Folk Music in Australia:

or Is There Life Beyond the Bee Gees?

by Terry Goldie

That title is only partly facetious. Recently I had occasion to ask a group of university students what Australian songs they had heard of. One replied, "Anything of Rick Springfield, Men at Work or Olivia Newton-John." Thus, to the world at large Australia has become much more than "Waltzing Matilda" but perhaps a bit less Australian.

Your average folkie of course knows at least one more song, "The Band Played Waltzing Matilda." The latter represents what a good singer-songwriter can do with a combination of strongly felt history and traditional music. It presents something more, however, in that the writer, Eric Bogle, is a Scottish immigrant to Australia.

As in North America, the immigrant has a larger presence in Australia than he has in Europe. As in Canada, he has also had a large impact on folk music. Much of the folk revivals in Canada has been an extension of the revivals in Britain and the United States and often it has remained for British and American immigrants to stimulate interest in our own traditions.

The Australian situation has been similar. Folk clubs have their requisite number of Sussex concertina players and Lancashire accordionists, although the American guitarist is not such a ubiquitous presence. And there are also our old favourites, the Morris Dancers.

But with that, there is a significant difference. For the Australian has a pretty good idea of what an Australian is, unlike most Canadians. It might take an Englishman to convince him to sing the local songs but he knew they were there and that they were part of the sheep-droving bush-ranging mateship that makes him Australian.

It seems something closer to the Newfoundland context. But like Newfoundland it remained for outsiders to show local revivalists how to "get it together." Now there are all kinds of folk clubs and festivals, usually run by Australians, but they were set up on British patterns, and many were begun by either Brit-
ish immigrants or Australians who had lived in Britain.

For the Canadian folkie the Australian folk movement presents a great many comparisons. Sad to say, I think we have more to learn from them than vice versa. But happy to say, it’s quite possible to learn those things in situ. If you can raise the money to get you and your fiddle across the Pacific you will receive a kind of hospitality you have never seen before.

The average Australian folkie is obsessively Australian without being xenophobic. An example might be the Brisbane-based band, Rantan, who did more than anyone else to make me feel musically at home in Australia. One of the few nontraditional songs which they do has a chorus: “We don’t play American music, we don’t sing American songs.” Yet they were more than ready to welcome any American bluegrass picker or English balladeer, or Canadian concertina player.

The response to British folk music is a nic microcosm of general Australian reaction to things English. The English are called Pommies or Poms. The derivation is not clear but most believe it reflects convict times, “Prisoners of His Majesty.” As one Australian told me, “Given my father’s language, I was fifteen before I realized ‘Pommie Bastard’ was two words.”

And yet there is an excellent turn-out for most touring British folkies, much better than one would see most places in Canada. I attended near or complete sell-outs for Vin Garbutt, Steeleye Span, and The Boys of the Lough. The general attitude is that Australia is rather off the beaten track and so whatever comes should be supported.

Anybody who is thinking of going to Australia should first write to the Australian Folk Trust, P.O. Box 33, Coolah, New South Wales 2853, Australia. Among other things, they publish the National Folk Directory, which lists addresses and times for folk clubs, festivals and dances. As in any folk circles, some references are more dependable than other but the Directory provides phone numbers which enable you to find what’s on and what isn’t.

For those interested in making a tour as a performer, try contacting the Australian Folk Touring Circuit. A good source there would be c/o Alan Craig, 11 Margary St., Mt. Gravatt, Queensland 4122, Australia. An accompanying tape and biography will do much to create some interest and the former need not be of professional quality. You’ll have to finance your transportation and payment will be small (although successful performers can do reasonably well on return visits) but most places will give you a chance to perform and a couple of nights room and board.

Don’t think, however, that there will be room for you only if you are a polished professional. There are a great many jam sessions, both at houses and in pubs. In some there is room for singers but many rapidly become too loud for other than instrumentalists. And even there a concertina or a soft fiddle can get lost. But anyone who knows Newfoundland or Irish tunes will rapidly find ways of fitting into Australian variants. And there will be some chances to sing. At one such affair I was surprised to find myself the only one present who knew all the verses to “Waltzing Matilda.”

Whether you go to Australia as a performer or a tourist you must take advantage of a wonderful cultural experience known as the bushdance. This is the most entertaining folk dance I have encountered in the world. It’s basically akin to the North American barn dance, with round dances, reels, squares, etc., danced to Irish and Australian tunes. The major difference from our square dances in atmosphere is that the bush dance is much less formal. The caller has no concern for patter but simply leads you through the dance. There are monthly or weekly venues for most dances and when the group is an experienced one the caller will be dispensed with altogether. A few of the regulars will be placed in beginning sets to direct traffic. The result of all this is glorious. The only problem is that Australia is just as hot as you have heard and Australians lack the American devotion to air conditioners. Drink plenty of fluids and bring a towel and at least three t-shirts.
If your interest in Australia is to be pursued from a distance, you will have a few problems. Few Australian records and songbooks are available here. The best source for records is Larrikins Records, P.O. Box 162, Paddington, New South Wales 2021, Australia, and they have a catalogue out. But I warn you, it will cost. There are cheaper outlets but they are not set up to handle mail orders. And in any case, Australian records tend to be expensive, even before postage and customs.

Larrikins produced one of the best Australian children’s records, Bunyips, Bunnies and Brumbies. Like some of the best Canadian children’s records, it’s the creation of a British immigrant, Mike Jackson, and his wife, Michelle. And like many Canadian recordings, it’s a wonderful experience for kids and adults alike. Unlike Canada, however, BBB pretty well stands alone. The Jacksons do a lot of school tours but the bookings are very much their own hard work. There is nothing like Mariposa In The Schools to help them along. In “Kiddie folk” Australia has a lot to learn from us.

In Canada, the best adult records available are probably the few records of Australian songs performed by British singers. Those by Martin Wyndham-Reed and A.L. Lloyd are the most obvious. A few records by the best-known Australian electric-folk group, the Bushwackers, are distributed in Canada on the Boot label. The material tends to be hardcore Australiana, either traditional songs or bush ballads set to music, but the Bushwackers have become increasingly devoted to heavy bass lines and extravagant guitar riffs. One doesn’t want to be too much of a purist but it becomes even more difficult to feel the original material than with groups like Steeleye Span or The Albion Country Band.

I think the best Australian recordings are the ones which are hardest to get, even in Australia. These are by various local bush bands, of which the aforementioned Rantan is one. Throughout Australia there is an obsession with things “bush”, or, in other words, the outback, a place where men are men and sheep are sheep. The bush ballads at times have tunes but many are just sets of verses, either anonymous or by someone like the two most famous Australian writers, Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson, who authored “Waltzing Matilda.”

The bush band reflects this sensibility. The basic band tends to have fiddle, guitar and washtub bass, with whatever else can be acquired, particularly concertina or button accordion. The interesting point is that like all of Australia, their ethos is extremely rural while their lifestyles are urban. Professional bush bands live in big cities and only venture back of beyond when there’s a good gig.

As noted above, Rantan is one of my favourites, and they have a couple of locally pressed records available in Brisbane. A similarly attractive group from a few thousand miles away is the Mucky Duck Bush Band from Perth, Western Australia. Their name reflects a typically Australian colloquial inversion. It refers to Perth’s famous black swans. A third group is the Larrikins, whose leader, Warren Fahey, runs Larrikin Records. There are a few other groups who have recordings but, as well, most folk clubs have resident bush bands, whose quality ranges from excellent to exactly what you might expect.

An interesting sidelight on this comment on bush bands is that the best recordings I have are not from Australia but from New Zealand. One Station Days, by the Canterbury Crutchings Bush and Ceilidh Band, and Swags to Riches, by the Canterbury Bush Orchestra, are both available from Kiwi Records, 182 Wakefield Street, Wellington, New Zealand. Actually both bands are loose conglomerations formed around Phil Garland, who is one of the best sources to find out about folk music in New Zealand. I don’t have his address but an inquiry to any record shop in Christchurch will lead you to him.

I feel badly to include New Zealand as a tidbit in an article about Australia. It’s too much like the usual view of Canada: take the United States and divide by
ten. Once I was walking down on English street with a New Zealand friend when an American asked for the time. On hearing my reply, he said “What part of the States are you from?” I drew myself up to my full nationalist height and said “I’m Canadian.” My Kiwi companion added, “I’m not Australian either.”

Having passed on that anecdote, I shall now proceed to offend it. The New Zealand folk scene is much like the Australian only smaller. The clubs are less viable financially, especially when it comes to employing outsiders, but are if anything even more friendly to touring folkies. And distances are smaller and expenses lower than in Australia. If you are going to New Zealand an excellent contact is Maggie Grayson, Brooklyn Castle, 15 Tanera Cres., Wellington 2, New Zealand.

Back to Australia, it’s a natural step from recordings to songbooks. There are a number of good ones. Best known here is probably Hugh Anderson’s *The Story of Australian Folksong*, published by Oak publications in New York. The most useful are *The Penguin Australian Songbook*, compiled by John Manifold, and *The Second Penguin Australian Songbook*, compiled by Bill Scott. I had the great opportunity to meet both of them when I was in Australia. Scott is a filmmaker, writer and folklorist, with a particular interest in “vanishing hitch-hiker stories.” A great raconteur, he has published a number of his own tall tales written in a traditional mode, *My Uncle and Arch and Other People* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1977). Manifold is the grand old man of Australian folksong and while a series of strokes have slowed him down he remains witty and concerned. An example of the former is found in one of the few modern inclusions in Scott’s songbook, Manifold’s “On a Queensland Railway Line”:

Iron rations come in handy
On the way to Dirranbandi
Passengers have died of hunger
During halts at Garradunga
Chorus: Bogantungan, Rollingstone.

Mungar, Murgon, Marathon,
Guthalungra, Pinkenba,
Wanko, Yaamba, ha, ah, ha!

For those interested in Australian folksong, there are many areas to pursue. Australian traditions tend to derive from the Irish or English so many comparisons can be made. For example, the English song, “Spanish Ladies,” with its chorus of “We’ll rant and we’ll roar like true British sailors” is better known in Canada as “We’ll rant and we’ll roar like true Newfoundlanders.” In Australia it becomes a much drier experience: “We’ll rant we’ll roar like true Queensland drovers.”

Then of course, there is the native music. As in Canada, this is usually seen as part of anthropology rather than folk music but just as a number of Canadian Indians have used country music styles as singer-songwriters in songs about the native experience, so have Aborigines. Perhaps the best known is Harry Williams, who, as well as his own recordings, appears on a collection called *The First Australians*, available from the Aboriginal Artists Agency. This includes everything from opera to didgeridoo solos.

No account for Australian folk music would be complete without a glance at another country performer, more or less the equivalent of our Wilf Carter. His name, Slim Dusty, sounds like a bad American movie, and many more purist Aussie folkies blanche reference to him but he kept the bush ballads alive in song for many years when they were usually seen only in poetry books. One of my favourite Australian acquisitions is the delightful titled record, *Slim Dusty Live at Wagga Wagga*.

There is much more to be said about all aspects of Australian music, including other indigenous country sounds, such as those of the Webb Brothers, best known for “Who Put the Roo in the Stew?” I hope you will dip into this fount of riches, whether by a trip to the country or through records and books. As they say in the Aussie pub when it’s time to buy the drinks, “It’s your shout.”