



The Evolution of 'Bush Dance' part 1

By Peter Ellis

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I have gone on record saying I think the use of the term 'bush dance' is a good name for the type of folk dancing that has emerged since the 1960s and 70s. But to clarify, this type of dancing did not have any real association of history in the bush. This seventies fad was simply a form of revived and contemporary British Isles and Irish folk dance with associated jigs and reels and the occasional European folk dance thrown in for variety - but under the cloak of 'bush dance'.

It had its appeal in that it provided instant fun for the youth of the day that had not been brought up in the established tradition of learning to dance from children as distinct from in the bush. Colin and Ila Silk of Lockwood South near Bendigo (esteemed dancers and MC) told me in an interview they practised the quadrilles and couple dances in the school yard (1920s-30s) at play time when living in a rural district of Geelong. Dances where most local families attended continued in barns, woolsheds, schools, Mechanics Institutes and Public Halls in districts such as these well into the 50s, 60s and 70s. But it was a very different scene in the 80s and in the city school environment post World War 2.

Thus in a similar manner to the 1950s craze for **American square dancing** and in fact emerging not long after, **contemporary bush dance** was eagerly sort out by schools and university youth wanting to dance with their own peers, as well as by organisations desiring to run family dances in which generations from grandparents down to little children could gleefully mix and participate. A simple walk through was sufficient to pick up any dance on the run and after attending a few, basically every dance would be known by memory or easy enough to follow as birds in a flock; in any case the dances were always called. In this aspect of the social side and the fun these dances did approach the atmosphere of a real dance in the bush. It became extremely popular and was 'the function to have'. These followings however generally lacked the basic skills of dancing such as to be able swing in a set or to Waltz or Polka, as well as experience in a repertoire of sequence couple dances such as Barn Dance, Pride of Erin, or even an occasional free-lance One-Step or Foxtrot, all of which were managed with reasonable skill by the lay bush communities.

I believe also that from the turn into the 21st century bush and folk dance has largely disappeared in popularity from the school and university arena and that which has evolved under the 'bush dance' name in the Colonial and folk dance circuit is also quite removed from that of the second half of the 20th C. "Bush dance" today has developed into a complex mix of traditions and newly composed dances that invariably require a fairly extensive workshopped programme dance by dance and actually there's almost zilch of true Australian heritage included.

There is little of the social side of either a real bush dance or the somewhat erroneously titled 1970s version. I don't really savour this style as 'bush dance' and believe some other name needs to be coined, or perhaps be thought of simply as contemporary folk dance. It certainly has no connection at all with any tradition of the bush. You could also argue that any invented dances are hardly folk dances until they've run a period of adaptation and acceptance in the general public arena.

Specialist folk and Colonial dance groups do not equate with the general public arena or mainstream culture in this respect. But little in social dance and music today is embraced in mainstream areas apart from the pub and the nightclub scene of our youth and that's largely either canned or electronic. That's not to say folkies in the contemporary bush dance scene are not having a good time any more than our youth in the pub and nightclub scene. The latter is the mainstream tradition of the youth of today and new vogue is that of the remaining elderly social dancers. Unfortunately across generations most have now become 'couch potatoes' and we have become so materialistic in our priorities. It is extremely difficult to organise support for anything, much less good old fashioned fun in which peer group pressure now seems to have widened the generation gap. This wasn't the case in the good old days.

But how did **Bush Dance** come about and how does it differ?

There was a parallel forerunner of 'bush dance' in the 1940s and early 50s under the title of '**Barn Dance**'. These were popular in Scotland and Ireland for example, conducted as ceilidhs with items interspersed between country dances, quadrilles and the old couple dances. There was a similar revival of *Barn Dance* in America and in which their square dances were also featured. I remember one on TV on the Andy Williams show.

The Australian Barn Dance of mid 20thC consisted of a mix of the country dances such as Virginia Reel, Strip the Willow, Rory O'More and perhaps an Eightsome Reel alternating with Old Time couple dances, Pride of Erin, Progressive Barn Dance, the polkas* and a set of Lancers, Alberts, Waltz Cotillion and so on. They were generally held in country barns and woolsheds. My mother recalled going to one in the early 1950s at Homebush - a homestead or run just out of Bendigo towards Axedale. Not long after in the early 60s Harry McQueen played for similar functions held in **Ottrey's Barn** at Muckleford to raise money to buy kilts for the Castlemaine Pipe Band. I'm not sure that there is any direct link between these barn dances and the emergence of bush dance, but certainly the barn dance had the atmosphere of a dinkum bush dance. There is actually an article titled 'Barn Dance' in the Illustrated Sydney News of 1889 which provides an excellent description of a Barn Dance and which could be compared with our contemporary view as a true 'Bush Dance'.



Additionally here is a music frontispiece illustrating a Barn Dance theme. The dance depicted above is the Haymaker's Jig or 'Sir Roger de Coverley'.

If the term Bush Dance was used in earlier times, it was only occasional and not in the generic sense of the 1970s style; it simply meant a Barn Dance or ordinary 'old time hop' in the bush.



Also there was certainly a national pride with our pioneer links in the bush, whether via the works of Lawson and Paterson or some association used to gain interest. Allan's Music for example had a button accordion tutor called "Play Easy" - 'The Stop Accordion' which featured a Mezon style instrument with the three stops of the German instrument displayed prominently in the illustration. The sub title was '**Bush Accordeon**'. Then there were popular brands of mouth organ such as 'Boomerang' and 'Crackerjack'.

Relating to 'Bush Music' Bob Bolton forwarded the following advertisement from the National Library of Australia's Trove online digitised newspapers:-

The Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser Saturday 11 April 1863 p7

BUSH MUSIC MANUSCRIPT COPIES of the under-mentioned

AIRS, composed by a person many years residing in the Bush, can be had on application to Mr. WILLIAM BRIGGS, Narrabri, at One Shilling each:

POLKAS. SCHOTTISCHE. The Australian Volunteers, The Cricketers, The Dashing Young Rifleman, The Narrabri, The Golden Fleece, The Gunnedah, The Magic Hoop or Crinoline, The Gulligal, The Rollickers, The Hibernian.

Written communications, forwarding the amount for any of the above in postage stamps, will meet prompt attention. 2245

Then referring to Bush Songs and with a Bush Dance mention:-

Brisbane Courier 17th Jan. 1924 p 10

The two border settlements, as mentioned previously, have declined. Last year the only school on the New South Wales side was closed for lack of pupils, but in the shearing seasons the places brighten up as numbers of shearers pass through to the various sheds in the district. Old shearing mates meet, and the concertina is heard at night, while a good old bush dance progresses in some house of the one in main street. On the hotel veranda sit old cronies talking of old times or singing the old bush ditties, those ditties of many subjects and many verses dealing with droving incidents, mining romances, of "My Lovely Kate of the Old Coach Stage," or "Jack, the Genteel Stockman," or "My Old Bush Hut on the Far Bulloo," or "Mulga Jim." All have choruses, which are roared out with rousing effect. A one-time popular Barringum ballad which might be entitled My Old Brown Hat and Shoes is still to be heard. It has a vigorous chorus: - Give me my old brown hat, A pair of my old brown shoes,

Pots and pots of money, Tons and tons of booze -with much stress on the last line.

Appearing in the 1950s there was a reaction against overseas culture, particularly from America and whilst Square Dancing mushroomed with popularity over this time it had its opponents. When the Bushwhackers Band formed in Sydney in 1952 and the Bush Music Club subsequently followed as well as the enormously popular play Reedy River of 1953 - Australian tradition certainly came to the fore over the 'Yankeeified material'. Here is a good reference to a kick-back on American square dancing:

Morning Bulletin Rockhampton Qld Wed. 11th Nov. 1953 p7 SQUARE DANCING

“Sir,- As an 'old timer” I wish to raise my voice on behalf of many of my old cobbers about what many of them consider is a lot of ballyhoo and false information concerning square dancing. First, the proper term for any of the dances is Quadrille. The Quadrille originated in Paris as a figure of a new ballet (Theatre d' l'Opéra et Ballet) in the mid 18th century. Shortly after its debut it was modified and brought from the stage to the ballroom floor. It followed in the wake of Bonnie Prince Charlie to Scotland, migrated to Ireland and was introduced into England at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. The original quadrilles were just titled so.

Then came modifications and we got Les Lanciers, each of which had not only five figures but also names for each figure. The sort of square dancing popular in Rockhampton just now and other towns is merely a bastardised form of the original quadrilles, square dances have been danced in Australia I'm sure for more than a century. There are modifications of these dances which are, so far as I can trace, original, indigenous to this country. Their names are the Fitzroy Quadrilles and the Exile Quadrilles. There is no need whatever for young Australians to copy any “Yankeefied” form of ballroom or other type of dancing, nor is there any need whatever for special frocks, shirts, trousers, etc., to participate in a set of Fitzroys or indeed any of the proper square dances. This special costumes for square dancing is mostly a racket, typical of Yankee land which has laid sacrilegious hands not only on dancing but on sacred human emotions even religion has not escaped - and turned them into commodities for the market place. The proper title for a caller is Master of Ceremonies. NO wonder the YMCA are losing money (as I have been credibly informed is the case), bringing a “caller” from Melbourne when we have still a few old time MC's like Joe Mullaney, Mr Harvey, or Les Delaney. I am game to lay a £1 to a penny that your Melbourne aces could not MC the Caledonian Quadrille, Lanciers or the Waltz Quadrilles, which have been glorified in verse by Ella Wheeler Wilcox. Queen Victoria is on record as being partial to a set of Quadrilles.”-J. H. WOOD.”

The mood may have been just right for the emergence of bush dance on the back of square dance.

* the term ‘polkas’ in this context refers specifically to a group of ‘hoppy’ dances, Varsoviana, Polka Mazurka, Highland Schottische and Polka, with sometimes the Two Step added. But only the polka with its step and music is a true polka. The polka medley was sometimes called the “old time medley”.

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