameron also wrote about listening to a radio presenter ask for requests:

One of his honeyed announcements was to this effect... 'Now, if you'd like to hear your request played in this session don't forget to write in and let us know. We'll be only too pleased to play your favourites for you, BUT NO HILLBILLES, PLEASE'. These last few words were spoken in such a pained tone that I could almost visualise his long-suffering expression.<sup>25</sup>

The 'honeyed' sound of the voice described by Cameron immediately classified the announcer in an elite class. The description also brings to mind the tone of voice used by Terry Dear in presenting Chad Morgan. (Although, in that case, superciliousness was tempered with genuine amusement. Perhaps it was in this case too, although Cameron missed the joke.)

Clearly, by the 1950s, elements of the country music community were concerned that their music had a low standing in Australian society. But to what degree were these concerns actually realised? Did 'swing fans' and the popular music media really despise hillbilly music as much as hillbillies thought they did?

There is evidence to suggest that hillbilly music was not treated seriously by more mainstream music publications. Indeed, from an early stage, hillbilly music was ridiculed for its rural and American qualities. Jazz, swing and dance periodical *Music Maker* also reviewed hillbilly releases in the mid 1930s. These reviews were written in a tone that mocked, albeit playfully, the oddness, the overt Americanness, the 'hillbilly-ness' of the music:

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<sup>24</sup> *Spurs*, March 1956.

<sup>25</sup> *Spurs*, March 1956. Capitals in original.

There are so many of these darned records this month that I have decided to put them all into a special section. I don't say that I will always do this, but for this month, doggone it, I will. (I'm beginning to feel like a goldurned hill billy myself.)<sup>26</sup>

In the next month's issue of *Music Maker*, the reviews appeared under their own section 'Instrumental and Hillbilly Records'. Tex Morton's latest release is greeted thus: 'Waal folks, hyer is good ole Tex Morton, our own hill billy boy form the wilds of them thar Blue Mountains.' And yet, even within the mockery and the even-with-his-American-image-we-all-know-he's-from-Sydney joke lay a serious interest in Morton's popularity: 'I believe that Tex's records are very popular in the country districts. This does not surprise me after hearing the terrific reception that he received at Orange when he appeared there with Jim Davidson's band.'<sup>27</sup> And then, in 1940, the excitable dispatch that 'Tex Morton's rodeo is Going Swell - you may not like yodelling, but you've got to admit that Tex is a pastmaster at it.'<sup>28</sup>

*Music Maker* found the success of hillbilly music surprising because it did not fit into the categories of urban and urbane popular music. That is, it was a music form that was obviously popular, but was not *popular* music. In this way, mainstream music media tended to treat it as swing, jazz and dance's 'other'.

As hillbilly music became more popular, magazines such as *Music Maker* felt obliged to give it more space in their issues. However, this space was granted conditionally and with the proviso that hillbilly music was essentially different to the rest of the music *Music Maker* wrote about. In the late 1940s, *Music Maker* began publishing 'Hillbilly Cavalcade' or 'Cowboy Corner', columns clearly delineated from the content of the rest of the magazine. The substance of these articles tended to be the surprising popularity of hillbilly artists, rather than their music, and the tone used was one of curious disbelief.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Music Maker*, August 1937.

<sup>27</sup> *Music Maker*, September 1937.

<sup>28</sup> *Music Maker*, November 1940.

<sup>29</sup> *Australian Music Maker and Dance Band News*, October 1947

Diane Pecknold has convincingly argued that in America, country music's new claims to respectability in the early 1950s was due primarily to the fact that it had become commercially successful to a degree that rivalled other forms of popular music.<sup>30</sup> Its popularity demanded respect. This was true of the Australian experience, although to a more limited degree. Mainstream music media increasingly acknowledged the popularity of hillbilly music, even if they tended to do so incredulously. However, the popularity of hillbilly music in Australia was complicated by the perception that it was an imported form. As we shall see, in Australia, hillbilly's respectability derived more from its increasing claims to being an Australian folk music than it did from its sales figures.

In Australia by the 1950s, the country music community were aware of their music's growing popularity and the media's ambivalent attitude to it - characterised by the treatment of the music and its popularity as 'odd'. As *Spurs* put it in 1955:

'Hillbillies are Radio Oddity', so says the headline in a recent copy of one of the big daily afternoon newspapers. If you haven't read the article...then you're very lucky indeed...The poor fellow does his best to put 'hillbilly' music in the gutter simply because he cannot understand its tremendous popularity...hence the term 'oddity'. Actually of course there is nothing odd about the popularity of our kind of music, its appeal lies in its simplicity and sincerity.<sup>31</sup>

It is notable that derisive or incredulous commentary on hillbilly music came not from cultural elites, but from low or middle-brow observers such as popular music publications and radio announcers. This was partly because these magazines were the only ones to write about hillbilly, but it does also suggest ways in which cultural status systems operated. Audiences of particular cultural forms tended to locate and criticise other forms lower on the ladder. As Bourdieu observed, 'tastes are first and foremost distastes' and swing fans could justify their taste by finding hillbilly distasteful.

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<sup>30</sup> Diane Pecknold, *op cit.*, p 72.

<sup>31</sup> *Spurs*, Dec 1955.

Jazz fans were eager to invert this characterisation of their music; to apply it to a form of music even more degraded than jazz or swing: hillbilly. In this way it legitimised jazz/swing/dance by making them more highbrow in comparison. In order to preserve the status quo, trash cultures need to be invented. To legitimise the vertical stratification of culture, some cultural products need to be represented as low. This is necessary for the differentiation of individualism. In this way, trash is necessary for hierarchical culture to function.

The country music community were, as we have seen, acutely aware of the trashy image of their music and sought to rectify that situation. Interestingly, unlike jazz, they chose not to emphasise the technical musical skills that hillbilly required. Tex Morton's article on yodelling, for example, downplayed his virtuosity and professionalism. He explained his decision to yodel: 'I guess a fella's got to something for a crust, and besides, this singing business provides a darn good excuse for not working.'<sup>32</sup> Rather, country musicians and commentators chose to emphasise the qualities of real life of their music. Country music's cultural value was not linked to technical ability, but to its sense of genuineness and Australianness. We will also see, later in this chapter, how country music that didn't communicate this sense was regarded as a lesser form. Thus, country music also created a low-status in order to legitimise itself.

### **Degeneracy and Race**

While jazz managed to acquire a significant degree of cultural capital during the middle of the twentieth century. It may be revealing to ask, why did hillbilly music not achieve a similar rise in status? In many ways, jazz had distinguishing features that, like hillbilly, gave it low cultural status when it emerged: it was both an American form and the product of a minority, fringe culture - in this case blacks rather than the rural working class - which, through exposure and marketing, found favour with a mass audience. However, unlike hillbilly, jazz had, by the 1930s, developed a certain degree of

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<sup>32</sup> *Australian Music Maker and Dance Band News*, May 1937.

respectability. While it did not become the epitome of highbrow taste, it did become something that highbrows could enjoy. Johnson has said that while jazz was a 'low brow' cultural product, it did appear on the ABC – the arbiter of 'high-brow' – as 'light entertainment'.

Jazz was not always so well regarded in Australia. At the time of its arrival in Australia (around the end of the First World War) it was commonly described, like hillbilly, as a degenerate musical form. In the case of jazz, this was due to its roots as black music. As *The Age* commented in 1920, Jazz was 'an imported vogue of sheer barbarism...a direct expression of the negroid spirit.'<sup>33</sup>

However, throughout the 1920s and 30s, jazz in Australia began to lose its black connotations. The predominant style of music played and consumed was, increasingly, not based on black performance models of small ensembles, but rather on the dance orchestra model of such American band leaders as Art Hickman and Paul Whiteman. Both Hickman and Whiteman were white. Thus, in Australia, by the 1930s, popular forms of jazz had largely lost their connotations with their black origins and become a white art, and listening and dancing to jazz a white leisure activity. In addition to their whiteness, both Hickman and Whiteman played a 'symphonic' style of jazz and, in Whiteman's case, led 'orchestras'. Its popular groups were large 'swing' or 'dance' bands, such as Jim Davidson's, which specialised in orchestral arrangements and displays of musical virtuosity such as individual soloing.<sup>34</sup>

Interestingly, hillbilly music in Australia has traditionally been 'blacker' than jazz. This has been the case both literally and figuratively. Hillbilly and country has a history of notable popular Aboriginal country singers such as Jimmy Little in the 1950s and Troy Cassar-Daley in the 1990s and 2000s and has a significant audience amongst Aboriginal

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<sup>33</sup> Johnson and Whiteoak, *op cit.*, p 374.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 374-378

communities. <sup>35</sup> While it came to Australia as a white man's form, it was adopted and made to sing in a new, Aboriginal, register.

Further, hillbilly and country music was 'black' in the sense that it was a lower-status 'other'. There was the sense that hillbillies were essentially different to other members of modern western society. Hillbillies were absolutely contained in their poverty and their rurality. Unlike the general working poor, they existed parallel to society, rather than beneath it, and as such did not possess the possibility of upward mobility. Further, while they were white, there was something about their Anglo-Celtic racial purity, their isolation from civilised society, their profound lack of education and their development of a culture out of time and place from the rest of America that marked them as virtually a different race. Illustration of this essential difference between hillbillies and the rest of society can be seen both in the extract from *Variety* and in Tex Morton's anecdote that a swing fan could absolutely not appreciate hillbilly music, and vice versa. The use of 'poor white trash' – as well as implying that all Blacks are trash – was the late twentieth-century linguistic inheritor of this way of delineating within whiteness.

### **Theatres of Respectability**

Despite the ridicule, both perceived and real, of the swing fan, hillbilly music could enter the domain of the high-brow world. Indeed, there were, in the 1930s at least, theatres in which hillbilly music could gain some respectability, although this respectability was still a 'radio oddity'.

Just as swing music began to be heard on the ABC in the mid 1930s, 'hillbilly' music began to make an appearance not long after. As we have seen, Tex Morton toured with Jim Davidson's big band in 1937. Indeed, Morton performed with Jim Davidson frequently in the late 30s and early 40s. At the end of 1939 he was booked by the ABC for a ten week season, during which he appeared with Jim Davidson in Sydney six times

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<sup>35</sup> Clinton Walker, *Buried Country*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 2000.

a week and with Davidson's Melbourne equivalent Harry Bloom.<sup>36</sup> In 1942 Tex had a weekly after-dinner show on the ABC.<sup>37</sup> Morton's familiar association with Davidson and the ABC meant that his music and persona could crossover into the world of respectable light entertainment.

Davidson himself featured hillbilly songs in his repertoire during the 1930s and 40s. Or, to be precise, the orchestras he conducted performed dance arrangements of songs associated with hillbilly music. Tunes such as 'In The Valley of the Moon', 'There's A Cabin In The Pines' and 'There's a Home in Wyomin'' recorded in 1933 and 1934 were 'hillbilly' in subject matter alone. John Warren's well-enunciated tenor bore little resemblance to the 'hillbilly music' emerging from America at the time, nor did Davidson's lush string and horn arrangements.<sup>38</sup> This perhaps says more about the fashion for dance bands to 'swing' in the 1930s. Taking music from another genre - hillbilly - and re-arranging it in order for it to 'swing' would have demonstrated the technical and virtuosic abilities of Davidson's orchestra.<sup>39</sup>

The position of hillbilly music in Australian society in the mid-twentieth century adds some new understandings to Johnson's characterisation of society as being marked by 'high-brow' and 'low-brow'. Firstly, it shows that there was a culture even lower than low-brow. Secondly, it shows that the categories were not as inflexible or as 'taken for granted' as they might appear. Rather, there were opportunities for high-brows to listen to hillbilly music, even if such opportunities were mediated by institutions like the ABC.

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<sup>36</sup> *Music Maker*, November 1939.

<sup>37</sup> *Music Maker*, June 1942

<sup>38</sup> Jim Davidson, *Yodellin' Jive*, Kingfisher Cassettes, Port Macquarie, 1992.

<sup>39</sup> Johnson and Whiteoak, *op cit*, p 377.

## **‘What Does the Word ‘Hillbilly’ Mean To You?’**

From its emergence in the 1930s, country music had assumed a role as popular music’s low status ‘other’. By the 1950s, this identity had become a problem for many people in the country music community. For many commentators, the word ‘hillbilly’ had lost its ironic and satirical connotations and was a singularly negative term. They saw it as encapsulating all the things that arbiters of culture and taste thought wrong with country music. Their music’s name was, they argued, one of the reasons why it occupied such a low place on the cultural ladder. Change its name, and you would change its status, or so the argument went. There were three, interrelated, reasons why *Spurs* and *Spotlight* sought to eradicate the word ‘hillbilly’: firstly, because it conjured up images of idiocy and moral degeneracy; secondly because it was an American term; and thirdly because it was a term invented for commercial reasons. Let us look at these three reasons in detail.

### **‘Empty Hooch Bottles’ and ‘Stupid Ditties’: The Degenerate Hillbilly**

As is demonstrated by the extract from *Variety* (quoted above), one of the popular conceptions of hillbillies was of a poor, isolated, uneducated, virtually illiterate, alcoholic, feuding, sexually degenerate, possibly inbred, white sub-race. The feelings of unease about the name and its connotations were summed up by Garth Gibson in a 1956 edition of *Spurs* in an article titled ‘Give It A Name’:

Have you ever realised just how much those who are against Western music use ‘Hillbilly’ as a derogatory term? Ever noticed what great ammunition it is for those supercilious radio announcers who sometimes take Western sessions? Ever noticed that anyone who really knows anything about Western music will never be heard using it.

Think about it, what does the word ‘Hillbilly’ mean to you? Does it give you the impression of clean, wholesome music, sung by artists who sing just because they want to sing, with lyrics that may be sad or cheerful but never objectionable. Or does it convey the impression of an old hobo sitting in a shack surrounded by empty hooch bottles, crooning stupid ditties to

himself? Well? What do you think? The popular conception of a 'Hillbilly' has always been something like this... A barefoot, bearded, unwashed old codger

Is it any wonder that people who don't like Western music use the word in derision, and point out that music which originated with people like 'Hillbillies' can't have much to commend it? The use of this word by people who should know better is doing untold harm to the cause of Country and Western music in general. Let's stop using it – and THIS MEANS YOU!<sup>40</sup>

The same issue of *Spurs* also published a photo of Melbourne hillbilly performer Tex Banes which perfectly illustrated Gibson's description. The photo of Banes was, indeed, the popular conception of the hillbilly - 'a barefoot, bearded, unwashed old codger' - although in Banes' version, the beard was fake and the bare feet made particularly grotesque via the addition of prosthetic toes. [See Fig 11]

Despite, or rather because of, the persistent use of the hillbilly image, Gibson's concerns were echoed two months later by Violet Adams, who had 'A Few Observations On A Vital Subject', the main one being that it was time for a name change: 'Doesn't Country and Western sound dignified and respectable? While 'hillbilly' can never sound anything but cheap and common and degrading?'<sup>41</sup> For Gibson, Adams and others, the term hillbilly wilfully misrepresented the lifestyles and attitudes of country singers. Its characterisation of the artists' life as one of wanton degeneracy rendered the music itself degenerate. It was a caricature, of that Gibson and the others were aware; but it was a caricature with large degree of recognition and currency.

Bourdieu has observed that for a broadly middle-class audience the success of a work of art is directly linked to the ethic displayed by the lifestyle of the artist.<sup>42</sup> For the country music community, the 'ethic' of the artist's 'lifestyle' was directly linked to the kind of

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<sup>40</sup> *Spurs*, April 1956. Emphasis in original.

<sup>41</sup> *Spurs*, June 1956.

<sup>42</sup> Bourdieu, *op cit*, p 48.

work he did. This was one of the reasons why these commentators favoured the use of 'country and western' – because it implied the working life of the cowboy or stockman. His work was done alone, was physically gruelling and was undertaken far from the city and its associated vices. It was work, which was, by implication, morally pure. This was in contrast to the work of the hillbilly, which in the popular imagination was distilling illegal moonshine liquor, when he was not merely drinking it.

That the lyrics of a country song, in Gibson's words, 'may be sad or cheerful but never objectionable' was also a key component in 'hillbilly's' moral unsuitability as a term. Indeed, the subject matter of country songs was *particularly* clean and wholesome, which was certainly not implied by the term 'hillbilly'. Another active contributor to *Spurs*, Joan Bailey, wrote in 1956 that her love for 'our kind of music' was due to its purity, simplicity and morality: 'I cannot honestly remember ever hearing a real Western number that could not be sung quite freely in mixed company of any age (I'm speaking of genuine Western tunes, not Hillbilly comedy).'<sup>43</sup> Gibson, too, was concerned with cleanliness: 'country music has always been one of the cleanest types of music, and it is very seldom a Country song has lyrics even half as objectionable as the trash which floods the country under the guise of 'Popular' music.'<sup>44</sup>

The desire for 'our kind of music' not to have connotations with debauchery was also evidence of broader concerns about impurity in post-World War Two Australia. Gibson's comments that much pop music had lyrics that were 'objectionable' were obliquely referring to the newest development in pop music: rock 'n' roll. Rock 'n' roll had begun to arrive in Australia in the mid 1950s and with it the sexually-suggestive lyrics of songs like 'Shake Rattle and Roll'. Country music was positioning itself as a wholesome alternative to these latest developments.

*Spurs* considered 'cowboy music' a more appropriate description of their music because the activities of the cowboy and the sentiment of his lyrics were 'clean' and 'wholesome'.

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<sup>43</sup> *Spurs*, March 1956.

<sup>44</sup> *Spurs* July 1956.

By the 1950s, the cowboy had become the antithesis of the hillbilly, embodying clean living, a strong work ethic and good manners. As Roger Horrocks has argued, the cowboy was not just the embodiment of such values, he was their protector and communicator by virtue of his physical strength, resourcefulness and place roaming the prairies.<sup>45</sup>

Singing Westerns were described by *Spurs* as 'good clean entertainment'<sup>46</sup> and were personified by Gene Autry. *Spurs* was enamoured with Autry's wholesome image, even publishing 'The Gene Autry Code', ten rules which real cowboys live by: for example, 'A cowboy is a non-drinker and a non-smoker' and 'A cowboy is clean about his person, in thought, word and deed.'<sup>19</sup> Australian singing cowboy and children's performer Smoky Dawson also produced a 'Code of the West' which was a checklist of tasks and qualities. Children were to tick off such demands as 'Brushed my teeth morning and night', 'Practised good sportsmanship at all times' and 'Was clean in my thoughts, word and deeds', before 'bunking down each night'.<sup>47</sup> [See Fig. 10.]

*Spurs* writers also considered the sound of cowboy music and its formal conventions aesthetically and morally superior to those of hillbilly music. *Spurs* characterised cowboy music as one cowboy or cowgirl singing and accompanying him or herself on the Spanish guitar, while hillbilly music was characterised by groups of men playing numerous instruments such as the banjo, fiddle or jug. An anonymous article of 1953 distinguished between hillbilly music – rowdy jugband music fuelled by family feuds and moonshine – and cowboy music – solo, reflective and lonesome.<sup>48</sup> Or, as Joan Bailey wrote in 1956, 'What could be better than the strum of a solo guitar?'<sup>49</sup> For Bailey, solo music was, by virtue of its simplicity, both more natural and purer 'sounding' and, as it required little technical skill to play, was a more natural expression of the cowboy life.

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<sup>45</sup> Roger Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity in Popular Culture*, Macmillan, London, 1995, p 56.

<sup>46</sup> *Spurs*, March 1955

<sup>19</sup> *Spurs*, March 1955.

<sup>47</sup> 'Code Of The West', *Kellogs Wild West Club*, Sydney, c1955.

<sup>48</sup> *Spurs*, August 1953.

<sup>49</sup> *Spurs*, Feb 1956.

That the minimalism of the cowboy sound was itself a formal construction was not a consideration for Bailey. It seemed and sounded naïve and therefore was identified with being pure and natural. As Aaron Fox and Simon Frith have observed, the authenticity of the singer tends to be communicated by sounding real, rather than necessarily being real.<sup>50</sup>

'Hillbilly music', on the other hand, because it was performed in a group, implied a level of technical ability, organization and professionalism. This perceived artificialness created an interesting tension with hillbillies' perceived lack of education. On the one hand hillbillies were backwards and unsophisticated; on the other they were playing a style of music that required musical skill and education. They were a peasant people who did not play folk music. This tension was somewhat resolved by the idea that hillbillies were playing music to sell rather than simply 'singing because they want to sing', as we shall see later.

Sensitivity to the immorality of the word hillbilly was also one part of the general tendency of Australian musicians and audiences to favour the sentimental, the gentle, the nostalgic and the song with the moral over the bawdy, the bluesy and the morally transgressive. It has been popular to equate Australia's embrace of cowboy performers with the outback's wide-open spaces and the working tradition of the stockman. This theory has paid too much credence to the idea that the lyrics are realistic rather than romantic and not enough to the sound of the music and the lyrics' implications. As the favouring of the 'cowboy' over the 'hillbilly' shows, Australian interest in country music had as much to do with an interest in ethics, respectability, lifestyle and modernity as it did with a spiritual connection to the landscape.

*Spurs'* valuing of solo over group music was indicative of Australian country music culture's rejection of group-performed music and formal experimentation in general. In

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<sup>50</sup> Aaron Fox, 'The Jukebox of History: Narratives of Loss and Desire in the Discourse of Country Music', *Popular Music*, 11/1, 1992, p 69; Simon Frith, *Music For Pleasure: Essays In the Sociology of Pop*, Polity Press, London, 1998, p 100.

# CODE OF THE WEST

NAME.....

BIRTHDAY.....

ADDRESS.....

## MY HEALTH CODE

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
Washed my hands, combed my hair before meals.																														
Brushed my teeth morning and night.																														
Cleaned my fingernails.																														
Had a good breakfast.																														
Played outdoors in fresh air.																														
Was careful of my health habits for a strong body.																														

## MY CITIZENSHIP CODE

Proud of my Country and its flag.																														
Respectful of my parents.																														
Abided by the law.																														
Was honest and loyal in my actions.																														
Helped my friends and neighbours.																														
Was clean in my thoughts, words and deeds.																														
Did my share willingly.																														

## MY RANGE CODE

Came first time I was called.																														
Remembered to say "please" and "thank you".																														
Looked both ways before crossing streets.																														
Swam between flags and obeyed lifesavers.																														
Practised good sportsmanship at all times.																														
Upheld the honour of my school.																														
Followed all orders with a smile.																														

Check this Code before bunking down each night!

RANCH FOREMAN (Mother or guardian to sign here when chart is completed)

Figure 10

addition to favouring the sentimental over the harder-edged styles, Australian audiences favoured the established form of one cowboy, one guitar over the bands that had started to gain popularity in the USA in this period. As we saw in Chapter One, this was due to specific historic reasons: firstly, the lack of blues performance models; secondly, the taste for the sentimental in Australian culture in the early to mid twentieth century; and thirdly, that due to economic concerns early Australian hillbilly music was musically minimal, thus emphasising the songs' moral or message.

The early development of the sound of Australian country music was to have ramifications in the 1950s. By this stage, two decades on, a tendency had hardened into a dictate. While harder-edged, band-style 'honky-tonk' music was on the ascendency in America in the 1950s, largely through the popularity of Hank Williams, Australian audiences remained largely unmoved by such developments. In 1959 Tex Morton toured Australia with Roy Acuff and his Smoky Mountain Boys, an accomplished American band with a high reputation in their own country. The tour was a financial disaster, however, and due to poor ticket sales had to be cancelled after just three shows. While audiences continued to find Morton's act appealing, Acuff's group were greeted with a lack of interest.<sup>51</sup>

### **'There Are No Hillbillies In Australia': Geographic Accuracy**

The second reason that *Spurs* and *Spotlight* objected to the term 'hillbilly' music was that it was too American. While 'cowboy' and 'country and western' were also terms with American origins, commentators saw them as having more applicability to the Australian rural experience than did 'hillbillies':

There should never be any reference to 'hill-billy' unless you're speaking of real 'mountain music'. Most of the singers today are classified as 'western'

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<sup>51</sup> Graeme Smith, *Singing Australian*, Pluto Press, Melbourne, 2005, p 95.

or 'country song' stars. It's correct to refer to 'hill-billy' only when it's the authentic Tennessee Mountain music.<sup>52</sup>

In 1954 Ron Folks stated that while 'the original American singers were called 'hill-billies'' Australia's music was not their inheritor. Rather than country music being an adapted form, originating in America, its origins were 'our own great open spaces'<sup>53</sup> For *Spurs*, country music in Australia had sprung, naturally, from the landscape, rather than as a local variant of an international form. Indeed, its cultural value lay in its national naturalness.

The naturalness of cowboy music in Australia was a result not just of the landscape, but also of the work done in it. As Bob '2-Gun Got-A-Licence' Fricker explained:

There are no 'hillbillies' in Australia. It's a term of derision, not endearment. The word 'cowboy' is all right but there are only a few of them, right up the top of Australia. I think 'music country style' or 'songs of the stockmen' is a better caption for this type of music – or perhaps 'bush ballads'.<sup>54</sup>

Readers of *Spurs* magazine tended to agree with its writers that the term 'cowboy' had more authentic connotations with Australia than did the word 'hillbilly'. Letters pages tended to paraphrase readers' concerns. For instance, in February 1954, *Spurs* wrote that 'Enid Jarrett, Casino, thinks that the term 'Hillbilly' music belongs to America and not Australia. Enid is all for our singers being referred to as 'cowboy' singers, being so much different to the real 'Hillbilly''.<sup>55</sup>

Other writers in *Spurs* and *Spotlight* preferred the term 'folk music'. Within the pages of *Spurs* and *Spotlight*, 'folk' was increasingly used interchangeably with 'country' and 'Australian cowboy' music. Performers who included a large degree of stockman,

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<sup>52</sup> *Spurs*, February 1955.

<sup>53</sup> *Spurs*, April 1954.

<sup>54</sup> *Spurs*, October 1952.

<sup>55</sup> *Spurs*, February 1954.

cowboy or roughriding songs in their repertoire – such as Smoky Dawson, Buddy Williams and Tex Morton - were often referred to as ‘folk singers’.<sup>56</sup> In reference to these artists, the term had achieved a level of ubiquity by the mid 1950s. A 1952 edition of *Music Maker* described Dawson as an ‘Australian cowboy and folk singer’, although it did so within its regular ‘hillbilly cavalcade’ column,<sup>57</sup> which shows the degree to which the terms were still interchangeable, at least for a broader audience, in this period.

In 1955 Burl Ives visited Australia. Ives was an actor, singer, broadcaster and writer and who had popularised many American folk songs. Ives had already recorded American folk songs for the Library of Congress and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and as part of his Australian tour he collected and performed Australian folk songs. According to *Spurs*, some sections of the Australian media were claiming that Ives had ‘discovered’ these songs. Writers for *Spurs* considered this claim, and the publicity generated by Ives’ tour, to be outrageous. They argued that the fact that an American was congratulated for uncovering ‘hidden’ Australian folk songs ignored the existence of a living Australian folk tradition; a tradition which happened to be called hillbilly or cowboy music.

In an article titled ‘Australia to the Fore’, ‘Matilda’ took issue with an article in the mainstream press. This article had pondered the irony implicit in the fact that Australian artists imitated American ones, while it took an American to draw attention to our own bush ballads. ‘Matilda’ used Smoky Dawson, who ‘sincerely endeavours to bring Australia to the fore’, as evidence to the contrary.<sup>58</sup>

Joan Bailey took up ‘Matilda’s’ argument two issues later. There were many artists whose recordings had an ‘Australian air’, such as Dusty Rankin and Slim Dusty, Bailey claimed. Indeed, Bailey went on, ‘the list is endless, and no stretch of the imagination could call these ‘poor’ compositions. Bailey’s praise was, however, given conditionally, and an already Australian music form could do with developing more Australianisms:

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<sup>56</sup> For instance, *Spurs*, August 1955.

<sup>57</sup> *Australian Music Maker and Dance Bands News*, November 1952.

<sup>58</sup> *Spurs*, June 1955.

All the same, I'd like to see our singers make more use of the splendid material available. Australia 'lives on the sheep's back,' so what about some more 'sheep songs', and a tribute to the sheepman's best friend – the faithful working dog. Remember, we're not in Texas where only cattle and horses count.<sup>59</sup>

For the writers of *Spurs* and *Spotlight*, country music should reflect the real Australian experience. This would disarm 'critics', 'supercilious radio announcers' and other elites who objected to the Americanism of hillbilly music:

What is wanted ...is an assurance that our songs are songs about Australia – written in Australian words, without reference to prairies or coyotes...but bringing into prominence our plains, cattle stations, and even our country towns...And once the critics see that we are singing about the things that are typically Australian, they will have no cause to grumble. Indeed, they will be forced to admit that our cowboy music is typically Australian.<sup>60</sup>

Embedded in the excerpt above was the assumption that 'the critics' dismissed Australian country music as being too imitative and that cultural value was largely determined by the music's overt 'Australianness'. It is notable that the writers of *Spurs* and *Spotlight* saw respectability as synonymous with national distinctiveness in this period. The equation of respectable culture with cultural nationalism tells us significant things about the demands of cultural purity in the 1950s and the impact that had on the identity of country music.

The post-War period was marked by a growing accessibility to culture with an American origin. The gradual shrugging off of cultural dependency on Britain - a process exacerbated by the strategic realignments of World War Two - had resulted in an increasing amount of and access to American popular culture. This 'flood' of American culture resulted in a distinct sense of anti-American sentiment. Interestingly, this

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<sup>59</sup> *Spurs*, August 1955.

<sup>60</sup> *Spurs*, January 1953

sentiment united the more extreme sides of politics, if for different reasons. For communists, socialists and those seeking an Australian working-class identity, American popular culture represented a threat to the development of this identity. For cultural conservatives, personified by the long-serving Liberal Prime Minister Robert Menzies, comic books, singing cowboys and American films represented a threat to Australia's traditional ties to Britain and its absorption of their cultural products (such as the BBC).<sup>61</sup>

For those on the left side of cultural politics in this period, music was an important factor. In the 1950s, historians such as Russel Ward and John Manifold collected nineteenth-century Australian folk songs in an attempt to identify a unique expressive culture. Ward and Manifold argued that these songs represented an expression of working-class culture and evidence that Australian culture had developed somewhat independently of Britain and America.<sup>62</sup> Some of the writers of *Spurs* and, moreso the writers of *Spotlight* with its more historical, critical perspective, shared this view. While not espousing the radical politics of these Marxist historians, they were keen to locate a uniquely Australian history for 'their' music. Consequently, they argued that Australian country music sprang directly from the continuing working tradition of the outback worker, particularly the stockman.

Certain longstanding characteristics of country music in Australia were developed in this period and as a response to such cultural trends. Most notably, this period saw the equation of 'real' country music with a nineteenth-century folk tradition and the subsequent development of the term 'bush ballad' to describe not just nineteenth-century folk music but contemporary country music was one of its results.

Eric Watson was a founding editor of *Spotlight* and writer for *Spurs*. He was also an active contributor to the debate about identity and terminology in their pages. Watson went on to write *Country Music In Australia* in the 1970s and 80s and institutionalised

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<sup>61</sup> See: Richard White, 'Combating Cultural Aggression': Australian Opposition to Americanisation' *Meanjin*, Volume 39, October 1980.

<sup>62</sup> See: John Manifold, 'Who Wrote The Ballads?', *The Realist Writer*, 12, 1963; and Russell Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Oxford University Press, 1978.

the cultural nationalist strand of country music historiography in Australia. Thus, the alignment of country music with cultural nationalism was, largely, the result of concern about country music's lack of respect in this period.

Two conclusions can be reached about the fact that the country music community in the 1950s saw national distinctiveness as a way of commanding respect. Firstly, it shows that not only did *Spurs* and *Spotlight* reflect the anti-Americanisation sentiment of Australian culture but that they proposed a decidedly radical solution to the issue: promote and celebrate local cultures. In doing so they implicitly sided with the left-wing tendency to locate rural folk cultures as evidence of national distinctiveness. Given the popular conception of country music as politically conservative, even 'redneck', in the 1980s and 90s, this is notable and shows us how the politics of cultural nationalism have shifted in the last few decades of the twentieth century. Secondly, it shows how country music's avowed connections to nationalism in the 1970s, 80s and 90s were not innate. Rather, they were the result of specific historic forces and cultural battles in the 1950s.

### **'Disturbing Conclusions': The Monetary Gain of 'Hillbilly'**

'American' and 'commercial' were often interchangeable terms in this period. As well as being an American term, 'hillbilly' was also criticised for being invented for commercial gain. As such, *Spurs* and *Spotlight* saw it as the antithesis of the Australian folk music they were trying to present and support. It was a well-established fact within the Australian country music community at the time that Ralph Peer had coined the term in an attempt to sell more records. This rendered it inauthentic and ill-equipped to describe country music. To name something is to claim it as one's own. 'Hillbilly' music had been named by the wrong person and done in bad faith. Renaming would, it was hoped, reclaim it for the musicians who played it and the audience who liked it.

*Spurs* and *Spotlight* characterised Ralph Peer as the villain in the story. In 1960, *Spotlight* described him as a businessman who saw an opportunity to exploit an untapped

rural market and coined a suitably catchy term for the genre. Garth Gibson wrote that 'Ralph Peer, seeking a new name for a new class of music, came up with the term 'hillbilly, a word which in my opinion has done more harm to country and western music than any other single factor.'<sup>63</sup> An important 'fact' for the country music community in the 50s and 60s was that 'hillbilly' was a term invented by a businessman, not by the musicians themselves. In drawing this conclusion, *Spurs* chose to ignore the possibility that the musicians themselves had been complicit with industry men in inventing and popularising the term, whether for popularity or as an ironic, power-inverting, gesture. In this way, *Spurs'* concerns tell us more about the demands for authenticity and respectability in Australia in the 1950s than they do about music marketing in America in the 1920s.

*Country and Western Spotlight* consistently and strenuously argued this point too. John Edwards wrote a series of editorials on the history of hillbilly music and the various efforts to make it commercial. In 1956 he wrote in favour of eradicating the term 'hillbilly' in favour of 'country and western' and pointed out that both it and the term 'race records' were detestable labels, designed by record companies as good marketing tools. Those performers that played the part of hillbillies were, therefore, acting in bad faith and undermining the efforts of authentic performers.

In *Spurs* Violet Adams was critical of those artists who called themselves hillbillies:

After giving this considerable thought, I have come to the disturbing conclusion that these people are in the business, not for the betterment and advancement of Country and Western music, but for the monetary gain only...What great allies they must prove to be to those radio announcers and other people who have a 'down' on Country and Western music.<sup>64</sup>

Adams and others do not deny the power of the term, indeed it started to take on an almost magnetic attraction in their descriptions. Adams' description indicates an interesting contradiction in the argument against 'hillbilly'. It was characterised as a

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<sup>63</sup> *Country and Western Spotlight*, April 1960.

<sup>64</sup> *Spurs*, June 1956.

detestable label, yet one possessing a powerful, almost hypnotic, power. The fact that 'hillbilly' music was appealing to 'hillbilly' audiences was taken as evidence that the audience was being duped, rather than the possibility that the audience themselves might find something amusing and ambivalent in the term.

We saw earlier how for *Spurs* magazine, hillbilly music could be simultaneously affected and lowbrow. Or, in other words, it employed sophisticated talent for unsophisticated purposes. One of the ways in which *Spurs* and *Spotlight* resolved this apparent contradiction was through the idea that overtly hillbilly music was created and performed for money, rather than for self-expression and artistic pleasure. Dressing up in overalls and floppy hats, blowing jugs, fiddling furiously, idiotically mugging for camera were all examples of the efforts some musicians would go to play up to the public's stereotypes and consequently to sell records. There is a conflation of popular with lowbrow here. Peer's invention worked. Hillbilly music, by its very popularity, was rendered embarrassing, lower class and base. For a community that was anxious about the perceived attitudes of highbrow critics, there was a perception that hillbilly music was trying to be popular. It was hillbilly's popularity and overt commercialism that was marginalizing the purer, more authentic, Australian cowboy song.

Bourdieu has observed that to achieve cultural status in bourgeois society, a work of art must conform to several criteria. These include the apparent lack of an economic imperative in its production.<sup>65</sup> Country music's commentators in Australia in this period had internalised such a demand and felt the need to distinguish between real, non-commercial country music and commercial hillbilly music. Just as the demand for music to be morally worthy and authentically Australian demonstrated the developing middle-class taste of country music critics, so too did the demand that the music be non-commercial in origin.

As well as worrying that the word hillbilly had commercial connotations, writers of *Spotlight* also worried that hillbilly music had become commercial-ised. *Spotlight's*

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<sup>65</sup> Bourdieu, *op cit.* p 42

passion was 'golden-age' music: recordings of American artists done in the period 1925-35. *Spotlight* calls this 'pure folk music', but its contemporary name was hillbilly music. In a series of articles, over several issues in 1956, John Edwards and Garth Gibson argued that since 1935 'pure folk music' had been commercialised by 'recording executives who, compelled by the profit motive, tried to mould the music into a fast-selling product.'<sup>66</sup> Recording executives hadn't only invented 'Hillbilly'; they had also changed its music.

As well as simply being superior because of its authentic origins, 'pure folk music' also had important stylistic difference to commercialised country and western. Edwards and Gibson believed that it was raucous rather than smooth; hard-edged rather than sweet; simple rather than unnecessarily technical and reliant upon 'larger accompaniments'; lead vocals that were rough and naïve rather than 'sweet and more sophisticated vocalising' and accompanied by backing vocals; and lyrics that were about issues that had relevance to the audience's lives, rather than vacuous escapism.<sup>67</sup> The rough-hewn and honest purity of folk music had been, according to these articles, 'watered down' into country and western.

Later, in a 1961 issue of *Spotlight*, Gibson questioned whether contemporary 'country music' deserved the name. He argued that a new style of pop music had evolved called 'country music' and that 'if this new style was correctly labelled as something totally different from country music, there'd be little to grumble about'. Gibson was referring to a style of music popularly known as the 'Nashville sound' which was developed in the late 1950s in response to country's perceived loss of market share to rock 'n' roll and was characterised by harmonised vocals and orchestral arrangements. Its critics saw it as lacking country's traditional rough edges.<sup>68</sup> Gibson went on to outline a set of rules which country music needed to adhere to in order to deserve its name. These were summarised as 'APPEAL, LYRICS, ACCOMPANIMENT, VOCAL and PRESENTATION'. These rules were detailed: ACCOMPANIMENT means no backing vocals and if there is

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<sup>66</sup> *Spotlight*, August 1956.

<sup>67</sup> *Spotlight*, October 1956.

<sup>68</sup> Joli Jensen, *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization and Country Music*, CMF Press and Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville and London, 1998.

‘anything that is sung behind the lead voice’ it must be ‘words and not simply sounds’; and PRESENTATION means that ‘the vocalist must be able to identify with the people to whom country music appeals, understand their emotions and share their tastes, before he can successfully sing country music.’<sup>69</sup>

Simplicity of arrangements was equated with purity. In this case that equation was centred around the sound of the country voice. The voice must remain uncomplicated by other voices and unnecessary arrangements. Nothing must obstruct the story that the country person is telling to his fellow country people. Commercialisation of country music was preventing a direct, authentic relationship between performer and audience.

Real country music should be musically minimal and rough-edged. This would ensure its identity as ‘pure’ and therefore non-commercial. This was a period in which the prevailing sound of country music in Australia was turned into a demand by elements of the country music media.

At the beginning of this chapter we saw how swing fans characterised hillbilly music as trashy partly in order to legitimise their own ‘low brow’ taste. Country music has also created an ‘other’ to denigrate. In Australia, since the 1950s, ‘real’ country music’s ‘other’ has tended to be music that is either too commercial or too American.

By doing this Gibson and others were able to place themselves and their authority higher than that of the average country fan by virtue of their taste. (Bourdieu’s homily ‘Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier’ is true here.) *Spotlight* was classifying itself as ‘professional’, ‘expert’, ‘knowledgeable’ through their stratification of taste. In some ways, perhaps, the country music commentators was aping the discourse of high culture.

Stratification within the subculture of country music has continued to occur after the 1950s. The 1990s, for instance, witnessed the increasing popularity of ‘alt country’. It became fashionable, transgressive even, amongst inner-city audiences to like such 1960s

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<sup>69</sup> *Spotlight*, Dec 1961.

country rock bands as The Byrds and Gram Parsons and contemporary artists such as Uncle Tupelo and The Jayhawks while delineating between them and mainstream country from Nashville and Tamworth. There was 'good' country music and 'bad' country music. I do not mean to suggest that aesthetic distinctions should not be made within a genre, but it is interesting to note the degree to which stratification becomes microscopic.

The articles, letters and editorials of *Spotlight* and *Spurs* in the 1950s and 60s reveal a constant and anxious discourse over definitions and terminology. Names provide distinction. They put up barriers and protect the thing they name from corruption. Eradicating the name hillbilly, these writers hoped, would better reflect real Australian country music, would disarm country music's detractors and would provide a future direction for the music to take.

The dedicated and long-lived campaign to change hillbilly music's name reveals the characteristic of embattled community-mindedness which country music culture embodies both in Australia and America. Country music has historically considered itself to be a denigrated form lacking the respect it deserved. Part of this acknowledgement of denigration was the strong sense of a community; a community defined and strengthened by adversity and perceived snobbishness.

*Spurs* and *Spotlight's* campaign was superficially successful. Due to their efforts and those of artists and other members of the country music community, 'country' or 'country and western' began to replace 'hillbilly' during the 1960s. By the late 60s and early 70s it was all but eradicated. The establishment of the Country Music Awards and the Country Music Festival in Tamworth in 1973 was the culmination of these efforts. Official titles such as these cemented the new terminology in the broader public's mind. Hillbilly had, by this stage, become increasingly marginalised, referring to either a very specific form of historic folk music, or a raucously comedic musical form, both clearly delineated from mainstream Australian country music.

*Spurs* and *Spotlight* did not work in isolation. Their arguments and campaign mirrored a concurrent movement away from the term 'hillbilly' in America at the time. There too, by the mid to late 1960s, country and western had all but replaced Hillbilly as a popular term.<sup>70</sup> In America in the 1990s and 2000s, 'hillbilly' came to refer to a particularly historicised musical form, sometimes interchangeable with bluegrass and encapsulated in the *O Brother Where Art Thou* film and accompanying soundtrack and concert at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville (a site with a cultural status and authenticity all of its own). Interestingly, such music's marginality has helped to give it arguably more cultural cachet than mainstream Nashville country. Hillbilly music has become respectable and popular with city audiences not by changing its name to country and western, but by being recognisably different to it.

Did *Spurs* and *Spotlight's* campaign work in a deeper way? Did eradicating the word hillbilly give Australian country music increased status? I would argue not. While some performers, such as Kasey Chambers and Slim Dusty, have crossed over into broader mainstream acceptance, country music as a genre has remained the subject of popular derision and frequent lampooning. Further, it has remained a signifier of a type of person. The 'swing fan' of Morton's anecdote can be easily substituted for the 'rock' or 'pop' fan of the latter twentieth century who dismisses country music as being below their taste. A taste for country music has remained a way in which to classify a person in an essential way.

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<sup>70</sup> Harkins, *op cit.*, p 101

## **'Our Kind Of Music'**

The movement to change the name of hillbilly music to country music not only reveals the effects of stratification of culture in Australia, but also the increasing organisation and professionalisation of its various fields of production. Renaming hillbilly music country music meant determining who country musicians and their audience were. This meant, increasingly, separating its audience from that of other musical genres.

Lawrence Levine provides us with a historical dimension to Bourdieu's observations about the class distinctions of culture and Lesley Johnson's arguments about high-brow and low-brow in Australian culture. In *Highbrow/Lowbrow* he argued that American culture in the mid nineteenth century was not delineated between 'high' and 'low' as it came to be later. For instance, audiences for Shakespeare plays and Italian opera were diverse both in class and race. However, the late nineteenth century saw an increasing 'bifurcation' of culture. This bifurcation saw a growing chasm between serious or 'legitimate' culture and popular culture.<sup>71</sup> The separation of cultural spheres was, according to Levine, part of the more general movements of modernity. A growing 'fragmentation of life'<sup>72</sup> saw increased professionalisation, specialisation, commercialisation, complexity and atomisation.

In terms of popular music, 'atomisation' can be referred to as 'genrefication'. The history of recorded popular music in the Twentieth century showed an ever-increasing sense of genrefication: the firming up of boundaries between styles; discrete target audiences; and audience identification with microscopic degrees of difference. The development of country music offers a fascinating example. The influences and styles of hillbilly music were various - Anglo-Celtic folk music; blues; gospel and spiritual music; Tin Pan Alley songwriting. Hillbilly music, as a discrete commercialised genre encapsulated all these elements. It was 'invented', as we have seen, by Ralph Peer in the mid 1920s.

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<sup>71</sup> Levine, *op cit.*, p 42.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p 206.

In Australia in the mid twentieth century, culture was in an ongoing process of bifurcating. The way in which hillbilly music tended to be characterised as *essentially* different to swing music and its audience as *essentially* different people is evidence of that. However, the total separation of country music from other musical forms - as we now know it in the early twenty-first century - was a task not completed until the 1970s. Certainly in the 1930s, atomisation was occurring gradually, conditionally and with exceptions. For instance, hillbilly music was still being played for non-exclusively hillbilly audiences, for example Tex Morton on the ABC. Indeed, one of the effects of the battle for respectability that the Australian country music community was engaged with in the 1950s was to more fully realise the bifurcation of its music from other genres and the separation of the identity of its audience from other popular music audiences.

Attached to the campaign to make hillbilly music respectful was an accompanying movement to create a distinct, self-aware country music community. *Spurs* and *Spotlight* hoped to galvanise a disparate group of musicians and audiences and to instil a sense of pride in 'their' music. Much of the language used to persuade readers not to use the term 'hillbilly' was the language of communal identity. Audiences were asked to 'get together' in order to create respect for 'our kind of music'.<sup>73</sup>

The delineation of country music as a discrete genre and its audience as a self-aware, coherent group, was done in a variety of ways. The first was to change the music's name. Commentators considered it important to have a name that was bestowed by the community itself and was a name that encapsulated the requisite sense of pride and respectability. The second was to educate audiences about their music's history. *Spotlight* in particular published a sustained and passionate series of articles about the history of American and Australian folk music which demonstrated that country music not only had a history, but had a history that was unique and special in comparison with other forms of popular music. The third was to set out a set of aesthetic criteria which Australian country music should adhere to in order to justify its name. For *Spotlight*,

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<sup>73</sup> *Spurs*, March 1956 and December 1955.

these criteria were detailed and prescriptive, and necessary to preserve country music from the threat of the Nashville sound. For *Spurs* the criteria were somewhat more flexible, but in general its writers valued the minimal style of the bush ballad as the highest form, being both more Australian and more wholesome.

A fourth, which I will discuss in more detail here, was to promote the idea of a country music community that was both large and widespread. Readers were invited to imagine a community of like-minded people stretching across Australia and across the seas. *Spurs* – with its sub-title ‘Australia’s Only National Hill-Billy Magazine’ – explicitly promoted the idea of country music being a countrywide phenomenon. Within its pages were frequent reports of activities around Australia, not just of the NSW coast and hinterland where the magazine was based: Tex Banes wrote regular letters reporting on the activities of the ‘Melbourne Hill-Billy Club’; Tim McNamara wrote a column titled ‘On The Road’ detailing his tours of Queensland; Lorraine Jolly wrote her ‘South Australian Letter’; and there were frequent reports of concerts and community events around the country. Dispatches even came from across the Pacific. Hal Stewart wrote from Canada and in every issue Americans and Canadians published letters requesting Australian pen pals.

There was also the sense that the country music audience was large and growing larger. We have already seen how non-country music publications such as *Music Maker* focussed almost exclusively, and usually incredulously, on country music’s popularity. *Spurs* magazine also made frequent mention of the size of audiences for country music performances. One 1956 article titled ‘Country Music Gets Them In’ detailed a Hank Snow concert at a cabaret dance hall in New York City: ‘All the big name dance and jazz bands had appeared there in the past, but a Country and Western singer had never trodden the boards of the stage until the promoter took what he thought was a chance and booked Hank Snow and his Rainbow Ranch boys.’ The result was a crowd of 1890 people but more than 3000 were turned away. Further, ‘Most of the audience were teenagers dressed in shirts and jeans’ which ‘Just goes to show that it isn’t only country folk who

go for our Western music.'<sup>73</sup> Within *Spurs*' obvious pleasure in large audience numbers also lay a possessiveness – a sense that 'our Western music' was essentially different from other forms of popular music and had a distinct audience.

*Spurs*' reports of the country music audience demonstrated not just their size and extent but also their importance in contributing to country music culture. The space given to amateur performances, community events, pen pals and unknown performers was unique within the field of music publications. It demonstrated an insistence that amateurism was a vital part of country music, as valid and as important as its star performers.

The battle for respectability for country music meant not only that hillbilly singers should be regarded as legitimate musicians, but also that their audience be transformed into informed connoisseurs. Audiences had to be educated as to the history and aesthetics of country music and its position as a unique musical form. And yet this process occurred while preserving and encouraging the folk-ness of country music – its links to the community and the importance it placed on amateurism. Indeed, hand in hand with the specialisation of country music that occurred in the 1950s and 60s went a recognition that country music had special links to the community. Part of country music's identity was an emphasis on the role of the audience.

Country music began to be broadcast on television in the 1960s. The most well-known and long-running show was Channel Nine's *Country and Western Hour* hosted by Reg Lindsay from 1964 to 1972. Even within the world of television, with its relatively high production values and large audiences, the *Country and Western Hour* tried hard to retain an image of casual performance and easygoing amateurism (and Lindsay himself had come to fame through an *Amateur Hour* performance in 1951). As well as featuring some well-known names such as Lily Connors and the Schneider Sisters, and Reg Lindsay, several performances on each show were given by relatively unknown performers, lending it the identity of an amateur hour. Further, performers were also the audience of the show – emerging from their seats on hay bales, rocking chairs or

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<sup>73</sup> *Spurs*, March 1956.

temporary front porches to provide some entertainment. The atmosphere was one of a casual get-together between friends and musicians, one the viewer had happened to drop in on.<sup>74</sup>

Country music continued to emphasise the importance of the audience not just as consumer but also as contributing to production. Indeed, since the 1950s it has been evident in areas as diverse as Slim Dusty songs and Nashville 'fan fairs'. Performers have been keen to emphasise their down-to-earthness and similarities to their audience. It has become one of the defining features of country music both in Australia and America. In Australia, it was partly the result of the battle for respectability. Part of that was the identification of an audience with knowledge, taste and requirements for their culture. Also, they were an audience that were essentially different to audiences for other musical forms. Part of the strategy for respectability was to delineate country music and its audience from other forms and to create identification and respect.

### **'The Last Of The Hillbillies?': Uses of the Hillbilly Sound and Image**

Despite the efforts of *Spurs* and *Spotlight* and other sectors of the country music community to eradicate the word hillbilly and develop a new, respectable identity for their music, Australian country performers continued to use the word 'hillbilly' and exploited a sense of hillbilly-ness throughout the 1950s. We have already touched on the hillbilly personas of Chad Morgan and Tex Banes. They, and other performers, chose an overtly hillbilly identity for two reasons: firstly, it enabled humour via its imagery; and secondly it allowed musical flexibility.

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<sup>74</sup> *Reg Lindsay's Country and Western Hour*, Channel Nine.

## The Hillbilly Image

Contributors to *Spurs* showed a range of attitudes to hillbilly clichés. Alongside the earnest declarations of moral purity and musical authenticity were humorous self-parodies. Indeed, the stereotypes that Garth Gibson and others recognised and deplored in the popular music media were also alive and well within country music publications too. For instance, a regular column entitled ‘Zeke Sez’ was written from the point of view of a semi-literate country bumpkin, replete with deliberate spelling mistakes and phonetic constructions, for example, ‘I still ain’t much goode on these noo fanguld ritin masheens toooo meny gadgutesd on em I reckon’.<sup>75</sup> American publications in the same period demonstrated a similar contradictory attitude towards the term ‘hillbilly’: discouraging its use on the one hand; exploring its comic possibilities on the other.<sup>76</sup>

From its appearance in the 1920s into the 1940s, hillbillies continued to appear on vaudeville and variety stages. For instance, ‘Norm Scott and His Singing Stockriders’ appeared at the Trocadero in 1942<sup>77</sup> and June Holm, ‘Australia’s Yodelling Cowgirl’, performed with variety shows such as Harry Wren’s ‘Folies Bergere’ in the mid 40s.<sup>78</sup> In the tradition of vaudeville and variety, hillbilly performers were often presented as comedic. For instance, Tex Ryan and Lucky Grills were a pair of ‘hilarious hillbillies who recently signed a contract to appear on the Tivoli Circuit.’<sup>79</sup> Hillbilly performers could share the same stage as jazz performers, but they had to be exaggeratedly marked as such. Their clothes and their repertoire marked them clearly ‘cowboys’ or ‘hillbillies’ and therefore a novelty.

The sense of hillbillies being hilarious was exploited by Morgan and Banes. But perhaps the ‘hilarious hillbilly’ who most successfully occupied a popular stage was Bob Dyer.

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<sup>75</sup> *Spurs*, October 1952.

<sup>76</sup> Pecknold, *op cit.*, p 115.

<sup>77</sup> *Music Maker*, May 1941.

<sup>78</sup> *Music Maker*, June 1948.

<sup>79</sup> *Music Maker*, February 1949.

Billed as 'The Last of The Hillbillies', Dyer, although being a Tennessean, was barely a hillbilly. Rather, he was an urbane personality who was able to crossover into a number of performance fields. He appeared on the British and Australian vaudeville circuit in the 1930s, Australian radio in the 1940s and went on to host the television quiz show *Pick A Box* from 1957 to 1971. Nevertheless, Bob Dyer's 1942 radio programme featured 'The Last of the Hillbillies and his Mountain Men' alongside a whole raft of hillbilly clichés: whooping and hollerin; and songs about a place where 'guns are law' and where 'automobiles ain't never been seen'.<sup>80</sup> Dyer's show was syndicated nationally in 1942 and broadcast every Thursday evening. Dyer was also popular with a non-country audience, as a 1947 *Music Maker* front cover showing Bob Dyer and his 'Range Riders' posing in Bob Dyer's 'Dude Ranch' attested.

Dyer's show and personality was predominantly comic in tone. It was a light, entertaining music show with an affectionate send-up of the hillbilly stereotype thrown in for good measure, with Dyer's American heritage providing an added element of exoticism. As such it is a good example of the way in which hillbilly music could be acceptable light middlebrow entertainment if promoted as clearly comic.

Performers such as Banes and Morgan took the comic potential of the hillbilly image of rural idiocy and backwardness into the realm of the grotesque. Banes, was a regular *Spurs* contributor, an active member of the Melbourne Hillbilly Club and the leader of a hillbilly band 'The Hayseeds'. Within the Hayseeds set, Banes would do an act where he performed with his 'Hillbilly Hornchestra' – a homemade contraption made up of a washboard, bicycle horns, cowbells and a rusty tin pot. Photos of Banes show him dressed in full Hillbilly regalia – fake beard, checked shirt, sack-cloth pants – playing the Hornchestra with his fingers and prosthetic toes. *Spurs* described his performance as 'a riot of sheer comic delight.'<sup>81</sup> Indeed, there was no intention that Banes' persona was to be taken seriously. The comedy of the hillbilly routine marked it in contrast to heartfelt cowboy or western music. Photos of Banes show the difference between his country and

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<sup>80</sup> 'Bob Dyer Radio Program c1940', in *Bob Dyer and Donn Reynolds*, Kingfisher Cassettes, Port Macquarie, 1997.

<sup>81</sup> *Spurs*, April 1956.

western persona and his hillbilly character. [See Figs. 11 & 12.] Indeed, Banes himself commented that while he was a hillbilly he preferred the 'western style of singing'.<sup>82</sup> The hillbilly persona was a comedic foil to the rest of the Hayseeds act. The use of comedy was one way in which country artists could still play at being hillbillies.

As we saw in the introduction to this chapter, Chad Morgan's image was central to his identity as a hillbilly performer. The degree to which Morgan valued this image can be illustrated with an anecdote, which although possibly apocryphal none the less demonstrates the centrality of his image. Morgan came upon fame suddenly. A chef in the army who wrote songs to entertain his friends, his appearance on *Australia's Amateur Hour* in 1952 made him almost instantaneously a household name. He went on to come second overall and sign a deal with Regal Zonophone. The recording of his *Amateur Hour* song 'The Sheik From Scrubby Creek' became a best seller for Regal Zonophone and Morgan's image - cloth hat and buck teeth - a popularly recognisable one. Shortly after the release of 'The Sheik' however, Morgan was involved in a serious car accident which knocked out his signature teeth. Not to be dissuaded, Morgan had false teeth put in following the original buck tooth pattern and embarked on a lengthy period of touring.

Images such as Morgan's and Banes' were not just funny, they also inverted existing hierarchical structures. Through its comic attitude, playing the part of a hillbilly enabled the performer to effectively own the stereotype. Rather than being reduced to a hillbilly by derogatory or supercilious commentators, the overtly hillbilly performer could ambush such an attitude through knowing self-parody. It was a strategy for respect that was vastly different to *Spurs* and *Spotlight's* campaigns.

The hillbilly image also enabled fans a sense of identification and a connection to a wider community. In response to *Music Maker's* series of articles about Bob Dyer, Banes took the opportunity to draw attention to the large and active hillbilly scene, and in particular its focus on amateurism. Banes wrote a letter to the editor: 'In case you don't know, Sir, Melbourne is alive with hill-billies who do radio and stage work, not professionally...So

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<sup>82</sup> *Spurs*, Sept 1955.



Figure 11



Figure 12



Mary and Rita on Stage.

Figure 13

you know now that Bob Dyer is not the last of the hill-billies.'<sup>83</sup> Banes' regular dispatches to *Spurs* made note not just of the musical performances going on in Melbourne, but also the day-to-day activities of the hillbilly club: numbers of members; the type of badge members received; and charity activities. To be a hillbilly offered young people a chance to join a club and wear a uniform.

Being a hillbilly was a recognisable role. It used easily-recognisable tropes and signifiers, particularly costumes, and had the appearance of an authentic Appalachian history. While often being comic in application, children could dress up as 'real hillbillies'. This made it an easily-marketable genre and one with which identification was easy. To call oneself a hillbilly was to automatically identify with a sub-culture. While, as a youth culture, it was losing some ground to the cowboy image, hillbilly culture managed to partly resolve this by being interchangeable with cowboy culture. For instance, a young Melbournian could join the hillbilly club, whose emblem was a cowboy.

Indeed, as far as Banes and the Melbourne Hillbilly Club were concerned, the hillbilly image and performance style offered a powerful way for an audience to become a distinct group with its own sets of identifications. It may not have been the type of audience self-identification *Spurs* was hoping for - with their interest in the wholesome cowboy image and Australian national identity - but it did show an interest in creating a distinct audience nonetheless.

## **Sound**

Being a hillbilly also opened performers up to musical experimentation and variety. The Schneider Sisters were another popular comedic hillbilly act during the 1950s and 60s. Mary Schneider played a homemade instrument known as the 'Schneiderphone' which, like Banes' Hornchestra, featured a washboard and bicycle horns. Rita Schneider accompanied on a more common instrument, a semi-acoustic, arch-top guitar.

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<sup>83</sup> *Music Maker*, August 1951.

Photographs of the Schneider Sisters showed them holding their Schneiderphone and invariably dressed up in cowgirl costume rather than recognisably hillbilly clothing. [See Fig. 13] However, their musical performances were a long way from the sentimentality of cowgirl songs. They were madcap, exaggerated, funny and fast.

Indeed, speed was one of the distinguishing features of a Schneider Sisters performance. Their appearance on a 1970 episode of *Country and Western Hour* featured a medley of well-known songs – such as ‘I’ve Been Everywhere Man’ – played at breakneck pace. The furious speed, strong backbeat and title of their 1957 single ‘Washboard Rock ‘n’ Roll’ inspired the liner notes of the accompanying CD to the 2001 ABC documentary *Long Way To The Top* to describe it as the first Australian rock ‘n’ roll song.<sup>84</sup> For a mid twentieth-century audience, however, their homemade instruments, their comic personas and their madcap performances marked the Schneider Sisters as hillbillies. Or, as *Spurs* called them, ‘Australia’s Craziest Hillbillies’.<sup>85</sup>

The Schneider Sisters were billed as hillbillies and played madcap, ‘crazy’ music. Yet they did not dress like hillbillies. There were examples of women dressing as hillbillies in American country music culture. The most famous was Minnie Pearl, a hillbilly comedian who appeared on the Grand Ole Opry stage and radio broadcasts from 1940 to 1991 and who wore ‘down home’ dresses and a straw hat with the price tag hanging from it. Interestingly, Minnie Pearl also sung sentimental and nostalgic songs, indicating the way in which the hillbilly in America, like the cowboy, could also be representative of lost rural types.<sup>86</sup> However, in Australia, the hillbilly image was exclusively comic and gendered in different ways; restricted to the bearded, the grotesque and the masculine. Combining a hillbilly sound and performance style with a cowgirl image enabled the Schneiders to experiment musically without compromising respectability.

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<sup>84</sup> *Long Way To The Top: Original Soundtrack from the ABC-TV Series*, ABC Music, 2001. Mary Schneider had a later career where she ‘yodelled the classics’, including the ‘William Tell Overture’.

<sup>85</sup> *Spurs*, February 1956.

<sup>86</sup> Kristine McCusker, *Lonseome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels*, University of Illinois Press, 2008, Introduction.

Other performers used curious percussion instruments. Tex and Lucky Grills (the 'hilarious hillbillies') featured what *Music Maker* could only refer to as 'the instrument': 'a fascinating combination of three cowbells, four carhorns, one pie dish, an army pannikin, a wood block, a bike bell, two jazzaphones, and, of course, the humble 'penny whistle.'<sup>87</sup>

It is notable that the most recognisably and self-consciously hillbilly acts of this period both used custom-made instruments with satirical names. Calling their contraptions a 'Hornchestra' or a 'Schneiderphone' was a satire, albeit a gentle one, of highbrow musical conventions such as orchestras and jazz instruments such as saxophones. Giving their ramshackle, stuck-together instruments such longwinded names lampooned the pomposity of jazz and classical music, and highlighted the place of hillbillies as separate from normal society and hilariously out of touch.

The Hornchestra and Schneiderphone, as well as referencing the American traditions of hillbilly music, also updated a local jazz tradition. As Bruce Johnson and John Whiteoak have observed, in the 1920s, jazz bands 'featured a drummer with interesting collections of 'jazz' - percussion instruments capable of producing what *Graphic of Australia* called 'a riot of jazz discordance'.<sup>88</sup>

Although Morgan accompanied himself on acoustic guitar, playing the pick 'n' strum style that was common to Australian hillbilly music, other elements of his sound marked him as altogether different to respectable country music. In particular, Morgan's voice was utterly unique in Australia at the time. Broadly Australian, it possessed whimsy and humour in its cadence. It also had echoes of more traditional hillbilly singing: a catch in his voice, a cry, an ability to flit into a head voice without going to a full yodel which produced a lonesome sound. Sometimes he sounded like a crow. Or a cockatoo. In many ways, Morgan was the most original country singer Australia produced in this period.

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<sup>87</sup> *Australian Music Maker and Dance Band News*, February 1949.

<sup>88</sup> Johnson and Whiteoak, *op cit.*, pp 374-375.

The majority of Australian performers of the time sang with a mild American accent. Even Tex Morton, who included many Australian folk songs in his repertoire, had a marked Texan twang in his voice, even his spoken-word performances. The Schneider Sisters and Chad Morgan were some of the few performers who sang in broad Australian accents. To be a hillbilly singer freed performers up from some of the more formulaic conventions of country music. To sing in an Australian accent was funny because it was unusual; the comedic possibilities of hillbilly music enabled originality. Interestingly, singers who have sung with broad Australian accents in the latter part of the twentieth century, such as John Williamson and Sara Storer, used their voices to emphasise the social realism and pathos of their songs, rather than as a comic device.

As a songwriter, Morgan was a satirist. 'The Sheik of Scrubby Creek' poked fun at male hubris and their belief in their own attraction to women. Later songs satirised other aspects of Australian small-town and conventional life: church, drinking and particularly marriage and romantic love were popular topics for Morgan. In general, Morgan's songs were detailed accounts of Australian country-life, almost like the country music equivalent of a Pieter Bruegel painting. They demonstrated an interest in the grotesque, the cartoonish, the hubristic and the misogynistic. They are an important contribution to Australian song.

Morgan would not have been able to sing and write in such a style if he had been a respectable cowboy performer. Being a hillbilly enabled him to reach beyond the confines of the sentimental cowboy style. The hillbilly performer asked not to be taken seriously, and thus could get away with more, in the tradition of the court jester who snuck social satire under the radar of laughter.

Morgan's existence beyond the boundaries of acceptable country music meant that he would be labelled as a comedic performer, rather than a serious country artist, for the rest of his career. He has been neglected by the Tamworth Country Music Festival and often

relegated to performing in shopping malls and busking, rather than the official concerts that are put on by the organisers.

The story of Chad Morgan was indicative of the splintering of comic country from serious country that occurred from the 1960s onwards. Indeed, one of the effects of *Spurs* and *Spotlight's* campaign to eradicate the word hillbilly was to delineate between these two forms. In some ways, the country music community's desire to rid themselves of the tag 'hillbilly' destined them for a future representation as humourless, sentimental and moralistic. Commentators were concerned that country music was not serious enough, while many critics saw it as too serious, or at least sentimental. Delineating between 'serious' and 'comedic' robbed country music of a lot of its vitality, flexibility and humour.

As we have seen throughout this thesis, the development of early Australian country music was marked by a rapid formalisation of musical style. In particular, the sound of one man or woman and one guitar, singing celebrations of rural life came to dominate. This style became known, retrospectively, as the bush ballad. In the 1950s, being an overtly hillbilly performer enabled some musicians to circumvent these generic restrictions. It allowed for musical flexibility, experimentation and exoticism. As compared to the rigid aesthetic strictures of cowboy and bush ballad songs, hillbilly music could branch out into other musical terrains, such as rock 'n' roll, jazz, swing or comedy, and use instruments other than the Spanish guitar to do so. In Morgan's case, it provided a format for subject matter and literary tone that was hard to find in other forms of country music in this period.

## **Conclusion**

Since its appearance in Australia in the 1920s and 30s, country music has been characterised as popular music's 'other': its backwards country cousin. The stratification of culture in Australia in the mid twentieth century has meant that country music occupied a low position within it. The responses from within the country music industry and community to their identity as a trashy 'other' have been varied and nuanced. On the one hand publications, critics and members of the audience have sought to raise their music's standing via claims to respectability. On the other, many country artists parodied their own identity as 'trashy'.

Ultimately, the former response came to dominate the culture of country music into the 1970s. While the tradition of the hillbilly comic had virtually died out by the end of the twentieth century, the identity of country music as wholesome, nationalistic and non-commercial (not as commercial as 'pop' anyway) had come to dominate. Ultimately, anxiety over hillbilly's name and status reinforced the prevailing trend of Australian country music towards sentimental nationalism. It encouraged musical minimalism over group work and formal experimentation. It also ushered in a new era of professionalism and organization, without losing its connection to amateurism and the broader community. All these effects of the battle to 'give it a name' have proved resonant and robust and have continued to define Australian country music.

Historians and sociologists have shown how Australian culture, and western culture in general, in the mid twentieth century was divided between high and low. These categories referred both to cultural products and as a way of distinguishing between discrete audiences. A study of hillbilly music in this period adds two things to this characterisation. Firstly, it shows that the categories of 'high' and 'low' are not comprehensive enough to give a clear picture of culture. Hillbilly music was both lower than low-brow and could, by using various strategies, attempt to change its status. Secondly, it shows ways in which low-brow culture could attempt an upward mobility in

this period. Most notably, it could do so by assuming a sense of local naturalness by linking culture with nationalism.

Since the 1950s, country music that did not display elements of the 'bush ballad', was too 'American' or too 'commercial', has been criticised by the country music community for giving their music a bad name. Australian musicians who play 'American-style' country have often looked overseas in an effort to find success. Their experience and strategies will be the subject of Chapter Four.

## Chapter Four

### **From New South Wales To Nashville: Australian Performers and Fans in America**

#### **Introduction**

In a 2008 appearance on the Late Show with David Letterman, Australian actress Nicole Kidman found herself explaining Australian country music. Although she was on the show ostensibly to talk about her upcoming feature film *Australia*, Letterman was more interested in discussing the career of Kidman's husband Keith Urban. Urban was, by 2008, one of the biggest names in American country music, despite being born in New Zealand and growing up in Australia. Letterman was surprised that an Australian would have heard much country music, let alone been inspired to play it. 'Is American country music popular in Australia?' Letterman asked. Kidman answered emphatically 'No.' As the interview progressed, Kidman sought to qualify her statement: 'I know I said there was no country music in Australia. There is. It's just not American country music...It's Australian country music...Please let's talk about the film.'

Kidman was fundamentally right. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Australian country music had become so localised, so intertwined with national content and contexts, that it operated largely independently of its American progenitors. While American country artists such as Garth Brooks, Shania Twain and Taylor Swift had been popular in Australia in the 1990s and 2000s, they used different strategies, images and musical styles to those of popular local country artists such as Kasey Chambers, Troy Cassar-Daley and the perennial Slim Dusty. Australian country music had, by this stage, so profoundly distanced itself from its American inspiration that it was able to position itself as a quintessentially Australian genre; if not *the* quintessentially Australian genre.

This fact would have struck an American audience as both noteworthy and strange. Indeed, Letterman was bewildered by the fact an Australian played country music and continued to return to it, puzzled, throughout the interview. The fact was that country

music in America was, by this time, popularly seen as a purely American genre. The need to claim indigenous roots, whether American or Australian (although interestingly, not British which had competing 'indigenous' folk forms) has been an essential part of country's self-image. In America, this was reinforced by several local characteristics: it had a popular history as a rural folk form; was often delivered in a 'yee-hah' twang; and its stars were, virtually without exception, white Americans. Further, for American coastal city audiences at least, it was also generally synonymous with 'American values' such as the family, evangelical religion and unguarded displays of patriotism and political populism.<sup>1</sup>

We should not take for granted that a cultural form originating in America should, some eighty years after its arrival, be considered an American form of music. Indeed, the identity of rock 'n' roll, although originating in the southern states of America has, since the 1960s been popularly recognised as a pan-western phenomenon. Further, the idea that an artist playing classical music is playing 'Austrian classical music' is equally unthinkable. Rather, country music has developed particular strategies and values that make it synonymous with nationalism. What is it about country music that inclines people to distinguish between Australian country and American country? What is its particular relationship to cultural nationalism? This chapter will attempt to answer these questions.

Publicity for Urban has acknowledged the paradox of a foreign artist becoming one of the most popular artists in such a nativist genre. It has mostly resolved this issue by paying tribute to the extraordinary individuality of Urban. As the biography on his website stated:

The road that Keith Urban has travelled to get here has been uniquely his own. How else on earth to explain how this kid, born in Whangarie, New

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<sup>1</sup> This identity had been reinforced by events following the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11th 2001. In the wake of these attacks, some American country singers - most notably Toby Keith - released songs that advocated revenge attacks. The Dixie Chicks, at the moment of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, stated that they were ashamed to come from the same State as President George Bush Jnr and subsequently a number of American country stations banned Dixie Chicks records from their playlists.

Zealand and raised in Caboolture, Queensland Australia, has grown up to somehow become one of the biggest stars in the very American world of Country music? <sup>2</sup>

However, Urban was not the first to travel down this road. Australian and New Zealand country singers have been touring, releasing records and publicising their music in America since the 1950s. While they have not reached the same destination as Urban, their journey has been riddled with similar issues of national identity and audience preconceptions. This chapter will look at the American careers of two acts in particular - the Le Garde Twins and Reg Lindsay - and the ways in which they negotiated their Australianness in establishing themselves in the American country tradition.

In 1971, Tom and Ted Le Garde – the Le Garde Twins - released ‘From New South Wales to Nashville’ as a single on New York-based Dot Records. It functioned as a biography, doubling as a piece of promotion and a philosophical manifesto:

We walked out of the outback with our worn-out pairs of boots  
And headed 'cross the ocean with our eyes on Nashville loot.  
Our accent's more down under than it really is at home  
But a country song's a country song wherever you call home.

Chorus:

From New South Wales to Nashville it's a long, long way to go  
With a tucker bag and a boomerang and a guitar hanging low.  
From continent to continent singing country songs we know  
From New South Wales to Nashville it's a long, long way to go.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.keithurban.net/biography.html> 22/08/2010

From Adelaide to Abilene it's the same old country beat.  
The accent doesn't matter, it's the tapping of the feet  
And the strumming of the guitar strings, the songs we sing in parts,  
But mainly it's the country that is there in people's hearts.

Well, we've travelled through this country and there's one thing  
we can say:

You've always been fair dinkum to these Aussies along the way.  
We can say you're really bonzer, which means you're really great,  
Give a tip of our Digger's Hats and say 'God bless ya' mate.'<sup>3</sup>

Within the history of American and Australian country music recordings *From 'NSW To Nashville'* is little more than a footnote. It barely registered on the Billboard charts; it does not appear on any greatest hits or compilations; and musically it is standard early 70s pop-country commercial fare – earnest, close-harmony singing set to a shuffling 2/4 beat. Yet it is a song worth listening to. It has much to say about Australian country performers in America. In this context it is an extraordinary document: a distillation of so many of the impulses felt, negotiated and exploited by Australian performers in a foreign land.

'From NSW To Nashville' reveals two themes that exemplify the experience of Australian country artists in America. Firstly, the way in which these artists performed their Australianness. Australian performers in America often reflected their audience's preconceptions by employing recognisable signifiers of Australianness, such as the boomerangs, tucker bags and Digger's hats of the Le Garde Twins song, and even unrecognisable ones that needed translation, such as 'bonzer'. However, this overt connection to Australianness was not static. Rather, in the Le Gardes' case, it was relatively muted in the 1950s and 60s and gradually emphasised more and more

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<sup>3</sup> The Le Garde Twins, *From NSW To Nashville*, (written by Tom Le Garde and Walter Evans), Dot Records '45, New York, c1971.

throughout the 1970s and 80s, demonstrating that national identity is not fixed, but situational and, in the case of country performers overseas, dependent on the changing expectations of the audience and varying strategies used to capture that audience's attention.

Part of the theme of performing Australianness was, ironically, how Australian performers played down the importance of their national heritage. The Le Garde Twins sing: 'From Adelaide to Abilene it's the same old country beat/The accent doesn't matter, it's the tapping of the feet', which is indicative of the way in which Australian artists often described their Australianness as superficial - an accent - which was merely the surface to the underlying spirit of country music. This is a spirit common to all nations: 'A country song's a country song wherever you call home'. Rural Australia could thus be described and imagined as intrinsically the same as rural America. This was reiterated by an American audience keen to locate a mirror image of the 'old west' and an American country music industry keen to describe country music as a global, homogenous, phenomenon with Nashville its world centre.

Secondly, this chapter will explore the idea of voyages by Australians to America (and particularly Nashville) as a secular pilgrimages. 'From NSW To Nashville' communicates a sense of a journey that is outside the parameters of normal experience: going to Nashville is a deeply held, almost uncontrollable, urge; it is a 'long, long way to go'; and at the end of the road lies a spiritual, communal goal 'the country that is there in people's hearts'. These are similar feelings to those expressed by other Australian country artists performing in Nashville and by Australian country music fans on organised tours to Nashville. This chapter will, therefore, attempt to understand Nashville as a spiritual centre (with the Ryman Auditorium and the Country Music Hall of Fame as its sacred sites) and journeys to it as pilgrimages.

This chapter will focus on the Le Garde Twins and Reg Lindsay. Other Australian performers have gone to America – such as Keith Urban, Tex Morton (who pursued a career in hypnotism, billed as 'The Amazing Morton'), Smoky Dawson, Diana Trask,

Arthur Blanch and Kasey Chambers – and their experiences and strategies will be woven into the chapter as well.

### **The Le Garde Twins - ‘Australia’s Yodelling Stockmen’**

In fact, the Le Garde Twins were not from New South Wales at all, but were born and grew up on a farm near Mackay, in rural Queensland. They began their long and exceptionally varied showbusiness careers in the late 1940s as rough-riders on the rodeo circuit. After several years of bull (or ‘bronc’) riding and buckjumping they made the move to singing. As the Le Garde Twins tell it, this move came as a result of a particular rodeo in Kyabram, Victoria, where they were forced to perform an impromptu singing cowboy act. The hat was passed around at the end of their performance and came back 65 pounds richer. They tried singing again at the next town and made 150 pounds<sup>4</sup> From then on their career road was sealed. As Tom Le Garde later put it, singing was ‘not only more rewarding than bronc riding...it was a lot less painful.’<sup>5</sup>

After making the metamorphosis into ‘singing cowboys’, the Le Garde Twins, like many other Australian country singers, found employment on the travelling sideshow circuit. They worked on the ‘Buddy Williams Wild West Show’, the ‘Tex Morton Wild West Show’ at the Brisbane Exhibition<sup>6</sup> and on notorious spruiker and circus entrepreneur Frankie Foster’s travelling sideshow.<sup>7</sup> From here, the Twins gained the job as support act for American singing cowboy and children’s entertainer Hopalong Cassidy on his 1954/55 Australian tour. This garnered them considerable publicity in Australia. Much of this publicity focussed on just ‘how highly Hoppy rated our sons of the soil’,<sup>8</sup> *Spurs*

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Biography of the Le Garde Twins’, Unpublished promotional material circulated by Terry L. Bock, personal manager, 1963?

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Morgan, Bob, *The Showies: Revelations of Australian Outdoor Side-Showmen*, Bob Morgan, Mitchum, 1995, p 124.

<sup>8</sup> *Spurs: Australia’s Only National Hilly-Billy Magazine*, Lismore, June 1955.

magazine even going so far as to print Cassidy's congratulatory letter to the Twins.<sup>9</sup> It was the Cassidy stamp of approval that, according to the Twins, got them to America and performing in 1957.<sup>10</sup>

Based in Los Angeles, the first two years of the Le Garde's US existence were marked by auditions, meetings and try-outs. There were some notable successes – such as their radio show on 'Double Time' on KTLA<sup>11</sup> – but it wasn't until they signed to Liberty Records in 1959<sup>12</sup> that they felt like they were achieving some real success. It was Liberty Records that sent the Twins to Nashville to work with the songwriters Boudleaux and Felice Bryant. This husband and wife team were part of the Acuff-Rose songwriting dynasty and had had success with pop-country songs such as 'All I Have To Do Is Dream' recorded by the Everly Brothers. The Bryants wrote several songs for the Le Gardes – including 'Babysitter' which was released in both the US and Australia and did fairly well in both territories.<sup>13</sup> 'Babysitter' was in the vein of the Everly Brothers' pop-country sound, although the Le Garde Twins emphasised the country nuances of their persona by appearing in cowboy clothing on the sheet music sleeve. [See Fig. 14]

By 1962 the Le Garde Twins had appeared on the Grand Ole Opry, the Ernest Tubb Show and the National Country and Western Music Convention which indicated they had some profile in American country music.<sup>14</sup> In 1963 they moved back to Australia and hosted Channel 7's nationally-broadcast variety show *Country Style*.<sup>15</sup> During this time in Australia they also founded and ran the Country Music Australia Theatre in Sydney, an attempt to duplicate Nashville's Grand Ole Opry. The commercial failure of Country Music Australia led the Twins back to the USA for good in 1967.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Interview, 04/04/03.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*; Bryant, Boudleaux, *Baby Sitter*, (performed by the Le Garde Twins), Acuff-Rose Publications, Melbourne, 1960.

<sup>14</sup> 'Meet The Twins', Country Song Roundup, Nashville, August 1963.

<sup>15</sup> *Country Style*, Episode 3, 1964, Screensound Archives Ref. No. 21426-03.

Since then they have continued to release singles and albums in America and have performed regularly, particularly on state and country fairs. In the mid 1980s they formed the band Australia and in the early 1990s returned to television with the show *Down Home, Down Under*, broadcast from Nashville and featuring both American and Australian country performers. The Le Garde Twins were still based in Nashville in 2010...

...which is the bare bones of the careers of Tom and Ted Le Garde. Yet, it is the way the bones are knitted together that is a fascinating aspect of the Le Garde Twins story. Much of the source material for this chapter comes from an interview I conducted with the Le Garde Twins in Nashville in April 2003; an interview that was as remarkable for its performative qualities as it was for its archival value. Tom and Ted Le Garde arrived for the interview dressed in their matching stage outfits – black pants, black waistcoats, white shirts and string ties (held together by a Star Trek clasp: souvenirs of their cameo performance in a 1967 episode of the sci-fi series). We sat down in the foyer of the downtown Best Western Hotel, the twins pulled out their acoustic guitars and gave a twenty-minute impromptu performance, running through their favourite ‘singing cowboy’ songs such as ‘El Paso City’ and ‘Wayward Wind’, as well as original, signature tunes such as ‘Brothers’ and ‘From NSW to Nashville’, with full harmony accompaniment from Ted’s wife Sharon. From their fluid guitar playing to their close-knit harmonies and matching suits, it was the performance of two professionals who had built up an easy understanding and repartee over some fifty years. Guests mingling in the foyer became the greater audience - applauding after every song.

In the interview itself, the Le Garde Twins also ‘performed’ their lifestory, emphasising its fantastic, larger-than-life feel. Throughout our conversation, Tom made it clear that he was under the impression that I was going to write the biography of the Le Garde Twins. Not only was it ‘an amazing story’ but it would also put ‘me on the map’. At first I thought that Tom and Ted had simply misunderstood or misheard me, and I reiterated that, no, I wasn’t writing their book, but a history of Australian country music more generally. However, as the ‘misunderstanding’ continued I began to see Tom’s

assertions as a strategy to make me interested in writing their book. In the re-telling of the story of their career the emotional highs and lows were emphasised - their 'almost there' brushes with fame and their saddening rejection by the Australian country music establishment.

Le Garde Twins have, throughout their career, continually rewritten their history. Their life story has often changed shape if not substance. The date of their move to America, in particular, has been continually re-assessed. Reading their interviews and press releases the year has been given as, alternatively, 1957, 1967, 1973 and 1976.<sup>16</sup> The manipulation of certain 'facts' to create a more appealing image is certainly not a foreign concept to the pop music world. However, it does sit uncomfortably in country music culture which stresses the values of sincerity, honesty, and non-pretension. Yet the Le Garde Twins were more than just 'authentic' country singers: they were also their own publicity agents and their effortless rewriting of history is credit to their ability as such. Their US career may have been far shorter without it.

Furthermore, the way in which Tom and Ted rewrote the story of their professional career says something revealing about the character of that career. That is, the story of the Le Garde Twins was not a straightforward, linear progression with a clear genesis. They had, in effect, two careers in the States – one in the late 1950s/early 60s, the other from 1967 to the present day. The short time between them in fact represented a significant break in approach; the line between two very different ways of negotiating and performing their Australianness. In short, their first stint in America saw them play down – or even deny - their Australian heritage, while their second saw this heritage become an essential part of their persona and the songs they sung. Indeed, by citing 1967 as the year they moved to America, the Le Garde Twins may not just be manipulating the media, they may also be implicitly recognising that the Le Garde Twins of the late

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<sup>16</sup> 'Biography of the Le Garde Twins', circulated by Terry L Bock, Sabina, Ohio, No date; 'Singing Twins Hail From Down Under', in *Hutchinson News*, 12/09/76; *Sun-Herald*, 30/06/91; 'Australia: An Overview', Unpublished Promotional Pamphlet, c1981; Walter Carter, 'Country Music Has No Respect For Geography', in *The Tennessean*, Nashville, 21/11/81.

1950s/early 1960s had a very different persona to the Le Garde Twins of the late 1960s-1990s.

The Le Garde Twins' absorption into American-style country/pop of the late 1950s is clearly seen in their choice of material. Tracks such as the self-penned 'Mountain Railway Song'<sup>17</sup> and 'Sunset Yodel'<sup>18</sup> as well as the Boudleaux and Felice Bryant numbers featured the close-harmony singing style that dominated commercial country music at this time, making the Twins barely indistinguishable from other familial duos such as the Everly Brothers. The lyrical content, too, fitted the conventions of American country songs: cowboys; prairies; yodelling; sweethearts. Photographs and promotional material, too, pictured them primarily as American-style singing cowboys. There was no mention of their Australian outback upbringing, which came to dominate their songs and image later.

According to Tom and Ted themselves, however, such a nationally ambivalent image was born of necessity rather than desire. It simply wasn't a smart career choice to be different in America in the 1950s – conformity and accessibility was the way towards show business success. For the Le Garde Twins this meant having to go to a Los Angeles drama school in an attempt to train themselves out of their Australian accents.<sup>19</sup> Angela Macdonald, in her study of Australians in Hollywood, described the similar necessities for Australian actors hoping to be cast in American films in the 1940s and 50s.<sup>20</sup> One example that perhaps best illustrates the American music industry's attitude to Australianness (or, indeed, any different-ness) is the reaction to the song 'Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport'. The Le Garde Twins had heard a version of this track while back in Australia in 1960 and returned to America soon after with plans to release it as their next single, excited by its originality. They recorded the song as soon as they were

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<sup>17</sup> Le Garde Twins, 'Mountain Railway Song', Regal Zonophone '78, c1955.

<sup>18</sup> Le Garde Twins, 'Sunset Yodel' on *Country Music in Australia, 1936-1959: The Regal-Rodeo Collection*, EMI, Sydney, 1993.

<sup>19</sup> Interview, 04/04/03.

<sup>20</sup> Angela Macdonald, 'Hollywood Bound: A History of Australians in Hollywood to 1970', Unpublished PhD Thesis, Department of History, University of Sydney, 2001, p 280.

back in Los Angeles and their manager Jo Allison, apparently similarly enthused by the idea, played it to Liberty Records president Al Bennet the next day. In Tom Le Garde's words, Bennet said: "Jo, have you gone crazy? Tie...Me...Kangaroo...Down...Sport!? Jo, where's your head at?" Al Bennet couldn't hear it. He refused to release it.' <sup>21</sup>

Six months later Twentieth Century Fox released Rolf Harris' version in America, indicating that there was at least some appreciation of novelty in the US entertainment business at the time, perhaps just not in the offices of Liberty Records or in the theatres of Nashville. Tellingly, 'A Pub With No Beer' which had been a best-selling record for Slim Dusty both in Australia and parts of Europe, was re-recorded and the details localised as 'A Bar With No Beer' by Texan singer Benny Barnes in 1965. It was not a particularly high-seller, but was well-known enough for both Johnny Cash and Tom T Hall to record it. Country music, as opposed to broader pop or rock music, was understood as 'American' music. Interestingly, it was the same process - changing lyrical details to make the localised - that provided Tex Morton with so many of his Australian cowboy songs.

From the start of the Le Garde Twins' second American career, however, they emphasised their Australianness more than any other aspect of their identity. It became their marker, the way in which they delineated themselves from other country performers in a competitive market. The press coverage they received throughout the 1970s and 80s was revealing of this. Headlines such as 'Singing Twins Hail From Down Under', 'Aussie Duet Arrives on a Whip and a Song' and 'Country Music Has no Respect For Geography' <sup>22</sup> were commonplace in the music and local press of the southern United States at this time. The Twins also made a conscious effort to release Australian material such as the autobiographical songs 'From NSW to Nashville' and 'Brothers' (with its lyric: 'from Sydney's harbour lights to the Opry stage') <sup>23</sup> that told the story of the

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<sup>21</sup> Interview, 04/04/03.

<sup>22</sup> *Hutchinson News*, 12/09/79; *Fort Worth-Star Telegram*, Fort Worth, TX, 22/07/83; and *The Tennessean*, Nashville, TN, 21/11/81

<sup>23</sup> The Le Garde Twins, 'Brothers', on *Le Garde Twins: Brand New*, Hendersonville, TN, No date (1990?)

Twins' journey from Australia to America. For the Le Garde Twins, 'Australia' was generally synonymous with the outback, physical hardship, geographical remoteness and horsemanship. Almost without exception, the interviews with and the promotional material circulated for the Le Garde Twins focussed on their poor rural upbringing in outback Queensland, the physical hardships associated with such an upbringing, and their expert ability as buckjumpers, sharpshooters and whip-crackers.<sup>24</sup> To readers of the American local and country music press, they had come straight from riding in the outback and 'busking in the streets' of 'dusty cowtowns' to the stages of Nashville.

This way of presenting Australian country performers and songwriters has continued in Nashville today. Keith Urban's biographies not only talk about the extraordinary individual journey he has taken, but also his rural upbringing. His second album *Golden Road* 'symbolizes the life and musical journey that has taken him from the Australian farm town of Caboolture to the top of the country music charts.'<sup>25</sup> Kasey Chambers 'has one of the most compelling stories in music, having grown up the daughter of subsistence hunters on the arid, treeless Nullarbor Plain of Australia.'<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Leigh Carriage and Philip Hayward have identified the fact that the 'mythologisation of her geographical roots' has been a key element in Chambers' American profile.<sup>27</sup> Locating authenticity in the rural upbringing of country performers is certainly a common impulse in Nashville. In the case of Australians in America, however, it has exotic connotations by virtue of distance.

This image of the Le Gardes as personification of the Australian outback reached a pinnacle in the mid 1980s. This was due to two factors: their formation of the band Australia for the Knoxville World's Fair in 1982 and the release of the feature film *Crocodile Dundee* in America in 1986. 'Australia' consisted of the Le Garde Twins

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<sup>24</sup> For instance: Walter Carter, 'Country Music has no Respect for Geography', *The Tennessean*, 21/11/81; *Fort Worth-Star Telegram*, 05/09/76; 'Biography of the Le Garde Twins', Unpublished promotional pamphlet, Terry L Bock, No date (1988?).

<sup>25</sup> 'Keith Urban: Golden Road', Unpublished promotional pamphlet, Capitol Nashville, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Craig Havighurst, Review of Barricades and Brickwalls, in *The Tennessean*, 18/02/02.

<sup>27</sup> Lee Carriage and Philip Hayward, 'Heartlands: Kasey Chambers, Australian country music and Americana', in Philip Hayward (ed), *Outback and Urban: Australian Country Music Volume I*, AICM Press, Gympie Qld., 2003, p 137.

accompanied by 'Wallaby Jack', an accordion player and stock-whip cracker, albeit in a more self-consciously Australian guise, fulfilling the requirements of a World's Fair. Photos of Australia at Knoxville show them performing in the 'Down Under Pub' (part of the Australian pavilion) in front of an Australian flag. They are clothed in an eccentric, hyperreal combination of outback clothing: slouch hats crowned with an Australian coat of arms; cowboy kerchiefs; and military-style shirts bedecked with sew-on badges of the Australian and American flags. [See Fig. 16] <sup>28</sup>

In 1988 they released a new single, 'Crocodile Man From Walkabout Creek' in the wake of the American release of *Crocodile Dundee*. 'Crocodile Man' effectively re-tells the plot of the film. Mick Dundee came 'From Walkabout Creek in the Northern Territory/ Raised by a tribe of local Aborigines' until 'The sheila writer with the inviting smile said/ come back to the States for a while'. Somewhat predictably, the songs featured a didgeridoo solo. More suprisingly, the song was written by a Nashville writer, Tom Kelly. <sup>29</sup>

The Le Gardes thought of themselves as part of a movement to promote Australia, a movement they saw the Hogan film reflecting and thus something which they should be part of. As Tom Le Garde said in an interview in the wake of the song's release:

We've been promoting Australia with a sledgehammer for years; Paul Hogan comes along with a buzz saw... One day I said to Ted, 'You and I have been doing these concerts and state fairs, which we love, but we haven't really reached people the way this one movie has'. <sup>30</sup>

Creative or intellectual frustration is often central to the colonial expatriate story. Studies of Australian writers, painters, academics and classical and rock musicians who leave their native shores frequently describe the sense of alienation felt by these creative souls

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<sup>28</sup> 'Australia: An Overview', Unpublished promotional pamphlet, No date c1982.

<sup>29</sup> The Le Garde Twins, *Crocodile Man From Walkabout Creek*, written by Tom Kelly, Bear Records, 1988.

<sup>30</sup> Robert K Oermann, 'LeGarde Twins find Australia is happening place', *The Tennessean*, Nashville, TN, 21/07/88.

and the overwhelming desire to escape Australia – the place, borrowing Ian Britain’s phrase, where ‘nothing happens’.<sup>31</sup> Clinton Walker’s history of Australian punk rock in the 1970s and 80s, for instance, has revealed the creative frustration many bands – such as the Go-Betweens and the Birthday Party – felt towards their home country. Their relocation to London was an effort to break free of these restrictions and allow their art and careers to flourish.<sup>32</sup>

The experience of the Le Garde Twins provides an alternative narrative to this paradigmatic way of describing the expatriation of Australian artists and a different way of seeing the relationship between nationalism and culture. There was not the sense of national alienation in the image of the Le Garde Twins; in fact they made a career out of celebrating Australia and finding inspiration in its outback and their place in it.

Further, it demonstrates how a sense of national pride has been used a strategy, just as rejecting the culture of the country of one’s birth can be a strategy also. Ultimately, it has as much to do with the different generic demands of punk rock and country. Punk’s authenticity, on the one hand, is linked to rejection of tradition, family and lineage; while a sense of country authenticity has frequently been derived by embracing these values. As a result, country music demands patriotism as it is one of the clearest and most colourful representations of ‘roots’. Rejecting one’s roots is unthinkable for country musicians who are often inventing roots to claim.

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<sup>31</sup> Ian Britain, *Once An Australian*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1997, Introduction. See also, Stephen Alomes, *When London Calls: The Expatriation of Australian Creative Artists to Britain*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999

Is it also possible that the lyrics to Australian alternative pop singer and infamous expatriate Ben Lee’s single ‘Nothing Much Happens’ – ‘A lot goes on/But nothing happens’ – obliquely refer to this state?

<sup>32</sup> Clinton Walker, *Stranded: The Secret History of Australian Independent Music, 1977-1991*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1996, p 108.

Figure 14

Recorded by the LE GARDE TWINS on London Records

# Baby Sitter

By BOUDLEAUX BRYANT



*Acuff-Rose*

PUBLICATIONS PTY. LTD.  
MELBOURNE



# LeGARDE TWINS

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Figure 15



Figure 16

## Cowboy Ambassadors

Increasingly, throughout the 1970s and 80s, the Le Garde Twins presented themselves as cultural ambassadors for Australia. Not only did they use this term explicitly, it was also implicitly reflected in many aspects of their career in this period: in their role in the Knoxville World's Fair; in their role as hosts of the television show *Down Home, Down Under* (which they described as being 'the first time in the history of country music' that Australian artists were 'presented' to and the 'culture and glory of Australia' exposed to an American audience<sup>33</sup>); and in their songs, such as 'From NSW to Nashville', in which they described themselves as on a mission to promote Australia. Thus they were, in their own words, 'roaming ambassadors for Australia for thirty years.'<sup>34</sup>

The strategy of describing oneself as a country music ambassador fitted very neatly into country music's conceptual framework for several reasons: firstly, it was an extension of country music's poetics of travel, roaming and rambling; secondly, because the metaphor of 'ambassadors' derived from nations and country music by this stage had assumed a role of national music; thirdly, because the ambassador is a representative of a community and country music had developed a strong identity as linked to a delineated community; and fourthly, as a pseudo-official title, an 'ambassador' represented a journey not just between countries but between cultural hierarchies as well.

Indeed, Australia has produced several artists who hoped to serve as 'country music ambassadors'. The Australian country music media, for instance, described Smoky Dawson as a 'Cowboy Ambassador of Goodwill' after his 1951 journey overseas which saw him speak and perform at the Festival of Britain, the Folklore Conference in Denver and on 'countless shows on radio and tv' in America.<sup>35</sup> Arthur Blanch, too, came 'a long way from a self built crystal radio listening to his favourite country music artists and

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<sup>33</sup> Sue Jarvis, 'Ted and Tom Sing Praises of Aussie Stars in the USA', *Sun-Herald*, Sydney, 30/06/91. Steve Irwin, 'The Crocodile Hunter', built a career around a similar philosophy.

<sup>34</sup> Interview, 04/04/03.

<sup>35</sup> *Spurs*, July 1955

singing to sheep and cattle to himself being a true ambassador for Australian country music on the entertainment stages of the world.’<sup>36</sup>

The most notable of Australia’s cowboy ambassadors was Reg Lindsay. After winning the 2SM talent quest in 1951, Lindsay established himself as one of Australia’s most popular and best-selling country artists - a position helped by his role as host of the nationally broadcast, weekly television show *Country and Western Hour* during the mid and late 1960s.<sup>37</sup> Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s Lindsay divided his time fairly equally between Nashville and Sydney, becoming one of the highest-profile Australian performers in America at this time. In Nashville, he made inroads into the industry sector of country music. In 1968 and 1969 Lindsay was the first Australian to be given membership to the Country Music Association, he received the CMA’s ‘Certificate of Merit’ in honour of his ‘efforts to perpetuate and advance country music’ and was made an honorary citizen of the state of Tennessee.<sup>38</sup> By the late 1970s Lindsay had appeared on the Grand Ole Opry five times and had represented Australia at the ‘CMA International Show’ – a sort of UN meeting for country artists – on numerous occasions.<sup>39</sup> Such events as the ‘International Show’ complicate the general trend for the nationalistic orientation of country music. However, the very fact that an international show was separate from the general concerts and events of country music in Nashville suggests the way in which foreignness was a novelty in country music in America.

Lindsay’s profile in Nashville was such that the American music press even reported his Australian tours, releases and television shows. The CMA’s official publication, *CMA Close-Up*, was particularly active in this promotion, regularly describing Lindsay as the ‘Number One Country Music Artist in Australia’<sup>40</sup> although does not say on what basis that title was awarded.

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<sup>36</sup> ‘Promotional Biography of Arthur Blanch’, Unpublished promotional pamphlet, no date.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Everybody Loves Country Music Sometimes’, TV Times, 12/06/1968.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Reg Lindsay Visits CMA’, CMA Close-Up, Nashville, July 1968

<sup>39</sup> ‘Reg Lindsay’, Unpublished promotional pamphlet, Con Brio Records, Nashville, TN, No date, c1980

<sup>40</sup> ‘Reg Lindsay Visits CMA’, op cit.

Given Lindsay's ambassadorial role, it is interesting to note that the Australian and American press did not regard him as singing 'Australian' country music. As one American country music publication put it: 'Australian country music is divided into two types – the bush ballad of the popular singer Slim Dusty and the adapted American versions sung by Reg Lindsay.'<sup>41</sup> Indeed, almost all of Lindsay's material was written by Nashville songwriters and he borrowed more from the American country-pop crooners of the era such as Charley Pride and Charlie Rich than he did from Slim Dusty.

The Le Garde Twins too, for all their rhetoric about promoting Australian culture, did not sing songs written by Australian songwriters. While songs such as 'From NSW to Nashville' and 'Crocodile Man' clearly delineated the Le Garde Twins as Australian, they were exceptions to their musical repertoire. Throughout their careers, Tom and Ted stayed primarily singers of American 'cowboy songs' from the 1930s and 40s such as 'Tumbling Tumbleweeds' and 'High Noon'.<sup>42</sup> Reports and reviews of their shows in the US in the 1970s and 80s make note of the 'whip-cracking and rope-twirling which they learned as cowboys in their native land of Australia'<sup>43</sup> yet also describe how a significant part of the programme was made up of tribute songs to America, the Civil War era and Marty Robbins<sup>44</sup> (famous writer of cowboy songs, such as 'El Paso City', a Le Garde Twins favourite). Even their exhibition as 'Australia' at the Knoxville World's Fair was a performance of American country music, embellished with 'peculiarly Australian sound effects' such as a stockwhip and an accordion.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, according to the Le Garde Twins' own promotional material, their Australianness was due to their 'unique cultural heritage, and not their musical style.'<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> 'Down Under's Top Side Singer...Reg Lindsay', *Country*, October 1968. The distinction between Slim Dusty and Reg Lindsay is also made in: 'No Hayseeds in Reg Lindsay's Hair', *TV Times*, Sydney, 01/10/69; and 'Everybody Loves Country Music Sometimes', *TV Times*, 12/06/68.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example: The Le Garde Twins, *Songs of the West*, JKRR Records, No date, c1990.

<sup>43</sup> 'Whip Crackin' Show Planned by Shriners', *Jackson Ohio Sun-Journal*, Jackson, OH, 25/02/74.

<sup>44</sup> John Sandvold, 'Aussie Duet Arrives on a Whip and a Song', *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, Fort Worth, TX, 22/07/83.

<sup>45</sup> 'Australia: An Overview', op cit.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

Given that Lindsay and the Le Gardes were, by their own admission and their own promotional material, not playing Australian country music, it is worth asking what were they ambassadors for? Rather than ambassadors for Australian country music, they were ambassadors for country music as a global phenomenon. Both performers can be viewed as foreigners demonstrating to an American audience that country music is played in – and has conquered – other parts of the world.

Indeed, showing that country music is a universal form that has no need of national or geographic boundaries was a central part of the Le Garde's strategy. The phrase 'country music has no respect for geography' recurred again and again in press interviews and in the interview I conducted with them.<sup>47</sup> It was a statement of intent that can also be seen expressed in 'From NSW to Nashville'. The Australianness expressed in the song was complicated by the fact that it, in essence, did not matter. The implication of being an Australian country singer was that it was a form played outside of America. It does not matter where you are from - 'the accent doesn't matter, it's the tapping of the feet' – as it is a truly pan-national movement. The surface trappings (clothes, accents, place names) may change but the heart of the thing remains the same – 'it's the country that is there in people's hearts'. The song is a tribute to country music's authenticity. It can be understood and performed throughout the world because it is real and heartfelt. In this way, it was a challenge to the orthodoxy of country music as an American form and localised by Australian performers. The implication of the Le Garde's stance was that while it may have American origins, country music is an international form, just as rock or classical music is.

The Le Garde Twins' claim that country music was an international language managed to sit side by side with their hyper-Australian image. On the one hand they were saying that geography did not matter; on the other they made constant reference to their own geographic roots. This apparent paradox indicates the continuing dominance of national readings of country music. The Le Garde Twins thought that the most plausible way they

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<sup>47</sup> See, for example: Walter Carter, op cit.; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 05/09/76.

could convince an American audience that country music had 'no respect for geography' was by exaggerating their own geographic exoticness.

As well as stating that firstly, country music was an international language and secondly, that the American and Australian landscape and culture are similar, the Le Garde Twins also argued that country music had its roots in British Isles folk music and thus was a shared heritage of both America and Australia. Ted Le Garde commented in 1988 that 'Country music has the same beat in America as it does overseas...the music really started in Ireland, Scotland and England, but the Americans were able to repackage it and sell it for a higher price.'<sup>48</sup> Reg Lindsay too thought that both America and Australia shared the same Anglo-Celtic cultural heritage and had, therefore, a similar tradition of folk music from which to draw on: 'The basics of it [country music] came to both countries a long time ago. Australians, Southerners and Texans are very similar.'<sup>49</sup>

That American country music has Irish folk origins is a point made by historians such as Bill C Malone.<sup>50</sup> And, indeed, Irish tunes were brought to Australia by its significant numbers of Irish immigrants and convicts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>51</sup> However, one gets the sense that the Le Garde Twins and Lindsay are overstating the case somewhat. It may well be that music with an Irish origin had an impact on Australian music, but it is difficult to see how this emerged as 'country music' or 'hillbilly music'. Rather, the main inspiration for country music in Australia, as we have seen, was commercially recorded music from America. The question is, why were these origins not authentic enough? For Lindsay and the Le Gardes, it seems, music that arrived in a nation 100 years ago is authentic enough, but music that arrived fifty years ago isn't. Such historical distinctions were compounded by the fact that, as Ted Le Garde suggested, hillbilly music arrived here as a commercial, rather than folk, music and thus seemed to lack authenticity.

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<sup>48</sup> *Southern Illinoisan*, 28/10/88

<sup>49</sup> *Chattanooga News-Free Press*, 11/07/78.

<sup>50</sup> See: Bill C Malone, *Country Music USA*, (Revised Edition), University of Texas Press, Austin, 1985.

<sup>51</sup> Graeme Smith, *Singing Australian*, Pluto Press, Melbourne, 2005, p 1

## Fellow Frontiers

When describing the genesis of their lives as yodelling cowboys, the Le Garde Twins have been eager to point out the resonance the filmic depiction of singing cowboys had with their own lives:

Tom: When we were kids our three heroes were Hopalong Cassidy, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry.

Ted: First movie we ever saw was a Hopalong Cassidy film when we were about nine in Queensland...A dirt floor, a few canvas chairs. And right then we wanted to become singing cowboys. It created a scene in our minds and we never deviated.

Tom: We just fell in love with the American west and we rode all over Australia. The Australian bush is so much like the American west.<sup>52</sup>

Earlier, this thesis argued that explaining the popularity of country music in Australia because of similarities between the Australian outback and the American prairies was flawed. While there may have been individual cases of recognition, such as the Le Gardes, it is nevertheless more useful to look at the Le Garde's story of inspiration as a strategy. Comparing their life to the lives of American cowboys was something they would do repeatedly and publicly throughout their American careers. It was a strategy that enabled American audiences to understand them as Australian variants of an American mythology.

The theme of shared cultural heritage and similarities of landscape between the two countries was taken up by the American country music media and local papers. In particular, articles focussed on the fact that Reg Lindsay and the Le Garde Twins had grown up in conditions that closely mirrored those of America's wild west. The house in which the Le Garde Twins spent their childhood consisted of a 'dirt floor with only a

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<sup>52</sup> Interview, 04/04/03.

wood stove and a kerosene lamp', just like Loretta Lyn's house in the persona she presented, later made explicit in the movie *Coal Miner's Daughter*.<sup>53</sup> They also worked at a cattle station in outback Queensland 'in conditions as primitive as those of our own Old West' and eventually got jobs as rough riders because 'In the outback, like the Old West, the cowboys' principal entertainment was rodeo'.<sup>54</sup> The parallels between the Australian outback and the old west even extended to the idea of mateship. In Australia, 'A hidy will get you a 'good-eye mate', six bits will get you a beer apiece and, well, a lot of good friendships have come from such beginnings.'<sup>55</sup>

Even their music, when they did play songs with Australian content, was described by the American music press as a version of local music. When reviewing *Ballads of the Bushland* in 1959, *Hi-Fi Tape Recording* stated that: 'The collection of numbers on this release are authentic ballads of the Australian bush country. Actually, they are very much like our own Western folk music'. And while the reviewer was not particularly impressed with the Le Garde's 'authentic ballads', they did like the 'unusual sounds pouring forth in the Cooee Call'.<sup>56</sup>

Seeing outback Australia as a variant of the 'old west' had, by the time of the emergence of the Le Gardes and Lindsay, a history within popular culture in America. Angela Macdonald has argued that Australians in Hollywood in the 1930s and 40s became 'substitute Americans pioneers with a frontier heritage.'<sup>57</sup> American film audiences expected Australians to be rugged, outback types, at least by the 1950s. For instance, biographies of Australian actors in Hollywood tended to emphasise the fact that they were 'from the outback'.<sup>58</sup> This is because, Macdonald argued, Americans imagined

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<sup>53</sup> Walter Carter, *op cit.*

<sup>54</sup> 'Biography of the Le Garde Twins', Terry L Bock, No date.

<sup>55</sup> *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, *op cit.*, 05/09/76.

<sup>56</sup> *Hi-Fi Tape Recording*, November 1959

<sup>57</sup> Macdonald, *op cit.*, p 299.

<sup>58</sup> Macdonald, *op cit.*, p 294

Australia as a 'fellow frontier nation'<sup>59</sup> and thus transferred these expectations onto individuals who seemed to personify this.

Australian roughriders, performing in America in the first half of the twentieth century, were also described as being from a fellow frontier. Thorpe McConville was the most prominent of these performing horsemen and women. In 1911 he directed and starred in 'Wild Australia', a demonstration of 'dare-devil riding', 'wonderful rifle shooting', 'artists on the stockwhip'<sup>60</sup> and snake and crocodile handling, part of the 'Pageant of the Empire' held to celebrate the coronation of King George at London's Crystal Palace in 1911. Wild Australia was designed to be a:

representation of an Australian Stockyard, at a cattle station in what is called 'the Never-Never country', and it is designed to depict realistically scenes from every day life of Australian boys and girls who spend their lives so largely in the saddle in their wild solitudes. Efforts are being made to render what is undertaken true to life.<sup>61</sup>

When McConville performed 'Wild Australia' in America, however, press and publicity commented not on the exoticism, the strangeness, of the 'wild solitudes' as was the case in Britain, but on the points of difference and similarities between Australian roughriders and American rodeo riders. McConville was known in America as the 'Australian cowboy', distinguishing himself from American rodeo stars through his riding style, saddle design and clothes. In particular, his white shirt and concertina leggings were the cause of some curiosity at rodeo meets.<sup>62</sup> McConville was followed by other Australian rough-riders, most notably members of the Skuthorpe dynasty – Violet and Lance Jnr.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p 289.

<sup>60</sup> *London Morning Leader*, London, 22/05/11.

<sup>61</sup> *Morning Advertiser*, London, 22/05/11.

<sup>62</sup> Jenny Hicks, *Australian Cowboys, Roughriders and Rodeos*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 2000, p 60.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p 54.

Jenny Hicks has argued that by the 1930s/40s Australian rough-riders and their antipodean oddities were a recognised part of the US rodeo circuit.<sup>64</sup>

Tex Morton also hoped to tour the 'Tex Morton Rodeo' in America in the 1940s. In 1941, his manager Mr Wm. F Scott wrote to the Prime Minister of Australia John Curtin and several other members of the federal government requesting financial support to tour the rodeo show in the USA. The intention of the show was to 'establish for all times the prowess of the Australian Horseman, Horsewoman and stock in the minds of the American people' and this would occur because of the technical differences between the national types of roughriding: 'as all American competitors use stirrups and pommels and large saddles, whereas the Australians use no stirrups, no pommels, and ride in twelve pound saddles.' There was no doubt in Scott's mind that the show would be successful:

the few American riders that have been out to the Royal Agricultural Show, Sydney, have expressed themselves in no uncertain manner as to the mammoth attraction value Australian Horsemanship would have on the American Public in this particular manner.<sup>65</sup>

Morton's rodeo would demonstrate that Australia not only had similar frontier cultures to America, but that their culture was notably tougher, less refined and more authentic.

Scott's letter was written on 5th November 1941. Just one month later Japan attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbour and Australia and America became wartime allies. This would have given the display of Australian roughriding prowess a particular context unavailable to earlier riders such as McConville. Whether the timing of Scott's letter was incredibly astute or just coincidental is unclear - no mention of the war is made in the letter. However, the Australian government declined to assist the Tex Morton rodeo and the American public were not able to witness the prowess of the Australian roughrider.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p 54.

<sup>65</sup> 'Letter from WF Scott to Prime Minister Curtin 5/11/41', National Archives of Australia, Series No. M1415 (M1415/1), Control Symbol 26. In file of Curtin's correspondence - 'S' file

<sup>66</sup> 'USA-Australian Proposed Visit of Tex Morton to the USA with Australian Rodeo', National Archives, Series No. A981 (A981/4), Control Symbol UNI 132, Part 1

Chapter One of this thesis argued that American hillbilly music and the cowboy image updated and internationalised an Australian rural identity. Seeing the Australian outback as a version of a disappearing American west was the same process in reverse. Certainly the Australian outback provided an Old West that still 'existed' and was less problematic. While the Old West provided the most obvious representation of virile American nationhood, patently, for Americans, it was beginning to disappear. The Australian frontier, on the other hand, was a mystical, distant place that most Americans could imagine still existing. The Australian outback was locked in the past by virtue of its distance. For American country music fans in the 1970s and 80s performers like the Le Garde Twins provided a believable version of the frontier myth – so central to the popular imaginings of America's past. The old west still existed in other parts of the world. The Le Garde Twins had just walked straight out of it.

Graeme Turner has observed that Australian culture has been marked by 'American dreams' - that is a fantasy of a lifestyle that is itself a fantasy of what America may really be like. Turner also argued that the success of films such as *Crocodile Dundee* showed how desire could travel in the opposite direction - that Americans could have 'Australian dreams' also.<sup>67</sup> To many American filmgoers, Australian films represented an idealised, nostalgic vision of America. One contemporary American review of *Crocodile Dundee* stated that the film 'successfully creates the impression that there is something approaching a smogless, egalitarian American heaven on earth, though it's called Australia'.<sup>68</sup> What this chapter adds to Turner's observation is that it was not only films that enabled 'Australian dreams' but country music and roughriding as well. Furthermore, it has a history that stretches back to a time before the 1980s.

Elsewhere, this thesis has also argued that hillbilly music in Australia can be understood as an example of Michel De Certeau's assertion that fringe cultures take hegemonic

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<sup>67</sup> Graeme Turner, *Making It National: Nationalism and Popular Culture*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1994, p 108.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, p 115.

cultures and make them 'function in another register'. In the case of Lindsay, the Le Gardes, *Crocodile Dundee* and Thorpe McConville, re-registering of culture can also occur in reverse. The Australian outback as represented in America is not the same outback as represented in Australia. It stands for different things and functions differently - most pertinently as a purer, still existing old west.

However, the re-registering and re-dreaming of the Australian outback does not explain why the Le Garde Twins changed their image so radically in the late 1960s. It is clear that American audiences had, to some degree, a conception of Australia as a 'fellow frontier' by the 1950s - a period in which the Le Gardes played down their Australian identity. Certainly the mid to late 1980s, with the popularity of *Crocodile Dundee* and Paul Hogan's advertisements for Tourism Australia saw a rise in this fascination and the Le Gardes have acknowledged they capitalised on this interest. However, that does not explain what caused the Le Garde Twins' celebrations of Australianness in the late 1960s and 70s.

There were several reasons, the first of which was specific to the Le Garde's experience. It was obvious to the Twins on their return to Australia in 1963 that their strategy to be indistinguishable from American singing cowboys had not worked. It was clear that they would need a new promotional strategy if they were to have success in America. Their national identity was one way in which they could delineate themselves from the bulk of country performers. Their Australianness was a hook - a hook which had a special resonance with American audiences.

However, there were other reasons for the change in the Le Gardes' image; reasons that have to do with the changing cultural milieus of both Australia and America. Firstly, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the 1950s and early 1960s were a time in which country music in Australia began to describe its cultural value in nationalistic terms. Commentators, artists and audiences were beginning to articulate the point that country music in Australia represented a local folk form and a distinctive piece of national

culture. The Le Garde Twins articulated this growing self-confidence in their image and interviews

Secondly, American country music and American popular culture in general was undergoing radical changes in the 1960s. By the early 1970s the 'cowboys and indians' myth of the American frontier had been questioned and weakened, not just by academic studies but by popular culture as well. Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, a study of the displacement and slaughter of the native American people in the late nineteenth century remained on the best-seller list a year after it was published in 1971.<sup>69</sup> Country music, too, was questioning the frontier view of history. In 1965 Johnny Cash released his album *Bitter Tears: Ballads of the American Indian* that dealt with the frontier wars, massacres and disenfranchisement of the indigenous American people.<sup>70</sup> *Bitter Tears* reached number two on the American country charts.

For an American audience, the Australian outback offered a version of the American west that had not been rendered problematic by new historical research and popular interest. Largely unaware of a similar history of displacement and massacre on the Australian frontier, an American audience could see the Australian outback as a place devoid of struggle and conflict. Singing cowboys could still be heroes, riding through an otherwise empty landscape, rather than representatives of an invading culture.

A specific aspect of American popular culture that enabled Australian country singers to be seen as a novelty in the 1970s was its tendency to see country music as a wholly white American form. The tendency to draw parallels between the outback and the wild west was also evidence of the developing reductive tendency of the culture of country music in America. 'Knocking down borders', 'having no respect for geography', being an 'ambassador' are all terms that illustrate the way in which country music reduces its

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<sup>69</sup> Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1971.

<sup>70</sup> Johnny Cash, *Bitter Tears: Ballads of the American Indian*, Columbia Records, New York, 1965.

globally diverse community into a culturally homogenous one. Country is not just a cultural movement that places great value on authenticity, it also requires rigid signifiers for what is authentic.

Consider, for instance, the way in which Reg Lindsay was described by a local San Antonio paper in 1975:

There have been numerous mentions in this space of the first black country and western singer, the first Mexican-American country and western singer and even the first Hawaiian singer...and now comes – are you ready for this? – the first Australian country and western singer ever to visit San Antonio...he's Reg Lindsay. <sup>71</sup>

What is striking about this extract is not the revelation that country singers have come from these exotic sources, but that this is considered a revelation at all. There had been, arguably, black country singers since the early twentieth century, Hawaiian musicians had pioneered the use of slide guitar – a staple instrument of country music - since the 1920s and country music, particularly the 'cowboy' variety, has borrowed much from the mariachi band traditions of Mexico. Indeed, the genesis of country music is fascinatingly heterogeneous and cross-cultural. In the words of Nick Tosches, the story of American country music is:

The story of the black stealing from the black, the white from the white, and the one from the other; of Tin Pan Alley songs culled from the air and then into the pines and the fields, gone feral and misperceived as primitive folk expression. <sup>72</sup>

Tosches, was writing in the 1990s and 2000s. Further, he has a substantial oeuvre of fiction, history and poetry that documents and celebrates the multicultural aspects of American society. In the 1970s, however, this version of the origins of country music had yet to be popularly agreed upon and the presence of foreign forms was worth commenting on.

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<sup>71</sup> *The Light*, San Antonio, TX, 06/02/75

<sup>72</sup> Nick Tosches, *Where Dead Voices Gather*, Little Brown and Company, Boston, 2001.

The editors of San Antonio's *The Light*, however, do not share Tosches' vision of American country and folk as a shapeless breeze – impossible to catch, to pin down, to define. Rather, *The Light*, and local southern American press in the 1970s in general, tended to view country music as an indigenous American music. Thus, when an artist who did not fit these definitions comes along (such as an Australian artist) two things happen: firstly they are treated as an exotic anomaly; and secondly (and almost simultaneously) this strangeness is neutralised and made to fit the reductive parameters. Reg Lindsay can be recognised as a country singer because he comes from a rural background similar to that of many American country music fans and because he sings about subjects they are used to hearing about. Not being a rural, southern American white presents problems for one's authenticity as a country singer, yet these can be overcome by locating a corresponding experience. Thus, Australian country performers in the US are interesting not only for the way in which they negotiate their 'Australianness' but also for the way in which they make their own experience fit American expectations of an authentic country performer and thus reveal the homogenising impulse of mainstream American country music.

It should be noted that the conception of country music in America as white and rural and nativist was not common just to the country music industry itself (generally considered to be 'right wing') but to city liberals as well. Robert Altman's 1975 film *Nashville* was partly a critique of the homogenising, reductive tendency in country music and of capitalism in America in general. Within this general understanding of country music, novelty could be simply being from another country, or even state or region.

In his study of Australians acting out their national identity by coo-eeing in the streets of London, Richard White has written: 'The performance of Australian identity often has a sense of playing up to the expectation of outsiders...' <sup>73</sup> Certainly, the way in which the Le Garde Twins negotiated their Australianness seems to suggest that they had

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<sup>73</sup> White, Richard, 'Cooees Across The Strand: Australian Travellers in London and the Performance of National Identity' in *Australian Historical Studies*, 32(116), 2001, p 109

recognised certain American preconceptions of Australians and were happy to perform to them (the fact that their upbringing had actually been in the bush only aided this).

The willingness with which the Le Garde Twins adapted their image indicates that they were indeed 'playing up to the expectations of outsiders' rather than reflecting an innate desire to communicate their Australian identity. The way in which the Le Garde Twins negotiated their sense of Australianness throughout their career also reflects the way in which national identity is both fluctuating and responsive. As White argued, in the particular circumstances of travel 'national identity appears to be situational and negotiable rather than innate and discoverable.'<sup>74</sup>

### **Rejections/Inclusions**

The apparent ease with which Reg Lindsay and the Le Garde Twins (and later Keith Urban) were absorbed into Nashville was connected to the style of country music they played. As noted earlier, it was no secret that the orchestrated, pop-tinged 'Nashville sounds' that Lindsay and the Le Garde's specialised in were different from the musical minimalism that was the hallmark of much country music in Australia. Further, with some obvious exceptions such as 'Crocodile Man' the lyrics tended to be about generalised, human concerns rather than celebrations of Australian rural working life and were, usually, the product of professional Nashville songwriters rather than the artists themselves

In addition, they were very particular performers – as much television and radio hosts as singers and songwriters. Reg Lindsay was best known to a broader Australian audience as the host of the nationally-broadcast, weekly *Country and Western Hour* throughout the mid and late 1960s.<sup>75</sup> Lindsay also worked regularly as a disc jockey on local Sydney

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid

<sup>75</sup> 'Everybody Loves Country Music Sometimes', *TV Times*, 12/06/1968.

radio in the 1950s and 60s.<sup>76</sup> The Le Garde Twins, too, have a long resume of television and radio work. Even before they went to America in the 1950s they had a spot on Australian network radio.<sup>77</sup> In Canada in 1962 they hosted the *Le Garde Twins Show* on CBC-TV<sup>78</sup> and, most notably, were the double-headed hosts of Channel 7's *Country Style* from 1964-66.<sup>79</sup> It was not unusual for country singers to be television and radio personalities as well. Tex Morton had a long-running radio variety show in the 1930s and 40s and Smoky Dawson is probably better known for the *Smoky Dawson Show* (a children's television serial). The occurrence of country musicians as television and radio hosts was partly due to the fact that the country music celebrity was a persona rather than a technically proficient artist. As we have seen repeatedly throughout this thesis, the particular demands of country music authenticity meant that artists had to be a personality first and an artist second.

Not only did their role as hosts emphasise their authenticity, the type of programme they hosted was also important. Both *Country and Western Hour* and *Country Style* were modeled on American 'barn dance' variety shows.<sup>80</sup> They created the atmosphere of an informal gathering with square dancers and guest singers, all set to a backdrop of barn doors and hay bales. Like Morton's radio shows two decades earlier, 'Country and Western Hour' and 'Country Style's intent was to encourage the audience to feel as though they just happened to drop in on a shindig that was going on anyway. 'Hello friends and neighbours and come into the old barn' the Le Garde Twins would announce at the beginning of 'Country Style',<sup>81</sup> welcoming in the curious watcher peeking their head round the door. This 'spontaneous' performance was punctuated by American words, accents and characters ('Hayseed' – the clown of the show – was straight out of the 'amusing hillbilly character' textbook of US shows). The songs too, with some exceptions, were covers of popular American songs of the day. While many Australian

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<sup>76</sup> Spurs Magazine, Lismore, April 1956, p 5; 'A Man Named Lindsay', *TV Times*, 21/08/1971; 'Reg Lindsay: Australia's Top Country Music Star', Unpublished promotional pamphlet, no date.

<sup>77</sup> 'Biography of the Le Garde Twins', Terry L. Bock, op cit.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Interview.

<sup>80</sup> Jensen, op cit., p 10.

<sup>81</sup> *Country Style*, Episode 3, 1964, ATV 7, Screensound Archives: 21426-03.

performers employed and adapted the idea of an informal gathering for their stage and radio shows (see Slim Dusty's comic sidekick Saltbush Bill for example), few included such obviously American images. It is further evidence of Reg Lindsay and the Le Garde Twins' ease with and willingness to use American idioms in their performances.

As the Le Garde Twins saw it, their use of American idioms and the time they spent in the USA were the source of hostility that came from other Australian country performers. They tell numerous stories about their rejection by the country music industry and their peers who have dismissed the Le Garde Twins as careerist and slavishly devoted to American-style country music. Two stories in particular exemplify the Le Garde's attitude to their home country. The first one was about their planned theatre 'Country Music Australia'.

In 1964, the twins bought the Five Ways Theatre in Paddington, had it lavishly furnished, renamed it 'Country Music Australia' and set about booking the acts:

We wanted Tex Morton, Buddy Williams, Slim Dusty, Reg Lindsay, Joy McKean, The McKean Sisters, Chad Morgan, Dusty Rankin, Rex Dallas, Billy Blinkhorn, Smoky Dawson. We wanted all the guys...

The first picture you saw was Tex Morton, then Buddy Williams, then Smoky Dawson, then Reg Lindsay, you didn't see anything about the Le Garde Twins. We were promoting Australian country music. We were trying to duplicate the Grand Ole Opry...But we couldn't get co-operation from anybody...Everybody was just selfish.<sup>82</sup>

The second anecdote concerned their rejection at the Tamworth country music festival in 1987:

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

When John Williamson was putting down America we went to the Country Music Awards and they snubbed us, Tom and I, like we were just, oh, terrible. They put our hands in the hall of fame but, because we were American citizens...But who cares! You know, Rupert Murdoch is an American citizen, but back then it was the small-mindedness.<sup>83</sup>

The Le Garde Twins explained the failure of their Australian careers as the result of a misunderstanding. The Australian country music industry did not understand that while they had been pursuing a career in America, that career had consisted of 'promoting Australia with a sledgehammer'. The Le Gardes claimed to be bewildered by the lack of recognition for this achievement in their own country.

It is true that the Le Garde Twins did not have a prominent place in Tamworth in the 1980s. However, this was not simply due to their perceived Americanness. Reg Lindsay had also put considerable time and effort into pursuing an American career, but had also sold healthy numbers of records in Australia and was a recurrent winner of Golden Guitar awards at Tamworth during the 1980s. Indeed, he was won three Golden Guitar Awards and in 1984 was added to the Golden Guitar's 'Roll of Renown'. It is more likely that the Le Garde Twins lack of success in selling records in Australia was the most significant contributing factor in their lack of recognition from the Australian industry. Unlike rock music or other forms of art in Australia, where international success could result in a newfound recognition at home (a phenomenon popularly known as the 'cultural cringe'), going overseas didn't guarantee respect within the country music industry and community. Indeed, it seems as if it didn't count for anything if you couldn't make it in Australia.

There is something approaching a consensus amongst country music commentators that the Le Garde Twins are to be treated with suspicion. The criticisms are that their music is American in flavour and that they are opportunistic and careerist. In *Country Music In*

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<sup>83</sup> Interview, 04/04/03

*Australia Vol II*, Eric Watson implied this, stating somewhat euphemistically: ‘the boys always had a flair for publicity, and they made the most of every opportunity to ride along on the [Hopalong] Cassidy bandwagon.’<sup>84</sup> Watson surely has this ‘flair for publicity’ in mind when skeptically describing their early American career: ‘by 1964 [they] were claiming to have toured and shown in 45 states of the USA’.<sup>85</sup> a cursory glance at the historical record would show this likely to have been true. While Watson does not comment on the style of the Twins’ music directly, he does include them in a section of new artists who emerged in the 1950s. The songs these emerging artists sang, Watson states, ‘came mostly from overseas, and their styles were mostly derivative of the records they heard’.<sup>86</sup> Ultimately, for Watson, ‘real Australian country music’ tells stories of life in the bush in a musically minimal style. The Le Garde Twins were, thus, playing an inauthentic style of country music.<sup>87</sup>

Throughout this thesis we have seen how Watson and other country music commentators have, since the 1950s, made distinctions between authentic and inauthentic styles of country music in Australia. The Le Gardes responded to the pressure to play authentic Australian country music in their time back in their home country in the mid 1960s. In 1964, for instance, they released an album of songs that had been made famous by Slim Dusty and Buddy Williams.<sup>88</sup>

Interestingly, the Le Garde Twins see this sort of protectionism as self-defeating. By rejecting America, they argue, Australian performers are cutting off many career options. They are also eliminating a chance to bring Australian music to the world and participate in what music should be all about: communication:

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<sup>84</sup> Eric Watson, *Country Music In Australia, Vol II*, Cornstalk Publishing, Sydney, 1983, p 31

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p 31

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p 4.

<sup>87</sup> as a more impressionistic example, when I was undertaking research for this chapter at the Australian Country Music Foundation Archives in Tamworth, one of the archivists expressed surprise at my interest in the Le Garde Twins. They gave country music a bad name, she argued, because they weren’t the real thing.

<sup>88</sup> For instance: The Le Garde Twins, *Down Under Country*, Festival, 1981; The Le Garde Twins, *The Le Garde Twins Sing Songs of Slim and Buddy*, EMI, Sydney, 1964.

John Williamson could come over here. He could play colleges. He would kill them. You shouldn't be anti-anything in music, or any art form really. Music belongs to the world...Music knows no geography, no boundaries.<sup>89</sup>

The debate about whether a cultural industry should appeal primarily to an international or national audience is a familiar one in Australian cultural history - see especially debates about the film industry - but in the context of country music's particular attachment to nationalism it takes on special significance. For an industry that has increasingly seen itself as promoting an indigenous form to a wholly local audience, the explicit targeting of an international audience by artists such as the Le Gardes seems like a betrayal.

### **Nashville**

Although the Le Garde Twins stated that country music had 'no respect for geography' and that country music was a global phenomenon, they still regarded Nashville as its centre. Indeed, for many Australian performers Nashville functioned as a metropolis - a cultural, commercial and historical centre of gravity like no other. It is one of the paradoxes of country music culture that it has both stressed its distance (both geographic and ethical) from the city yet has identified very strongly with a metropolitan centre. This paradox stems largely from the sheer necessity of having a career in country music - Nashville is where the record labels, the venues, are. Yet, it also says something about one of the central and unique features of country music - the fact that songs are not just written about the country but, and more specifically, are written about being in the city and longing for the country. Country music needs its metropolises to contextualise the rural experience.

Nashville is also a unique metropolis because the values it represents are not only those traditionally associated with the city (ie progress, commercialism, modernity) but also

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<sup>89</sup> Interview, op cit.

those values generally seen as the antithesis of the city (ie tradition, family, nature, heritage). This is both the result of Nashville's history and the aura generated by its cultural sites such as the Ryman Auditorium and the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. The Ryman Auditorium was home to the Grand Ole Opry from 1941-1974. The Grand Ole Opry is a country music concert, held every Saturday night and broadcast live throughout the southern states of America. Performing on the 'Opry' is still considered the marker of 'making it' as a country performer. The Ryman Auditorium has become, therefore, synonymous with the birth and continuing traditions of American country music. It is a place where the visitor can experience 'living history'<sup>90</sup> by virtue of the building's seamless connection with past and present. This association with tradition and genesis has been aided by the Ryman's original function as a tabernacle church.

While being housed in a building constructed in 2001, the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum has also provided a point of contact between contemporary country music culture and its past. The Hall of Fame, thanks to its extensive collection of country music artefacts, archival material and public exhibitions, has become a place where, according to the Hall of Fame's slogan, country music fans can 'Honor Thy Music'.<sup>91</sup> The Hall of Fame and Museum has been the 'home of country music since 1967' and is now 'poised to carry the heritage of country music into the 21st century.'<sup>92</sup> The Hall of Fame also has a special connection to the past because of its location 'on the west bank of the Cumberland River just a few steps from the historic Ryman Auditorium and the authentic honky-tonks of Lower Broadway.'<sup>93</sup> The Hall of Fame, the Ryman and the bars and restaurants of 5th Avenue define downtown Nashville as a place with a special heritage. This image of Nashville has come to dominate popular perceptions of the city.

Adding to the growing literature of 'Elvis Studies', Gilbert B Rodman has written eloquently about 'Elvis Space; in particular, the function of Graceland as a place for

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<sup>90</sup> <http://www.theryman.com> 01/09/03

<sup>91</sup> <http://www.countrymusichalloffame.com/museum/> 01/09/03

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

'pilgrimage and congregation' after Elvis Presley's death.<sup>94</sup> This is due, Rodman argued, to the association Elvis had with Graceland. 'From almost the first moment of his stardom, Elvis was associated with a very specific site on the map...in a way that no other star has – or has been since.'<sup>95</sup> Rodman goes on to say that no other popular culture phenomenon has the same single geographic focus as Elvis. While not associated with a specific star, Nashville is associated with the 'first moment' of country's stardom. Further, Nashville's identity has transcended that of place of origin. Memphis is certainly an important cultural centre for rock 'n' roll and blues, yet its function is limited to that of genesis. Similarly, Liverpool is understood as home to the Beatles, but not as an industry centre. The commercial centres of rock 'n' roll have remained Los Angeles or New York. Nashville, however, functions as both historic birthplace *and* continuing industry centre. In terms of popular perceptions of 'centres', *Lonely Planet* describes Memphis as the birthplace of rock 'n' roll, while Nashville is the 'country music capital of the world.'<sup>96</sup>

Nashville contains the operations and sites you would expect to find in a 'capital': government (the CMA); big business (the record labels, management companies, publishing companies and booking agents of 'music row'); heritage (the Ryman Auditorium); history (the objects, relics and exhibits in the Country Music Hall of Fame Museum and Archives); a continuing and authentic culture (the 'smoky honky-tonks' and 'venerated dives' on Broadway<sup>97</sup>); and diplomatic dialogue (the CMA International Country Music Show which, in 1975, included representatives from New Zealand, Canada, Japan, Holland, Czechoslovakia, England, France, Sweden and Australia ).<sup>98</sup>

And Australians have responded to Nashville's status as capital. We have already seen how Reg Lindsay was frequently Australia's representative at the International Show and how he and others saw their role in Nashville as 'ambassadors'. Further, the Australian

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<sup>94</sup> Gilbert B Rodman, *Elvis After Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend*, Routledge, London, 1996, p 102.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p 102.

<sup>96</sup> *Lonely Planet: USA*, Lonely Planet Publications, Melbourne, 2002, p 578 and 585

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p 589

<sup>98</sup> *CMA Close-Up*, CMA, Nashville, October 1975.

media have treated Australian country singers' appearances in Nashville as an ultimate recognition of their talent – the centre's appreciation of the periphery. In Reg Lindsay's case, the Australian press reported that he 'achieved the ultimate' by appearing on the Grand Ole Opry.' This was 'tantamount to an Opera Singer being invited to work with Callas at La Scala, or a ballet dancer being offered a spot at Covent Garden.'<sup>99</sup> Keith Urban, too, has journeyed '9,000 miles' to Nashville, 'including the nerve-wracking 10-yard trek across the famed Opry stage to receive the CMA's Horizon Award'.<sup>100</sup>

Australian performers have not gone to Nashville just for their careers, however. The journey there has also been described as the realisation of a spiritual destiny. Many artists described it as something that just had to be done; something beyond their control; something innate and ineffable. For the Le Garde Twins, 'entertainment was in their blood and it just had to come out', hence their appearance on the Grand Ole Opry.<sup>101</sup> Their songs, too, frequently express this sense of destiny. If 'From NSW to Nashville' describes the Le Garde Twins' journey to America as a mission, their more recent release, 'Brothers', talks about this mission as something that is almost beyond their control: 'Mum would say: 'Those Kids are born to entertain/ From Sydney's harbour lights to the Opry Stage.'<sup>102</sup> Keith Urban, too, at age seven 'knew that one day he would move to Nashville to play country music.'<sup>103</sup> The idea of country music being artless, a genuine expression rather than a career-driven one, reverberates even in that apparently most careerist of decisions: moving to America.

### **Musical Pilgrimages**

Given Nashville's function as centre and Australian performers' innate drive to go there, it is useful to think about their journeys as forms of secular pilgrimages. Indeed, it is not

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<sup>99</sup> 'No Hayseeds in Reg Lindsay's Hair', *TV Times*, Sydney, 01/10/1969.

<sup>100</sup> 'Keith Urban: Golden Road', op cit.

<sup>101</sup> 'Meet The Twins', *Country Song Roundup*, August, 1963.

<sup>102</sup> The Le Garde Twins, 'Brothers', op cit.

<sup>103</sup> 'Keith Urban: Golden Road', op cit.

just the performers who make these pilgrimages, but Australian country music fans too. For Australian performers and fans alike, the journey to Nashville represents something more than mere tourism or career opportunity; it is a spiritual journey to a special place.

In their 1978 study *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*, Victor and Edith Turner provide useful ways of conceptualising not just ancient Christian pilgrimages, but modern, secular ones too. Their central argument is that pilgrimage is a 'liminoid' experience.<sup>104</sup> That is, it lies outside the boundaries of everyday life. The pilgrim is, thus, 'an initiand, entering into a new, deeper level of existence than he has known in his accustomed milieu.'<sup>105</sup> Further, the act of pilgrimage is not a solo one, but is undertaken as part of a spiritual community. It is, in the words of the Turners, an experience of *communitas* – a shared experience.<sup>106</sup> The interlocking, concepts of liminoid experience and *communitas* are played out in myriad ways in the journeys Australians took (and continue to take) to Nashville.

Applying the Turners' theories of pilgrimages to popular culture is not a new idea. Numerous texts have been written on a great variety of modern, secular pilgrimages. One of the most notable of these is a collection of articles *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture* which studies pilgrimage sites as diverse as Glastonbury, Anfield (the Liverpool Football Club's home ground) and Graceland<sup>107</sup> and demonstrates the way modern, 'everyday', life is full of 'implicit religions'.<sup>108</sup> Australian country music performers' and fans' relationships to Nashville provide a fascinating, and as yet unexamined, example of an implicit religion.

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<sup>104</sup> Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1978, p 1.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p 8.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p 32.

<sup>107</sup> Ian Reader and Tony Walter (eds), *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, Macmillan Press, London, 1993. See also, for example: Roger C Aden, *Popular Stories and Promised Lands: Fan Cultures and Symbolic Pilgrimages*, The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa and London, 1999; Greil Marcus, *Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession*, Doubleday, New York, 1991; and Rodman, *op cit.*

<sup>108</sup> Ian Reader, 'Introduction, in Reader, *op cit.*, p 23.

Journeys to Nashville have certain qualities common to the Turner's understanding of pilgrimage: firstly, they are liminoid experiences, outside the boundaries of 'everyday' life; secondly they are conversional - converting dream into reality; thirdly, they have redemptive, cleansing properties; fourthly they are shared journeys; fifthly, they provide a way of accessing the past; and lastly, they provide a sense of intimacy between pilgrim and idol.

### **Liminoid Experience**

With regard to the first feature, there has been an impulse to describe journeys to Nashville as outside the 'normal' tourist or touring experiences. While the modes of tourism and pilgrimage overlap – in the words of the Turners 'a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist'<sup>109</sup> – journeys to Nashville are special compared to other journeys. They are outside normal experience and are, thus, liminoid. We have already seen how performances by Australians on the Grand Ole Opry have been described as the 'ultimate' performance and the realisation of long-held dreams. In this way, these performances occupy a different sphere to other performances – both in Australia and in America.

Voyages to Nashville undertaken by fans also occupy a special place. In 1975, Reg Lindsay advertised a tour to America for Australian country music fans with himself as guide. 'Discover Country Music USA' took in not just Disneyland and Las Vegas, but the Country Music Hall of Fame, the Grand Ole Opry, the Ernest Tubbs record stores, Opryland and 'the studios in famous music row'. Lindsay described it as the 'trip of a lifetime...one you won't want to miss out on' not just by virtue of the quantity of sites it visits but also because of the quality of these sites as sacred to country music fans. The Hall of Fame becomes a temple, bringing 'a true feeling of excitement and reverence to those who venture through its doors.'<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Turner, *op cit.*, p 20.

<sup>110</sup> 'Discover Country Music USA: With Reg Lindsay', Unpublished advertising brochure by Air New Zealand and American Express, 1975. 'Reg Lindsay' file, Country Music Hall of Fame Archives, Nashville.

It is a common reflex to see package tours as the antithesis of a liminoid experience: as generic, assembly-line sightseeing where greying tourists are herded from one kitschy site to another. Yet, travelling in a group of similarly devout pilgrims is certainly in the spirit of *communitas*. Just as in the mediaeval period ‘it was customary for pilgrims to travel in organized parties on shipboard and in caravans’,<sup>111</sup> the package deal coach tour heightens the pilgrim experience by providing a spirit of common spirituality and shared culture. Further, is this no normal package tour and Reg Lindsay is no normal guide. As potential pilgrims ‘may possibly know’, Lindsay was:

recently asked to visit Nashville Tennessee as Australia’s representative at the International Show and Seminar. Now starts the good news for you AND me. After I made the trip to the USA in 1969, I was asked by the Grand Ole Opry to appear on their show and I also recorded there.<sup>112</sup>

Patrons of the tour will, therefore, not only get to travel with the famous Reg Lindsay – a man whose aura has grown as a result of his Nashville appearances – and see him perform on the Grand Ole Opry, they will also get be able to have a closer relationship with Nashville than they would by undertaking the journey on their own. Lindsay, by virtue of this experiences and connections, is able to offer access to normally restricted aspects of Nashville. He can, for instance, introduce you to ‘people like Hank Snow, Roy Acuff...Bill Anderson, Dotty West and Grandpa Jones.’<sup>113</sup> Lindsay’s role, therefore, is one of medium between the rarefied, sacred world of country music and its Australian fans.

The Turners comment that ‘the final ingress to the holiest shrine will be for each pilgrim a momentous matter.’<sup>114</sup> The blurb to ‘Discover Country Music USA’ also makes much of the importance of the ‘approach’: ‘The highlight of the tour will be when you cross over the Walkway of the Stars and into the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in

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<sup>111</sup> Turner, *op cit.*, p 26.

<sup>112</sup> ‘Discover Country Music USA’ (Capitals in original.)

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Turner, *op cit.*, p 23.

which you will spend one full hour.’<sup>115</sup> The phrasing of this passage is revealing. The moment of revelation occurs not *in* the Country Music Hall of Fame itself, but in the journey to it. In the words of the brochure, when you *cross over*. The concept of ‘crossing over’ has deep repercussions with conventional spirituality – it is the phrase often used to describe the journey from earth to heaven; or, if not to heaven itself, to a place with a clear view of it. It is a place of deep reverence and communion where enlightenment can be achieved. ‘Country Music USA’ is a package tour outside the parameters of normal tourist experience because it offers the travellers a chance to cross over into the enlightened state.

### **Making The Ideal Real**

Part of what makes the process of ‘crossing over’ vital is the way in which it opens the pilgrims’ eyes and transforms the dream into reality; innocence into knowledge: The innocence of the eye is the whole point here, the ‘cleaning of the doors of perception.’ Pilgrims have often written of the ‘transformative’ effect on them of approaching the final altar of the holy grotto at the end of the way.<sup>116</sup> It is, the Turners argue, transformative because it is the point ‘where the ideal is felt to be real’;<sup>117</sup> where the visions of a holy place in the pilgrim’s mind find embodiment. The process of making real what has been a central part of the imagination is a defining feature of pilgrimage and one which frequently occurs in discussions of secular pilgrimage and implicit religion.<sup>118</sup> There is a sense in the descriptions of ‘Discover Country Music USA’ that this journey is the realisation of fans’ dreams and imaginations. It is there in the description of the Hall of Fame as the place where ‘the great people in Country Music have been immortalized in bronze’<sup>99</sup> and it is there in the excitement surrounding audiences with stars such as Hank Snow and Roy Acuff.

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<sup>115</sup> ‘Discover Country Music USA’, op cit.

<sup>116</sup> Turner, op cit., p 11.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p 30.

<sup>118</sup> Reader, op cit., p 9.

<sup>99</sup> ‘Discover Country Music USA’, op cit.

Much of the language of the tourist brochure and the promotional website is advertising hype. The prose is flamboyant and emotional in an effort to lure customers to Nashville's various attractions. However, such sentiments are, to some degree, reflected in individual accounts of journeys to Nashville. Arthur Blanch, for instance, who with his wife Berice and daughter Dot had a sustained career both in America and Australia, described visiting Nashville in his memoirs. It was described as the realisation of a long-held dream: 'What a thrill to be sitting in the famous old Ryman auditorium with its hard wooden pews and watching some of our favourite singers perform'.<sup>119</sup>

### **Cleansing and Redeming**

The 'transformative effect' of pilgrimage that the Turners talk about also has a result of 'cleansing' the pilgrim. The site where the 'ideal is felt to be real' is also the site where the 'tainted social persona may be cleansed and renewed.'<sup>120</sup> While this aspect certainly has very specific ramifications for Christian pilgrimages – the cleansing of one's soul prepares you for a joyful afterlife – it also finds echoes and variants in secular pilgrimages. Cleansing, in the secular sense, can mean the washing away of the pressures associated with modern life. The pilgrimage site becomes a respite from everyday life – a place to refresh, renew and to get in touch with a neglected spiritual core. Like the narrator in Paul Simon's song 'Graceland' who, with his son and other 'poorboys and pilgrims...ghosts and empty sockets' are journeying to Elvis Presley's home to 'be received' and achieve redemption.<sup>121</sup>

'Discover Country Music USA' also puts a great deal of emphasis on the redemptive experience of the journey to Nashville. The trip to Opryland (the themepark on the city's outskirts) appears as a pastoral idyll in which visitors will experience a dreamlike reverie: 'Relax and enjoy the scenery, sit in the shade of the beautiful Tennessee woods and listen

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<sup>119</sup> Berice and Arthur Blanch, *Wollun One: The Story of the Blanch Family*, Tamworth Music, Palm Beach (QLD), 2004, p 54

<sup>120</sup> Turner, *op cit.*, p 30

<sup>121</sup> Paul Simon, 'Graceland', on the album *Graceland*, Warner Brothers, 1986.

to the happy sound of the waterfall blended with a medley from strolling troubadors (sic),<sup>122</sup> This image of Nashville as calm, reflective and redemptive corresponds to the popular image of country music itself as a form that exists somehow outside modern life. This can be seen in its emphasis on the outback, the past and traditional values. Country music tells stories about a mythic utopia – an imaginative place that exists parallel to modern society. The image of Nashville as different to other cities (indeed, as somewhere where respite from these modern cities can be achieved) reflects this utopian impulse.

### **Communitas**

We have already seen how Lindsay's coach tour contained elements of *communitas* through travel as part of a like-minded group, but *communitas* is also a feature of the trip to Nashville for the individual traveller. At the Ryman Auditorium, at Opryland and, in particular, at the Country Music Hall of Fame the solo traveller can see other fans of country music visiting a spiritual centre. Even the exhibits in the Hall of Fame reflected the value of fan culture. The second floor of the building is devoted to private collections such as Marty Stuart's (himself a country singer) extensive collection of posters, records and stage outfits. In the words of Rodman, having a specific site where like-minded fans can gather creates 'a sense of themselves as a community' which helps to reinforce 'the feeling that their personal obsession is shared by thousands, if not millions, of other people.'<sup>123</sup>

This is a particularly important aspect to the function of Nashville, given country music's status as a marginal culture. In particular it is a marginal culture that regularly incurs the class-based slurs of cultural elites as being a white trash, hillbilly, southern, musically banal phenomenon (in much the same way that Elvis and his fans incurred the same snobbery).<sup>124</sup> Thus, the need to have a 'sense of themselves as a community' is, perhaps, more vital for country music fans than for, say, classical music fans. Further, it is even

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<sup>122</sup> 'Discover Country Music USA', *op cit.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p 128.

<sup>124</sup> See Marcus, *op cit.*

more important for *Australian* country music fans to feel part of a community of fellow fanatics. Australian country music fans are, if anything, more isolated and more frowned upon by cultural elites than their American counterparts. They are, too, a long way from Nashville. It is, in simply geographic terms, a longer journey to take.

### **Accessing the Past**

Further, the sacred sites of Nashville provide a particularly strong sense of community because they talk about the past. Specifically, they are about genesis and a shared heritage. The Ryman Auditorium is a place where one can experience 'living history'; the Hall of Fame is a space where one can 'honor they music'. Honouring, taking pride in a tradition meant, for the Hall of Fame, locating and celebrating the roots of tradition. Thus the history in the Hall of Fame is, to a large degree, a history of genesis. Much of the museum is devoted to the early stages of country music – its genesis in the amalgam of folk music, gospel, blues and tin pan alley songwriters that found commercial expression in the late 1920s.

Country music's relationship with its own past and national pasts has often been one of celebration and veneration. Halls of Fame, with their display of relics, their sense of reverence and their canonisation of selected aspects of the past are a good example of this impulse. This theme will be explored in more detail in Chapter Five.

Many relics are namechecked in Reg Lindsay's release 'Country Hall of Fame': Jimmie Rodgers' railroad lantern; the bronze statue of Roy Acuff; Maybelle Carter's autoharp; Eddy Arnold's guitar; and a recording of Tex Ritter singing High Noon, as well as the ghostly presence of numerous other country stars: Riley Puckett; Minnie Pearl; Hank Snow; Patsy Cline; Ernest Tubb; and Hank Williams. These relics have a saintly aura, made explicit by Lindsay in the closing stanza of the song: 'May the Lord bless those still living/and those that bless his throne./ Though some are gone they'll live forever/ in the Country Hall of Fame' <sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Reg Lindsay, Country Hall of Fame, Festival Records single, No date (c1975).

## Intimacy

Ian Reader has argued that relics and saints 'appeared to offer the ordinary person ready access to the holy' and that one of the vital signifiers of pilgrimage sites is 'a sense of accessibility...the notion that of the site and route as places of unmediated meeting.'<sup>126</sup>

Or, in words of the Turners, pilgrimages are a way of attaining a 'hotline to the almighty'.<sup>127</sup> Not only does the Hall of Fame provide fans of country music with a deeper sense of connectedness to their idols, it gives them a deeper sense of connectedness with the history of country music in general. There is a sense that by visiting these holy places and seeing the dead saints' relics first hand, country music fans are able to *feel* history rather than simply *know* it.

For Reg Lindsay, visiting and singing about the Hall of Fame provides a sense of legitimisation as well as connectedness. By talking about the glorious figures of country music's past he positions himself as an inheritor of their legacy. We have already seen how Lindsay's performances at the Grand Ole Opry occupied a special, privileged realm, and public visits to the Hall of Fame serve this purpose too. One example of Lindsay's visible, active role in Nashville's sacred sites is the photos on the sleeve of his LP *Reg Lindsay in Nashville*. The front cover features him lounging on a sports car in front of the Hall of Fame, while the back has him standing on the Ryman Auditorium stage, looking out wistfully towards where the audience would be. If the Reg Lindsay fan is in any doubt as to where exactly Lindsay has been, the slogan 'Recorded in Nashville, Tennessee, USA, 1975' is emblazoned across the back cover.

A visit to Nashville and the Hall of Fame provides the devotee of country music with a deep sense of its heritage, genesis, wider community and, for the performer, of their place within it. This, in turn, reinforces the individual's cultural identity. Indeed, it is useful to conceptualise these journeys to Nashville as pilgrimages of identity. Stepping outside

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<sup>126</sup> Ian Reader, 'Introduction', in Reader, *op cit.*, p 19.

<sup>127</sup> Turner, *op cit.*, p 16.

everyday experience, making the imaginary become real, participating in spiritual cleansing, joining with a like-minded community and getting in touch with the heritage of the music are processes which all contribute to this quest.

Further, there seems to be no equivalent journey for other fans of specific music genres. While there is a Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio, it does not generate the same kind of aura. There is not the same sense of it being a pilgrimage site – a place for rock fans and performers to reaffirm their sense of identity. There are, as far as I know, no songs written about it, nor does it grace album covers. The cultural difference between country and rock 'n' roll could no doubt fill an entire tome, however the experience of pilgrimage and travel suggests four specific ways in which the culture of country music orientates itself

Firstly, there is the sense of country music as a marginalised culture. Many performers and fans are highly attuned to what they perceive as snobbery and derision from cultural elites. It is therefore important to a sense of cultural worth to legitimate the music they love. There are many ways this is done – including the campaign to eradicate the term 'hillbilly' in favour of 'country and western' in the 1950s because of the negative stereotypes associated with the American south that was covered in the previous chapter. Another is through the discovery and display of a heritage in which pride can be taken. History legitimates, and one of the primary functions of Nashville is to provide expression of history.

Secondly, there is the sense of genre and community distinctions. Country music has followed a historic logic of becoming a discrete genre, often articulated as popular music's 'other'. To like country music does not require the generalised taste in popular music, but a specific taste and sense of identity as a country music fan.

Thirdly, country music's relationship with the past tends to be one of celebration of heritage. From its incarnation as a mass cultural phenomenon it provided images of a rural, traditional heritage that stressed the importance of tradition. It also provided a

sense of connectedness between the present and the pastoral past. This connectedness is reflected in myriad aspects of country music, including the sacred sites of Nashville.

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, pilgrimage says something about the particular relationship between country music and national authenticities. This addresses the paradox of a rural, self-consciously peripheral musical form, having a 'centre'. That is, that it fits the identity of country music as being American, and Australian country music as being a variant. Rather than a global phenomenon that has transcended its roots (like jazz, rock or dance music) country is still popularly seen as American, even quintessentially so, with exotic anomalies around the world.

As with many sacred sites, there is a sense that Nashville's authenticity is under threat from rampant commercialism (indeed, if it hasn't drowned under it already). In particular, there is frequent criticism that Nashville is full of opportunists willing to make a quick buck. Once again, the Turners have written about this phenomenon in ancient Christian cultures:

To cater for the fired-up pilgrim's needs, the merchants of holy wares set up booths in the market, where they sell devotional statuettes and pictures, rosaries, missals, sacred tracts, and a variety of other sacramental objects and edifying literature.<sup>128</sup>

This description finds striking reflection in the bewildering amount and variety of souvenirs on sale in Nashville: stickers, yo-yos, guitar picks, calendars, t-shirts, fridge magnets, paperweights...all adding to the sense of 'unmediated meeting' with the idols and saints.

Australian country performers, journalists and tourists have also responded critically to what they see as the crassness of Nashville, making the point that, far from being the home of the spirit of country music, it is an inauthentic, commercially-driven culture. In Slim Dusty's autobiography he describes his 1989 trip to Texas and Nashville. There is no sense of pilgrimage in the description; no sense of connection with the roots of

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<sup>128</sup> Turner, *op cit.*, p 25.

country music. While he has an enjoyable experience at the 'Carter Fold' in rural Tennessee – a small hall where old-time music and bluegrass is featured every night, he finds Nashville ugly, crass and out of touch with its past.<sup>129</sup> A large degree of Dusty's disappointment stems from the fact that given mainstream American country music is commercial and vulgar, he can't understand why so many Australian artists imitate it. For Dusty, Nashville is a symbol of the Americanisms that are corrupting Australian country music. It is a threat to Australian country music authenticity. Which is not to say that Slim Dusty is not interested in getting touch with the roots of country music and his cultural identity, he just locates this elsewhere to Nashville. His autobiography ends with the exclamation:

I'm going at last to sing in Ireland. That old country sent it music out here in my father's bones, and I'm going to give them a taste of what Australia has done with that music.<sup>130</sup>

## Conclusion

The story of the Le Garde Twins, Reg Lindsay and other Australian performers in America reveals the way in which cultural nationalism is a strategy, rather than innate. A sense of national identity is one of the many choices performers make. The ways in which these performers have alternatively de-emphasised or emphasised their Australianness has been in response to the shifting demands and expectations of both Australian and American culture in the mid to late twentieth century.

The history of Australian country performers and fans in America also tells us nuanced things about the nature of 'centre' and 'periphery' in country music culture. On the one hand, country music in Australia has treated Nashville as a spiritual and industrial centre and journeys to it as pilgrimages. On the other hand, the strategies of the Le Gardes and

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<sup>129</sup> Slim Dusty and Joy McKean, *Slim Dusty: Another Day, Another Town*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1997 p 264.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, p 299.

Lindsay and the way in which they have been accepted by American music and local media tells us that country music in Australia cannot be understood simply as a regional variant of an American tradition. Rather than being local content dressed up in an American form, as the majority of historiography and popular understandings of cultural transmission would have it, the Le Gardes and Lindsay were essentially saying that country music is a global form. While its origins and largest market are in America, it has an international popularity and resonance that supersedes these local origins. The Le Garde Twins, Reg Lindsay, Smoky Dawson and Tex Morton's interest in being 'ambassadors' shows, amongst other things, an implicit critique of accepted ways of looking at authentic cultures and nationalism.

## Chapter Five

# Country Music Capital: The Past In Tamworth

### Introduction

Tamworth is a town that lies in the pastoral New England region of northeastern New South Wales. It is one of Australia's larger inland towns, with a population of approximately 40,000 in 2006. In 1969, a local commercial radio station, 2TM, coined the phrase 'Country Music Capital' to describe Tamworth. 2TM subsequently inaugurated Australia's first country music awards - the Golden Guitar Awards - and accompanying country music festival on the Australia Day long weekend holiday of 1973. Nominations and categories for the Awards expanded during the 1970s, as did the Festival itself, becoming a ten-day event. In 1992 Channel Seven broadcast the awards on national television.<sup>1</sup> By the early twenty-first century, Tamworth had become an icon: arguably the largest musical festival in Australia, attracting some 50,000 visitors over the last two weeks of January, and the focus of unusual national media coverage and broad public recognition - an unusual situation for a country music event in Australia. Despite the fact that most of the record labels and recording studios have remained in Sydney, Tamworth has become the symbolic home of Australian country music.

In January 2010, however, the Tamworth country music festival was suffering from an identity crisis. This crisis was the result of a difference in opinion over what 'Country Music Capital' exactly meant. On the one hand, the Country Music Association of Australia and Tamworth Regional Council saw it as a term that was inclusive of a variety of genres of music and had sought to broaden Tamworth's appeal by including acts outside the rubric of what had traditionally been considered 'country'. Most notably, in 2010, a high-profile concert by Guy Sebastian - a soul-influenced singer and winner of popular music talent quest *Australian Idol* - was staged at the Tamworth Regional Entertainment Centre and performances by alternative folk troubadours Josh Pyke and

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<sup>1</sup> *Northern Daily Leader*, 20/01/92.

Bob Evans and heritage rock acts such as Daddy Cool's Ross Wilson also took place around town. On the other hand, founders of the Festival saw Tamworth's identity in more particular terms and argued that such non-Country inclusions epitomised the ongoing abuse of the traditional identity of Country Music Capital as a place that preserved traditional country music, namely a genre known as the 'bush ballad'.

By the 1970s, country music could consider itself a discrete genre with its own heritage. This chapter will examine Tamworth's fascination with heritage. In doing so it will look at the creation of the terms 'Country Music Capital' and 'Bush Ballad'. It will then look at the ways in which Country Music Capital has sought to preserve the bush ballad. Lastly it will examine how Tamworth negotiated narratives of Australian history and identity in the 1980s and 90s.

### **Creating Country Music Capital**

By January 2010, Tamworth had become popularly synonymous with country music to such a degree that Mayor James Treloar was able to claim that the city was 'the spiritual home of country music.'<sup>2</sup> The term 'spiritual home' carries with it connotations of tradition and permanence, however the term 'Country Music Capital' wasn't coined until the late 1960s and its popular association with Tamworth has only occurred since then.

Tamworth was, from the late nineteenth century until the early 1970s, known as 'The City of Light' due to the fact that in 1888 it became the first place in the southern hemisphere to have electric streetlight. This achievement was the result of Tamworth's size, prominence and wealth - the city had been founded as the centre of operations for the Australian Agricultural Company in 1833 and had played a central role in developing the Australian wool industry. The term 'City Of Light' symbolised all that was progressive, modern and forward-looking about Tamworth. Early and mid twentieth-

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<sup>2</sup> James Treloar, 'Welcome To Tamworth', *2010 Official Guide to the Tamworth Country Music Festival*.

century tourist literature advertised Tamworth as a good tourist destination because of its picturesque setting and centre and character as a thriving centre of the wool and cattle industries.<sup>3</sup>

Historically, Tamworth had no overt claim to being Australia's Country Music Capital. Like many other towns in northeastern New South Wales, such as Armidale, Grafton, Casino and Lismore, it was home to some country singers and a regular inclusion on the country touring circuit, but it certainly wasn't unique in this. What Tamworth did have was local commercial radio station 2TM and its nightly hillbilly show *Hoedown*, hosted by John Minson. During the 1960s, as radio switched from specialist shows to mixed format,<sup>4</sup> rock 'n' roll began to gain favour with youth audiences and television became widespread, country music began to disappear from the airwaves and the national consciousness. By 1968 *Hoedown* was the only daily show dedicated to hillbilly music on the Australian airwaves. It also broadcast via an unusually clear channel and could, it was claimed, be heard as far as Tasmania in the south, New Zealand in the east and New Guinea in the north.<sup>5</sup>

Members of the 2TM staff in the late 1960s exploited the station's position. As Max Ellis, station manager and ongoing key figure in the development of Tamworth put it, 'With perhaps two exceptions we were not what you'd call fans of the music and our most powerful motivation was to do something for Tamworth and to make reputation and money for the station.'<sup>6</sup> Thus, 2TM coined the phrase 'Country Music Capital' in 1969 as a marketing slogan for their station. They inaugurated the Golden Guitar Awards and accompanying festival on the Australia Day holiday weekend of January 1973 to further publicise the station and to bring tourist income to Tamworth.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Greetings From Tamworth*, No Publisher, 1935.

<sup>4</sup> Graeme Smith, 'Country Music' in Whiteoak and Scott-Maxwell, *op cit.*, p 196.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.historyofcountrymusic.com.au/jemstory.html> 16/03/10

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.historyofcountrymusic.com.au/htbcmc.html> 16/03/10

<sup>7</sup> For instance: Interview with Max Ellis,

<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2010/01/21/2798273.html>. 15/03/10; *Northern Daily Leader* 17/01/81 and *Northern Daily Leader*, 27/01/91.

Like many rural centres with declining rural economies, Tamworth had come to rely increasingly on tourism. However, the last two weeks of January, even though falling within Australia's longest period of school holidays, were a traditionally slow time for tourism.<sup>8</sup> Uncomfortably hot in inland New South Wales during the summer months, many locals and tourists preferred to spend their holidays by the beach. The Festival and award ceremony was an attempt to stem the tide to the ocean. An attempt that, as audience numbers would come to attest, worked well.

'Country Music Capital' was invented primarily for economic reasons. Further, this motivation has become central to the way in which members of 2TM have told the history of Tamworth. Max Ellis in particular has stressed the role of marketing and planning in creating Country Music Capital, downplaying the idea that such an identity simply evolved:

'Country Music Capital' was not the result of good luck. It didn't just happen. It wasn't an accident. It didn't just evolve... it happened because WE MADE IT HAPPEN'...The story of Tamworth and Country Music provides an object lesson for other entrepreneurs keen to develop their cities or towns in a similar way.<sup>9</sup>

This non-accidental creation of 'Country Music Capital' and shift away from the 'City of Light' was rapid and profound. In 1973, no mention was made of the Awards, Festival or Country Music Capital in Tamworth tourist literature. In 1975 a City of Tamworth Information Booklet dryly stated that '2TM has been responsible for Tamworth receiving National recognition as 'Country Music Capital'' and notes that 'The Australasian Country Music Awards are held annually over the January long week-end.'<sup>10</sup> However, by 1979 the festival took a prominent place in tourist literature, with particular emphasis on its place as the *capital* of country music. Thus, glowing prose announced that: 'Tamworth is a city of many changing faces. Known for many years as the City of

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<sup>8</sup> Max Ellis, 'The Essence of Tamworth', *2010 Official Guide to the Tamworth Country Music Festival*.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.historyofcountrymusic.com.au/htbcmc.html> 16/03/10.

<sup>10</sup> *City Of Tamworth Information Booklet*, 1975.

Light...in recent years a new and unusual label has been appended to the city's name – 'Country Music Capital.' Tamworth is recognized by 'people all over the Commonwealth...as the nation's focal point for the rapidly expanding field of music known as 'country''. Much was made of the size of the festival: 'Every January, many thousands of fans from as far away as New Zealand converge on Tamworth for a full week of entertainment and festivity.'<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the tourist literature of the 1970s, Tamworth was presented as a growing, thriving, bustling, pastoral and manufacturing centre. Tamworth Regional Council and the Chamber of Commerce took a strong role in promoting this image of Tamworth to those from out of town. The eventual recognition of the Awards and the Festival as 'famous'<sup>12</sup> was neither accidental nor altruistic; rather it was seen as an important way to generate income for the city via tourism. 'Country Music Capital' would, it was becoming clear, bring monetary capital to the city.

Local media, too, reflected the rapid recognition of Tamworth's new identity and the numbers of visitors that this identity attracted. Beginning in the first year of the Awards, the *Northern Daily Leader* published regular articles about the significant size of the audiences. In 1973, 'a big audience of record industry representatives, country music artists and visitors from all over Australia filled the Tamworth Town Hall for the First Annual Australasian Country Music Awards.'<sup>13</sup> Such an audience meant that 'Tamworth can now rest on its laurels as the undisputed country music capital of Australia.'<sup>14</sup> (This after only having been in existence four years.) The *Leader* has continued to emphasise the size, and therefore success, of the Festival in its pages. From 1973 until 2010, at least one article every year was written about the size of the festival and its impact on Tamworth business. In 1978 'free-spending country music fans' were expected to bring 'roaring trade' to the town,<sup>15</sup> while in 1982 it was 'standing room only' as 'tourists pour

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<sup>11</sup> *City Of Tamworth Information Booklets*, 1979.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> 'Slim Dusty Is Still Country Music King', *Northern Daily Leader*, 29/01/73

<sup>14</sup> 'They Came, They Saw, They Adored', *Northern Daily Leader*, 30/01/73

<sup>15</sup> *Leader*, 27/01/78

in for a million-dollar eating, drinking and music splurge.’<sup>16</sup> In 2010, however, local media reports tended to focus on the diminishing crowd numbers and retail trade.<sup>17</sup> Country Music Capital had been invented as a way to bring tourists to Tamworth and commercial success had become central to its identity. Part of the ‘crisis’ of 2010 was how this identity had been disrupted.

During the 1980s and 90s, another key aspect to Tamworth’s identity as Country Music Capital was that it was rural and, therefore, old-fashioned and traditional.

Chris Gibson and Deborah Davidson have argued that Tamworth tourism bodies constructed a sense of ‘rurality’ in order to appeal to city audiences and that Tamworth’s status as Country Music Capital ‘derives not just from the festival and the presence of a local country music industry, but from metropolitan fascination with the town and with images of rurality...it embodies.’ Further, ‘images of rural Australia have spilt over from the genre of country music to become associated with the place itself.’<sup>18</sup> Davidson and Gibson also show how by being ‘authentically rural’ Tamworth was able to market itself as ‘authentically Australian. Both Tamworth Council and Tourism Tamworth have placed the Festival ‘at the centre of nationalistic discourse with allusions to mateship, beef, ANZAC and the Kokoda Trail’. As one tourist brochure bluntly puts it, ‘Tamworth – it’s Australia.’<sup>19</sup>

Tamworth’s shift from the forward-looking, internationally-minded identity as the ‘City Of Light’ to a hyper-rural, hyper-Australian identity reflects the history of popular images of Australian nationalism and regional pride too. While the late nineteenth century had seen the development of a nostalgic ‘bush myth’ in Australia – largely, according to Graeme Davison, in the cities – country towns sought to identify themselves with international standards of progress and modernity.<sup>20</sup> It was only in the later

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Standing Room Only’, *Leader*, 30/01/82

<sup>17</sup> ‘Country Music Fans Spend Less in 2010’, *Leader*, 30/01/10.

<sup>18</sup> Chris Gibson and Deborah Davidson, ‘“Tamworth, Australia’s Country Music Capital’: Place Marketing, Rurality and Resident Reactions’, *Journal of Rural Studies*, 20/4 (October 2004), pp 387-404.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Graeme Davison, ‘Sydney and The Bush’, *Historical Studies*, Vol 18, No. 71, October 1978, pp 191-209

twentieth century – with the decline of their role in the economy and the rise of tourism – that they came to value rural-derived qualities of mateship and tradition, giving them expression through folk cultures with their aura of national and regional authenticity.

### **National and International Contexts**

It is also important to see the invention and exploitation of country music heritage in Tamworth in an international context. Some scholars, notably Raphael Samuel, John Corner and Sylvia Harvey<sup>21</sup>, have identified the late twentieth century preoccupation with heritage, and the burgeoning industry that has accompanied it, as a response to Britain's declining status as an imperial power and growing narratives of post-colonialism and globalisation. In this context, business, government and individuals tend to look inwards and backwards to find evidence of tradition, permanence and continuity. While Australia's relationship to colonialism is different to Britain's – in that it was both a coloniser and a colonised – we can see equivalent ways in which industry and individuals have responded to globalisation. In the face of growing populist conservative sentiment that tends to see 'authentic' Australian culture being wiped out by the forces of global capitalism, that which appears nativist and historically continuous – ie locally owned companies, farms and mines, tariffs to protect trade and colonial-era buildings – are heralded as bulwarks in the almost unstoppable flow.

It is in this context that country music in Australia in the late twentieth century has positioned itself as fundamentally different to country music in America. It has developed its own foundation myths, generic conventions and geographic specificity as a means of identifying itself as native and fine. This identity has, in turn, contributed to the economic success of the Country Music Festival and country music in general. In a globalised world, localism has become increasingly important as a marketing strategy – selling the product's point of difference. As Corner and Harvey have demonstrated, the

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<sup>21</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres Of Memory*, Verso, London, 1994, p 221; John Corner and Sylvia Harvey, *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture*, Routledge, London, 1991, p 28.

marketing strategies of many multinational companies in the 1990s can be described as 'global localisation'<sup>22</sup>. Just as hillbilly music in the 1930s was a response to the technology and psychic threat of modernity, so to we can see country music, its industry and its culture, as a response to post-modern capitalism and globalisation.

There have also been certain organisational changes to the manufacture, distribution and marketing of country music that have aided its identity as an authentically Australian form with a local flavour. Most notably, the national broadcaster, the ABC, has played an increasingly prominent role, both in its capacity as one of the biggest record labels for Australian country singers and as a place to hear country music on the radio. As of 2010, the ABC had a country music show on Saturday nights (hosted by country music singer Felicity Urquart) broadcast nationally as well as significant airplay on local regional stations. In 2009, the ABC launched a dedicated digital country music station (one of only three music stations). Every Sunday morning the show 'Australia All Over' hosted by Ian 'Macca' McNamara is broadcast around Australia, from a different regional town every week. It has a general atmosphere of folksy informal, community-mindedness – having stories told by town locals in their own voice – as well as country music.

The rising prominence of the national broadcaster has both aided in and reflected the general trajectory of the identity of country music in Australia. The ABC has a brief to promote locally produced culture. Further, the ABC, its listeners and its supporters, have equated locally-produced cultures with cultural worthiness. The growing interest in country music on behalf of the ABC has, thus, emphasised the music's identity as important to the nation and important to local regional communities.

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<sup>22</sup> Corner and Harvey, *op cit*, p 28

## Creating Country Music 'Capital'

Although the primary reason for creating Country Music Capital was economic, the sense of embattlement and marginalisation felt by members of the country music industry in the late 1960s and early 1970s both encouraged it and aided in the development of its character. Twin forces - the first the desire to improve the status of country music, the second the emerging status of rural Australian cultures - meant that the cultural capital of country music was Australian and Tamworth reflected that.

'Country Music Capital' was born at a specific moment in country music history. Country artists and the industry were acutely aware of their music's low status (as we saw in Chapter Three) and a loss of their audience to new musical genres (such as rock 'n' roll) and new media (such as television). Country music had, during the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, gone from being a broadly popular culture to one that existed on the margins. As John Minson put it: 'My radio program *Hoedown* on 2TM was mainly Australian country music that wasn't heard on radio anywhere else.'<sup>23</sup>

The festival and the awards provided a solution to the sense of embattlement that many in the country music industry felt. According to the founders of Country Music Capital, the media profile of the Awards and the Festival improved the image of country music in the mind of the general public almost straightaway. After the second awards ceremony in 1974, Max Ellis said that 'Until a year ago there was a stigma attached to this type of music' but that now country music was 'respectable',<sup>24</sup> a claim that Ellis was to make repeatedly throughout the early years of the Festival.<sup>25</sup>

Others echoed Ellis' claims. Barrie Brennan, in his 1977 'Fifth Columnist' opinion piece for the *Leader*, wrote that the festival was gaining respect in Sydney<sup>26</sup> and that as a result

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.historyofcountrymusic.com.au/soacm.html>. 10/01/10

<sup>24</sup> *Northern Daily Leader*, 26/01/10.

<sup>25</sup> For instance, *Northern Daily Leader*, 17/01/81.

<sup>26</sup> *Northern Daily Leader*, 31/01/77 and 28/01/80.

of the Awards, 'country and western music was acceptable to a wide spectrum of the community and that it did not have to be apologised for'.<sup>27</sup> The *Leader* summed it up with a 1982 headline: 'Tamworth loses its hillbilly tag'.<sup>28</sup> Chapter Three of this thesis gave historical context to such concerns: they were the continuation of the status anxiety that marked country music in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. Just as the country music community hoped that changing the name from 'hillbilly' to 'country' would aid respectability, similar hopes were held for a successful awards ceremony and festival.

Undoubtedly, much of this supposed newfound respect derived from the economic success of the Festival and Golden Guitars and their corresponding sense of glamour and celebrity.<sup>29</sup> However, it was also encouraged by the development of the specifically Australian character of Country Music Capital. As we have seen, cultural commentators often criticised Australian country music as being too American (an intellectual sport that has proved enduring). This was evidence used in the claim that it was an unrespectable artform, a claim vigorously denied by journalists, artists and industry members in the pages of *Spurs* and *Spotlight*. It was in this context that the Tamworth country musical festival was born as a specifically Australian country music festival.

The festival was, from the beginning, only open to Australian performers.<sup>30</sup> Further, until the 1980s at least, the awards were only open to Australian performers who had recorded in Australia, leaving artists such as Reg Lindsay, who often recorded in Nashville, ineligible for a Golden Guitar. Such regulations were part of the positioning of Tamworth as an Australian country music festival, rather than simply a music festival with more flexible definitions.

Further, the festival made distinctions between types of Australian country music, stating that Country Music Capital was going to promote and recognise 'real' Australian country

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<sup>27</sup> *Northern Daily Leader*, 07/02/77

<sup>28</sup> *Northern Daily Leader*, 28/01/82.

<sup>29</sup> 'Country Music Awards Souvenir Supplement', *Leader*, January 1983, p 7.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.historyofcountrymusic.com.au/htbcmc.html>

music.<sup>31</sup> Hierarchical distinctions between types of music were the result of broader issues connected to the horizontal stratification of culture in Australia in the post-War period. In particular, forms of popular music, keen to dissociate themselves from charges of 'low-brow', distinguished themselves from other potentially similar genres: jazz from pop; pop from country; real country from manufactured country; and so on. What is relevant for the history of Country Music Capital, however, is that 'real' country music came to mean music with historic and national purity.

Notably, the response of festival developers to country's lack of respect within broader popular culture was to move further away from it. Country Music Capital represented a retreat from rock, pop and popular culture. It was a retreat geographically – to the country, away from the traditional music industry centre of Sydney – and stylistically – to the bush ballad style. Country's response to its perceived marginalisation was to invoke a sense of its own heritage: to emphasise its rurality, nationalism and musical simplicity. It sought to distinguish itself from other forms of popular music – namely rock and pop – by declaring itself a musical form with its own roots.

Such distinctions were made most comprehensively in country music historian Eric Watson's paradigmatic *Country Music In Australia*.<sup>32</sup> In it he distinguished between the popular clichés of American cowboy and hillbilly music – the big hats, the rhinestones, the accents – and 'real' Australian country music, which he called 'bush ballads.' Let us now unpick what is meant by the term 'bush ballad'.

Although 'bush ballad' was a contemporary description for nineteenth-century verse - for instance Adam Lindsay Gordon published *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes* in 1894<sup>33</sup> – with regards to commercially-recorded country music it was a term used retrospectively. Slim Dusty has claimed that the term 'bush ballad' didn't gain

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.historyofcountrymusic.com.au/intro.html>

<sup>32</sup> Watson, Eric, *Country Music in Australia*, Rodeo Publications, Kensington (NSW), 1975

<sup>33</sup> Gordon, Adam Lindsay and Lloyd O'Neil (ed.), *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes: Poetical Works of Adam Lindsay Gordon*, Lloyd O'Neil, Hawthorn, 1970.

acceptance until the 1960s, following the release of his *Australian Bush Ballads* album.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the periodicals, sheet music and recordings of country music from the 1930s to the 1960s demonstrate that a variety of terms were used – hillbilly, cowboy, traditional, folk, old-time - but there is no record of the term ‘bush ballad’ being employed. Similarly, 1930s and 40s artists such as Tex Morton and Buddy Williams described themselves as ‘hillbilly’ or ‘cowboy’ singers, not ‘bush balladeers’.

‘Bush Ballad’ is a term that was popularised by country music writers in the 1960s and 70s.<sup>35</sup> For Watson, the term ‘bush ballad’ carries with it connotations of a rustic past that suit his argument and distinctions. Because of its radically Australian connotations, it has continued to gain currency in Tamworth. Just as ‘Country Music Capital’ was an invented term, so it seems, is ‘bush ballad’. It is a term popularised by those who seek to invent a stylistic and historic purity for country music.

Much of the music discussed in this thesis - Tex Morton’s and Buddy Williams’ Regal Zonohopne recordings and Slim Dusty’s work for instance - would be described by Watson as bush ballads. I have chosen not to use this term because it was not, until the 1970s, a contemporary description for commercially recorded country music. A bush ballad is characterised by musical simplicity and narrative directness. In its earliest variants in the 1930s and 40s, rhythmic and melodic accompaniment was provided primarily by the acoustic guitar – the thumb picked out the bass notes, alternated with strummed chords – although also included melodic lines played on electric guitar and interspersed between vocal phrases (popularised by Slim Dusty’s guitarist Barry Thornton) as well as violin and piano accordion parts. Space is paramount to the musical arrangement – space for the voice to sit so the lyrics can be clearly comprehended on first listen. These lyrics are typically about life in the Australian bush, typically work done by men such as droving, shearing, fencing etc. Many bush balladeers, most notably Dusty and more recently John Williamson, have chosen to sing in a recognisably Australian accent that stands in contrast to other forms of country.

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<sup>34</sup> John Whiteoak, ‘Bush Ballads’, in Whiteoak and Scott-Maxwell, *op cit.*, p 100.

<sup>35</sup> Watson, Eric, *op cit.*

There have been significant musical variations of the bush ballad. For instance, Slim Dusty has 'electrified' the bush ballad sound with a rock drum kit, electric guitar and bass guitar and Northern Territory balladeer Ted Egan typically accompanies himself only with percussive tapping on a cardboard carton of beer. Lyrically, however, the demands are much stricter. The bush ballad must be about Australian rural life. The bush ballad is 'real' Australian country music because it is about real Australian life.

Music that features overly sophisticated production techniques, with foregrounded instrumentation to the detriment of the singing, and lyrics that are not about Australian rural working life have been dismissed by Watson and others as commercial, or 'mediocre imitation of American styles' and therefore inauthentic.<sup>36</sup>

The fact that the bush ballad is an invented tradition has not impeded its canonisation as the authentic form of country music today. Photographer and author John Elliott gave a lecture entitled 'Let's Get real: The Need For Authenticity in Country Music' during the 2010 Festival. In this lecture, Elliott expanded on his thesis that 'There is an integrity in the bush ballad lyric that makes it impossible for a city person to write an authentic bush ballad'<sup>37</sup> by stating that country music is 'real stories about the country.'<sup>38</sup> The bush ballad is real country music, and a real bush ballad is authentically about the bush. The demands of contemporary country music have created a fetishisation of rurality as the fulcrum of authenticity.

It is interesting to compare how the rules for 'real country' in Australia differed to those in America. To 'be country' for American performers such as Hank Williams, Merle Haggard and David Allan Coe was to be 'hard', that is to have a hard-luck life story

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<sup>36</sup> Watson, *Op cit.*, p 127.

<sup>37</sup> John Elliott, *Where Country Is*, Rural Press, Tamworth, 2005, p 3.

<sup>38</sup> John Elliott, 'Let's Get real: The Need For Authenticity In Country Music', lecture given at the ACMF, Tamworth NSW, 21/01/10.

marked by relationship problems, drinking, depression and economic trouble.<sup>39</sup> In Australia, to be 'country' was more literally about the rural life – to have grown up on the land. It professed a desire for 'realness', but was located more specifically in the bush, not in the honky-tonks for large cities and towns. Both Slim Dusty's 'Where Country Is' (1982) and David Allan Coe's 'If That Ain't Country' (1977) seek to define country, but do so in different ways. For Dusty, 'Country' is an old man who has lived a life in a 'humpy' and has worked in various rural industries, such as droving. The songs he sings on his 'cracked and battered Gibson' leave no doubt in one's mind that the old man symbolizes 'where country is.' David Allan Coe, on the other hand claims to have led a difficult life, is 'poor white trash', has met Johnny Cash and 'if that ain't country' he'll kiss your ass.<sup>40</sup>

Rurality has always been central to Australian country music's cultural capital. As we have seen throughout this thesis, all Australian hillbilly, cowboy and country and western singers marketed themselves as real country people. However, what shifted in the latter part of the twentieth century was what being a real country person meant. In the 1930s it stood for a sense of sincerity - meaning what you say. By the 1970s, however, it stood for how Australian you were. For instance, Tex Morton in the 1930s occupied, interchangeably, both the Australian outback and the American prairie. He exhibited a whimsical attitude to recognisable national signifiers such as the boomerang and the cowboy shirt. While he did record Australian folk songs, they were not presented as the authentic and native bush ballad that they are today, but rather as a curious local variant of an international tradition. What was important for Morton was that he was a country person; which country exactly was of secondary concern. The revisionist attitude to Morton tended to neutralise his American influences and claim him as the originator of a particularly Australian tradition.

We have already seen, Australian culture since World War Two increasingly privileged a sense of Australianess (or, at least, the absence of American influences) and Country

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<sup>39</sup> Barbara Ching, *Wrong's What I Do Best: Hard Country Music and Contemporary Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001.

<sup>40</sup> David Allan Coe, 'If That Ain't Country', *Rides Again*, Columbia, 1977

internalised such prejudices. In locating a sense of Australianess, Country turned to its roots: the Australian bush. Locating Australian character in the Australian bush has been a preoccupation with radical Australian intellectuals and artists since at least the 1890s.

Such arguments began to resurface in Australia in the 1960s and 70s, after being given academic weight by Russel Ward, and Australian rural authenticity began to acquire previously unrealised degrees of cultural capital. Tamworth was the suitable capital for country music partly because it was in the country and had links to a pastoral tradition. If indeed images of rural Australia had 'spilt over' from country music to Tamworth (as Davidson and Gibson would have it) then they spilt back into country music as well. Further it was the appropriate place to preserve and protect the bush ballad

### **The Death of Reality**

Almost at the very moment that the term 'bush ballad' was born, it was dying. Fears that Tamworth was being corrupted by impure music were not new. Rather, such anxieties have been evident since at least the first decade of the festival. In 1980 the *Northern Daily Leader* sought to outline what is real country,<sup>41</sup> while two years later it described 'the usual argument about 'traditional versus contemporary country,''<sup>42</sup> with the obvious implication that this debate was a feature of the festival. Even though created for economic reasons, the identity of Tamworth became, quite rapidly, preservationist. Its role was to preserve and celebrate a unique piece of Australian culture: the bush ballad. Thus, the introduction of different genres to the festival represented a threat to the traditional identity of Country Music Capital and the continuation of a specifically *country* music festival.

While not new, the threat to real country music was ubiquitous in 2010, expressed in letters-to-the-editor, interviews on radio and newspaper, in public meetings and in song. Two self-described 'bush balladeers', Keith Jamieson and Reg Poole wrote, recorded and publicised a 'protest song' about the direction of Tamworth:

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<sup>41</sup> *Leader*, 27/01/82

<sup>42</sup> *Leader*, 27/01/84

Don't Let Them Murder Tamworth/ Don't let them steal The Peel<sup>43</sup>  
Don't let big business call the tune/ Tell them how you feel  
Our pioneers would tremble/ Up in heaven's hall of fame  
To hear what's happening here on earth/To their country music name.  
If they really want the rockers/And they want to change the name  
We'll take our music elsewhere/And that would be a shame.  
Take your hands off Tamworth/ leave our country name alone  
let's get back there to our roots/ not that rockin' thumpin' moan<sup>44</sup>

Two arguments established by 'Don't Let Them Murder Tamworth' were echoed by other critics of the festival: the stylistic objectionability of rock – 'that rockin, thumping moan'; and the loss of control to 'big business'. Both elements were indicative of the lack of respect to the heritage and 'pioneers' of Tamworth.

Firstly, in regards to other genres of music, one of the most vocal critics of the direction of the Tamworth Country Music Festival has been Eric Scott. Scott was one of the creators of the festival in the late 1960s and early 70s, making use of his connections to radio station 2TM. He went on to found Tamworth's first recording studio, Hadley Records, and was its primary sound engineer. By 2010 he was the President of the Australian Country Music Hall of Fame (ACMF). Scott has been voicing warnings over the direction of the festival since at least the early 1980s. In 1982 he commented that:

I think the awards should always be concerned with country music only.  
If the officials suddenly decide to turn Tamworth into the 'music capital',  
taking in all forms, then there would be disaster. It must remember where its  
roots are and concentrate on developing those basic principles.<sup>45</sup>

More recently, 'all forms' of music has come to mean rock music in particular. Scott in 2010, like Poole and Jamieson, regretted the 'ingress of the screaming rock acts'<sup>46</sup> and favoured the stylistic purity of the bush ballad.

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<sup>43</sup> Peel St is Tamworth's main shopping street. Blocked off to cars during the Festival, it is the home to a multitude of buskers.

<sup>44</sup> Damien Murphy, 'Country Faithful Rocked By New Tune', *Sun-Herald*, 17/01/10.

<sup>45</sup> *Leader*, 25/01/82.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Eric Scott: <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2010/01/21/2798273.html>.  
15/03/10

Part of the attraction of traditional country music over rock was its unique claim to national authenticity. Bob Kirchner commented that ‘the best thing is the Australian-ness of the Festival...But we’re losing that’ as a result of the inclusion of performers such as Guy Sebastian.<sup>47</sup> Objections to rock were based not only on the fact that it was loud, but also that it was an international genre, regardless of who was singing. Australian country, on the other hand, was Australian.

Real country music was not only being killed by other genres, it was also being killed by commercial variants of country music. The early years of the twenty-first century have seen a proliferation and popularity of artists that employ the musical arrangements and glossy image of pop music, yet with the lyrical directness and rhetorical flourishes of country. Many of these acts have emerged through the ‘Starmaker’ talent quest system of Tamworth and have experienced significant commercial success – even crossing over into the realm of popular music. Such acts – in addition to the more obviously pop music acts such as Guy Sebastian – are not considered ‘real’ country by Elliott, Scott and others.

For instance, the McClymonts combine the metropolitan, sexualised imagery and closely entwined vocal harmonies of contemporary popular girl groups with the instrumentation –guitar and mandolin predominates – and lyrical directness of country. Similarly, Amber Lawrence channels the strong lyrical tradition of country through pop instrumentation and production techniques. While the narratives of songs such as Lawrence’s ‘Good Girls’ make no reference to country, they do discuss issues that are relevant to young women in Australia – femininity, identity, romantic love – and do so with a directness and sense of wordplay and language that shows a debt to country.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with Bob Kirchner:  
<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2010/01/21/2798273.html>. 15/03/10

<sup>48</sup> The McClymonts, *Chaos And Bright Lights*, Universal Music, 2007; Amber Lawrence, *The Mile*, MRA Entertainment, 2007

That many of the artists who represent the death of real country music are women is notable. Indeed, there is a whiff of sexism in the arguments for 'real' country music. The heroes of the bush ballad form – Tex, Buddy and Slim – are men and the songs they sing chronicle rural masculine work. In many ways, the McClymonts and Lawrence represent the death of this established masculine way of seeing country music.

In reality, much of the history of Australian country music features women performers singing songs that have oblique connections to the 'bush ballad' form: the McKean Sisters sang joyous odes to feminine leisure activities, such as gymkhanas; Shirley Thoms and June Holms sang of romantic and familial love; and the Schneider Sisters performed raucous invocations to 'rock 'n' roll'. In many respects, the McClymonts and Lawrence better represent the spirit of 1950s hillbilly than do the slavish renditions of the bush balladeers: they are part of a contemporary youth culture of both music and imagery; they feature the vocal acrobatics of modern rhythm and blues (perhaps the yodelling of the day); and their lyrics speak about issues that are of concern to their young, female, suburban audience.

The problems with commercial, feminine, country music were made more acute by Slim Dusty's death which in 2005 has had profound reverberations within the country music community. According to John Elliott, 'Slim was a shining light. Everyone aimed at being that good, that credible, that authentic. Since Slim died, it's almost like the day the music died.'<sup>49</sup> Dusty was a point of reference for country music and for Tamworth. He was the personification of country's identity. Dusty never strayed far from the 'bush ballad' style while managing to become Australia's highest selling recording artist. Dusty had become more than just a good example of traditional Australian country music, he *was* Australian country music. There was a sense that with his death country music had lost a compass and was finding it difficult to orientate itself towards reality.

Secondly, in regards to the commercial imperatives of the festival, Eric Scott also concluded that the festival was changing because 'Council were after the bread' but that

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<sup>49</sup> 'Slim pickings since Dusty died', *The Australian*, 21/01/10.

this was shortsighted as ‘country music punters will say ‘we’re not going to be conned, we don’t like it, and they’ll stay away’’.<sup>50</sup> Much of the media coverage of Tamworth 2010 tended to stereotype festival boosters as being interested in the commercial aspects of the festival and its critics as only interested in its heritage. But this was an oversimplification. Critics of the festival also saw its ongoing commercial success as imperative, but considered the preservation of heritage as the best way to achieve that.

The commercial health of the festival was brought to a head by declining Festival numbers from 2008-2010. Both sides of the debate were acutely aware that Tamworth has recently lost some of its audience, but are polarised on how to bring that audience back and attract a new one. Much of the local media reports in 2010 were dominated by anecdotal and documented evidence that numbers have been dropping.<sup>51</sup> For a regional centre that had come to rely on a regular tourist income in the last two weeks of January, this has had a wide range of effects.

An unavoidable part of Tamworth’s popularity problem is that its audience is ageing. One survey stated that sixty percent of visitors to Tamworth are over the age of sixty-five. While Eric Scott hopes to galvanise existing fans via musical specialisation, Mayor James Treloar has spoken of the importance of attracting young people to the festival.<sup>52</sup> Part of this desire is linked to the fact that Tamworth doesn’t necessarily reflect the audience for country music in general: ‘I think that this year the festival is seeing the youngest group of finalists for the Golden Guitar Awards ever and it reflects the types of audiences country music is playing to now.’<sup>53</sup> It is true that country music in 2010 represents a diverse range of musical styles and audiences, not merely the bush ballad. Some Country performers have echoed Treloar’s desire to attract a youthful audience. Established performer and regular Golden Guitar winner Adam Harvey has recently recorded an album of duets, many of the tracks featuring non-country singers. Harvey

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> For instance, *Northern Daily Leader*, 30/01/10.

<sup>52</sup> Carmel Melouney and Jonathon Moran, ‘Tamworth rebels launch country revolt’, *Daily Telegraph*, 17/01/10

<sup>53</sup> James Treloar, ‘Welcome To Tamworth’, *2010 Official Guide to the Tamworth Country Music Festival*.

commented that 'I understand we've got to respect our heritage' but 'the old guard tend to forget that the traditional Tamworth crowd's getting older'.<sup>54</sup>

'Heritage' has taken on talismanic properties in Tamworth and the need to 'respect' it are regularly declared by both sides of the debate. For the council and Tourism Tamworth, heritage can still exist alongside commercial success. In their words, change is 'all about making the Festival an even more iconic event and celebrating its heritage'.<sup>55</sup> Others that value 'change' and 'moving forward' have raised the question of what Tamworth's heritage *is* exactly. Rather than be satisfied with the idea that Tamworth's heritage is a historically-pure musical form, Roger Corbett of the Australian 'bush band' and Tamworth mainstays the Bushwackers wrote that the traditional identity of Tamworth is democratic and inclusive. He wrote that trying to regulate who plays at Tamworth is ridiculous as the festival is a 'free enterprise model' without the overarching body of an event such as the Gympie Muster, Australia's second most popular country music festival.<sup>56</sup>

An editorial on the same page agreed with Corbett, stating that the spirit of the festival is inclusive and democratic and 'began life as a grassroots event'. Mayor Treloar has shown a desire to recognise both commercial and heritage imperatives. He has argued that even though the festival is changing, it hasn't forgotten its roots: 'History has made this event the wonderful thing it is and we will preserve that heritage while ensuring we continue to make it attractive to younger fans.' In the Mayor's world, it is possible to be 'the spiritual home of country music' as well as 'one of the world's leading music festivals.'<sup>57</sup>

Such statements did little to relieve the anxieties felt by the founding fathers of the festival about its direction. Such anxieties were partly the result of particular

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<sup>54</sup> Andrew McMillen, 'Lonesome Highway', *The Australian*, 6-7/02/2010.

<sup>55</sup> *Northern Daily Leader*, 22/01/10.

<sup>56</sup> *Northern Daily Leader*, 19/01/10.

<sup>57</sup> James Treloar, 'Welcome To Tamworth', *2010 Official Guide to the Tamworth Country Music Festival*.

contemporary stylistic and commercial pressures on country music in the early twenty-first century. How can country be true to its roots and still be commercially successful?

In many ways, anxiety about the death of reality in 2010 is also the continuation of a theme consistent throughout the history of Australian country music: anxiety about modernity. As we have seen, Tex Morton's image of a 'real Australian cowboy' and early songs about the valleys and plains of the rural landscape both addressed and alleviated unease associated with a rapidly modernising world. Similarly, the emphasis placed on reality in Tamworth, and the accompanying fear that reality is dying, is also emblematic of fear about change. The issue is heightened when the music and the festival itself are threatened with change.

Of course, anxiety over a lack of reality is apparent in society in general in the post-modern western world. Indeed, as Lionel Trilling has argued, such a condition and its supposed cure in locating 'authentic' cultures maybe one of twentieth century society's defining feature. What an analysis of Tamworth and country music since the 1970s shows is that not only are such anxieties acute, but that the cure is to be found in authentically *national* cultures. For country music, reality has become synonymous with nation.

In 2010, much was made of the proximity of country music's death and the need for effort to ensure its survival. Indeed, it's not just real country music that is at risk, but reality itself. At Elliott's lecture an audience member commented that 'the real gets lost' and Elliott replied, 'reality is the victim.'<sup>58</sup>

### **Preserving Reality: Heritage Sites and Living Museums**

In response to the impending death of reality in Tamworth in 2010, many concerts were advertised as 'real' country music, in contrast to the higher-profile commercial country, rock and pop shows around town. The 'Memories Trail Show: Songs of our Country

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<sup>58</sup> John Elliott, 'Let's Get real: The Need For Authenticity In Country Music', lecture given at the ACMF, Tamworth NSW, 21/01/10.

Music' was 'A night of REAL country music', while 'Where Country Began' 'a show of real old time country'.<sup>59</sup> At the 'Salute to the Pioneers' show, presented by the ACMF, the compere began the night by asking the audience 'You've come here to hear some real country music haven't you?' The audience answered emphatically 'Yes!'<sup>60</sup>

In keeping with their appetite for real country music, the audience at the 'Salute to the Pioneers' show were then treated to a series of impersonations of dead country singers. A very young and very strapping man played Buddy Williams and his sketches of bush working life such as 'Little Jackaroo' and 'Where The White-Faced Cattle Roam'; a startlingly accurate, middle-aged Slim Dusty performed the much-loved paen to a hometown 'Camooweal' as well as a Henry Lawson poem 'Do You Think That I Do Not Know'; an under-rehearsed Rick and Thel Carey stopped and started a tribute to the well-known husband and wife duo; a teenage boy, so nervous he began to cry, played Barry Thornton and his instrumental guitar pieces; a rather elderly Tex Morton struggled his way through the acrobatic demands of the Swiss yodel; while the woman playing Shirley Thoms gave a more robust account of this now historic vocal form. The only exception to these impersonations was Chad Morgan, who played himself.

That impersonations can be considered 'real' is noteworthy. The 'Salute To The Pioneers' show was authentic because the pioneers had played 'real' country music and because they were saluted with the greatest sincerity. Chad Morgan also demonstrated the connections between sincerity and reality. The majority of his performance was comic and bawdy in tone – dick jokes, drinking songs, bawdy descriptions of virility and ironic takes on institutions of country town Australia, especially marriage, religion and family – for which he wore his iconic, floppy-brimmed hat. There was one notable exception, a song called 'The Ballad of Bill and Eva'. The song told the story of a mixed race marriage and the subsequent removal of the couple's children by government authorities (a policy that produced what has become known as the 'stolen generation'). The 'Ballad of Bill and Eva' was poignant and heartfelt, an effect only heightened when

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<sup>59</sup> [www.tcmf.com.au/index.php?page=tickets](http://www.tcmf.com.au/index.php?page=tickets) 13/01/10. Emphasis in original.

<sup>60</sup> 'Salute To The Pioneers', Butlins Auditorium, Tamworth, 19/01/10.

Morgan, following the song, revealed that Eva was his grandmother. For this song, Morgan wore his 'real' hat - a cowboy hat.

Concerts such as these can be seen as living history. Indeed, history 'lives on' in many sites around Tamworth in 2010 - mostly through displays of objects or likenesses.

The Australian Country Music Hall of Fame contains both a public display of artefacts of the bush balladeers – stage outfits, guitars, concert posters – as well as an archive for country scholars; the 'Roll of Renown' and the 'Hands Of Fame' acknowledge the contribution of individuals to Australian country through brass plaques and impressions in concrete respectively; and the Tamworth Wax Museum which features 'Australian country music stars and pioneers...dressed in the original clothing and displayed in settings which reflect the time and person, their lives and their music.'<sup>61</sup>

Writing about 'Living History', Graeme Davison observed that 'pop history ... specialises in the careful recreation of a style, or veneer, of the past'. Popular culture, thus, is guilty of not seeing the past clearly: 'The pop historian views the past in soft focus through a sepia filter', an approach which results in 'uncritical nostalgia'.<sup>62</sup> These are rather serious claims to make against popular histories and, indeed, many of the uses of the past in Tamworth fail to support such a claim. While living history in Tamworth generally celebrates the past, rather than interrogating it, the distinction between past and present is usually made clear. Tributes, museums, heritage concerts tend to view the past as affecting the present - 'living on' in the present - rather than being seen as sepia-toned or simply nostalgia.

For instance, the 'Salute to the Pioneers' show is, in many ways, a sophisticated negotiation of history and memory. There is no attempt to seduce the audience into thinking that they are seeing the past in front of their eyes; no attempt to imbue the current presentation with veracity; no attempt to provide a facsimile of the past; no sense

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<sup>61</sup> <http://www.biggoldenguitar.com.au/Subpages/wax.htm> 22/03/10

<sup>62</sup> Graeme Davison, *The Use and Abuse of Australian History*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2000. p 165.

of being 'immersed in the past' (which Davison says is a key component of nostalgia<sup>63</sup>). The audience can be in no doubt that the past is being performed, rather than re-lived. The choices, talents, nerves, physical attributes and quality of voice of the performers all mark it as an interpretation of history. It has a transparency of method that belies Davison's claims that popular histories peddle nostalgia and pastiche. Indeed, if there is a 'veneer' covering the 'Salute to the Pioneers' show at all, it would be more accurate to say the past is covered in the veneer of the present.

Many of the popular displays of history in Tamworth, such as the Wax Museum and the Hall of Fame are designed to attract and receive their income from tourists, and indeed the past is just one of the many exotic things luring them to the region. For the country music audience, however, the past 'lives on' in other ways: namely through the songs of contemporary artists.

### **The Boy From The Bush: Lee Kernaghan**

Many country performers have referenced and updated past country music traditions in their music. Lee Kernaghan is perhaps the most popular example. Part of a country music family (both his father Ray and his sister Tania are established performers), Lee had a fairly dramatic rise to fame in 1993 when he and his album *The Outback Club* won four Golden Guitar Awards. He went on to significant commercial success and is still one of the most recognised faces of Australian country.

Much of Kernaghan's songs were concerned with Australian rural life as it was being experienced in the 1990s and 2000s. Much of his work consciously recontextualised the traditional bush ballad concerns of male rural work and leisure. His sound – up-tempo rock played on electric instruments, but still providing notable space for Kernaghan's voice – was also an update of the musically-spare bush ballad form. His album titles,

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, p 164.

such as *The New Bush* and *Electric Rodeo*, indicated his intention to modernise tradition.

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His 1992 single 'Boys From The Bush' contained all the recognisable elements of the updated tradition. Some slide guitar referenced country music and the rock influence has been kept spare. The lyrics paint a picture of masculine bush culture as rowdy and eager to let off steam in town after a week's work in the bush. The chorus of the song states 'we're the boys from the bush and we're back in town'<sup>65</sup> and establishes the protagonists as on the margins of mainstream city society. By coming to town, they will disrupt its order through their more primitive, unsophisticated leisure requirements. Such a picture fits with country's self-image as embattled and radically separate from the city, yet places this identity in a contemporary milieu.

In 1993, John Minson wrote Kernaghan a letter which sought to put Kernaghan's music into a historical perspective:

...there is something epoch-making about your song, 'Boys From The Bush'. The more I think about it, the more I see it as a milestone in Australian Bush Balladry. Bush Balladry? You think that's a strange term for the song? Think about it. The song is about the bush, fellers who work there, lifestyle, problems, partying, all the classic ingredients of the Aussie bush ballad.<sup>66</sup>

Minson assumed that Kernaghan would be surprised to learn that 'Boys From The Bush' could be considered a bush ballad as it is performed as an electrified rock song. For Minson and Elliott and others who seek the continued commercial success of the 'bush ballad', songs such as Kernagahn's were a lodestar. They updated the ballad form – with a lyrical directness and a concern about the country – and managed to stay true to Australian country's roots while reaching the younger audience they so desired.

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<sup>64</sup> This impulse echoes a similar trend in American country music to update ideas of regional, particularly southern, pride. Hank Williams Jnr, for example, released an album entitled *The New South*. See Ching, *op cit*.

<sup>65</sup> Lee Kernaghan, *Outback Club*, ABC Country, 1992.

<sup>66</sup> John Minson, reprinted in: Lee Kernaghan, *The Big Ones: Greatest Hits Volume I*, ABC Country and Warners, 2004.

Some of Kernaghan's songs literally referenced the history of Australian country.

'The Western Beat' celebrated the genesis of the Australian sound: 'Legend has it years ago/A sound was born and began to grow/ Old Tex and Buddy showed the way/ And a brand new beat was here to stay.'<sup>67</sup> Kernaghan claimed that 'the western beat is alive and kicking' in 1998 and the contemporary-sounding, hard rock accompaniment backed up his claim.

Graeme Smith has written of 'The Western Beat' that its instrumentation and musical feel owe a debt to the 'agile flatpick of bluegrass, western swing and the Nashville studio' rather than the 'plodding bass-chord strum' of Buddy Williams, Tex Morton and Slim Dusty.<sup>68</sup> Kernaghan was, Smith argues, essentially re-writing history. He invented an Australian musical tradition and back-projected his tastes onto the past. The inference of Smith's observation is that Kernaghan was assuming his artistic and commercial success was partly due to his music's sense of history and tradition. By the time of 'The Western Beat' (1998) Kernaghan was accepted by Tamworth as the continuer of the bush ballad tradition.

Kernaghan's cross-cultural pronunciation was also notable. He generally employed a southern American-accented hillbilly twang, except for key words that he pronounced with an over-emphasised Australian accent – can't becomes 'carnt' instead of 'caint' – particularly place names such as 'Kerrigundi Creek'. Sometimes the difference was noticeable on the one word - he tended to emphasise his 'r's' as an American singer, but flattened his vowels as per Australian pronunciation. The effect is as if an American singer has been living in Australia and has picked up some local knowledge. Tex Morton projected a similar national ambiguity via his pronunciation and in this sense Kernaghan is referencing a key aspect of the history of Australian hillbilly music – its impulse to dress up Australia in American showbusiness glamour.

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<sup>67</sup> Lee Kernaghan, *op cit.*

<sup>68</sup> Graeme Smith, *Singing Australian*, p 128.

## **The Heritage and Bush Ballad Awards**

Other country artists have sought to update the bush ballad form and have referenced the history of Australia and Australian country music in song. Indeed, this has become a defining feature of contemporary Australian country. The Golden Guitar Awards ceremonies have recognised and encouraged this impulse through the establishment of two special categories - the Heritage and Bush Ballad Awards - which recognise the importance of historic continuity and rural narratives in contemporary country music.

The Heritage Award was established in 1980. The organisers stated that the award would be given to the song which 'most genuinely reflects the Australian heritage and national character in content and performance' in order to demonstrate 'the unique quality and spirit of our Australian country music heritage.' Max Ellis hoped that the Heritage Award would assist in the preservation of Australia's music heritage: 'With much of today's music tending towards a more international style it is important...that these artists are not overlooked.'<sup>69</sup>

In 1995 the Heritage Award became the Bush Ballad/Heritage Award, a move that sought to institutionalise ideas of stylistic purity within broader claims for traditional music. In 1997, the CMAA decided to split the awards into two separate categories. From that point on, the Heritage Award tended to be given to songs that mentioned specific aspects of Australian history, in a broader range of musical styles, while artists that received the Bush Ballad award tended to write in a musically minimal style, while perhaps updating stories about the bush. It was possible, and indeed not uncommon, for the same artist to win both awards in one year. For instance, in 2004 Sara Storer received the Heritage Award for 'Drover's Call' – a song about the Drovers' reunion in the rural Queensland town of Camooweal, but based around the intricate and layered arrangements common to contemporary pop releases – and the Bush Ballad Award for 'Boss Drover's Pride', which was about the less traditional subject matter of a drover's daughter, but featured

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<sup>69</sup> *Leader*, 24/01/80

more minimal, mostly percussive, musical accompaniment.<sup>70</sup> Such differentiation was often minimal and the two categories could be interchangeable, according to the judges' desires. Indeed, it is possible that the creation of two awards simply doubled the number of songs that 'paid respect' to heritage.

Nowhere is Tamworth's sensitivity to country music history and Australian history more pronounced than in the Heritage Award and Bush Ballad Awards. They are unique in a commercial popular music awards ceremony. There is no equivalent award, for instance, in the major Australian popular music awards ceremony (the ARIAs) or the Country Music Awards (CMA) in Nashville. While both ARIA and the CMA, like Tamworth, have a 'hall of fame' where historic artists are canonised, there is not the same encouragement for contemporary artists to 'respect' the past.

There is a sense that the other Golden Guitar Awards are inspired by commercial success and so are respondent to fashion, marketing, youth cultures and the taste and style of individual performers, while the Heritage Award and the Bush Ballad Award say something intrinsic and permanent about country music. They were supposed to reflect 'Australian heritage and national character', but what heritage and what kind of character exactly?

The majority of songs that received these awards were celebrations of rural work and the qualities of toughness and stoicism they produced. In these songs, the bush was a place of work done by white men, generally work done on horseback such as droving and rounding up cattle. For instance, Reg Poole's 'The Warrumbungle Mare' was the story of an 'outlaw' horse and the 'wiry horseman' that claimed he could ride her, as was Dusty's 'Banjo's Man'.<sup>71</sup> Sometimes work was put aside for entertainment and Dusty's 'Old Time Country Halls' and Paul Kelly's 'Rally Round The Drum' tell the stories of recreational bush cultures, country music and sideshow boxing respectively.<sup>72</sup> Often

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<sup>70</sup> Sara Storer, *Beautiful Circle*, ABC Country, 2002.

<sup>71</sup> Reg Poole, 'Warrumbungle Mare', in *Country Music In Australia*, Soundbeat, 1999; Slim Dusty, *The Slim Dusty Heritage Album*, EMI, 1988.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*; Paul Kelly and The Stormwater Boys, *Foggy Highway*, Gawd Aggie Recordings/EMI, 2005.

these songs described the physical beauty of a particular place via the organising structure of a travelogue, such as in Colin Buchanan's 'Edge of the Kimberly' and 'That Old Caravan'.<sup>73</sup>

In addition to general invocations of Australian bush work, culture and landscape some recipients of the awards documented iconic moments in Australian history. Lee Kernaghan's 'Changi Banjo' was a description of Australian prisoners in World War II Japanese internment camps,<sup>74</sup> while Brendon Walmsley's 'Never Never' was narrative of the Flying Doctor's Service who refused to say 'never, never it can't be done' and delivered emergency health care to isolated communities via a 'never never sky.'<sup>75</sup> Slim Dusty's 'Banjo's Man', as well as describing horsework in general, was about the myth of Banjo Paterson's nineteenth-century verse 'The Man From Snowy River'<sup>76</sup> and in 'Close As A Whisper' Kernaghan outlined the history of another Paterson composition, 'Waltzing Matilda', tracing its journey from 'A simple gathering of melody and rhyme/written down and tweaked a bit/ink pen on manuscript' to its arrival as Australia's unofficial national anthem.<sup>77</sup>

As well as tracing the history of Australian icons, Heritage and Bush Ballad Award winners also traced the history of Australian country music itself. Dusty's 'Old-Time Country Halls' remembered the touring circuits of hillbilly bands in the 1940s and 50s and wonders whether 'the old time shows we used to know will soon be off the road.' John Williamson celebrated the bush ballad itself, stating that the clarity, truth and simplicity of such songs 'ring like bells in a bushman's ear.'<sup>78</sup>

Songs about Slim Dusty have recently begun to contribute to this tradition. In 2005, Kernaghan won a Heritage Award for 'Missin' Slim', about the mourning and communal grief that Dusty's death caused. Such grief is resigned, subdued, stoic, masculine and almost invisible: 'Scotty is a mountain man, as hard as Snowy granite/ but when 'Pub'

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<sup>73</sup> Colin Buchanan, *Edge Of The Kimberley*, Warner Music, 1998.

<sup>74</sup> Lee Kernaghan, *Hat Town*, EMI and ABC Country, 1998.

<sup>75</sup> Brendon Walmsley, 'Never Never' in *Australian Country 2002*, Country Music Channel, 2002.

<sup>76</sup> Slim Dusty, *op cit*.

<sup>77</sup> Lee Kernaghan, *The New Bush*, ABC Country and Warner Music, 2004.

<sup>78</sup> John Williamson, 'Bells In A Bushman's Ear', *Chandler of Stars*, EMI, 2005.

came on the radio I swear I saw a tear.’ In Dusty’s passing, both the bush and Australia have ‘lost a hero and we all remember him.’<sup>79</sup> Dusty’s daughter, Anne Kirkpatrick, an established country artist in her own right, released a personal eulogy to her father ‘One Of A Kind’ in 2006.<sup>80</sup> The roots of the bush ballad, its development, its passing and the need to preserve its heritage were recurring features in country music in the 1990s and 2000s.

A substantial number of Heritage/Bush Ballad songs can be termed ‘patriotic songs’: songs that celebrate aspects of Australian history and culture. In 1988, to coincide with the bicentenary of European settlement in Australia, Slim Dusty recorded ‘We’ve Done Us Proud’, written by Graeme Connors which documented the past achievements of Australians. Familiar chapters were mentioned – the goldrush, shearing, the formation of unions, building the railroads and the experience of war – as well as the less obvious aspects of nation building, such as the contribution of migrants, housekeeping, childrearing, teaching and art. The chorus states that for ‘200 years we’ve done us proud’.<sup>81</sup> Doug Anthony, the leader of the federal rural/conservative political party the Nationals, when presenting Dusty with the Heritage Award, congratulated him for ‘building up an Australian pride and an Australian ethos.’<sup>82</sup>

‘We’ve Done Us Proud’ was a form of social history. Its message was that the most important contributions to nation building were those made by the common man and woman. It explicitly states what many of the other Bush Ballad and Heritage award winning songs implicitly suggested: namely, that the source of Australian character and identity is to be found in rural labour and culture. In this it asserts a form of radical cultural nationalism that had become broadly popular since the 1970s. That such a history could be used to celebrate official national anniversaries and was recognised by

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<sup>79</sup> Lee Kernaghan, *The Big Ones: Greatest Hits Volume I*, ABC Country and Warners 2004. ‘Pub’ refers to Slim Dusty’s best-selling and best-known song ‘Pub With No Beer’.

<sup>80</sup> Anne Kirkpatrick, *Showman’s Daughter*, Compass Brothers Records, 2006. For Anne Kirkpatrick, this was a one-off tribute. In America, Hank Williams Junior constructed a whole oeuvre around the negotiation of his identity as Hank Williams’ son. See Ching, *op cit*.

<sup>81</sup> ‘We’ve Done Us Proud’, *Very Best Of Slim Dusty*, EMI, 1998.

<sup>82</sup> *Leader*, 02/02/82.

conservative politicians demonstrates that by the late 1980s, such narratives were very much part of the mainstream of Australian cultural life.

It also suggests the continuing potency of the pioneer legend and bush legends. JB Hirst has argued that 'the Pioneer Legend can scarcely help being conservative in its political implications' for three reasons:

It encourages reverence for the past; it celebrates individual rather than collective or state enterprise; and it provides a classless view of society since all social and economic differences are obliterated by the generous application of the 'pioneer' label.<sup>83</sup>

'We've Done Us Proud' draws on both the pioneering legend and the bush legend for its message. It is conservative in its 'reverence for the past' and its claim that Australia in 1988 is a coherent, classless community due to the achievements of our ancestors. However, in its description of the formation of the unions it acknowledges the historic importance of class struggle and collective enterprise.

'We've Done Us Proud' indicates that historical 'legends' are fluid, changing and open to interpretation. The present constantly manipulates the past to its own advantage. In some ways, though, the mention of the unions in 'We've Done Us Proud' is an anomaly and I would suggest that the majority of Bush Ballad and Heritage songs drew more from the pioneering legend than from the bush legend. In particular, they have tended to describe the Australian bush as classless. Struggle, if it occurs at all, occurs not between people but between people and the land. The landowner, the worker, the drover, the farmer are all experiencing the same thing. In Hirst's words, the pioneer legend stated that 'The squatter was a bushman too'.<sup>84</sup> Country music has described community solidarity along geographic rather than class lines. It has stated that the people in the bush have more in common with each other, regardless of race, sex or class than they do with anyone from the city.

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<sup>83</sup> JB Hirst, 'Pioneer Legend', *Historical Studies*, Vol 18, No 71, 1978, p 316.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, p 319.

The subsuming of radical nationalism into a conservative agenda is, in some ways, indicative of general patterns of popular nationalism in the late twentieth century. Ward was also attacked from the 'New Left' – Humphrey McQueen's *A New Britannia* appeared in 1970<sup>85</sup> – and his bush radicalism came to be seen as increasingly old-fashioned as 'progressive' politics moved towards a politics of identity, around migrant politics, Aboriginality, feminism and gay issues. John Howard and Pauline Hanson were able to capitalise on those shifts in their deployment of the battler image in the late 1990s. Symbols of popular nationalism – the bushman, the digger, the pioneer – have been captured by a conservative nationalism in the sense that they've become recognisable and reassuring: Howard's reinterpretation of Ward's 'mateship' is perhaps the most telling example.<sup>86</sup>

The majority of Heritage and Bush Ballad Award winners have reiterated popular late twentieth century narratives of Australian identity, as deriving from the bush and as embodied by the bushman and the digger. However, there have been some notable exceptions. In 1990, John Williamson won the Heritage Award for the Ted Egan song 'Drover's Boy', the story of a love affair between a white drover and an Aboriginal woman. To hide their relationship from white society she had to disguise herself as 'the drover's boy'.<sup>87</sup> In 1994 Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly won the Heritage Award for 'From Little Things Big Things Grow', a song which describes the strike by the Gurindji people of the Northern Territory as the genesis of the Aboriginal Land Rights movement.<sup>88</sup>

Many of Sara Storer's songs tell stories of life on the land through the eyes of women, as the Bush Ballad Award winner 'Boss Drover's Pride' does. Slim Dusty's daughter Anne

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<sup>85</sup> Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia*, Pelican Books, Melbourne, 1970 pp 40 & 124 (for example)

<sup>86</sup> For recent uses of such traditional values, see Judith Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class: From Alfred Deakin to John Howard* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 203; for their role in rural politics, see Don Aitkin "Countrymindedness – the spread of an idea", in *Australian Cultural History*, edited by S L Goldberg and F B Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>87</sup> John Williamson, *Australia Calling*, Matthews Music, 1992.

<sup>88</sup> Kev Carmody, *Bloodlines*, Festival, 1993.

Kirkpatrick's 'Peppimenarti Cradle' documents native Australian mothercraft. The song was written by Joy McKean about, we are to assume, a cradle made for baby Anne: 'when they knew my child was coming' the women of Peppimenarti made a cradle from 'seed, root and flowers'.<sup>89</sup> This song makes an interesting companion piece to one of Slim Dusty's most popular and recurring songs 'Plains of Peppimenarti' – a place where 'every day's a Sunday when You're catching Barramundi'.<sup>90</sup> Peppimenarti Cradle provides a layered set of meanings within the structures of a 'bush ballad': it describes intercultural exchange; 'women's business'; and generational continuity.

Australian country music has chronicled diverse aspects of rural life, as the Bush Ballad and Heritage Awards go some way towards illustrating. However, such voices and stories have not been part of the popular image of Tamworth as it has developed over the last forty years.

### **We've Done Us Proud: Nationalism at Tamworth**

The dominant character of mainstream country music in the early twenty-first century was overtly Australian. As we have seen, the radical nationalism that country music sought to assert - via its veneration of the bush ballad - had been growing from the 1970s onwards. Events at Tamworth have both promoted and reflected such an image. Further, in this period, country music was eager to participate in patriotic sentiment in general. It is possible to trace an upsurge in patriotic feeling, and its connections to Tamworth, over the Country Music Festivals during the 1980s. The reason for holding the festival on the Australia Day holiday weekend was, as we have seen, to promote tourism and income for the city. During the 1970s, there was very little recognition of the meaning of the holiday, or conflation of country music with nationalism. However, during the 1980s, more began to be made of the timing of the festival. In 1985 a 'Spirit of Australia' concert was held, the advertising for the concert featured such iconic Australian images

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<sup>89</sup> Anne Kirkpatrick, *Showman's Daughter*, Compass Brothers Records, 2006

<sup>90</sup> 'Plains of Peppimenarti', *Very Best of Slim Dusty*.

as a swaggie boiling his billie and an Akubra hat perched on top of an Australian flag.<sup>91</sup>  
[See Figure 17.]

By the late 1980s, the conflation of country music with national pride reached an apex, largely surrounding the celebrations for the bicentennial of white settlement in Australia. One of the most publicised events of the 1988 festival was 'The Hoedown All Star Salute to the Australian Bicentenary'. 'Country music has always been an important part of Australia's history' the *Leader* informed its readers. 'It tells the stories of the pioneers, the hardships of the early settlers and the growth of this beautiful and often harsh land.' Thus, in order to pay tribute to '200 years of white settlement' organisers considered it fitting to tell the national story through country music. The first part of the show was devoted to country artists illuminating the major themes of Australian history, which were 'The First Settlement, The Pioneering Days, The First Australians, The Pioneer Women and The Australian Character.' The second half of the concert featured a 'Bicentennial Supergroup' which included members of 'top Aussie band The Bushwackers' who presented 'a musical tribute to Australia' demonstrating 'the place country music has held in her history and its role in her present and future.'<sup>92</sup>

The inclusion of the Bushwackers in the bicentennial concert reveals something else about the growing sense of nationalism at Tamworth: it was reflected in the style of music played there. 'Bush bands', such as the Bushwackers and Bullamakanka, performed songs mainly from the canon of Australian folk song – Irish, Scottish and English in origin – and accompanied by rhythmic accompaniment on such 'traditional' instruments as the tea-chest bass, tin whistle and 'lagerphone'.<sup>93</sup> It was a genre that identified strongly with an Australian folk tradition and bush band performances tended to have an air of reenactment about them. The Bushwackers and Bullamakanka both won several Golden Guitars and, by the late 1980s, the 'Battle of the Bush Bands' – 'the national bands of Australia' – had become one of the major events of the festival.

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<sup>91</sup> *Leader*, 25/01/85.

<sup>92</sup> *Leader*, 19/01/10

<sup>93</sup> Graeme Smith, 'Bush Bands', in Whiteoak and Scott-Maxwell, *op cit.*, p 100.



# SPIRIT OF AUSTRALIA CONCERT

2 P.M. - 7 P.M.  
 AUSTRALIA DAY  
 JANUARY 26, '85  
 TAMWORTH COUNTRY CENTRE (OPPOSITE 2TM)



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- HATS ..... \$2.50
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**FREE BUS SERVICE**  
FROM KABLE AVE. (Rear Grace Bros)  
 1.00 p.m. to 3.30 p.m.  
to Country Music Centre  
 Return Journey from 7.00 p.m.

**BUSKERS COMPETITION**

**PEEL ST.**  
**SATURDAY 26TH JANUARY**  
 10a.m. to 12.30p.m.

**OVER \$1000 IN CASH & TROPHIES TO BE WON**

- 1st: \$500 + Trophy
- 2nd: \$250 + Trophy
- 3rd: \$100 + Trophy

Only performers appearing on Peel St. between Fitzroy St. and Brisbane St. during the specified times without using amplification will be eligible for entry. Presentations to the winners will take place at the main entrance to Grace Bros. at 12.30pm.

presented by ...

The Northern Daily

**LEADER & GRACE BROS**  
TAMWORTH

Figure 17

Clearly, the Bushwackers were not a hillbilly band. They were influenced by the folk music of the English isles, as transformed through the Australian experience, rather than American folk music. Also, their appearance reinforced the sense that Tamworth was celebrating real Australian culture and experience. That all this could still be presented under the heading of a 'Hoedown' (a word resonant with Americana) showed, firstly, the ease with which Tamworth negotiated (or negated) fraught questions of Australian versus American culture and, secondly, how the primary meaning of word in Tamworth had become inextricably linked with the 2TM radio programme.

The inclusion of the Bushwackers also said interesting things about political commitments at Tamworth. Bush bands were adopted by Tamworth both as a result of their popularity amongst a broad range of audiences in the 1970s and for the way in which they complemented the nationalist agenda. Bush bands grew out of the folk revival of Australian cities in the 1960s. This revival had, at its base, a radically left-wing philosophy. And yet bush bands also managed to fit into the conservative, populist position of nationalism. Country music culture freely borrowed from 'people's histories' of Australia in order to take part in a conservative veneration of the past. This demonstrates the power the pioneer legend held for country music, and the way in which radical nationalism was subsumed into more traditional ideas of nation-building and veneration in Australia during the 1980s.

Another performer who projected a similarly complex array of political commitments was John Williamson. Thoughtfully parochial, Williamson's songs tended to be detailed evocations of place, particularly the Mallee region where he grew up, such as 'Mallee Boy' and 'Galleries of Pink Galahs' and tributes to traditional Australian values of mateship and 'the fair go', such as 'True Blue', 'Australia Calling' and 'Australia Is Another Word For Free'.<sup>94</sup> He is also a vocal advocate for environmental issues, as heard in songs such as 'Rip Rip Woodchip' and 'Goodbye Blinky Bill'.<sup>95</sup> His vocal delivery features broadly Australian pronunciation and is clipped and conversational.

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<sup>94</sup> John Williamson, *Australia Calling*; and *Hillbilly Road*.

<sup>95</sup> John Williamson, *John Williamson's Australia*, Reader's Digest, 1999.

Williamson's public persona was also radically nationalist. He was a supporter of an Australian republic and a new national flag. In 1985 he became the 'first country folk singer to be ambassador for the Advance Australia Foundation' during which time the Special Minister of State, Mick Young, described him as 'the most fair dinkum of all fair dinkum Aussie singers.'<sup>96</sup> In 1988, he refused to perform in the bicentennial concert in Sydney because the audience included Prince Charles and Lady Diana.<sup>97</sup>

Williamson dominated the Golden Guitar Awards during the late 1980s and early 1990s and came to personify the emerging, radically nationalistic image of country music. Importantly for Tamworth, his musical simplicity, narrative directness and Australian subject matter meant that he could fit the bush balladeer mould, indeed he has won several Bush Ballad and Heritage Awards.

As is evident from the programme of the Bicentennial concert and the musical styles that were becoming popular in the 1980s and 90s, Tamworth sought to assert a radical Australian identity. This was not particular to country music. The mid 1970s to early 1990s were a period in which other areas of popular culture projected a consciously Australian character. Rock band Men At Work's 1982 international hit song 'Down Under' is one of the most parochial examples, but other bands such as Midnight Oil and Yothu Yindi explored aspects of Australian identity, politics and culture in this period. However, what differentiated country music's investigation of Australia was its celebration of history. In particular, country music venerated a rural, working-class past and considered that past central in the development of the Australian character. Tamworth stated, unequivocally and repeatedly, that this experience was Australia's heritage. A particular symbol of this experience was the pioneer.

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<sup>96</sup> *Leader*, 25/01/85.

<sup>97</sup> *Leader*, 22/01/88. For a thorough analysis of Williamson's singing voice and public image, see Rebecca Coyle, 'Country Folk: The 'voices' of John Williamson and Sara Storer, in Hayward and Walden, *op cit*.

## **We've Done Us Proud II: Narratives of Country Music History**

Country music tells a similar story about itself. The phrase 'pioneers of country music' was heard repeatedly in Tamworth in 2010. The ACMF hosted the 'Salute to the Pioneers' Show', the Balladeers Homestead hosted events such as 'We Remember Buddy Williams' and 'Memory Trails: Songs from our Pioneers',<sup>98</sup> while the Tamworth Wax Museum is 'A Special Salute to many of Australia's Famous Country Music Stars & Pioneers'.<sup>99</sup> In the Reg Poole and Keith Jamieson song that we examined at the beginning of the chapter, pioneers are described not just as starting country music, but as embodying its spirit: 'Our pioneers would tremble/ Up in heaven's hall of fame/ To hear what's happening here on earth/ To their country music name'.<sup>100</sup>

We have already seen how the 'pioneer legend' was central to country music's negotiation of the past, particularly for the way in which it considered the present to be the result of the achievements of the pioneers and thus encourages 'reverence for the past'. Such a reverence meant that the present had to treat the past with great sensitivity. As Hirst wrote: 'In claiming that the pioneers were working for us, it puts on later generations a special obligation not to tamper with the world which pioneers made.'<sup>101</sup> Anxiety over the direction of Tamworth in 2010 can be understood as a desire not to tamper with the world the pioneers made. Such a world should be fixed and unchanging.

Concurrent with the legend of the 'pioneer' is a sense of arrival. The essence of a pioneer is legacy: the pioneer must have produced something worthwhile for him or her to earn that term. And thus, the glorious success of country music in the twenty-first century is the pioneers' legacy. The history of country music has arrived at a point of commercial success, thanks to the hard work of the pioneers.

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<sup>98</sup> *2010 Official Guide to the Tamworth Country Music Festival*

<sup>99</sup> <http://www.biggoldenguitar.com.au/Subpages/wax.htm> 22/03/10

<sup>100</sup> Damien Murphy, 'Country Faithful Rocked By New Tune', *Sun-Herald*, 17/01/10.

<sup>101</sup> Hirst, *op cit*, p 316.

At the 'Salute to the Pioneers' show, the compere announced that after a relatively bleak period for country music in the 1970s and 80s 'by the 1990s country music had become a tidal wave' and that 'thankfully 95% of it was real country music'. A result of the 'tidal wave' of country music has been commercial success: this is a place at which country music has arrived. 'Country music is big business today, it's no longer a cottage industry' announced the *Leader* in 1982.<sup>102</sup> Max Ellis summed up this sense of commercial arrival in 1993:

Country music has suddenly become an industry where people can make money. Not so long ago only a handful of stars were making a living. For years they toured in sheds in the backblocks for little money. Now there are a lot of people making very good money. They can now afford to do country music as a career and not just part time.<sup>103</sup>

Tamworth itself has a sense of journey and arrival too. In John Minson's words, 'we've come a long way.'<sup>104</sup> In Max Ellis' introduction to the 2010 programme he writes that the festival has 'put our little city on the map' but that 'it wasn't always like that'. Locals used to holiday in the coast in January to avoid the oppressive heat and occasional floods and that despite this bad weather and opposers 'who felt that country music was 'hick'' the Festival 'took off' and is now recognised as 'one of the top ten music festivals in the world.'<sup>105</sup> In 1980, Ellis wrote about the rapid rise of the Festival from its humble beginnings in the Town Hall to the place of enormous recognition.<sup>106</sup>

Concurrent with the 'rags to riches' story that Tamworth tells is a strong sense of community. The claim that 'our music' was now getting the success it deserves has regularly been made in Tamworth. This was perhaps most clear in the events that followed the Golden Guitar organisers' decision to distribute the presentation of the awards over separate nights throughout the festival in 1992. As a result, various artists,

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<sup>102</sup> *Leader*, 26/01/82.

<sup>103</sup> *Northern Daily Leader Festival Magazine*, January 1993, p 3.

<sup>104</sup> *Northern Daily Leader Country Music Awards Souvenir Supplement*, January 1983, p 2.

<sup>105</sup> Max Ellis, 'The Essence of Tamworth', *2010 Official Guide to the Tamworth Country Music Festival*.

<sup>106</sup> Max Ellis, 'Welcome', *Leader*, 24/01/80.

including Slim Dusty, Joy McKean and John Williamson, and industry stalwarts, such as Max Ellis, formed the CMAA in order to take back control of the awards. The CMAA claimed that artists such as Slim Dusty 'are the awards' and thus should control them.<sup>107</sup> The CMAA would give Country artists representation within the country music industry.

This claim is reflective of country music's conception of itself as a grassroots, community movement. Just as there was a manufactured sense of connection between performer and audience, there was also one between the performer and the industry. Country has assumed a fluidity of roles within its community – the borders between professional and amateur, performer and audience, industry and artist have been fluid since the 1930s. Thus, when Tamworth brings respectability to country music, it brings respectability to 'our kind of music'. The whole of the country music community – its pioneers and its fans – have been part of a history of struggle and recognition. Tamworth represents the emergence from that history for the whole community.

Implicit within this sense of arrival is that country music now exists within an unchanging present. The hard work of the pioneers has been done, the lean years have been lived through, and the present is an unchanging state of glory. Thus the twenty-first century anxiety felt over Tamworth's identity and popularity crisis derives from the way in which this crisis disrupts country music's sense of its own history.

This historical sense is linear and can be traced a series of myths: its folk antecedents, its 'pioneers', its flowering in the 1940s and 50s, its period of struggle in the 1960s and 70s and its eventual conquering of this struggle and arrival at a permanent home in Tamworth. The linear history of country music reflects conventional histories of nation-building. As Raphael Samuel has observed, 'foundation myths' are central to nationalism.<sup>108</sup> In Australia, the foundation myths of white settlement and the pioneering spirit led, inexorably, to the arrival of Australia as a global democracy, a state that is generally assumed to be unchanging. Thus, we can see country music as a nation: it has a

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<sup>107</sup> *Northern Daily Leader Festival Magazine*, January 1993, p 3.

<sup>108</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres Of Memory, Volume II: Island Stories*, Verso London, 1998, p 12.

foundation myth, a linear history, a sense of arrival and, of course, it has a capital, Tamworth, Country Music Capital.

Elsewhere in this thesis I have argued that country music offered audiences a glimpse of an older, traditional world that alleviated anxieties about modernity. This was particularly the case in the middle part of the twentieth century. Country music was real - of an older time and place - it had a heritage. In the words of Graeme Davison: 'Heritage offers the consolation of a glorious, if largely fictitious past, to a nation in the midst of a painful present.'<sup>109</sup> What is interesting about the story that country music told about itself in the 1980s, 90s and 2000s was that heritage could work the other way too: the glories of the present could justify the difficult struggles of the past.

### **Koori Country**

In an effort for coherency of identity, national histories tend to leave out elements that don't fit with the story. Official and popular celebrations of Australia have tended to leave out the contribution of Aboriginal people to Australian identity and their persecution. While historians since the 1960s have attempted to give voice to this silence, it still remains a marginal aspect of the story of the Australian nation, most starkly seen in the conservative Prime Minister from 1996-2007, John Howard's, regard for such alternative narratives as being 'black armband history' and damaging to a sense of national pride and progress.

In Tamworth, as in many parts of Australia, the bicentennial celebrations were marked by a problematic attitude towards Aboriginal participation. While the Hoedown All Star Salute to the Australian Bicentenary did include the theme of 'The First Australians', such a theme was secondary to the story of nation-building that had happened over the last 200 years. There is no other mention of Aboriginal participation or recognition in bicentennial celebrations.

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<sup>109</sup> Davison, *op cit*, p 115.

The primary function of the Tamworth Aboriginal community in the Australia Day celebrations of 1988 was as a threat to the success of the celebrations. The front page of the *Northern Daily Leader* on 26<sup>th</sup> January announced 'Koori Protest Claim Probe'. The article went on to say, 'Tamworth police are investigating reports that members of the Aboriginal community are arming themselves with cricket bats and gardening tools for a violent bicentennial protest'. Such was the 'threat of racial brawls' that some shopkeepers had removed items such as cricket and baseball bats from their shelves.<sup>110</sup> Such threats went unrealised. However, the reports serve to highlight the position indigenous Australians held in the media imagination during the 1988 festival.

Even indigenous festival participants took up a threatening position in the white imagination. In 1990, emerging indigenous country star Roger Knox and his all-Koori band Euraba were 'forced to play on a street corner' because they had attracted the 'wrong crowd' at an unnamed Tamworth hotel the previous year.<sup>111</sup> Even though Roger Knox had been nominated for two Golden Guitar Awards, other country musicians had hailed Euraba as one of Australia's best country bands and they had played a series of sold-out shows at the same venue the previous year, a prejudicial attitude to the racial make-up – and therefore violent tendencies of their crowd – had, according to the *Leader*, resulted in their rejection.

Being relegated to buskers, or other places on the margins of the festival, is a familiar story for Koori singers and bands at Tamworth. Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson have observed that Aboriginal performers are not visible in the mainstream festival circuit, but rather have to 'carve out space' through specifically designated events such as The Koori Country Spectacular, the 'Koori Health Concert', the 'Feeling Good Town Hall Showcase Concert' and the 'Aboriginal Talent Quest',<sup>112</sup> or through their participation as buskers, passers-by or performers at more low-key, impromptu events.

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<sup>110</sup> *Northern Daily Leader*, 26/01/88.

<sup>111</sup> *Leader*, 25/01/90.

<sup>112</sup> Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Place, Contemporary Aboriginal Music in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2004, p 113.

This is part of the general tendency in Australian country music for Aboriginal performers to be, in Gibson and Dunbar-Hall's words, 'both 'there' and 'not there.''<sup>113</sup>

Indeed, the history of Tamworth during the 1980s shows that when Aboriginal concerts occurred at all, they tend to be quarantined from the more mainstream events. While Koori concerts were publicised they were invariably seen as different to the rest of the festival, with its emphasis on bush ballads and traditional constructions of rurality. A 1984 article in the *Northern Daily Leader* claimed that 'Koorie country and western has bigger impact' through its own festival and talent quests, yet is still somewhat segregated from the rest of the festival. 'More support from the backers of the Tamworth Festival would be welcomed by Aboriginal musicians'.<sup>114</sup>

As well as being an alternative to the festival, much Koori country has provided an alternative to mainstream country music in general. As such work as Clinton Walker's *Buried Country* and Gibson and Dunbar-Hall's *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places* have shown, indigenous Australians have made significant contributions to country music; significant largely because of their quality and difference. For example, there is a body of work that documents the experience of the stolen generation, such as Bob Randall's 'Took The Children Away'<sup>115</sup> and Chad Morgan's 'Ballad of Bill and Eva.'<sup>116</sup> There are also inversions and reimaginings of the stock 'longing for home' genre. In 'Streets of Old Fitzroy' the Country Outcasts are weary of the 'glow of the city lights' and long 'to be back in the dreamtime'. (Roger Knox later recorded a version of this song, substituting 'Tamworth' for 'Fitzroy'.)<sup>117</sup> This song is a fine example of recontextualising a worn tradition – the prairies of America become the Dreamtime of Aboriginal Australia.

In *Buried Country*, Clinton Walker suggests a variety of reasons why Aboriginal people have been attracted to country music. One reason is because country music is the music

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p 114

<sup>114</sup> *Leader*, 27/01/84

<sup>115</sup> Various Artists, *Buried Country*, Larrikin, 2000.

<sup>116</sup> Chad Morgan, *The Ballad of Bill and Eva*, Sheiktone Records, 2009.

<sup>117</sup> Various Artists, *op cit.*

of loss.<sup>118</sup> As Bob Randall has commented, indigenous Australians are drawn to country music 'because we had so much loss' and that 'country music gave us something to gain.'<sup>119</sup> We have already seen how much early Australian Country communicated a sense of longing for place, or a sense that home is under threat or already gone. The Australian Aboriginal experience is characterised by loss: loss of dignity; loss of rights; loss of way of life; loss of children/parents; and loss of land. Longing for a home place typifies both Country and the Aboriginal experience.

This particular character of Koori country does not sit easily with Tamworth's interest in preserving the purity of the bush ballad, an interest that Walker describes as 'almost xenophobic'.<sup>120</sup> As we have seen, the Australian bush ballad has tended to describe Australia as a place where people have triumphed against the adversity and hardships of the land. It has celebrated past rural experience as being central in creating a successful nation and unique Australian character. Music of loss does simply not fit within this structure. If Aboriginal people were drawn to country music because it is the music of loss, as Walker contends, then it was American country music they were drawn to. As we have already seen, 'real' American country music was characterised by economic and emotional hardship; 'real' Australian country was characterised by songs about the rural experience. American 'hard country' artists such as George Jones and Merle Haggard have been a more persuasive influence on Aboriginal performers like the Country Outcasts, Roger Knox and Troy Cassar-Daley than has a mythic Australian bush ballad tradition.<sup>121</sup> Interestingly, Aboriginal country music may be seen to be too American in flavour to be absorbed into Tamworth.

Tamworth is not the only place that Aboriginal participation in country music can occur. Not only does it have a particular history of race relations, it is also not country music's only 'centre'. Indeed, if Koori Country has a centre, it is more likely to be Alice Springs,

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<sup>118</sup> Walker, Clinton, *Buried Country: The Story of Aboriginal Country Music*, Pluto Press, Annandale, 2000, p 14.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, p 15.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*, p 285.

<sup>121</sup> Walker, *op cit*, p 286 - talks about Cassar-Daley's love of Jones and Haggard.

home to CAAMA (Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association) and its associated radio station, recording studio and record label, or Broome, with its tradition of successful 'saltwater country' bands such as the Pigram Brothers.

Tamworth has made some exceptions. Troy Cassar-Daley was one of the best-selling country artists in Australia during the 1990s and 2000s and swept the pool at the 2010 Golden Guitar Awards. Jimmy Little had several hit singles in the 1950s and, after some decades in popular obscurity, was added to the Roll of Renown in 1994. Both Cassar-Daley and Little have wax sculptures of their likenesses at the Tamworth Wax Museum. Despite its conservative, even 'red neck' reputation, no other musical genre in Australia can claim a similar degree of recognition or veneration for Aboriginal artists. Indeed, the two indigenous artists that have been inducted into the ARIA Hall of Fame are Jimmy Little and Kev Carmody, both frequently described as country musicians.

How are we to make sense of this apparent contradiction? On the one hand, Aboriginal country artists, even 'successful' ones like Roger Knox, have been systematically marginalised by Tamworth. On the other, some black faces and voices, such as Troy Cassar-Daley's, were notably visible in Tamworth in the 2000s. I will briefly suggest two explanations here. The first is simply that times have changed. The early 1990s saw a shift in the public presentation of Aboriginal-ness. As a result of raised awareness of Aboriginality in Australian society in general - due to such events as protests to the bicentenary celebrations and the High Court's rejection of historic term *terra nullius* in the Mabo vs Queensland case in 1992 - and the trail blazed by Roger Knox and the Country Outcasts in country music in particular, artists such as Cassar-Daley could now foreground their Aboriginality both in song and as a marketing device; a situation unthinkable when Chad Morgan shot to fame in the early 1950s.

Secondly, Cassar-Daley expressed an overwhelmingly positive view of Australia and race relations. Although he had sung about controversial race-related issues - the title track of his 1995 debut album *Beyond The Dancing* was about black deaths in custody - most of his songs assumed a more apolitical stance. Also on his debut album, 'Dream

Out Loud', for instance, stated 'There's two people in a room/one black and one white/ now who's to say who's wrong and who's right?'<sup>122</sup> This was a theme taken up by later songs such as 'One Big Land' which celebrated the equality and sense of a 'fair go' that Australia offered.<sup>123</sup> Later records continued to mine the vein of patriotism: *True Believer* in 1998<sup>124</sup> and *I Love This Place* in 2009, the cover of which featured Cassar-Daley leaning on a fence post in front of gum trees.<sup>125</sup>

Race and conflict have existed in Cassar-Daley's songs, yet such themes tend to be neutralised by his sense of patriotism. He is more interested in celebrating the achievements of Australia - its ability to absorb different cultures and these various cultures' conquering of a difficult environment. Ultimately, Cassar-Daley's view of Australia is sympathetic to Tamworth's: it is a glorious place, produced by the struggle of early pioneers in the bush.

## Conclusion

Tamworth, and by extension mainstream Australian country music from the 1970s to 2010, has demonstrated an interest in its own history and Australian history that is unparalleled in the world of popular music. When compared to rock or pop music, or even hip hop, its reverence for the past and the past's place within it is striking. Indeed, it was the dominant feature of Australian country music in the early twenty-first century.

One of the implications of Raphael Samuel's *Theatres Of Memory* is that heritage tells us far more about the present than it does about the past. Or, to put it another way, preservation tells us more about the preserver than the preserved. So, what does Tamworth's peculiar interest in heritage tell us about country music from the 1970s-2000s?

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<sup>122</sup> Troy Cassar-Daley, *Beyond The Dancing*, Sony, 1995.

<sup>123</sup> Walker, *op cit*, p 256.

<sup>124</sup> Troy Cassar-Daley, *True Believer*, Sony, 1997

<sup>125</sup> Troy Cassar-Daley, *I Love This Place*, Liberation Music, 2009.

Firstly, it tells us that 'real' Australian country music, through its asserted connections to past traditions, began to situate itself as a particularly Australian artform. So strong is the association that country has with jingoistic nationalism in 2010 that it is hard to imagine it ever being otherwise. However, this association was the result of historic forces specific to the late twentieth century. These forces came from within country music culture itself - in particular from an assumption that the Australian flavour of country music gave it both cultural and economic capital - and from the rise of popular nationalism in Australia in this period.

Secondly, it tells how contemporary country music views its relationship with the past. This relationship has taken the form of a constant conversation. This conversation is dominated by the twin questions 'how can the past live in the present?' and 'how can the present live up to the past?' 'Heritage' songs and 'bush ballads' are some of the answers to these questions. It is clear that several successful country artists – Lee Kernaghan in particular – have tried to give the bush ballad a modern context. Overall, heritage in country music means eternal values and a sense of destiny. That the achievements of the 1930s have led to this place, today, and continue to inform what is pure and fine about Australian country music.

By contrast, the past in other 'theatres of memory' is quarantined from the present. Such theatres see the past, as Samuel puts it, 'not as a prelude to the present but as an alternative to it, 'another country.''<sup>126</sup> ARIA has a 'Hall of Fame', yet without the equivalent sense of legacy; the 'Heidelberg school' is seen as an important moment in Australian artistic maturity, yet no painter today would be expected to stay true to it; and Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson, while respected as experts in vernacular style, do not 'live on' in contemporary Australian literature. In these theatres, heritage is typically something that needs to be preserved for its own sake. A sense of eternal values – the past informing the present – is anathema to other forms of culture which have adopted the modernist project of change.

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<sup>126</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres Of Memory*, Verso, London, 1994, p 221.

## Conclusion

### **The Light Goes Out: Slim Dusty and the Death of Reality**

In September 2003 the New South Wales Government held a state funeral for Slim Dusty. The funeral was held at St Andrew's Cathedral in the centre of the city of Sydney. The cathedral was full, and an additional crowd of several thousand gathered in the square outside to watch the proceedings on big screens. The funeral was also televised live throughout the nation. Various country music artists paid tribute to Dusty during the proceedings, including Troy Cassar-Daley and Kasey Chambers who performed one of Dusty's best-known songs (and title of his autobiography) 'Walk A Country Mile'. Dusty's casket was adorned with the Australian flag, native flowers and an Akubra hat. Following the funeral, the cortege made its way down Bathurst Street followed by some 1500 people.<sup>1</sup>

It is worth considering the significance of a state funeral for a country music singer. No other musician has received an Australian state or commonwealth funeral. State funerals are offered for politicians, heads of state and judges. In special circumstances a state funeral will be offered to a 'distinguished NSW citizen'.<sup>2</sup> Since their inception, just ten New South Wales state funerals have been held for such citizens. Of these, two have been for artists: the writers Henry Lawson (in 1922) and Dame Mary Gilmore (in 1962). In the late twentieth century, state funerals for 'distinguished NSW citizens' became more common. They were held for soccer player and community organiser Johnny Warren and billionaire tycoon Kerry Packer. However they were not generally extended to musicians. While the 1998 funeral of Michael Hutchence, singer with internationally-popular funk/pop group INXS, was also held at St Andrews Cathedral, was televised and featured musical tributes from fellow musicians (in this case, Nick Cave, whose performance was edited out of the broadcast) it did not receive official state recognition.

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<sup>1</sup> *Newcastle Herald*, 27/09/03

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.warmemorialsnsw.asn.au/pdf/s\\_funeral\\_policy.pdf](http://www.warmemorialsnsw.asn.au/pdf/s_funeral_policy.pdf) 20/05/210

It is clear that fame alone does not guarantee a state funeral. Rather, the recipient must be seen to have contributed to the cultural life of the state or nation in some way. While Dusty was Australia's best-selling recording artist, this achievement alone would not have been enough to grant him the official recognition of a state funeral. Rather, if the media reports were anything to go by, Dusty's national significance was due to his Australian character.

Slim's death was literally front-page news in Australia, and the obituaries and tributes continued for several days following it. The conservative Prime Minister of the time, John Howard, described him as 'a one off, a great bloke in the proper sense of that expression and a great Australian figure and icon'. Fellow country musician Jimmy Little commented that 'he was the glue that held the identity of this nation together', a view that carried a special sense of legitimacy given Little's Aboriginality, while ex-Midnight Oil singer (and future federal politician) Peter Garrett suggested that 'his was an unaffected Australian voice.'<sup>3</sup> Music writer Glenn A Baker took hyperbole to the limit declared that he 'wasn't just Australian, he was Australia.'<sup>4</sup>

Part of Dusty's contribution to Australian character was his particular musical inventions and style. As Slim's biographer Peter Bowers commented in his obituary, 'When The Rain Tumbles Down In July' was a key moment in the movement away from hillbilly towards an Australian tradition.<sup>5</sup> However this achievement alone would not have been enough to warrant the degree of official and popular recognition of Slim as encapsulating 'Australia'. Even though writers such as Patrick White or AD Hope and painters such as Norman Lindsay described Australian life in styles previously unexplored, it is hard to imagine any of these artists being celebrated as being as not just Australian, but Australia itself, even if such statements were verbose rhetoric.

Three elements of Slim Dusty distinguished him in this regard. Firstly, part of the difference was that Dusty was a performer. He appeared in front of people. Audiences

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<sup>3</sup> Patrick Donovan, 'Farewell to Slim Dusty, The Bush Balladeer With No Peer', *The Age*, 20/09/03.

<sup>4</sup> *Illawarra Mercury*, 20/09/03.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Bowers, 'Just Say Goodbye', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20-21/09/03

heard his 'unaffected Australian voice' and observed his humbleness, his shyness, his unpretentiousness. As a *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial put it, he exhibited a 'self-effacing but determined' quality. 'Qualities that Australians, or at least a good number of them, wish to ascribe to themselves.'<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, unlike White, Lindsay or Hope, who encapsulated mid twentieth-century ideals of 'modern art' with its connotations with inaccessibility and elitism, Dusty was working in a broadly popular medium. His songs chronicled working-class rural life and found particular resonance with a middle to working-class, rural audience. He employed a vernacular, accessible style that favoured narrative over poetic expression. He was working in a 'people's style'.

Thirdly, and most importantly, Dusty was working in the idiom of country music. Country music's claims to naturalness and authenticity make it, as a genre, particularly well-suited to being incorporated into national narratives. It was not just Dusty's particular sound, repertoire and image that made him seem to speak for Australia; it was also the historic identity of country music in general that led to this association. Throughout its history, Australian country music claimed that real things existed, despite the bewildering changes associated with modernity. In the early twenty-first century, with its accompanying bombardment of information, images and culture, country music's apparent opposition to such post-modern overload struck many observers as worth commenting on. Country had sung of places of tradition and permanence, outside of urbanification and globalisation, and its singers seemed to come from that place.

Jimmy Little also observed Dusty's death signified 'the very end of an era in bush balladry'.<sup>7</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, some elements of the country music community even saw the death of Slim Dusty as signifying the death of reality. There are several elements at play here. Firstly, the links between strong emotions such as grief and a particular type of patriotism appear to have been in keeping with the late-twentieth-century Australian tendency towards 'sentimental nationalism', as Mark McKenna and

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<sup>6</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26/09/03.

<sup>7</sup> Donovan, *op cit*.

Stuart Ward described it in relation to pilgrimages to Australian war sites such as Gallipoli.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the level of public mourning and media hyperbole associated with Dusty's death was due to the fact that he represented an Australia that appeared to be dying out. Slim's Australia was laconic and understated; it valued mateship; found its inspiration in the bush; and was, above all culturally distinctive. This was in contrast to the global, multicultural, economically-deregulated country that Australia has popularly been seen to become in the latter part of the twentieth century. Particularly within the context of popular music - which valued youth, glamour and newness - Dusty stood for something older, more real.

Australian country music had, by the turn of the twenty-first century, become synonymous with a particular definition of patriotism. Nationalism has been marked by an anxiety about reality. As Lionel Trilling has observed, anxiety about 'the credibility of existence' characterises 'nationalist ideologies'.<sup>9</sup> Nations are invented entities, and as such are eager to convince themselves and their citizens of their naturalness. They tend to locate authenticity in a shared culture. This is the basic assumption of a nation: we are a nation because we have a culture. In Australia, country music has claimed to be such a culture, not just because it claims to be indigenous, popular and about Australia, but because it claims that something real exists at all. It seeks to alleviate anxiety about authenticity and reality. It therefore provides a nation with an example of its authenticity. Slim Dusty was a shining example of national authenticity.

Throughout its history, country music has projected a sense of real-ness. As this thesis has shown, this manifested itself in a variety of ways. As we saw in Chapter One, the sound of its music and the message of its lyrics have communicated a sense of heartfelt sincerity, while the image of its performers have emphasised their rural authenticity. It

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<sup>8</sup> Mark McKenna and Stuart Ward, 'It Was Really Moving Mate': The Gallipoli Pilgrimage and Sentimental Nationalism', in *Australian Historical Studies*, v 38, no 129, pp 141-151

<sup>9</sup> Lionel Trilling quoted in Richard Handler, 'Authenticity', in *Anthropology Today*, 2 (1), 1986, p 3.

has celebrated the familial, traditional life in the valleys, often in direct contrast to the values and experience of the city, as described in Chapter Two. The culture around country music demanded respectability for its music and demanded that its music be respectable, in the sense that it should be morally pure, sincere and not 'American', as we saw in Chapter Three. Increasingly, it positioned itself as an authentically Australian culture and one with a distinct history and heritage, as argued in Chapters Four and Five.

Ultimately, these projections of authenticity were expressions of concern about change and modernity in the twentieth century. The features of modernity that country music engaged with and critiqued were numerous. They included: technology and urbanisation (as we saw in Chapters One and Two); Americanisation, globalisation and capitalism, expressed as a desire for respectability (as we saw in Chapter Three); centralised culture and metropolises (as we saw in Chapter Four); and corruption or dilution of cultural essence (as we saw in Chapter Five). Country music's critique of modernity was complicated by the fact that it was, itself, a modern form and relied on modern modes of communication for the propagation of its message. While it celebrated ideas of tradition, continuity and the country, its meaning was wrapped in the veneer of modernity.

This thesis has understood country music in Australia as an expression of authenticity and nationalism and as a response to modernity. This way of looking at country music has added to an understanding of four specific areas of historical inquiry: the history of country music in Australia; the history of country music in general; cultural history in Australia; and cultural history in general.

Firstly, this thesis has show us that, despite the arguments of Eric Watson and Philip and Roger Bell, country music in Australia cannot be fully explained by determining its Australian characteristics, or lack of them. Rather, it is more satisfyingly understood as a contemporary response to modernity and change. Modernity was an international process and its effects, such as urbanisation, industrialisation and economic depression, were global events. However, they did have specific ramifications in Australia: in particular,

they influenced patterns of migration from country to city and a resulting romanticisation of the bush life.

Furthermore, defining early country music in Australia as a modern form, with a sound resembling 'bustling modernity', as Philip Hayward has done, distorts the evidence and only tells part of the story. While hillbilly music relied on new technologies for its dissemination and provided audiences with modern, international sets of engagements, its dominant sound and lyrical content was sentimental and nostalgic. Indeed, notably more so than hillbilly music in America.

Secondly, this study has told us that while country music, like rock music, has privileged a sense of autobiographical authenticity, it has located this authenticity in a fundamentally different place. Simon Frith has shown us the way in which rock has valued a sense of seeming or sounding real, while Aaron Fox has argued that country singers have seemed to be or sounded like real rural people. These observations are true enough, however what this thesis adds to Frith's and Fox's account of authenticity is that nationalism is also important in conceptualising the specific way in which country music projects authenticity. Perhaps scholars have taken for granted the way in which country music is imagined along national lines. It can be an instinctive assumption, seen even in the use of the most basic terms such as 'American country music'. To have origins in a particular country does not make a cultural product eternally 'of' that country, yet country music has consistently assumed that to be the case. Seeming to be real in a country music sense is not just seeming to be rural, but also seeming to be really American, or really Australian. This is a continuation of historic assumptions that the rural working class naturally embody national values.

Thirdly, this thesis has demonstrated that a sense of Australianness is not innate nor eternal, but rather has responded to changing historical currents. Emphasising or de-emphasising aspects of national identity can be thus understood as a historically-contingent strategy. While several historians have argued for this view of Australian

culture (such as Richard White, Graeme Turner, Hsu-Ming Teo and John Rickard) the example of country music both expands and adds to their understanding.

Country music provides a detailed account of how popular conceptions of what it means to be Australian and ways of seeing Australia have shifted over a seventy-year period. In the 1930s, there was an ease of exchange between older and newer types of popular culture. In particular, cowboy images, meanings and sounds could be used to commentate on, update and glamourise a sense of Australia that was built on mythic ideas of the bush. Part of this ease of exchange was due to the fact that popular culture in this period was marked by a sense of romance and adventure. Consequently, both the American prairies and Australian outback could be rendered exotic, rather than realistic. During the 1950s, this ease of exchange became problematic. This was a period marked by complex and intensive stratification of culture. Popular culture with recent American origin began to be regarded as contributing to 'Americanisation' and 'commercialisation'. Country music, in response, sought to emphasise its sense of folkness and Australianness. By the 1980s, Australian patriotism was dominantly expressed as cultural distinctiveness from England and America. Proof of this distinctiveness was often found in (white) rural histories. Country music participated in and encouraged this nativist orientation.

Lastly, this study of country music in Australia illustrates the enduring power of nationalist narratives and identities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although its origins were in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries - the result of the declining power of monarchical and religious systems and modes of identification - nationalism has continued to be expressed in popular culture some 200 years later. While popular accounts of world history may incline us to conclude that cultures that assume a globalised, multicultural, international position have developed potency and currency over the late twentieth century, such accounts do not tell the whole story. Rather, practices that assume a close connection to national landscapes and national cultures continue to find an audience. In fact, the nationalism of country music has become, if anything, more pronounced over the course of its history.

Nationalism in the post-modern world exists somewhat peripherally to government, corporate and cosmopolitan interests and tastes. The relationship between nationalism and culture has become a populist movement that identifies itself as outside the mainstream: metropolitan culture's 'other'. In this sense, just as country music has reacted to modernity over much of its history, increasingly we may see it reacting against post-modern ideas of global identities.

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