

Oz Rock and the ballad tradition in Australian popular music

‘While we are sitting here, singing folksongs, in our folksong clubs, the folk are somewhere else, singing something different.’

Quoted in Jeff Corfield ‘The Australian Style’¹

Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs, and the Twilights, discussed in chapter one, were manifestations of an Australian popular music sensibility which was fundamentally European-derived, white. It was a tradition that valued melody, musical linearity and lyrical clarity. These bands, in particular Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs, and the Easybeats, laid the basis for the flowering of Australian rock in the 1970s and for Oz Rock groups such as Rose Tattoo, the Angels, Midnight Oil, Cold Chisel, Australian Crawl, and, in the 2000s, You Am I and Powderfinger among others.² This tradition has continued to blend melody with strong guitar riffs and a big beat. Billy Thorpe’s self-penned ‘Most People I Know (Think That I’m Crazy)’, released in 1972, with its melody, driving beat and anthemic chorus combined with an emphasis on the lyrics, provided a template for Australian rock, for a tradition of bands—those Oz Rock bands that I mentioned above—whose success in Australia has, in the main, continued to be far greater than what they have achieved overseas.³ This tradition continues to privilege elements drawn from the white, European musical tradition over influences from African-American, and other Black musics. This hard rock development in Australia has another strand, the importance of the traditional ballad tradition and, along with this, the influence of American country music. The combination of these was most obvious in the work of Cold Chisel.

In chapter one I argued that what set Australian popular music off from its British counterpart in the post-Second World War period was its lack of engagement with African-American music and, more abstractly, a consequent lack of comprehension of that music's aesthetic. The result was that Australian music of the beat boom tended to be 'whiter,' that is, more melodic, more concerned with harmony and with lyrics than with the conveying of emotion and with rhythm. Above, I referred to Thorpe's 'Crazy's use of melody, especially its anthemic quality, the preoccupation with lyrical clarity, and its tuneful linearity. All underscored by a driving rock beat. Now I want to add to that list the song's first person narratorial voice, and the theme—the use of the first person not to offer the expression of an emotion, most usually love or loss in modern popular music, but to articulate from an individual perspective a feeling of alienation which the singer expects his audience to share.

'Crazy' marks the aural beginning of the musical element of Oz Rock. In *Long Way to the Top*, James Cockington describes Oz Rock, for which he uses the alternative term pub rock, as 'a distinctively Australian phenomenon'.⁴ He writes that, while '[b]ands had always played in pubs ... during this period a unique atmosphere developed'.⁵ He is thinking of roughly the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. Cockington explains that:

At its peak ... pub rock was a style of music found nowhere else. Bands from the UK and America were astonished when they saw these huge brick sheds with all the charm of a bus shelter, filled to the rafters with screaming shit-faced masses. Most were frightened.⁶

Here, Cockington conflates the form of the music itself with the environment in which it was played. More subtly he argues that the musical expression which characterises

Oz Rock was deeply imbricated with the requirements of the audience. Cockington quotes Doc Neeson, lead singer with Oz Rock icon, The Angels:

The phrase I hear at most gigs in Australia—you hear guys talking at the bar, and they're always saying they've come for a rage. They come to our gigs, or gigs generally I guess, to let something go, a sort of catharsis. We always feel that there's this implied confrontation between band and audience. They're saying, 'Lay it on! Do it to us!', and its like a veiled threat that if you don't, you'll get canned.⁷

Neeson is describing the dark side of the personal alienation that Thorpe celebrates in 'Crazy'.

As its venues suggest, the bulk of the Oz Rock audience was working class in their attitudes and cultural understanding of the world. The personal alienation can be understood as an expression of the oppression embodied in that class position.

Neeson himself was a drama student from Flinders University in Adelaide. An Irish immigrant, his family settled in Elizabeth, the working-class Adelaide suburb which produced so many Australian musicians in the 1960s and 1970s including the Scottish migrant Jimmy Barnes, lead singer of Cold Chisel.⁸ Neeson is distantly related to Ned Kelly and had a fascination with the folklore of the American West (a characteristic to which this chapter will return).⁹ He was ideally suited to write and perform rock music that fitted into an Australian musical sensibility an important part of the heritage of which was a ballad tradition drawn from England and Ireland.

This chapter argues that Oz Rock, the hard rock core of the modern Australian popular music tradition, is deeply influenced by the Australian ballad tradition. This tradition was brought to Australia from England and Ireland with white settlers. In

England, more than Ireland, the ballad tradition died out. In Australia it never did. The ballad tradition has been a key component in the formation of an Australian popular music sensibility. The most popular of the Oz Rock bands, Cold Chisel, worked most closely within the ballad tradition. We can go on to suggest that this aspect of their music, which helped to make them so successful in Australia, was precisely what the British and Americans found incomprehensible in a rock band. Hence, it was one of the factors that led to the failure of Cold Chisel, and Jimmy Barnes as a solo artist, in those markets. Conversely, AC/DC, learning from the overseas failure of the Easybeats for other musical reasons, something discussed in chapter one, were able to adapt, dropping specifically Australian qualities, at least to the extent of making a rock sound that could be embraced by non-Australian audiences.

If the ballad tradition is so central to Australian rock music, to the Australian popular music sensibility, why hasn't it been commented on before? There are two complementary reasons for this. The first has to do with the way the Australian ballad tradition has been studied.¹⁰ As in England and the United States, the Australian orally-transmitted musical tradition became understood as folk song as these songs started to be collected. Graeme Smith has explained that:

Until the 1950s there was almost no awareness of any comparable [to the American] folk music or song traditions in Australia. Wendy Lowenstein has noted that when she and Ian Turner set up the Victorian Folklore Society in 1955 they knew exactly three Australian folk songs: 'Click Go The Shears', 'The Wild Colonial Boy' and 'Botany Bay'.¹¹

Smith writes that the earliest collecting of Australian folk songs was by Dr Percy Jones in the mid-1940s. The 1950s saw the beginnings of the so-called folk revival

which, as Smith describes, was ‘inspired by ideals of cultural nationalism and radicalism’.¹² These historians and folklorists saw themselves as rescuing an oral tradition that was on the verge of complete extinction, killed by the mass media and commercial popular music.

Smith tells us that, by the 1960s, there had developed a canon of Australian folk songs which ‘was being widely performed in the coffee lounges and folk clubs of the folk boom, generally by solo performers within the conventional singer-guitarist, folk singer format.’¹³ It was out of this revivalist tradition that the bush bands evolved in the 1970s. Smith notes that: ‘Bush bands began in the Oz Rock scene but acquired more general popularity through the staging of bush dances’.¹⁴ This in itself would suggest that there was something more complicated going on than a revival but the preoccupation of the folklorists stopped with ballad production around the time of World War I. Stopping then was based on the assumption that by this time ballad production was either in great decline or had finished.

The second reason the importance of the ballad to Australian rock music hasn’t been commented on before has to do with the perception of Australian rock music as being more or less wholly derivative of American, and to some extent English, popular music. I have discussed this problematic assumption in this book’s Introduction. Here, I shall just note how this claim gets played out in popular histories of rock music in Australia. To take the example of Cockington’s *Long Way to the Top*, from which I have already quoted, he writes:

The Australian public’s extraordinary response to the arrival of rock and roll is all the more understandable when you realise that it was merely the latest manifestation of an ongoing love affair with all things American.¹⁵

Cockington examines this response but never looks at how Australian culture, in particular the Australian musical sensibility, incorporated and developed rock music within the Australian musical tradition. This means that in his book, as well as in the admirable television series on the history of Australian rock music from which the book derives,¹⁶ a particular, and quite narrow, definition of rock music is implied which excludes bands such as Redgum and Weddings, Parties, Anything, of which more later. Both of these bands, on the grounds of popularity alone, ought to have warranted a mention. For this series the particularity of Australian rock music is a consequence of the innovations of Australian composers and performers relating solely to the rock music tradition, defined still on Anglo-American terms.

This chapter argues that, far from dying out, the ballad, as an aspect of the Australian musical sensibility, which we can define more subtly as the learnt cultural repertoire of assumptions through which Australians experience and appreciate music, has a living and continuous history. Unlike England, where the traditional, rural ballad had lost relevance as a part of everyday life by about 1800 and the urban, broadside ballad by the middling part of the nineteenth century, in Australia the ballad in rural areas was still an important element in everyday life in the first part of the twentieth century. From there it was incorporated into the Australian country music tradition as it evolved by way of, most importantly, Tex Morton and, in the next generation, Slim Dusty. However, unlike the United States, country music in Australia has always occupied a central position in Australian popular music, acknowledging its heritage in the same bush song background as that of the revivalist bush bands.

Slim Dusty's continuing popularity reflects his ongoing centrality in popular music in Australia rather than a minority interest or cult status. Because his career

overlaps with the establishment of rock music in Australia Slim Dusty occupies a pivotal position in the post-1950s rearticulation of the Australian musical sensibility. The importance of Slim Dusty's music to Australian popular music, and to Australian culture, was evidenced in his being chosen to be the final act at the closing ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympics. His relevance to the Oz Rock tradition is demonstrated in the rock bands, including Midnight Oil, Don Walker (who was the principle songwriter for the by-then defunct Cold Chisel), The Screaming Jets, who contributed to the 1998 *Not So Dusty*, Slim Dusty tribute album.

The Modern History of the Ballad

We need to begin by examining the ballad tradition more closely. J.S. Manifold, in a book published in 1964 which is possibly still the best work on Australian ballads, defines ballads as 'narrative folksongs or literary imitations thereof'.¹⁷ Bruno Nettl, the well-known ethnomusicologist, writes that:

As far as the words are concerned, the ballad tells a story involving one main event. In contrast to the ballads, the epic songs are long, complex, and involve several events tied together by a common theme.¹⁸

At its most fundamental, lyrically the ballad is distinguished by the use of narrative and the focus on a single event. Historically, Nettl tells that, while narrative songs occur in other places, in Europe 'they occupy a position of pre-eminence'.¹⁹

By around 1800, that is during the early settlement of Australia, the rural ballad was losing its importance in England. Edward Lee explains that, at that time:

the decline in the traditional folk song had begun, and such musically talented people of the working class as could find any outlet at all, must have been drawn to the towns, where it was possible to have a

life which was easier than that of a labourer and, as in the present day,
offered richer rewards.²⁰

To describe these people as working class promotes a misunderstanding. The loss of the popular song tradition, including the ballad, in the English countryside was caused in large part by the massive disruptions occasioned by the introduction of industrial capitalism: urbanisation, enclosures, land clearances, the construction of an urban industrial working class. All these developments, combined with the commercial reformation in farming practices, transformed the English rural environment.

Another ballad tradition, the printed broadside, existed in London. Starting in the early sixteenth century, this ballad form continued until well into the nineteenth. It was considered a very low form of popular culture. Writing about the eighteenth century, Alan Bold tells us that: 'While the broadside ballad existed as an inescapable part of urban life it had a disreputable name; the men who made the broadsides were regarded as culturally unspeakable and completely mercenary.'²¹ Nevertheless, in the first half of the nineteenth century, Lee writes that selling ballads was 'a very lucrative business'.²² One murder ballad in 1849 sold two and a half million copies.²³

The murder ballad, the description of a murder, often told in the first person as if by the murderer on his way to the gallows, was one of the most popular genres. One well-known example, from 1828, is 'The Murder of Maria Marten or Confession and Execution of William Corder, The Murderer of Maria Marten.' It begins:

If you'll meet me at the Red Barn

As sure as I have life

I will take you to Ipswich town

And there make you my wife

This lad went home and fetched his gun

His pickaxe and his spade

He went unto the Red Barn

And there he dug her grave

Come all you thoughtless young men

A warning take by me

To think upon my unhappy fate

To be hanged upon a tree

Depending on the version, there are up to fourteen further stanzas describing the murder and its consequences. There is nothing exceptional about this ballad and it is important to remember that this was a common type of ballad in London during the convict settlement period in Australia. In other words, the concerns and affects of the murder ballad were a formative part of the Australian musical sensibility. It should not be surprising, then, to realise that murder plays a significant role within Australian hard rock. One example is the track 'Jailbreak' off AC/DC's 1976 album, *Dirty Deeds Done Cheap*. 'Jailbreak' is about a man charged with murder who is killed trying to escape from prison. On the 1995 AC/DC tribute album, *Fusebox*, Yothu Yindi, the Aboriginal rock band, recorded a version in which the man commits suicide in prison, evoking the problem of Aboriginal deaths in custody which many consider has not been given the importance it warrants by the Australian government.²⁴ We will consider the subversive strand in Australian rock later.

While not usually classified as Oz Rock, perhaps the most obvious, and most likely self-conscious, evocation of the murder ballad genre is Nick Cave's 1996 album *Murder Ballads*. Cave's work has often been concerned with murder and retribution. There is, for example, 'The Mercy Seat' on *Tender Prey* (1988). This track describes a murderer's execution in the electric chair. We might also think of 'Red Right Hand' off of *Let Love In* (1994) which seems to elevate murder to being the natural order of God's creation. *Murder Ballads* reached number one in the Australian charts (number eight in the British charts) and sold over 600,000 copies. The album, which includes nine songs describing murders and one, the final one, redemptively suggesting, as the title has it, that 'Death Is Not The End,' is the culmination of Cave's preoccupation.

While in the Australian ballad tradition that hails from the nineteenth century broadsheet ballads, *Murder Ballads* has the typically American reference points of late-twentieth century Australian rock. Seven of the tracks on the album were written by Cave. Two, 'Stagger Lee' and 'Henry Lee', are traditional American ballads ('Stagger Lee' became a rhythm and blues hit for Lloyd Price in 1959) and one, 'Death Is Not The End', was written by Bob Dylan.²⁵ Similarly, while the tracks are ballads in the sense of being narratives about a single event, they are not in any traditional meter or rhyme, nor do Cave and his band the Bad Seeds use traditional instrumentation. This is a rock album that comes out of the ballad aspect of the Australian musical sensibility.

Bold quotes Henry Mayhew, from his 1851 investigation into the lives of the London working class *London Labour and the London Poor*, on the patterers who sold the broadside ballads:

It is not possible to ascertain with any certitude *what* the patterers are so anxious to sell, for only a few leading words are audible. One of the cleverest of the running patterers repeated to me, in a subdued tone, his announcements of murders. The words ‘Murder’, ‘Horrible’, ‘Barbarous’, ‘Love’, ‘Mysterious’, ‘Former Crimes’, and the like could only be caught by the ear, but there was no announcement of anything like ‘particulars’ ...²⁶

Under the guise of spreading news, the nineteenth century murder ballad detailed the crime in such a way as to produce the reader’s or auditor’s voyeuristic pleasure by summoning horror and fear. For example, here are the two stanzas of ‘Maria Marten’ which describe the murder:

With her heart so light she thought no harm

To meet me she did go

I murdered her all in the barn

And laid her body down

After my horrid deed was done

She laid there in her gore

Her bleeding mangled body

Lay beneath the Red Barn floor

Here we have an early version of the detailed description of the crime that, in the later twentieth century, became normalised in horror films, television cop shows and the tabloid press with the same affects. Cave’s murder ballads continue this tradition.

Moreover, Cave uses 'Maria Marten's' traditional motif of the innocent victim murdered by her lover in his own murder ballad 'Where The Wild Roses Grow', his duet with Australian pop diva Kylie Minogue. In a mass mediated world saturated with images of violence Cave ups the confrontational quality of the imagery, for example retelling 'Stagger Lee' with a liberal sprinkling of swear-words and sexual explicitness.²⁷

The broadside ballad's attempts to evoke horror and fear through a recounting of working class crime is present in a reworked form in some of the Angels most well-known songs. Here, for example, are the first and last verses from 'Take A Long Line', off their second album, *Face to Face*, released in 1978:

He was selling postcards from a paper stand
A whiskey bottle in his withered hand
He put a finger on a photo from an old magazine
And saw himself in the shadow of his dream
...
They put him a well wound whirlwind
Pulled out his teeth and told him to grin
He gave them a smile, pulled out a bottle of wine
And said "I never existed, you've been wasting your time"
Take a long line, reel him in

This album stayed in the Top Forty for seventy weeks. In these lyrics there is a politics to the narrative that comes out of an aspect of the Australian ballad tradition which originates in the Irish influence. Manifold tells us that:

After 1798 a large proportion of our Irish were in fact (though not in law) “political” prisoners with an intense *esprit de corps* and a common repertory of insurgent songs.

Such songs were banned in Ireland; it was treason to sing them ...

Accordingly, it had become a point of honour to preserve these songs in oral tradition and to sing them whenever possible.²⁸

Writing about the nineteenth century Australian bushranger ballads, Danny Spooner comments that:

... the anti-establishment sentiments the heroes represented and the ballads popularised reach deep into the furthest recesses of the class psyche. The power of the ballads as propaganda was well known to the establishment itself, as the many ordinances passed against the ballads, ballad-makers, and ballad singers testify.²⁹

In ‘Take A Long Line’ the narrative describes a poor, lumpen working-class man persecuted by an unknown ‘they’. The man’s torture produces a defiant response. The song’s atmosphere carries the menace and horror typical of the broadside ballad tradition. AC/DC’s, but even more Yothu Yindi’s, version of ‘Jailbreak’ comes from this same speaking position.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the urban street ballad went into a quite rapid decline in England. Lee quotes a writer in the *National Review* in 1861 commenting that: ‘For several years the fact that the street ballad singer is disappearing from among us has been forcing itself more and more on the unwilling minds of ourselves and a few others.’³⁰ Lee suggests a number of contributory reasons for the urban broadside’s disappearance: an increase in education accompanied by the

arrival of cheap newspapers (thus making the topical ballad largely redundant); the music hall, which took over comic and amatory topics; the introduction of penny songbooks, which clearly gave one more for one's money; and the opposition of the newly formed police.³¹

It is worth pausing for a moment and thinking about music halls. These began in London in the early part of the nineteenth century and increased rapidly after the Theatre Act of 1843 allowed places other than Drury Lane and Covent Garden to put on plays.³² One of the earliest, and most well-known, of the working-class music halls was attached to The Canterbury Arms tavern on Lambeth Marshes. In 1848 its owner, Charles Morton, 'built a hall at the back of his property. After alterations it was reopened in 1851 to seat 1,500 people.'³³ Lee offers this description of the music hall:

The music hall grew out of the drinking habits of a lower level of society. Many taverns found musical entertainments so popular, among both sexes, that they found it worthwhile to put on special performances in back rooms, with an entrance fee of sixpence or a shilling. The popularity of these was such that in some cases they became the main attraction of the house.³⁴

Earlier, I quoted Cockington outlining the Oz Rock venue. Now we can see a continuity of form and intent between the English-originated music hall, which was subsequently brought to Australia,³⁵ and the places where Oz Rock was, and continues to be, played. In fact, contrary to Cockington, pubs in England do still have bands performing—the now-defunct Hope and Anchor in Islington where many punk bands, including the seminal Australian punk band the Saints, played in the late 1970s is one well-known example.³⁶ However, the tradition has continued with much greater force in Australia.

The Ballad from Ireland to Australia

In England the urban ballad had died out before the end of the nineteenth century, replaced by the relatively respectable jollity of the songs composed and performed in music halls.³⁷ In Australia, the end of the nineteenth century marked a transformation, rather than an ending, of the ballad tradition. Manifold argues that the earliest Australian songs, as opposed to those brought to the country from other places, date from the late 1820s and early 1830s.³⁸ He suggests that their background was Irish rather than English and writes that, 'it is clear that colonial conditions, convict discipline, and the total lack of opportunity either for ballad-printer or ballad-hawker, would bear hard on those who were accustomed to buying ballads at any street corner; and the same conditions would correspondingly favour those who were already accustomed to clandestinity and concealment and to singing in a whisper behind the overseer's back.'³⁹ The Irish ballad tradition had remained rural and oral. Indeed, significantly for the continued life of the ballad in Australia, Irish traditional music never died out, finally being renewed in a commercial form by groups such as, and most importantly, the Chieftains, from the 1960s, and subsequently integrated with rock music by the pioneering band Horselips in the early 1970s.⁴⁰

Under English colonial government, Ireland did not industrialise except for Belfast. Moreover, in the period after 1840 the percentage of people engaged in manufacturing actually fell. In Cork City it declined from 40 to 20 per cent between 1841 and 1901 and in Dublin from 33 to 20 per cent between 1841 and 1911.⁴¹ At the same time the population remained predominantly rural and retained their traditional culture. As Theodore Hoppen puts it: 'Although ... a growing proportion of the post-Famine population began to live in towns—17 percent in 1851, 33 percent in 1911—

this generated only the most marginal of effects upon the governing values of Irish society as a whole.’⁴²

In Australia the flow of Irish began with the prisoners from the 1798 rebellion and continued through the nineteenth, and the twentieth, centuries. Patrick O’Farrell tells us that, in the nineteenth century, the greatest number arrived in the period after the Famine. In 1841–50, the decade of the Famine, 23,000 migrants arrived, in 1851–60 the number was 101,540, in 1861–70, it was 82,900 and in 1871–80 it was 61,946.⁴³ Moreover, at least in the earlier period these people came mainly from poor, rural areas, Cork, Clare, Limerick and Tipperary. As O’Farrell writes ‘the typical Irish emigrants to Australia in the late 1830s and 1840s tended to be semi-skilled farm workers forced off the land by the contraction of tillage in those areas.’⁴⁴ Niall Ó Ciosáin, in his discussion of the role of print in Irish popular culture between 1750 and 1850, comments that: ‘The decades before the Famine were certainly a golden age for the cheapest collectively read (or sung) text, the single-sheet ballad.’⁴⁵ As can be seen from the figures given above, unlike that to the United States, the peak of Irish migration to Australia came in the decades after the famine and was related to the hope engendered by the Victorian gold rushes. In Australia these migrants reinforced the living tradition of Irish music and, specifically, the ballad tradition.

Smith has described well the importance of the post-Second World War Irish migration in the renewal of Irish music in Australia: ‘They established employment networks, often operating out of particular pubs at an informal level, and associations such as Irish pipe bands, hurling and Gaelic football teams, country associations, all of which organised social dances.’⁴⁶ These migrants brought with them the *ceili* dance band which had evolved in Ireland in the 1930s. Smith tells us that the first Australian *ceili* band was formed in the early 1960s. He suggests that in Australia by the 1950s

and 1960s, 'Irish music moved from being purely emblematic to being a part of functional popular entertainment.'⁴⁷ One element in this transformation was the Irish ballad revival driven by the music of the Clancy Brothers and the Dubliners.⁴⁸ In 1976 the Chieftains paid their first visit to Australia:

Australia offered plenty of hectic diversion to dispel feelings of homesickness. As [Paddy Moloney] remembers, 'They went berserk, laying on pipe bands, dancers, and local musicians. Often we were greeted at the airports by TV crews to wind up on the evening news.'⁴⁹

By this time there was a strong general foundation of interest in Irish music partly driven by the folk revivalists.

The best comparison with the Chieftains' reception is that which was given to the Beatles on their 1964 tour. One of the reasons for the extraordinary welcome given to the Beatles was that they represented 'home', literally to the English migrants and metaphorically to many Australian-born.⁵⁰ A similar argument could be made for the Irish migrants and those of Irish origin where the Chieftains are concerned. The enthusiasm with which the Chieftains were greeted (they toured Australia ten times in the ensuing twenty years) suggests both the extent to which Irish music continued to be a living force in Australia and the recognition of its place in Australian popular music.

Writing about the ballad in nineteenth century Australia, Manifold explains that:

'in convict surroundings, the commercial element disappears. Convict and bush-ranger ballads develop from street-ballad stock (chiefly Anglo-Irish) that has reverted to type'.⁵¹

In other words, as compared to England especially, there was a shift back from print to oral transmission, though now based on the verse forms of the printed ballad, and also a movement from urban, city distribution and reproduction to rural, to the bush. Even though Australia grew into the most urbanised country in the world, it remained pre-industrial until after the Second World War and looked to the bush for its cultural identity.

In the 1880s, when the urban ballad tradition had died out in England, in Australia the ballad once more intersected with print and developed an urban following. Here, though, with a more respectable and middle-class inflection. Adam Lindsay Gordon's *Bush Ballads and Galloping Rhymes*, which began that specifically Australian genre of the literary ballad, was published in 1870. In 1880 J. F. Archibald started publishing the *Bulletin*, celebrating the bush and criticising urban Australian society. Archibald published ballads both newly composed and from the oral tradition. For Graham Jenkin, the *Bulletin* 'effectively disseminated the Bush Ballad throughout the continent, and established it as the major form of Australian poetry for nearly thirty years.'⁵² This is not the place to get caught up in the discussions of, aesthetic judgements about, and distinctions between, oral ballads, literary ballads, newly composed ballads to be sung, ballads to be recited, and so forth. It is enough to note that, from this period there was a complex interaction between oral transmission and print transmission, the bush and the city and the commodification, again, of the ballad as a musical form. Banjo Paterson's work moves across all these generic forms. He wrote literary ballads for recitation (such as 'The Man From Snowy River'), for singing (such as 'Waltzing Matilda') and put together a collection of bush ballads (*Old Bush Songs* published in 1905).

The complexity of the interactions between all these forms, and their currency into the era of commercial pop, is well-illustrated by Rolf Harris' 'Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport' which was the highest selling Australian single in Australia in 1960, only outsold by Elvis Presley's 'It's Now Or Never.' Harris wrote 'Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport' in 1957. On a webpage dedicated to Rolf Harris it claims he was inspired by Harry Belafonte's calypsos.⁵³ However, this song-ballad is in a tradition that may have started with a literary ballad written by Gordon entitled 'The Sick Stockrider.' Gordon's poem begins:

'Hold hard Ned! Lift me down once more, and lay me in the shade
Old man, you've had your work cut out to guide
Both horses, and to hold me in the saddle when I swayed,
All through the hot, slow sleepy, silent ride.'

Fifteen years later Horace Flower wrote a ballad to be sung called 'The Dying Stockman' which was published in the Portland Mirror in 1885. It begins:

'A strapping young stockman lay dying,
His saddle supported his head,
His two mates around him were crying
As he rose on his saddle and said'

Harris' ballad uses the same motif:

'There's an old Australian stockman, lying, dying,
And he gets himself up on one elbow,
And he turns to his mates,

Who are gathered round him and he says:'

The unusual scansion in third and fourth lines of Harris' version is because this verse is spoken, leading into the song itself. The point here is to show that Harris was working with a traditional topic of the Australian ballad. Indeed, while in England 'Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport' is heard as a comic song about the strange behaviour of Australians, for Australians Harris' song is more complex, working as a sympathetic parody within the ballad tradition. While his success in England, like that of Slim Dusty's 'A Pub With No Beer' two years earlier, had, most likely, more to do with novelty and colonial exoticism—in England, where he now lives, Harris is thought of as an all-round entertainer rather than a country singer—in Australia both songs indicate the Australian appreciation of the local ballad tradition. Slim Dusty recognises Harris' musical background. In 1980 Dusty had a hit with '(I Love To Have A Beer With) Duncan,' a paean to mateship and drinking. In 1996 he recorded another version of 'Duncan' with Rolf Harris.⁵⁴

Tex Morton; Slim Dusty; Redgum; Weddings, Parties, Anything

Historically, the figure who connected the ballad tradition with the commercial Australian popular music industry was Tex Morton. Morton was a New Zealander, born in Nelson in 1916. By the time he was sixteen he was singing hillbilly-style songs. In the 1920s in the United States Jimmie Rodgers was revamping hillbilly folk music into a commercially viable entity:

When Rodgers first appeared on the scene, the music then becoming known as "hillbilly" was mostly string-band instrumentals and maudlin old stage ballads. To this Rodgers added authentic blues lyrics from

Afro-American folk song, jazzy dance-band accompaniments, and a cool, catchy, vibrant vocal style.⁵⁵

Morton was picking up on the new style.⁵⁶ In 1932 he came to Australia where, for four years, he travelled around busking, doing odd-jobs including working on the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and, it is said, stints as a drover and shearer.⁵⁷ In 1935 he recorded eight tracks. Eric Watson tells us that:

Of that historic first session, two songs were American cowboy ballads and two compositions were his own. One, a yodelling song about Switzerland and the other of indeterminate setting. Two more sessions of cowboy songs followed before the next Morton composition, 'The Wandering Stockman' and the first attempt anybody had made at recording an Australian folk song, 'Wrap Me Up In My Stockwhip And Blanket'.⁵⁸

'Wrap Me Up In My Stockwhip And Blanket' is Flower's 'The Dying Stockman.' Jack O'Hagan, the Australian composer of popular music who wrote 'Along The Road To Gundagai,' set it to music. As well as being a song about death—though not murder—it may well be the version on which Rolf Harris drew. In these recordings we see already the beginnings of the attempt to synthesise Australian and American folk/country/ballad musics. It seems that, while in Australia, Morton got Banjo Paterson's personal permission to record some of his ballads.⁵⁹ If we were looking for the precise moment of transition when the Australian ballad moved into commercial Australian popular music, this would be it. It is also the moment when the Australian ballad tradition begins to be influenced by American commercial recordings. Watson discusses a song composed by Morton at this time about the depression years entitled 'Yodelling Bagman.' He describes it as, 'a strange mixture of the Australian reality and the American stereotype'.⁶⁰ Morton returned to New Zealand broke.

With radio exposure, Morton's records rapidly became popular. In 1937 he played to 50,000 people in Brisbane. His records sold around 32,000 a month making him the top-selling artist in Australasia in the 1930s, outselling even Bing Crosby and Gracie Fields. Clearly, his synthesis of Australian and American musical styles appealed to Australian audiences. Morton imitated an American accent in his earlier recordings. Later his accent, and his topics, became more trans-Tasman. Morton's popularity suggests that the Australian ballad was still musically acceptable within the Australian musical sensibility, though now given a white folkish American inflection. Morton can be thought of as the connection that leads not only to Cold Chisel and Paul Kelly but to Nick Cave's *Murder Ballads*.

Today, one of Morton's more well-known ballads is 'Sergeant Small.' Set in 1931, the song tells of a Queensland policeman who tracked down train-fare evaders during the Depression. The chorus has Small's victim wishing he were sixteen stone and seven feet tall so that he could go back and beat up the sergeant. In typical Australian ballad style, the song is narrated in the first person by one of Small's victims. Morton released the track in 1938. Marking its link with the colonial, bush-ranger treason ballads, the record was banned in Australia because of its inflammatory content. In an acknowledgement of his place in the politically populist, Australian popular music tradition, Weddings, Parties, Anything, recorded 'Sergeant Small' on their second album, *Roaring Days*, released in 1988. On the same album, Mick Thomas, the founder and main composer for the band, has a tribute to Morton called 'Morton (Song for Tex)'.

In 1949 Morton left for the United States. As with other performers whose work expressed so well the Australian (and perhaps New Zealand) musical sensibility, Johnny O'Keefe, the Easybeats, the Angels, Cold Chisel, Morton failed as a singer

outside of Australia and New Zealand. He shifted careers and became The Great Morton, a hypnotist and sharp-shooter.

In the 1960s Morton had a hit in Australia with the traditional ballad ‘Click Go The Shears.’ His last successful single was ‘The Goondiwindi Grey’ about the champion racehorse, Gunsynd, in 1973. Here, as is typical of the ballad tradition, Morton was not only singing about a current event of great meaning to, in particular, working class Australians and betting people generally, he was also singing about one of the traditional topics of Australian ballads, horses. Now, though, unlike the rural horse ballads of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Morton was singing about urban concerns, a winning racehorse. Morton died in 1983.

Eleven years younger than Morton, Slim Dusty was in a better position to synthesise the new, beat-based American country music with the Australian ballad tradition, both in its established musical styles and its subject matter. In his autobiography he writes about his name:

I wanted another name. I knew that all cowboy singers had American names like Buddy, Gene and Tex, but I wanted one that sounded like an Australian cowboy. One day it clicked in my mind. Slim—a good cowboy name.

Dusty—something as Australian as the blowfly.⁶¹

Here we can see the same concern to synthesise traditions that appears in his songs. Like Morton, Slim Dusty’s early influence was Jimmie Rodgers. He tells us how his farming family’s neighbours used to get together for small parties:

But one night I heard something different [from Billy Kyle’s fiddle playing traditional music] that made a lasting impression. An Aboriginal from the Bellbrook Mission, who was working on one of the farms, pulled out a home-

made acoustic guitar and sang 'The Drunkard's Child,' a sad song made famous by Jimmie Rodgers, the father of country music ... It was a wistful, clinging sound that I had never heard before and I was entranced by it.⁶²

He was about ten at the time. Slim Dusty's early song-writing was heavily influenced by the new American country style. However, having written the American-influenced 'The Way The Cowboy Dies,' by the time he made his first, self-funded, recordings in 1942 he was singing 'Song For The Aussies.' Slim Dusty's first commercial recording was his own composition, 'When The Rain Tumbles Down In July,' written in ballad form. In his autobiography, he writes somewhat oddly that, 'some people, when they looked back at the history of Australian country music, would identify it as the first song of a genre called the Bush Ballad.'⁶³ Perhaps he means the first commercial recording of a newly composed bush ballad. The point here is that it is a ballad in both form and narrative content, that Slim Dusty's Australian synthesising of American and Australian musical forms was a traditionally constructed ballad.

'A Pub With No Beer' was Slim Dusty's breakthrough hit. In 1958 it was the top selling Australian single by any artist, followed by the Everly Brothers' country-tinged 'Bird Dog.' The second and third top-selling singles by an Australian artist that year were by Johnny O'Keefe, 'So Tough' and 'The Wild One.' 'Pub' is a typical event ballad describing the terrible consequences when a bush pub runs out of beer. While the music has a certain American swing to it, Slim Dusty sings in a clear Australian accent.

The lyrics of 'Pub' are themselves embedded in Australian history. Slim Dusty's words come from another country singer, Gordon Parsons. While Parsons has the credit for writing the song, it is a reworking of a poem published in 1944 by Dan

Sheahan, an Irish migrant. Parsons tells how he was given the unattributed words on a scrap of paper while he was working in the bush.⁶⁴ The occasion for the poem was Sheahan's visit to the Day Dawn Hotel in Ingham, North Queensland, immediately after the Battle of the Coral Sea in 1942. The pub had been drunk dry by celebrating American service personnel. Sheahan's literary ballad begins:

It is lonely away from your kindred and all
In the bushland at night where the warrigals call
It is sad by the sea where the wild breakers boom
Or to look on a grave and contemplate doom.
But there's nothing on earth half as lonely and drear
As to stand in the bar of a pub with no beer

The Parsons/Slim Dusty version cuts the number of lines per verse to four, turning it into a more conventional ballad form:

Its lonesome away from your kindred and all
By the camp fire at night where the wild dingoes call,
But there's nothing so lonesome, so morbid or drear
Than to stand in a bar of a pub with no beer.

Danny Spooner has discussed what he calls the 'Come all ye' ballad form which, he writes, was one of the last broadside forms to develop. He tells us that: 'Folklorists agree that the form arose in the towns and cities of Ireland during the eighteenth century.'⁶⁵ As for the form itself: 'It consists of four-line stanzas, each line having fourteen syllables, the first and second and then the third and fourth lines rhyming.'⁶⁶

'Pub' is a very traditional Australian ballad. Sheahan had emigrated from Ireland in 1905.

Born David Gordon Kirkpatrick, Slim Dusty himself has an Irish background.⁶⁷ His grandmother, Mary Kirkpatrick migrated in the early 1880s and became a rural midwife in New South Wales. Slim Dusty's father, known for his loud singing and traditional Irish fiddle playing, was nicknamed Noisy Dan. He had been born in Ireland before his mother migrated. Slim Dusty's music combines influences from his Irish background, the Australian ballad tradition and American country music. That his music has continued to be so popular in Australia exemplifies the ongoing centrality of the ballad tradition and, indeed, the importance of country music, in the Australian popular music sensibility.

As rock music became established in Australia, one aspect of its popularity came from its integration into the living tradition of Australian popular music. This included the ballad tradition. Recognising the adaptation and reconstruction of rock music in Australia during the 1960s, but especially the 1970s, enables us to broaden our definition of Australian rock to include bands such as, but most importantly, Redgum and Weddings, Parties, Anything which, conventionally, are thought of as occupying a middle ground between folk and rock.⁶⁸

We can also distinguish between these bands and the folk revivalism of bush bands, most importantly the Bushwackers. I have already noted Smith writing about bush bands in the early Oz Rock scene. From their first album release in 1974, *The Shearer's Dream*, comprised of traditional material, the Bushwackers reached a point where their 'astounding popularity in concert peaked in the 1980s when their dances attracted crowds of 4,000 in capital cities.'⁶⁹ Such popularity suggests revivalism on a

living base, a base at the least where the musical sensibility includes the comprehensibility of the musical styles.⁷⁰

In this sense, Redgum, formed at Flinders University, Adelaide in 1975 with John Schumann as frontman and main writer, and Weddings, Parties, Anything, formed by Mick Thomas in 1984, present a connection between the ballad tradition and more conventional rock music. Redgum's first album, *If You Don't Fight You Lose*, was released in 1978. The title signals the band's left-wing politics—they had Maoist connections—and, as in the ballad tradition, many of their songs deal with current events. The band's instrumentation, including flute, tin whistle, and fiddle reflect the Irish influence. The original line-up was Verity Truman, John Schumann, Michael Atkinson and Chris Timms. Timms left after the band's third album in 1981. Later members of the band had played in AC/DC, the Honeydrippers, the Captain Matchbox Whoopee Band and the Bushwackers suggesting the diversity of the musical references the band embraced and their centrality within the Australian musical sensibility.

Redgum's biggest hit was 'I Was Only 19 (A Walk In The Light Green)' which was sung in the first person as a narration of an Australian Vietnam War veteran's experiences and their traumatic consequences. The track reached number one in April, 1983 and stayed in the Top Forty for fifteen weeks. I would argue that its success was not just due to the topic, there was still a silence about the problems of veterans in Australian culture at that time, but because the topic was addressed using ballad techniques, most obviously strong story-line and a first-person narration from the point of view of the oppressed—in this case the veteran—and, indeed, traditional ballad versification in four line stanzas rhyming, mostly, ABCB. Tex Morton had

himself written an anti-Vietnam War song using ballad techniques called ‘Twenty-First Birthday.’ Watson quotes these lyrics:

He borrowed my razor then, just like a man,

Said “If I must go, I’ll do all I can.”

(Oh, they’d brainwashed him well.) “It’s gotta be done,

We’ll have good party when I’m 21”

...

Oh, we have a nice letter, “He died not in vain...”

A medal, a picture, and our hearts full of pain’.⁷¹

Reflecting his age when he wrote it, Morton’s song is written from a father’s point of view. Schumann’s is a first person narrative. Nevertheless, again, we can perceive the traditional influence—one in which Schumann’s song may or may not have been directly inspired by Morton’s, after all, even the titles are similar. In any case, what we have here is a ballad sensibility. Even more than Morton’s, Schumann’s song fits into the treason song tradition to the extent that it spoke about a subject that the government wished to ignore and seemed to want silence about in the public arena.⁷²

Mick Thomas came out of a bush band and folk background and played in Melbourne pub bands in the early 1980s.⁷³ Weddings, Parties, Anything’s name is ‘from a throwaway line during the fade out on The Clash’s ‘Revolution Rock’.’⁷⁴ The reference to The Clash suggests both the rock influence and the band’s left-wing politics. While the reference is from England, the political position is a part of the Australian popular musical tradition. Redgum, starting before punk had a general acceptance and with their assertively Australian name, more clearly situated

themselves within the Australian radical nationalism of the union, and folk revival, tradition.

While having a pub/punk rock background Weddings, Parties, Anything's instrumentation included an accordion and later a violin—once again suggesting an Irish influence (though their accordionist had been playing in a Scottish Club band). The best comparison for Weddings, Parties, Anything is the Irish diaspora band the Pogues, fronted by Shane McGowan. Formed in London in 1982, the band were originally called Pogue Mahone, Gaelic for 'kiss my arse'. Their first album, *Red Roses for Me*, was released in 1984. The band synthesised traditional Irish musical and punk sensibilities. Both bands form part of the ongoing engagement of Irish music with rock music.

Coming out of pub rock did not stop Weddings, Parties, Anything self-consciously positioning themselves, as I have already explained, within the ballad tradition through their references to Tex Morton, and also to Henry Lawson the title of whose 1889 poem, 'Roaring Days', is used for the second album and whose image is on the cover.⁷⁵ Like Redgum, Weddings, Parties, Anything's breakthrough hit in 1992 was a track with a traditional ballad sensibility. 'Father's Day', narrated in the first person, told the story of a separated father's agony over his limited visiting rights. Once again, also, this was an issue which was little talked about, the ideologically correct position being to emphasise the rights of the mother.

Through the reworking of the Australian bush tradition in the form of country music, influenced by the American musical tradition, the ballad has continued to be an important component of the Australian musical sensibility.⁷⁶ The difference between Nick Cave, Tex Perkins' band the Beasts of Bourbon⁷⁷ and the Johnnys, and Redgum and Weddings, Parties, Anything is primarily where they source their ballad

influence. Cave, Beasts of Bourbon and the Johnnys all look to the American tradition, synthesising American country and ballad concerns with an Australian sensibility, most obviously in the ironic humour involved in songs like the Perkins-Jones composition 'The Day Marty Robbins Died,'⁷⁸ and in their overwhelming preoccupation with murder and death generally. Redgum and Weddings, Parties, Anything emphasise more the Irish and Australian, Irish-Australian, ballad tradition. However, all these bands integrate ballad stylings into rock music as part of a distinctive Australian musical tradition. All were working within the Australian popular music sensibility.

Cold Chisel and the Ballad Tradition

In an interview in Canada in 1990 about what he wanted to do with Weddings, Parties, Anything, Thomas's reference point was not Redgum but Cold Chisel:

Cold Chisel—they probably provided the revelation for me. They had a song called Khe Sanh, and it was about a Vietnam vet. I'll never forget, it hit me like a bolt from the blue ... The thing that struck me about it was that I had always thought that to sing about Australia, you had to do it in a folky way ... They come on with this country rock song about this guy getting back from Vietnam, and the chorus is

'The last plane out of Sydney's almost gone

Only seven flying hours and I'll be landing in Hong Kong'

It's about this guy who can never settle down, and it's just become this anthem in Australia. Cold Chisel's been broken up for ten years, but this really weird thing happens in a lot of suburban discos in Australia. A band like us will play, and then they'll have a disco for an hour after

the band. And at the end of the night, they play Khe Sanh. Everyone stops dancing and all these guys [he stands up, clasps an imaginary rum and coke to chest and intones]: “last plane out of Sydney’s almost gone”—it’s like this anthem. I’ll never forget seeing that and thinking: *you can do it*, it’s possible to sing about history and about Australia and even political things, without affectation.⁷⁹

Australian men don’t just sing ‘Khe Sanh’ at discos. At weddings or barbeques, after a few beers and even without the aid of Chisel’s version, a group of men, not usually women, will often find themselves singing ‘Khe Sanh’. It is not so much an anthem as, more correctly, a ballad. Certainly that is how it is experienced in the Australian popular music sensibility.

‘Khe Sanh’ is on the first, self-titled, Cold Chisel album released in 1978.⁸⁰ As a single it got no higher than number 43 in the charts. Their second album, *Breakfast at Sweethearts* (1979), reached the Top Five and went platinum. Chisel’s mass popularity came with their third album, *East*, which reached number two on the album charts and stayed in the Top Ten albums for twenty-six weeks, selling over a quarter of a million copies.

Like ‘I Was Only 19’, ‘Khe Sanh’ has some of the key characteristics of the Australian ballad, it is a first person narrative about an event told from a subordinate point of view. Structurally, the balladic strength of the song lies in its rhythmic regularity and its use of detail:

I left my heart to the sappers round Khe Sanh

And my soul was sold with my cigarettes to the black-market men

I’ve had the Vietnam cold turkey

From the ocean to the Silver City

And it's only other vets could understand

In addition, like the nineteenth century urban ballads, the lyrics urge identification even when they are claiming exclusivity. The key difference from those ballads is that it is set to a rock beat—and it is worth remembering that Thomas describes ‘Khe Sanh’ as country-rock. However, this does not stop the song having a ballad feel to it. We should also note how perhaps the most socially divisive event in late twentieth century Australia called forth a typically ‘folk’ response in the form of ballads narrated from the point-of-view of those forced to fight. Here we can see well the strength in Australia of the tradition of balladic criticism that runs from the convict ballads of the early nineteenth century.⁸¹

Don Walker, who wrote this song and was the main composer for Cold Chisel, comes from Ayr, on the Central Queensland coast, though he spent many of his formative years in the central, inland New South Wales town of Grafton. On the Slim Dusty tribute album, where he sings Slim Dusty’s ‘Highway Fever,’ he reminisces:

I can remember me and my brother rowing across a river and riding
eight miles into town to the Show, which for us meant sideshow alley,
the boxing tent on one, and the Octopus the other and Slim halfway
along opposite the Maoris.

Here, Walker lays explicit claim to Slim Dusty’s heritage. However, as I have been at pains to explain, it is not these empirical connections that are important but, rather, the cultural reproduction of the Australian popular music sensibility.

Many of Walker’s songs, though not in the traditional ballad structure, and sung to Anglo-American rock, nevertheless express Australian ballad concerns using

techniques typical of the ballad tradition. Given the post-1950s importance of rock music in the Australian popular music sensibility it should not come as a surprise to find that Walker not only contributed to the Slim Dusty tribute album but also to the AC/DC tribute album where he covered 'There's Gonna Be Some Rockin'.' At times Walker self-consciously references the ballad tradition. For example, on *Circus Animals* (1982) Walker has a track entitled 'Wild Colonial Boy.' It begins:

I am a wild colonial boy

My name you'll never see

My land is ruled by Anglophiles

And forces foreign to me

This wild colonial boy is a member of the urban working class who finds his country run by people who are leeching it and sending the profits back to England. It is a song that supports unionism and Australian nationalism, political positions typical of the urban folk revival. The song's reference point is the early Australian ballad of the same name. That ballad celebrates a bushranger, Jack Doolan, in the lyrics. Walker's song is an Oz Rock urbanisation of the earlier rural ballad. By referencing that ballad Walker places his song in that tradition. Further, the reference suggests that the unionised working class are the inheritors of the legitimate rebellion of the bushrangers. On the same album Walker acknowledges the American musical influence with a track called 'Hounddog' which echoes the Elvis Presley hit of the Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller composed song 'Hound Dog.' The concerns of the two songs are quite different, Leiber and Soller's song is implicitly about sex and Walker's about travelling. 'Hound Dog' has a blues-derived structure and Walker's

song refers to the ‘highway blues.’ The American influence is present but it is very much appropriated and re-used.

East contains another of Chisel’s most renowned songs, ‘Star Hotel.’ This was inspired by the demolition of the Star Hotel in Newcastle. The pub was a favourite resort for working class young people and on the night that it closed for the last time, on September 19th, 1979, there was a riot. Walker’s lyrics narrate the story in the first person plural and comments:

(Here lies a local culture

Most nights were good, some were bad

Between school and a shifting future

It was most of all we had)

Once again we have a ballad based on a current event. Such is the lyrical identification with that event that ex-Chisel members are constantly reiterating that the band never played the Star Hotel.

Because the ballad sensibility is so central to Walker’s writing there are very many examples in Chisel’s corpus. One more will suffice. ‘Flame Trees’ is a song, again in the first person, which tells the story of a man revisiting his old town and remembering his lost love. However, this is not the usual popular music rendering of love through a description of affect. Rather, what we have is a narrative filled with detail. Unlike ‘Khe Sanh’ and ‘Star Hotel’ it is about a personal experience; we do not know if it was inspired by an actual event. Toby Creswell, Jimmy Barnes’ biographer, writes that ‘Flame Trees’ ‘was written about Grafton where Don spent most of his formative years. The song was inspired by a girl whom Don had known in his youth and who “doesn’t live there anymore”.’⁸² ‘Flame Trees’ is not a political but a love

song. It is suffused with loss and nostalgia. It uses ballad techniques to evoke atmosphere and, again, identification. While some might describe its sentimentality as verging on the maudlin, it is typical of the urban ballad and, of course, present in much twentieth century commercial popular music.

Even more than the Angels, Chisel have an iconic status in Oz Rock. They were, and are, without doubt the highest selling Australian rock band within Australia. The Warner Music Australasia webpage for Chisel describes their success in this way:

Cold Chisel are unique within Australian rock. In 1983 their series of Last Stand concerts set attendance records that still stand. They have sold more records since break-up than while they were performing. . . .

As a matter of fact Cold Chisel is Warner Music Australia's No 1 bestselling catalogue band delivering Platinum sales each year!

Cold Chisel's constituency has endured and regenerated throughout a 20 year hiatus. It stretches from teenagers to original fans now 50+. It encompasses working, middle, professional and academic classes, male and female.⁸³

At the same time, the band notoriously failed miserably in its attempt to crack the American market, as did Jimmy Barnes when he tried as a solo artist.

The balladic emphasis on narrative detail, and a politics from the subordinate point of view did not end with the generation of Cold Chisel and Midnight Oil. In the late 1990s these lyrical concerns were taken up by the Brisbane band Powderfinger. While Bernard Fanning, the band's main writer, doesn't work with the same emphasis on narrative as Walker, he is preoccupied with detail and his song about Pauline Hanson's populist politics, 'The Day You Come' on the album *Internationalist*

(1998), evidences an ambivalence understandable from the point of view of a ballad tradition that champions those who feel oppressed.

Cold Chisel were not the only Oz Rock band to fail outside of Australia, the same lack of success greeted the Angels and Australian Crawl, and for that matter Paul Kelly (who is increasingly described as a ‘singer-songwriter,’ very likely as a consequence of the attempt to position him within the American popular music discourse). All these bands, but most obviously, as I have been describing, Cold Chisel, were deeply imbued with the Australian musical sensibility which continues to experience the ballad as a living force. What made Chisel and the other bands so successful in Australia is also what contributed to their failure in Britain and the United States. To return to my epigram. While mostly middle class folk singers and bush bands were reviving historical ballads in the mistaken belief that the ballad tradition was as dead in Australia as it was in England, and to a large extent in the United States in the arena of commercial popular music, the folk were in the pubs singing ‘Khe Sanh’ either along with Cold Chisel, or to a record on the juke box, or a cappella. Today, the folk are singing ballad-inflected songs along with Powderfinger and You Am I⁸⁴ at rock festivals like The Big Day Out and even at some of the same Oz Rock venues at which the Angels and Cold Chisel used to play.

¹ J. Corfield, ‘The Australian Style: Some Influences, Images and Myths Concerning Australia’s Folk Culture Past and Present’ in J. Ramshaw (ed), *Folklore in Australia: Proceedings of the 1st National Folklore Conference*, Melbourne, November 1984, p. 27. Corfield attributes this reference to Bill

Scott who has published widely on Australian folklore and folk song, but the precise source is obscure.

This chapter was originally published as an article. My thanks go to the anonymous readers of this article for *Perfect Beat* who offered a number of suggestions and corrections.

² The original, article version of this chapter used the term ‘pub rock’ rather than Oz Rock. The two terms are quite interchangeable though, of course, their connotations are different. Over the last few years it has become more usual to use the term Oz Rock. I have altered the defining term here to Oz Rock because that is the term I have used elsewhere in this book.

³ The most important exceptions here are AC/DC and INXS. This is not the place to discuss why these bands were more marketable outside Australia than, say, Cold Chisel, or even Midnight Oil. We should not forget the exceptional success of that Anglo-Australian band The Bee Gees who started out as pop ballad singers.

⁴ J. Cockington, *Long Way to the Top: Stories of Australian Rock and Roll*, ABC Books, Sydney, 2001, p. 184.

⁵ Cockington, *Long Way to the Top: Stories of Australian Rock and Roll*, p. 184.

⁶ Cockington, *Long Way to the Top: Stories of Australian Rock and Roll*, p. 184.

⁷ Doc Neeson quoted in Cockington, *Long Way to the Top: Stories of Australian Rock and Roll*, p. 184.

⁸ See L. Zion, ‘The Impact of The Beatles on Pop Music in Australia: 1963–66’ in *Popular Music*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1987, for a discussion of the importance of migrant suburb of Elizabeth in this regard.

⁹ The biographical information about Neeson comes from ‘The Angels’ website, *Howlspace*, <<http://www.howlspace.com.au/en2/angels/angels.htm>>, 5 July 2006.

¹⁰ I would like to thank the folklorist Graham Seal for generously emailing me a bibliography of works on the ballad in Australia.

¹¹ G. Smith, ‘Making Folk Music’, *Meanjin*, vol. 44, no. 4, 1985, p. 479.

¹² Smith, ‘Making Folk Music’, p. 480.

¹³ G. Smith, ‘Celtic Australia: Bush Bands; Irish Music and the Nation’, *Perfect Beat*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2001, p. 6.

¹⁴ Smith, ‘Celtic Australia: Bush Bands; Irish Music and the Nation’, p. 5.

¹⁵ Smith, ‘Celtic Australia: Bush Bands; Irish Music and the Nation’, p. 20.

¹⁶ *Long Way to the Top* is available on VHS and DVD from ABC publications at <<http://shop.abc.net.au/browse/promotion.asp?promoid=60>>.

¹⁷ J. Manifold, *Who Wrote the Ballads?*, Australasian Book Society, Sydney, 1964, p. 7.

¹⁸ B. Nettl, *Folk and Traditional Music of the Western Continents*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1973, p. 47.

¹⁹ Nettl, *Folk and Traditional Music of the Western Continents*, p. 47.

²⁰ E. Lee, *Music of the People: A Study of Popular Music in Great Britain*, Barrie and Jenkins, London, 1970, p. 73.

²¹ A. Bold, *The Ballad*, Methuen, London, 1979, p. 73.

²² Lee, *Music of the People: A Study of Popular Music in Great Britain*, p. 85.

²³ Lee, *Music of the People: A Study of Popular Music in Great Britain*, p. 83.

²⁴ See also, for example, the first album by the Beasts of Bourbon, *The Axeman's Jazz*, released in 1984. Fronted by Tex Perkins, later of The Cruel Sea, the Beasts of Bourbon worked on the fringe of the Oz Rock scene playing a form of countrified hard rock sometimes described as psycho-country for the preoccupations of their songs' lyrics. *The Axeman's Jazz* includes the Perkins/Spencer P. Jones composition 'Evil Ruby' in which Ruby murders her boyfriend and 'Psycho,' an American country song written by Leon Payne, in which the narrator murders a number of people culminating in his mother. (The song's reference point is Alfred Hitchcock's film *Psycho*, itself based on Robert Bloch's novel of that name which, in turn, lifted off from the notorious Ed Gein case).

On Weddings, Parties, Anything's third album, *The Big Don't Argue* (1989), there is a ballad composed by Mick Thomas called 'A Tale They Won't Believe.' This is about Alexander Pearce who, in 1823, escaped with seven other convicts from Macquarie Harbour in what is now Tasmania. On their way to Hobart they became so hungry that they resorted to killing and eating each other. Pearce was the only survivor. This composition, based on Robert Hughes' account in his book *The Fatal Shore*, makes clear the connections between Australia's murderous origins and the ballad tradition through its many transformations to today's Australian rock music. This song was one of the band's most popular.

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- ²⁵ 'Death Is Not The End' appears on Bob Dylan's 1988 album *Down in the Groove*.
- ²⁶ Bold, *The Ballad*, p. 74.
- ²⁷ Originally 'Stagger Lee' was the account of a drunken bar room argument and murder. The inspiration for Cave's version's sexual material may well have derived from Robert Hunter's version for the Grateful Dead. This 'Stagger Lee' has Billy DeLyon's girlfriend revenging the death of her man by shooting Stagger Lee in the balls. The Grateful Dead's version can be found on their album *Shakedown Street* (1978).
- ²⁸ Manifold, *Who Wrote the Ballads?*, p. 23.
- ²⁹ D. Spooner, 'Come All Ye Folksongs: The Ballad in Australia', *Ormond Papers*, vol. 4, 1987, p. 111.
- ³⁰ Lee, *Music of the People: A Study of Popular Music in Great Britain*, p. 84.
- ³¹ Lee, *Music of the People: A Study of Popular Music in Great Britain*, p. 85.
- ³² Lee, *Music of the People: A Study of Popular Music in Great Britain*, p. 93.
- ³³ Lee, *Music of the People: A Study of Popular Music in Great Britain*, p. 93.
- ³⁴ Lee, *Music of the People: A Study of Popular Music in Great Britain*, p. 93.
- ³⁵ On the history of the music hall and vaudeville in Australia see R. Waterhouse, *From Minstrel Show to Vaudeville: The Australian Popular Stage 1788–1914*, NSW University Press, Kensington, NSW, 1990.
- ³⁶ See for example the live double album *Hope and Anchor Front Row Festival* released in 1979.

³⁷ J. Bratton, *The Victorian Popular Ballad*, Rowman and Littlefield, Totowa, NJ, 1975.

³⁸ Manifold, *Who Wrote the Ballads?*, p. 24; also C. Semmler, 'From Dublin to the Bush', *Quadrant*, January–February, 1979.

³⁹ Manifold, *Who Wrote the Ballads?*, p. 24.

⁴⁰ The Chieftains first album, *The Chieftains*, was released in 1963. Horslips first album, *Happy to Meet, Sorry to Part*, was released in 1973.

⁴¹ T. K. Hoppen, *Ireland Since 1800: Conflict and Conformity*, Longman, London, 1989, p. 110.

⁴² T. K. Hoppen, *Ireland Since 1800: Conflict and Conformity*, p. 110.

⁴³ P. O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, NSW University Press, Kensington, NSW, 1993, p. 63.

⁴⁴ P. O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia*, NSW University Press, Kensington, NSW, 1993, p. 71.

⁴⁵ N. O'Ciosan, *Print and Popular Culture in Ireland 1750–1850*, MacMillan, Basingstoke, England, 1997, p. 190.

⁴⁶ G. Smith, 'Irish Music in Melbourne, 1950–1980', in P Bull et al (eds), *Irish-Australian Studies: Papers delivered at the Sixth Irish-Australian Conference*, July 1990, p. 219.

⁴⁷ G. Smith, 'Irish Music in Melbourne, 1950–1980', p. 221.

⁴⁸ Smith, G., 'Irish Music in Melbourne, 1950–1980', p. 222.

⁴⁹ B. Meek, *Paddy Moloney and the Chieftans*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin, 1987, p. 93.

⁵⁰ On the Beatles' tour see G. Baker, *The Beatles Down Under*, Wild and Woolley, Glebe, NSW, 1982; also Zion, 'The Impact of The Beatles on Pop Music in Australia: 1963–66'.

⁵¹ Manifold, *Who Wrote the Ballads?*, p. 101.

⁵² G. Jenkin, *Songs of the Great Australian Balladists*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1978, p. 17.

⁵³ At <<http://www.rich.durge.org/rolf/kangaroo.html>>, 6 July 2006.

⁵⁴ 'Duncan' is credited to Pat Alexander. Slim Dusty tells the story of how he came to record the song, and meet the Duncan who inspired the lyric. (S. Dusty & J. McKean, *Slim Dusty: Another Day, Another Town*, Macmillan, Sydney, 1996, p. 235–6). Confusingly, the 'Tex Morton: Boundary Rider' website at <<http://www/nzedge.com/heroes/morton.html>> credits Morton with writing the song and having a hit with it in the 1960s.

⁵⁵ Porterfield, 1994.

⁵⁶ Eric Watson writes that: 'The Columbia Gramophone Company began pressing records in Australia in December 1926. The following year the flood of American hillbilly records began.' (E. Watson, 'Country Music: The Voice of Rural Australia')

in M Breen (ed), *Missing in Action: Australian Popular Music in Perspective*, Verbal Graphics, Melbourne, 1987, p. 53).

⁵⁷ All the biography of Morton here comes from ‘Tex Morton: Boundary Rider’, *New Zealand Edge*, B Sweeney (ed), 1998–2005, <<http://www.nzedge.com/heroes/morton.html>>, 5 July 2006. A reader for *Perfect Beat* points out that we should be wary of claims about his life that derive from Morton. It seems that in his songbooks from the early 1940s he also asserted that he had been a Texan cowboy!

⁵⁸ E. Watson, ‘Country Music: The Voice of Rural Australia’, p. 54–5.

⁵⁹ This story is told in ‘Tex Morton: Boundary Rider’.

⁶⁰ Watson, ‘Country Music: The Voice of Rural Australia’, p. 55.

⁶¹ S. Dusty & J. Lapsley, *Slim Dusty: Walk a Country Mile*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1984, p. 23.

⁶² Dusty & Lapsley, *Slim Dusty: Walk a Country Mile*, p. 21.

⁶³ Dusty & Lapsley, *Slim Dusty: Walk a Country Mile*, p. 38.

⁶⁴ Slim Dusty provides a history of ‘A Pub With No Beer.’ According to this, Sheahan’s poem was first published in the North Queensland Register, 1 January 1944. Slim Dusty subsequently recorded a number of other poems by Sheahan. (Dusty & Lapsley, *Slim Dusty: Walk a Country Mile*, p. 117-121).

⁶⁵ D. Spooner, ‘Come All Ye Folksongs: The Ballad in Australia’, p. 107.

⁶⁶ D. Spooner, ‘Come All Ye Folksongs: The Ballad in Australia’, p. 107.

⁶⁷ See his autobiography: Dusty & Lapsley, *Slim Dusty: Walk a Country Mile*. It is worth remarking on the importance of Irish-background Australians to Australian popular music. For example, in addition to Slim Dusty, both Johnny O’Keefe and Kylie Minogue had Irish backgrounds.

⁶⁸ Interestingly, on American websites Weddings, Parties, Anything are often described as alt. country. This identification of the band as alternative country suggests an American recognition of the band’s country heritage which, in Australia, tends to be thought of more as a folk influence.

⁶⁹ ‘The Bushwackers’ website, <<http://www.bushwackers.com.au>>, 5 July 2006.

⁷⁰ In contrast, the 1960s folk revival in England was just that, a working over of material which was no longer a part of the English musical sensibility. Even Pentangle, the most popular of the folk-rock bands—their album *Basket of Light* reached number five on the British charts in 1969—only ever achieved a cult following.

⁷¹ Watson, ‘Country Music: The Voice of Rural Australia’, p. 75.

⁷² The rock artist who most obviously provides a link with the Australian ballad tradition is Paul Kelly. Even a cursory perusal of his published lyrics (1999) will show this. ‘From Little Things Big Things Grow,’ written with Kev Carmody, the Aboriginal singer-songwriter and activist, is even in traditional ballad form. Kelly’s first public performance is reputed to have been of the traditional bushranger ballad ‘Streets of Forbes’ which ends with the bushranger being killed by the police and his body paraded round the town. However, I am not considering his work in detail here because he does not

play hard rock and is not a part of the Oz Rock tradition. Nevertheless, we can see how well he sits in that tradition by noting that one of his longtime backing musicians has been Spencer P. Jones who worked with Tex Perkins in the Beasts Of Bourbon and was one of the founding members of the psychocountry rock band the Johnnys (their album *Highlights of a Dangerous Life* was released in 1986). Kelly illustrates well how the continuing importance of the ballad tradition expands the discourse of rock music in Australia to include performers who elsewhere, say in the United States, would be positioned as folk or country performers.

⁷³ This information comes from the Howlspace webpage for Weddings, Parties, Anything at <http://www.howlspace.com.au/en2/weddingspartiesanything.htm>

⁷⁴ ‘Weddings, Parties, Anything’, *Howlspace*, <<http://www.howlspace.com.au/en2/weddingspartiesanything/weddingspartiesanything.htm>>, 7 July 2006.

⁷⁵ Discussed in J. Mouat, ‘Making Australia’s Past/Modern: The Music of Weddings, Parties, Anything’, *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada*, no. 6, 1991.

⁷⁶ It is important to recognise here the significance of country music in Aboriginal society. On this see Clinton Walker’s groundbreaking book, *Buried Country: The Story of Aboriginal Country Music* (2000). The importance of the Australian ballad tradition is demonstrable in the work of, for example, Kev Carmody (whose most obvious influences include the Australian bush tradition and American folk music, early Bob Dylan in particular) and Archie Roach. That Roach is regarded in Australia as a mainstream popular music

artist is itself, in part, a consequence of the ongoing relevance of the ballad tradition. It is worth noting that Paul Kelly has worked with both artists.

⁷⁷ Tex Perkins' given name is Gregory. I can find no information on why he uses the stage name 'Tex'. However, it not only carries an American reference, it also connotes Tex Morton who, the story goes, took his name from a sign he saw in a Waihi garage. The name, then, places Perkins within the Australian bush music tradition, acknowledging also the post-1920s commercial American country music influence on that tradition, in the first place as filtered through Tex Morton's work.

⁷⁸ Versions of this song—ballad really—can be found on both the Beasts of Bourbon *The Axeman's Jazz* and the Johnnys' *Highlights of a Dangerous Life*.

⁷⁹ Thomas, cited in Mouat, 'Making Australia's Past/Modern: The Music of Weddings, Parties, Anything', p.

⁸⁰ For a history of the band see A. O'Grady, *Cold Chisel: The Pure Stuff*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 2001; also M. Lawrence, *Showtime: The Cold Chisel Story: The First Decade and Beyond*, ed. E Nimmervol, M. Lawrence, Belmont, Victoria, 1998.

⁸¹ We need to keep clear that Morton's song was a protest against the Vietnam War while Redgum's and Cold Chisel's are about the plight of veterans. It is worth noting that there were other popular music songs protesting the Vietnam War: Masters Apprentices' 'War Or Hands Of Time' and Johnny Young's 'Smiley.'

⁸² Cold Chisel website, <<http://www.coldchisel.com.au/petrolheads.html>>, 5 July 2006.

⁸³ Found at the Warner Music Australia website at:
<<http://www.warnermusic.com.au/artists/press.asp?pressid=377>>, 10 October 2003.

⁸⁴ It is instructive to listen to Tim Rogers' solo album, *Tim Rogers and the Twin Set What Rhymes With Cars And Girls*, released in 1999. Rogers is the lead singer and composer of You Am I's songs. On *What Rhymes* one of his backing musicians is Jen Anderson, the violinist from Weddings, Parties, Anything. This, again, suggests the centrality of Weddings, Parties, Anything to Australian rock and does so through recognising the continuing importance of country music. Mark Neilsen, in his review of the album in *Drum Media*, notes that: 'Tim's gone and packed away his distortion pedal and left the rockin' electric guitar at home and produced a mighty fine album of acoustic numbers with a bit of country twinge to them.' ('You Am I' website, <http://www.youami.com.au/articles/cd_wrwcag.html>, 10 October 2003). 'What Rhymes' is an album of songs about love, loss and relationships. It is not a ballad album either in content or song form. However, while the songs are about situations rather than events, the personal rather than the public, they still retain a narrative element and evidence the detail characteristic of the ballad tradition. This in addition to the album's country influence which comes out of the continuing importance of country music in the Australian

popular music sensibility, especially when we take into account that the album entered the Australian album chart at number fourteen.