

## **FOLK AND COUNTRY MUSIC FESTIVALS IN AUSTRALIA**

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### **Festivals, genres and scenes**

In recent times, following from Will Straw's article "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music", the previously colloquial idea of a musical scene has been elevated to an analytical concept in the study of particular genres of popular music in their social settings.(Straw 1991). The term promises to capture something missing from Franco Fabbri's "social genre" on the one hand, for some perhaps overly focussed on the musical text; and sociologically inflected studies of contexts of musical interaction on the other, which say little about the discourses which create the conditions for the creation and understanding of these social contexts. (Fabbri 1982 a,b)

What makes some musical genres into musical scenes? One important feature is the existence of some spectacular points of collective consumption of the music. This collectivity can create a heightened social interaction; in this participants can learn the social meanings of the music and themselves generate further meanings. Typically, this process is carried out in venues, concerts, dance clubs and so on; but one of the most powerful and effective sites for this to occur is a festival. Festivals have acted as nodal points in the creation and consolidation of many popular genres in the twentieth century. In folk revivals, particularly in the USA, various folk festivals have been centrally important, from a number of festivals of the 1920s, to the Newport Folk Festival of 1959 to 1966 and beyond, sketched so perspicaciously by Robert Shelton at its very emergence. These festivals established the patterns and potentials of such gatherings, and lead on to the epochal rock

festivals of Woodstock and Monterey, to the many subsequent ones. (Rosenberg 1993: 6-7) Various studies have emphasised features of ritual, spectacle, and of the enhancement of genre continuity in such festivals. (St John 1998, Cantwell 1996, 1993, Cameron 1995, Laing and Newman 1994)

In this paper I will describe two such festivals, respectively in the folk and country movement in Australia; and indicate how these festivals structure these musical scenes and create musical meanings.

Festivals work in a particularly powerful way in the genres of Folk and Country in Australia. This is because, firstly, they are economically important for performers and audiences, as concentrated centres of music production and consumption. But secondly, and more importantly, these festivals assume an importance because of the special claims which the musical genres make concerning the political organisation of *sociality*, by which I refer to a mode of understanding of social and political bonds. These claims are advanced and enacted within the promotion and self explanation both of the festivals and the music performed there.

As I have argued elsewhere, folk and country claim their national significance and authenticity through the socialities advanced in the music. (Smith and Brett 1998) Over the past twenty or thirty years they have engaged with the long running debates on the basis for the Australian political community, the various ways in which the community of the nation has been, in Benedict Anderson's term "imagined". (Anderson 1983) Such an engagement takes place at many musical levels. The overt lyrical content and the rich symbolic resource of musical connotation are important parts of this: songs can address these social and political issues quite directly and relatively unambiguously. Statements which are less explicit, though no less powerful may be made

by a range of musical markers, from overall styles to allusive fragments. However, here, rather than a lyrical or a musical content analysis, we will look at the enactment of sociality in these festivals.

How does a festival enact a sociality? I will suggest three points of action. First, at a festival the audience and other musical actors - performers, organisers and so on - recognises itself as a distinctive social grouping.

Second, the music in performance creates models and ideals of social interaction. This can occur in the specific content of songs, but also in macro-musical features such as rituals of presentation, in on-stage chat, the style of concert organisation, of festival administration and so on.

Third the ideal social relations thus enacted are projected onto broader social formations, and ultimately onto aspects of the imagined national community. The "we" of participation in the festival becomes a nationally inflected "we" which these musical styles can express.

To argue for this interpretation we need to look briefly at the history of the genres concerned: folk and country in Australia, at the role of festivals as important sites in these genres, and at the forms of the sociality enacted in the festivals.

## **The Australian folk music movement**

The Australian folk movement developed along a similar trajectory to that of the the British revival, by which it was much influenced. It is convenient to periodise it into three eras: the radical nationalist period of 1950s, the folk boom and folk club period of the 1960s and 1970s and the festival period of from about 1985 to the 1990s.

In the 1950s “folk” was constructed as a public music genre within a left radical nationalist intellectual movement; led especially, but not exclusively, by enthusiasts and cultural activists of the Australian communist party. This process was essentially a continuation of popular front cultural politics within cold war circumstances. (Smith 1985) The genre was constructed through the collection of a body of vernacular historical and traditional musical material, which was subjected to the processes of mediation typical of folk revival movements, in the selection, heavy handed interpretation, and subsequent canonisation of repertoire.

In the 1960s the folk boom established styles of performance, new venues and expanded audiences. Within these the folk singer as popular entertainer and poet hero emerged, and the folk movement in Australia accommodated the cultural nationalist preoccupations of the earlier period within the modernising cosmopolitan humanism of an internationally conceived folk movement. This process continued in the 1970s within a folk club movement which was strongly modelled on the British folk club movement. A network of clubs formed involving a large number of organisers and performers at the grassroots level.

When the folk club movement waned in popularity in the early 1980s, it was able to reform itself

into a folk festival movement. The successful growth of festivals in the 1980s and 1990s can be attributed to several factors. The active core of the folk club movement was tied to a particular generation of enthusiasts and activists. As this central cohort aged it was more attracted to organised family-friendly festivals weekends than to regular socialising in the pub.

The viability of festivals was enhanced by the public cultural funding policies which were instigated by the Australia Council from the mid 1970s. , The Australia Council, the peak arts funding body in Australia which vastly expanded its role in Australian cultural life from the mid 1970s, and the new levels of funding for the arts flowed on through state and local government during the next decade (Hawkins 1992). The funding ideologies, particularly those associated with the influential Community Arts Board of the Australia Council favoured organisations and collectively organised institutions; and the folk scene's move into festivals fitted into these approaches to funding support. The creation of the links between the folk scene and government cultural policy were enhanced by the individual activists of the folk movement in public administration. The wide ranging Federal government report, *Folklife, Our living heritage*, was spearheaded by the well directed energies of a folk movement activist and performer from department of Arts Heritage and the Environment, and the appointment of long established singer-songwriter and folk educator Phil Lobl to the music board of the Australia Council in 1985 added to the folk movement's integration with government funding. (Anderson, Davey and Mckenry 1987). This support provided Festivals with continuous administrative structures which enabled them to grow to become the centre of the folk movement. Though the federal government funding for the peak organising body, the Australian Folk Trust ceased in 1996, from 1997 a so called "folk alliance" movement of folk activist and organisers has formed, parallel to similar British and American movements. The Folk Alliance has largely become a federation of festival organisers. The first conference was held in Sept 1997, and since then it has established itself as an effective coordinating group.

## FOLK FESTIVALS

Australian folk festivals range from small country town festivals to large national ones, one of which claims to be the largest single entry music event in Australia with 70,000 tickets sold. About 40 folk festivals are held annually throughout Australia.

We will here look at the Port Fairy folk festival. It developed from a festival organised by provincial city folk club. Held in a seaside town in Southern Victoria, it attracts crowds of about 50,000. It has deliberately limited itself to 20,000 tickets, which sell out in the first weekend; some have reported a sell-out within the first few hours of release. But it also attracts a large number of casual visitors to the fringe performances in open venues around the town. (Stubington 1998: 84)

It has consistently booked high-profile touring professional performers who currently derive a significant part of their income from international folk festivals; performers such as Martin Carthy, Ani di Franco, Dougie Maclean and others. However, as well as these star attractions, many Australian performers are booked.

The format of the Port Fairy festival is similar to other large Australian folk festivals. There are concerts staged in big marquees, generally with relatively short performances of a range of performers. Usually each has 1/2 hour bracket. There are also many informal performances, especially Irish-style sessions, in bars in the festival area and in town pubs. There are also workshops. These may be introductory tuition in stylistically specific "named-system" genres (Rosenberg 1993:177-8), and occasionally interpretative and explanatory lectures on styles of music.

Its most striking current feature, and the one most often commented on, is the diversity of the musical styles presented. It is commonly argued that this shows how "folk" has moved beyond its

central core of folk conceived of as a specific type of national or cultural emblematic musical style, or of folk conceived as a specific sort of performance: which is generally the independent singer songwriter, with socially conscious lyrics and small scale, largely acoustic accompaniment, and so on.

Folk's new diversity embraces "ethnic" Australian performers from non english-speaking background performers, often from migrant communities; Aboriginal popular music performers; Neo-Australiana country music performers; singer songwriter "folksingers"; as well as traditional style folk enthusiasts or "named genre" performers.

The folk movement's own explanatory narrative on this diversity is that it shows folks musical broadness, its cosmopolitanism, social inclusion and democratic flavour, anti commercialism. However, a more critical perspective would see it as a process of interpretative control; by which the range of diverse and divergent genres are brought within the ideology of the folk movement. I argue this in a recently published article (Smith and Brett 1998: 6-7). The schemes for the interpretation of musical styles which make up the folk ideology are varied, though they usually include ideas of special relationships to a community of creation, performance, or understanding of a music; an idealised humanist interpretation, all constructed in contrast to some commercially corrupted or distorted mass music.

It is important to consider why this process of interpretative control is particularly attractive to the enthusiasts of the folk movement. As such writers as Harker, Boyes and Gammon have stressed, earlier British folk revivals have been characterised by the imposition of the mediations of middle-class revivalists on vernacular popular cultural forms. (Harker 1985, Boyes 1993, Gammon 1980) However, the models of cultural distortion and theft on which such historical analyses depend do not easily account for the way the folk ideology acts within the already public and

popular forms which characterise much folk-movement music today. Nevertheless folk movements still tend to be drawn from what has been referred to as the new knowledge caste, whose power is based on the social primacy of the abstract structuring of experience. Here I am referring to the sociology of Alvin Gouldner and his characterisation of the new class and their culture of critical discourse; in particular that expressed in his *The Future of the Intellectuals and the rise of the new class* (1979, London Macmillan) (Gouldner 1979). The application of folk's interpretative control is not so much a wresting of a music from its "true" owners, as numerous critiques of historical folk movements have analysed, as a way of fitting it within a discursive form within which the participants are comfortable and socially efficacious.

## AUSTRALIAN COUNTRY MUSIC FESTIVALS

Australian country started its growth in the early 1930s. Australian performers started to copy , to emulate and to seek inspiration from the emergent American genre, especially influenced by such performers as Jimmie Rodgers, Carter family, Goebbel Reeves, Wilf Carter and others. Australian country evolved a distinctive style of localised narrative: the bush ballad. These locally referenced strophic songs promoted the outback mythology of cultural nationalism, often referred to as the Australian legend. (Ward 1958)

This musical form was developed in the 1940s and 1950s by touring performers; these often performing in agricultural show sideshows, rodeos, personally organised tours, as well as in country halls and theatres. Their itineraries took them through remote and outback Australia where they gained a solid support base, and consolidated their own self image as the voice of this sector of Australia. (Smith 1994)

However, the coherent and self conscious scene we see today, although it is very concious of its own history and its roots in the singers of the 1940s and 1950s, is largely a product of the 1970s and 1980s. It emerged in this period as a number of institutions formed and expanded, especially independent recording companies and studios, a network of regional country music clubs, and with these a large circuit of festivals developed. In 1988 84 such annual festivals were listed in a directory of Australian Country Music. (*Directory* 1998)

Country, the audience and the industry, understands itself as a distinctive and authentic national

voice, and is claimed as the favourite genre by about 20% of Australian. This preference for country is strongly socially marked: country is one of the most demographically weighted music genres in Australia: heavily rural, but just as heavily working class and blue collar, and consistently rejected by the educated, the administrative professional strata and the young. (AMR Quantum Harris 1996,7)

As with the folk scene, festivals provide a window to the structure and preoccupation of the Australian country movement, and most significant of these is the major festival held annually at Tamworth. Tamworth is a provincial rural city in north central NSW, and the festival is well known throughout Australia, and widely taken to be the heart of Australian country music.

The festival started in the early 1970s, around a local radio station which had developed a strong country music component since 1966. Held around the national day holiday weekend in January, the festival has become one of the biggest culturally focussed gatherings in Australia. In 1996 there were 1473 advertised events, 2547 acts, 100 different venues, 655 performing artists. The festival attracts 35,000+ visitors, who are estimated as adding \$30-40 million to the local economy (CMAA 1997)

Much of the Tamworth festival is relatively undocumented, because it is not centrally organised. Most of the festival occurs in individually organised venues : pubs, working mens' clubs and service organisations, privately staged and entrepreneured concerts, even at the home DIY stages set up in the front paddock of locally based performers.

However, the main organisational focus of the weekend is the awards of the Australian country music industry organisation, the "golden guitars". These are awarded for categories such as best song, best singer, male and female, best recording production and so on. The most ideologically

important of these awards are those given for the categories of "bush ballad" and that for "heritage song"; both of these categories are rather difficult to delimit and define, and are the only official awards which are not simply defined. They are intended for to songs reflecting the style and genre of Australian country, in the approved subject matter within which the distinctiveness of Australian country can be expressed. (CMAA 1996) Recent years have seen controversies over the eligibility of entrants, and indeed of winners. These debates express the anxiety of country over its national distinctiveness and its boundaries.

These country and folk festivals highlight socially significant features of these scenes in several ways, and show how the genres map out a place for themselves in the whole socio-musical field.

The considerable similarity between much of the music of the festivals makes the delineation of the boundaries between the styles the more necessary. Consider the similarities. A range of artists cross over between the two fields, including Australian bush balladists, some Aboriginal artists, Bush poets, old-timey music or bluegrass practitioners, as well as Folk-rock style bush bands in both professional and amateur forms.

The festivals described here are both summer, outdoors, camping, family based festivals. In their promotion, in overt musical style and in the general atmosphere of the way in which people participate, they are typically read by many Australians as illustrating a particular national cultural stance, where an easy relationship to the outdoor life is taken as part of the national character.

But just as striking are the contrasts. The most obvious differences are in the social style and demographic characteristics of the crowd. The Tamworth crowd is working class, small business, rural, totally unstylish; the folk festival is much more middle class in its appearance.

The relationship to public funding of the two festivals is also quite different. The Port Fairy folk festival is closely integrated with government support, the Tamworth festival is independent of this.

Clearly and unashamedly commercial in its organisation: concerts are underwritten by individual entrepreneurs, and their success is measured by the attendance which they attract. The reason why country can't get state funding is not primarily that it would be regarded as aesthetically inadmissible: the subsidiary of the national public broadcaster, ABC recordings, has been a crucially important producer of Australian country music recordings in the past nine years. However, the country music scene has no way of participating in the current discourse of socio-political abstraction within which arts policy exists: particularly, but not only, in fitting itself into multicultural explanations of Australian social structure. By contrast, its key source of validation is the market place: and this is reflected in the central place of industry awards in the festival.

The festivals also reveal fundamental aesthetic differences between the two musics, as projected through the festivals. The prominence of the awards alerts us to the distinctive role of competitions in expressive activity: there can be little that so disrupts the bourgeois aesthetic of transcendent expression in art than an organised competition. I would argue that competitions invoke the artisan instead of the artist; and here the music can link this to the habitus of the physical productive labour that country refers to and memorialises, through, for example, the mythologisation and aestheticisation of pastoral work in the rodeo, or through the promotion of other symbols of (mainly) male labour for subject matter and idealised audience.

These festivals organise and imagine society around different metaphors of social organisation, and these metaphors provide the basis of the claims which they make for national cultural significance. Folk's conception of society rests in an abstract control: where social plurality and difference need not be antagonistic if properly understood and managed. Within this conception, democracy is "the management of diversity". Therefore, for Folk, the nation is called into being through this bureaucratic rationality. Country, by contrast, is bounded by concrete

understandings of society; conceptually rooted in physical production, the genre maintains itself and its meaning through its boundedness and a generalised defensiveness. Projected onto, and largely accepted by its audience, this creates the image of a limited and unitary nation, one which might seem hopelessly outmoded by many more cosmopolitan Australians, but which commands the sympathy of many more.

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