

Evolution of 'Bush Dance' part 6 - Conclusion

by Peter Ellis



In conclusion there has been a gradual revival of the dance tunes that were played in the bush and in this arena a move away from the revivalist British and Irish material of the seventies.

There were also several factors that influenced my work in reviving both 'bush dances' and 'dances of the bush' as a compromise or blend of traditions and in what has demonstrated can be very popular with all ages.

In my twenties about 1968, I had started attending rural dances around Bendigo and further afield; these dances and balls were generally a 50-50 blend of Old Time Dances with the standard Quickstep-Foxtrot bracket. I.e. every second dance was what was referred to as 'modern'.

There were also large venues in the city such as the 'Pacific Ballroom' which were '60-40' in favour of the modern Foxtrots with an occasional Pride of Erin, Progressive Barn Dance, Evening 3 Step danced with a real 'jivey' swing and perhaps a Gypsy Tap and the Parma and Veleta waltzes. Late in the night the lights would be turned low for a Modern Waltz (Jazz Waltz in gringo land). Significantly more contemporary dance was permitted during the Foxtrots where young people could jive or rock n roll in the corners or in front of the band although by the time I went to these dances this had mainly given way to 'mod' or 'go go' dancing which appeared straight after the seasonal run of the Twist (1961).

At occasional Friday night dances such as at Lockwood South all 'old time' nights were arranged about 3 times a year. This was not as popular with the regular dancers as the 50-50 dance or the 60-40 ratio of every Saturday night which in these country areas was a little in favour of the Old time. I.e. the Foxtrots were every third or fourth dance.

At the special all Old Time nights three set dances, the Alberts, Lancers and Waltz Cotillion were programmed and this was the first time I saw and learnt them - 'on the run'. Dances were not taught or walked-through, this would be taboo at a public dance or ball. But veteran dancers were always very good at mixing and inviting new comers and those green like myself to be partnered so that you could pick up the steps as you went. There were always two encores, or to put it another way, three rounds of each couple dance, so you had time to preview, attempt and generally learn by the third time through. Some organisers did however conduct a separate learner's night, but this was primarily for the couple

dances and the occasional newer dance which I later found was called 'new vogue'. Old Time Dance Clubs also started to form and their programmes were heavily 'new vogue' orientated.

But during the special old time nights at Lockwood South and later with the Wedderburn Oldtimers the 'polkas' were bundled together into a medley, a round of Varsoviana (usually called the Waltz of Vienna then), Polka Mazurka, Highland Schottische and Polka. This group of dances was usually called either the 'Old Time Medley' or the 'Polka Medley'. In earlier times and this would be before the Second World War, these dances would have been programmed singly in their own right, but as the new old time sequence dances emerged, the older polkas had to be bundled together to make room on the programme. They were called 'polkas' because of the hoppy steps, although only 'the polka' often called '3 hop polka' was a true polka to true polka music in 2-4 with the 3 quaver beat to emphasise the 3 hop step of the dance, there being a rest or 'spring' on the last beat. The Varsoviana and Polka Mazurka were in 3-4 but did incorporate a half polka step turn between the mazurka sections. The Highland Schottische in 4-4 was danced to Scottish styled tunes, the Keel Row the typical one. The older step hop turns at the end of sequence had either been replaced by a barn dance waltz turn, or a polka turn.

When the Wedderburn Oldtimers Orchestra formed in 1975 they based their programmes on the real old time dances that existed in the country districts just before the First World War and as a consequence the polkas were revived as separate single dances and the three sets, Lancers, Alberts and Waltz Cotillion were always included. Only in one district out of Wedderburn would you get the First Set, and that was at Fenton's Creek. The locals taught all the young people of the district to dance the old dances and they really took to the lively sets and polkas, while the older people who'd danced these in their youth were starting to feel the pace and therefore happy if necessary to sit the energetic dances out and enjoy the waltzes and barn dances.

Put Wedderburn Oldtimers picture at Lancefield here.



Wedderburn Oldtimers at a

Lancefield Ball middle 1980s - photo by Rob Watson

Coinciding with the revival of this more genuine Old Time Dance by the Oldtimers, **Maldon Folk Festival** was also in full swing and their dances were then held in the Castlemaine Town Hall. They had marvellous ceilidh bands of folk musicians and it was at these dances I saw the Circassian Circle, Dashing White Sergeant and Virginia Reel for the first time. These of course had come from the revival of the bush dance movement as well as influence from both Nariel and the VFMC and bands such as the Cobbers and Bushwackers in Melbourne.

A Central Victorian band '*Tipplers All*' based in Castlemaine was very good at teaching and calling folk dances and usually included one or two heritage dances such as Varsoviana, Pride of Erin or Berlin Polka. Harry McQueen actually sat in with this band to help out, but it was from them he learnt the tunes for the Galopede and the Waves of Tory as well as 'double timing' the Soldiers Joy. It was a sort of handing on in reverse although I'm sure Harry contributed dance music and timing to 'Tipplers All' in exchange.

Put Tiplers All picture here and Harry McQueen beside on the right



Harry McQueen of Castlemaine mid 1980s photo John Meredith

Tiplers All Chewton Vic. circa 1982. LR Gordon Cowan, Roddy Read, Helen McGeachin, Mark Walters, Ian Huxley. Photo courtesy Helen McGeachin.

The Irish dances such as Waves of Tory, Siege of Ennis, and Walls of Limerick had generally only evolved in Ireland around the turn of the nineteenth-twentieth century and remember the Irish immigrants of the nineteenth century could only have brought out the earlier ballroom dances along with their native Irish jig and stepdance to Australia. Many of the jigs and reels they brought with them were associated with the quadrilles and they actually lost some very good music with the Gaelic League's banning of the non-Irish dances to which these tunes were attached.

But in Australia with the influence of the Cobbers and Bushwackers in particular the newer Irish dances were prominently included in their repertoire of the 1970s. As well as this of course the predominance of jigs and reels (in contrast to the bands in the bush such as the Wedderburn Oldtimers) were played very much upbeat and became 'the thing' with younger people, particularly with the University folk clubs in Melbourne. I imagine this would have been the same in Sydney. Whilst the Oldtimers played mainly the waltzes, other couple dances and the sets, when they did play a jig it was sensational, in my biased opinion with a beat and rhythm and totally acoustic without any aid of amplification. You seldom hear it this way in the folk scene.

As time went on The Bushwackers gradually changed hands and moved towards electronic amplified beat. It is interesting that Shirley Andrews 'tongue in cheek' dubbed the electronic rock beat style and dance of the Bushwackers as 'Folk Disco'. I dub the Bush Dance of the Colonial and Folk Dancers scene as 'New Vogue Bush Dance'.

In contrast I believe the 70s style Bush Dance fostered by the Bushwackers and Cobbers really has a lot going for it, even although it is no longer 'kosher' with the younger generation; but if you manage to get them to such an event with their own peers, they really enjoy it. Perhaps it's because the dance bands no

longer actually exist or actively perform at University dances. John and Aylwen Garden have successfully encouraged (extremely so) young University students to attend their classes and dances of various traditional genre of eras. So it can still be done.

I doubt whether Reedy River or the Bushwhacker's style of the 1950s that filled the Sydney Show Ground with thousands would be successful today, but if Mulga Bill was around, they'd still be swamped.

Over recent decades many dedicated performers of collected Australian 'bush tunes' - the real thing, have managed to profile this tremendous music and adapt the tunes for some of the revived British and Irish dances as well as mixing in a few of the more genuine dances that did exist here. And with great success I might add. Tremendous collected tunes are coming out of Tasmania and my congratulations to all those dedicated Van Diemen's.

Rob Willis and Dave de Santi did a power of work in the Pioneer Performer series, based on John Meredith's 'Real Folk', promoting the tunes he had collected and published in Folk Songs of Australia and adapting some of these to contemporary bush dance. The Wongawilli Colonial Dance Club was to the fore in presenting dances along with Dave's Wongawilli Band to these tunes. Also the Australian Folk Festival (firstly at Glen Innes and later transferring to Kiama and Albion Park) was an important festival for profiling the Australian tradition in the 1990s.

Put Australian Bush Music Festival Glen Innes poster here and Wongawilli Dancers to right of it.



Wongawilli Colonial Dancers Photo courtesy Dave



de Santi & Wongawilli Band Picture underneath
Wongawilli Bush Band 1994, photo courtesy Dave de Santi

The Bush Dance and Music Club of Bendigo in a similar manner since inauguration in 1979 followed by their Emu Creek Bush Band of 1983 have been promoting Australian tradition in their area as well at the National Folk Festival. The club and band produced a massive series of CD dance recordings as well as the 'Merry Country Dance' book covering social history and the dance instructions. They conduct successful dances in which there's an equal blend between the old time dances, the collected heritage forms and the seventies style bush dances.

Whilst the followers, as with most things today are elderly, there have been a number of functions conducted by young folk which have been absolutely fantastic. One was in a little district north of Lockington called Kotta. When I went to an old time dance back there in the seventies the tiny hall was extremely hot (a February dance) and the piano covered in dust and bird dung. I didn't want to go back to Kotta. However the young people of the district led by the local Veterinarian, Nurse, Doctor and so on didn't want to move the dance into nearby Rochester where the facilities would have been better. When we arrived at the hall, it was spick and span, totally cleaned up and the ceiling lined with egg cartons to help with the acoustics. I should have explained Emu Creek normally play without any amplification except for one microphone for announcements, walking through and calling. There was a barrel of beer running outside, but not one person under the influence. The hall was packed with 300 dancers and no-one over 30 and they as well as the band and hall rocked off the stumps. I've never played for such an occasion. Now the oldies of the district didn't turn up because they thought it would be amplified bang bang music. The following year they were there in force as well.

Two more recent events are worth mentioning. One we were approached by two lovely 18 year old girls desperate to run a bush dance for their Outdoor Education group at the local University. This was at a time I was trying to wind up the band and retire. But how could you refuse such wonderful young ladies. So our seniors came along to help, and again it was an absolute hoot, the young ones couldn't dance for

nuts but made up for it in enthusiasm and bounding around in vigour and it added zip to the oldies steps too. Some of these young people then continued coming to our dances for the balance of the year until the exams were on and their course finished; one lad even brought a basket of supper balanced on the handlebars of his bicycle.

The other function was at our own dance, but it was St. Patrick's night and so everything green and Irish was the theme. A twenty seven year old decided to celebrate her birthday at something different and thus turned up at our dance with about a dozen young friends from 17 upwards. Again the vim and enthusiasm of the young catalysed enthusiasm with everyone as well as again adding zip to the oldies' footwork.

It's interesting because the factors in these cases are that the band is acoustic, old fashioned instruments and sound, plenty of life based on the style of how dance bands used to play and no peck order or 'you should do it this way'. It again shows with younger people it is possible and don't forget, all those old dances in their day, when new, were danced by the young. The elderly were simply chaperones.

Emu Creek specialises in playing good lively music incorporating as much collected Australian tunes as possible but also plays the Celtic jigs and reels were required for the seventies bush dances. One follower at Maldon Folk Festival some years back referred to the band as the 'Chieftains of Australia'. Emu Creek Bush Band celebrates thirty years next November.

Put Emu Creek picture here and Bendigo dancers to the right of it.



The celebrated **Emu Creek Bush Band** circa 1984 Photo courtesy Sheryl Hayes

BDMC Double set of Royal Irish fig.5 Piazza NFF 1994

Looking at others Dave Johnson included many good Australian tunes in his blue book 'Bush Dance' in the 80s. More recently he and Ray Mulligan through the establishment of 'Bush Traditions' commenced a series of collected tune workshops aided by annual booklet publications for the sight readers and made

available at the Australian tune sessions at the National Folk Festival in the recent decade. Greg O'Leary also recorded the music on a companion CD for the ear players as well as providing a reference to the nuance of the tunes and timing for the sight readers.

On the Labour Day weekend at Goulburn 'Bush Traditions' profile more of their workshops and performance as well as bush poetry and bush dance. Their 'Settler Sessions' at the National Folk Festival each morning have attracted more and more musicians from all over Australia and this year it was well over 100 hundred. The tune books that have been compiled each year now number over 700 collected Australian tunes and there are still tunes appearing, particularly out of Tasmania. The Oz Trad Tune following is healthy and growing.

PUT BUSH TRADITIONS POSTER HERE



Johnson

One problem perhaps is having the dances to go with the tunes as the original dances seem to be either too energetic for an ageing dancer following, or the dances have passed their use by date (not for me, but sadly for others). Although I'm not a fan of a host of newly composed dances, I can certainly see that if some were created having the simplicity and brightness of the revived seventies bush dances to which our collected tunes could be matched, this is what is needed. The set tunes in 6-8 and 2-4 can easily be adapted to the established bush dances as both Wongawilli and Emu Creek have successfully trialled, but we need dances for the Schottische, 3 Hop Polka, Varsoviana and Mazurka group as some of our best music is from that side.

Having become a 'grumpy old man' I have tended to slate the modern 'bush-dancers' to a fair extent and simply because I grew up with both traditional old time dance and seventies bush dance and although quite apart from each other, they were extremely social and good fun. Dances then were not heavily workshopped if at all and only the simple bush-dances required a quick walkthrough. You could laugh and talk while dancing. That is not to say there are not many very good dance callers and teachers in the

scene today and some of the new dances that have been created for school children I think will provide an excellent resource for the future. Time will tell what survives, endures, and grows, or disappears.

Just keep up the good work folks. Peter Ellis