Australian Folk Music
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Introduction
Folk music speaks in so many different ways across the globe that it is difficult to comprehensively (and briefly) describe. Put simply, folk music is perhaps ‘the music of the people’ - the tunes and songs passed down through the generations orally that describe the ways of life and stories of those people. For many centuries folk music has been a revealing and accurate measure of cultures all over the world (Lomax, 1968). The Australian Macquarie Dictionary (2001) defines folk music as “music usually of simple character, originating and handed down among the common people” (p. 728). Folk music is an adaptable idiom. For this reason its melodies and songs develop over time and take on variations of tempo, melody, time and most importantly, lyric. As cultures have developed, so too have their songs been re-interpreted over time - as times change so do the ways people tell and re-tell history. Folk music around the world has strong links to the types of acoustic instruments available to the working class, and it is historically played by community members who may not be professional musicians. Much folk music is borne of the poorer classes. In the countryside and mountains, in the suburbs and towns, opportunities were less but the struggle was always shared and the stories were told. The music emerged from these places, where a simple way of life (often living off the land) led to a simple style of music in which traditions and stories were passed down from one generation to the next.

Indigenous Australian Music
Australia is at once a new and very old nation. While the history of white Australia (stemming from European settlement) goes back some 220 years, the history of Australia’s indigenous Aborigines goes back approximately 45,000 years, making it one of the oldest surviving cultures in the world. Aborigines were nomadic tribes that were dependent on the land for their survival. They adapted to Australia’s diverse landscape and lived in isolation from the rest of the world until settled by the British in 1788. For surviving indigenous communities today, many aspects of Aboriginal teaching, spirituality, tribal lore and history are still taught orally through song and dance.

As Australia is a vast nation, the types of indigenous songs and dances vary from place to place. The Ngarla people in north-west Australia for example, have many surviving songs used for teaching, initiation and ceremony, some of which still have restrictions on who can sing them and who they can be heard by (Brown & Geytenbeek, 2003). Many of these surviving songs describe the animist belief systems (widely known as the ‘Dreamtime’ or ‘Dreaming’) that indigenous Australians follow, in which spirituality is closely related to the landscape, flora and fauna of Australia (Magowan, 2007). Two types of Ngarla songs have survived - jarlurra are corroboree songs (corroborees are Aboriginal ceremonies) and yirarru are story songs (Brown & Geytenbeek, 2003). The Yolngu are an Aboriginal tribe
that inhabit north-east Arnhem Land in Australia’s Northern Territory. Music remains a strong part of Yolngu culture and they continue to pass down their traditions of music and dance orally. Music and dance remain ways of expressing aspects of the Dreamtime as well as teaching ancestral Yolngu law (Magowan, 2007). In the last 30 years, the Yunupingu family (from Elcho Island, off the coast of Arnhem Land) has produced the internationally famous band Yothu Yindi (led by Manduway Yunupingu, 1956-), and more recently, Gurrumul Yunupingu (1970-) has sung his hauntingly beautiful original songs in Yolngu language all over the world.

‘Songlines’ is the western name given to indigenous songs that have survived many thousands of years in aboriginal communities that are linked to land and history. These songs describe the Australian landscape in detail and were used to navigate its vast distances and harsh, arid interior. The songs developed over time with the landscape, much the same as folk songs do when sung through different generations in other parts of the world. These songs often linked together into cycles over long distances, and detailed crucial elements of hunting and survival for these traditionally nomadic people (Chatwin, 1987). Very few indigenous Australian songs are well known amongst white Australians, though the instruments of the culture are widespread and in some cases, known throughout the world. Yidaki (more widely known as the didgeridoo - its western name) is the best known of these.

Yidaki is an ancient wind instrument made of a hollowed (by termites) branch of Eucalyptus with a molded beeswax mouthpiece. It is played (traditionally by men only) using circular breathing to achieve its distinctive drone. Bilma (clapsticks or woodblocks) are common the world over and when played by Aborigines are made from hardwoods like Eucalyptus.

19th Century Colonial Music

In 1788, the first British fleet arrived on the east coast of Australia, settling it initially as a penal colony. This brought with it many new musical traditions from Europe, particularly the instruments, songs and musical styles of Great Britain. Most of what survives of these traditions of early folk music in Australia are songs. Many early colonial Australian songs describe life the ‘Outback’ (the arid Australian countryside) where the hard work of clearing land, crop growing and sheep shearing where a way of life for many. Frank MacNamara (a.k.a. ‘Frank the Poet’, ca. 1810-1861) is one if the first known Australian ‘Bush Poets’ who as a transported convict, wrote of the hardship and brutality of life as a prisoner in early white Australia. One of MacNamara’s songs Bold Jack Donohue (itself an adaptation) is thought to have gradually been adapted into the much better known The Wild Colonial Boy.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Bs5gnh6vF0&feature=relmfu Yidaki is an ancient wind instrument made of a hollowed (by termites) branch of Eucalyptus with a molded beeswax mouthpiece. It is played (traditionally by men only) using circular breathing to achieve its distinctive drone. Bilma (clapsticks or woodblocks) are common the world over and when played by Aborigines are made from hardwoods like Eucalyptus.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4RToRAxA9VQ Though he is acknowledged as early Australian songwriter, not many Australians would really know MacNamara’s songs and poems. Perhaps the most famous song about Australia’s convict history is Botany Bay (site of the landing of the First Fleet in 1788), a song sung from the perspective of convicts being transported to Australia. Botany Bay http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2Eot7XDk8Y was first performed as part of the musical comedy Little Jack Shepherd, staged in Melbourne in 1886. The lyrics were partly written by the writers of the production, Henry Pottinger Stephens and William Yardley (who borrowed from some from an 1820’s production called Farewell to Judges and Juries) and the tune has been credited to Florian Pascal (a.k.a Joseph Williams).

As the 19th century continued Australia became increasingly prosperous and outgrew its penal colony beginnings. In the 1850’s a gold rush saw worldwide immigration to the
State of Victoria, where new settlers from Europe, North America and Asia sought their fortune. This influx of people brought with it many new songs, styles and instruments, further enriching the colony’s burgeoning music. The instruments used in 19th century Australian folk music are mostly drawn from European musical traditions – instruments brought to Australia by convicts, early settlers and gold diggers. Easily portable instruments like the fiddle, button accordion, tin whistle, concertina, harmonica (mouth organ), and banjo were common. Charles Robert Thatcher (1831-1878) was an entertainer who travelled the Victorian goldfields, singing new words to familiar melodies about life as a ‘digger’. Thatcher’s songs describe life on the gold fields in remarkable detail – the harsh conditions, the fighting, the drinking, tensions with the authorities, and the daily struggle to survive (Anderson, 1958). Despite Thatcher’s songs expressing aspects of these harsh colonial times, they also contain a quirky sense of humour (perhaps stemming from the fact that he was a travelling entertainer who needed to engage his listeners with a laugh) and an optimism that breaks through the misery of the times. Thatcher’s work is an enduring document of the origins of the Australian ‘fighting spirit’ - the sense that Australia is a tough nation borne of courage and humour through hard times.

Australia’s colonial era is often punctuated by its history of Bushrangers (outlaws living in the bush). The most famous of these was Ned Kelly (1855-1880), a bushranger eventually tried and executed for his crimes (murder, theft). The Kelly legend has endured for 130 years and in that time there have been artworks (Sidney Nolan), books (Peter Carey among many others), films (in 1906 The Story of the Kelly Gang was the world’s first feature film) and songs written about Kelly and his gang of criminals. A surviving colonial song (composer unknown) known by titles such as Kelly Song and Farewell Dan and Edward Kelly describes the point of view that Kelly and his gang were working class folk heroes, fighting against the cruel ruling class (perhaps similar to Robin Hood). Fragments of the song emerged in the 20th century and it has since been recorded by many popular folk and rock artists. From this working class tradition there also emerged songs like Click Go the Shears (1890’s, composer unknown), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qacah3lVc3o which describes the work of sheep shearsers in the outback. This song is clearly an adaptation of the tune Ring the Bell, Watchman by American songwriter, Henry Clay Work (1832-1884) and became widely known in the 1950’s. The Ballad of 1891 (composed by Jacobs and Palmer in 1951) has become a well-known folk song that describes the shearer’s strike in 1891, often considered a time when Australia came perilously close to civil war (Meredith and Anderson, 1967).

A lot of colonial Australia’s early folk music was passed down through the generations orally, and by the late 19th century some volumes of published songs and poems appeared. A.B. “Banjo” Patterson’s (1864-1941) Old Bush Songs published in 1890 is a famous collection from this time, which sourced and published many of the most famous colonial songs and poems of the day. In 1895, Patterson wrote the words to what is arguably the best known of Australia’s folk songs, Waltzing Matilda. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pu5byl6pZY0 There is much debate about the true origins of this song. Most widely, the melody is thought to have been ‘composed’ by Christina MacPherson (1864-1936) who borrowed from a number of melodies while playing piano for Patterson. MacPherson’s own account claims that she was trying to recall an unfamiliar tune she had heard played by a band whilst at the horse-races (Richardson, 2006). Patterson then took the tune and wrote his now famous words to it (Magoffin, 1987). In subsequent years Patterson’s lyric has undergone many developments and changes (there are also two versions of the melody), though the core of the story remains the same. The song tells the tale of a
swagman (an itinerant worker) who camps by a billabong (a waterhole) and captures a sheep to eat by his campfire. He is then caught by the ‘troopers’ (police) and chooses to drown himself in the billabong (which he subsequently haunts) rather than be caught and tried. *Waltzing Matilda* was first recorded in the 1920’s and quickly became a popular song, and it is well known throughout Australia today (and many other parts of the world). There is much conjecture about the meaning of the song, with some seeing it as political allegory (Magoffin, 1987) and others explaining that as a ‘Matilda’ is a *swag* (the rolled up belongings of a swagman), the song asks the listener to ‘Waltz Matilda’ and come on a journey (Richardson, 2006).

20th Century Australian Music

As the 20th century came Australia achieved its federation (1901) and developed into a flourishing nation, eventually building its own identity in music. Jack O’Hagan (1898-1987) was a musician and songwriter who wrote some of Australia’s earliest folk songs using entirely original words and music. *Along the Road to Gundagai* (1922) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyLNZFlG3gU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyLNZFlG3gU) and *Our Don Bradman* (1930) are O’Hagan’s best-known songs with the latter describing the Australian public’s enduring admiration for its finest cricketer, the late Sir Donald Bradman (1908-2001). In 1952 the Australian Broadcasting Commission invited the great American folk musician Burl Ives to tour the country and research its folk music history. Dr. Percy Jones, a Victorian clergyman with a penchant for folk songs was instrumental in assisting Ives in his search for the best Australian songs. The result of this visit was Ives’ 1958 LP *Australian Folk Songs*, a record that documents much of Australia’s greatest 19th and early 20th century folk songs. Ives sang many of the songs already discussed in this article (*Botany Bay*, *Waltzing Matilda*, *the Wild Colonial Boy*, *Click Go the Shears*) and a number of others, further cementing their place in the lexicon of true Australian folk songs.

In many ways folk music is closely linked with what eventually became called ‘country’ music. Much the same as folk music, the origins of country music lie in acoustic instruments and storytelling. Slim Dusty (1927-2003) was a famous Australian country singer-songwriter whose version of *A Pub With No Beer* (composed by Parsons/Sheehan in 1957) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K04tytl-pOY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K04tytl-pOY) became Australia’s first single to become a gold record and one of its most loved songs. The song borrows parts of its melody from the famous 19th century American parlour song, *Beautiful Dreamer*. The humorous song tells the story of the devastating effects on a country town, when the pub (the local bar) runs out of beer. The 20th century saw the appearance of some authentically Australian instruments, like the *lagerphone*, a percussion instrument made of bottle-tops nailed to a wooden stake, the *beer carton*, a cardboard box used for percussion (used by folk singer Ted Egan, 1932-), and the *wobble board*, a semi-rigid board ‘wobbled’ between the hands in time with the music, made famous by singer and artist Rolf Harris (1930-). Harris’s *Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport* (1960) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_D-LmRNdOQiQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_D-LmRNdOQiQ) is one of Australia’s most internationally recognized songs and it uses much colloquial language to describe a dying stockman’s request that his mates take care of his kangaroo, cockatoo, koala, wallaby, and platypus (all animals native to Australia).

In the early 1960’s Australia achieved its first international musical success with the folk-pop group *The Seekers*. The Seekers had top 5 hits in the United States, the United Kingdom and in their home country with their folk inspired pop influenced songs (*Georgy Girl*, *The Carnival is Over*, *Morningtown Ride*, *I’ll Never Find Another You*). The Seekers were not songwriters and they sang both Australian composed songs (*Waltzing Matilda, I Am*...
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Australian folk music consists of songs by American and English songwriters. While the Seekers achieved international success on a level unusual for an Australian folk band (and perhaps delved into pop sounds), they should be considered folk as their instrumentation (two acoustic guitars, double bass and vocals) always kept them within this genre. Eric Bogle’s *And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda* (1971) uses the feel of a Celtic ballad to describe the brutality of Australia’s involvement at Gallipoli in the Great War (often considered Australia’s ‘coming of age’). This song became internationally famous, particularly when covered by the Pogues on their classic album *Rum, Sodomy and the Lash* (1985).

One of Australia’s greatest living songwriters is Paul Kelly (1955-). First coming to prominence in the 1980’s, Kelly mixes rock, folk bluegrass and country influences, and writes about Australian people, places and ways of life. Kelly’s best known (and highest charting) song *To Her Door* (1987) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZrfG9P6_D0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZrfG9P6_D0) tells the story of a young Australian couple struggling through hard-times – it touches on unemployment, addiction, break-up, rehab, taxis and buses, the Australian landscape, and eventual reconciliation. Kelly has also written with many other artists including Kev Carmody (1946-), one of Australia’s most loved indigenous songwriters. Carmody and Kelly co-wrote the song *From Little Things Big Things Grow* (1993), [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysXQf7zx968&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysXQf7zx968&feature=related) a political song that tells the story of Vincent Lingiari, an Aborigine who in 1966 led an indigenous work strike which began a decade-long struggle for native land-rights and equal pay conditions for Aboriginal workers. In the late 1980’s and early 1990’s the indigenous group Yothu Yindi had great success in blending traditional instruments (yidaki and bilma), stories and language, with a modern approach to production and performance. They blended their instruments with those of the traditional rock band (guitars, bass, drums, and keyboards). Their song *Treaty*, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7cbkxn4G8U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7cbkxn4G8U) written by Paul Kelly and Manduway Yunupingu was a surprise hit on the popular and dance charts, and it used both English and Yolngu language to describe the story of the fight for Aboriginal land rights. While Yothu Yindi’s music may not meet the traditional description of folk music, this song can be said to mark a significant moment in the history of Australian music, as it saw the first mainstream blending of black and white musical traditions, at a time when white Australia was celebrating its bicentenary – a politically and emotionally fraught time for indigenous Australians.

2000 and Beyond

Over 200 years Australia has grown into a distinctly multi-cultural nation. The folk music of Australia has a broad range of influences, stemming from its indigenous origins, growing in its colonial days, and coming of age with its modern amalgams of folk, pop and world music. With so many countries represented in cities such as Melbourne and Sydney, there is a rich trove of world music available to interested Australian listeners. The folk music styles of countries like Vietnam, India, Pakistan, Sudan, Italy and Greece (among many others) are gaining exposure and popularity through World music clubs and festivals. Australian folk music continues to survive with a number of small folk festivals in regional centers (e.g. the Port Fairy Folk Festival), maintaining the performance and teaching traditions of this style of music. In the coming years Australia faces a challenge that is perhaps faced by many other countries. In the modern age, folk music struggles to keep up with the ‘big business’ of the music industry. Record sales are low and it is perhaps the music of an older generation. Folk music is at its core, history. Through understanding our history we can avoid the mistakes of the past. For Australians there is a need to build a better understanding of the music of our indigenous population, the Aborigines. Colonial folk songs
are in some cases better known, but very few young people sing them. It is vitally important that Australians do not lose their connection to the past that resides in the teaching and storytelling of folk music.
References


