

The Collector and the Songwriter: The interaction of tradition and creativity

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1. Introduction

This video [[click here](#)] provides a couple of examples of Peter Ellis in performance. Just to remind you of what he did best – if you needed any reminding.

Peter loved music. He was an exuberant player. Apparently, one time he was bouncing around so much that his chair slipped off the stage and he landed on top of Olive, the piano player.

2. A great traditionalist

Peter was a fine exponent of the button accordion, concertina, harmonica and tin whistle. His playing was technically solid and grounded in tradition.

He was also a dab hand at the piano, fiddle, ukulele, bones and swanee whistle.

He was Australia's foremost collector of traditional folklore relating to dance, dance music and the social history around them.

As a musician, collector and author for four decades, his body of work was immense.





He founded and led the Emu Creek Bush Band for 34 years and was a member of the Wedderburn Old Timers for over 30 years, and several other bands.

He collected with John Meredith – in Victoria, as well as on a fabled trip across the Nullarbor in Peter’s FJ Holden.

He produced 20 CDs of dance music and historical music with Emu Creek and others.



He notated and videoed all Australia’s known quadrilles.

He wrote several books, many of them multi-volume pieces, jam packed with sheet music, illustrations, CDs and solidly researched social history.



Many are the definitive texts in their field, such as *Music Makes Me Smile* and *The Merry Country Dance*, with its six CD collection.

He also contributed to many compendiums and collections and was a regular contributor of comprehensive and informative articles to *Trad & Now*.

According to the National Library he amassed the largest selection of dance-related material in the country.

And he was a gold medal winning ballroom dancer to boot (if that's the right word!).

When did he ever get the time to sleep!



3. Living folklore

But while Peter was a great collector and traditionalist, he did not believe that folklore was something to be preserved in formaldehyde or that that the folk tradition stopped some time in the 1800s, as some do. A living tradition is one that must be constantly replenished, as society changes.



If a recent tune was good and, importantly, fitted the dance, he would have his bands play it: tunes like *Rock around the Clock*, and even *Up There Cazaly!*

And in relation to replenishing the tradition, I saw a side of Peter Ellis that most did not see. On several occasions we collaborated to create new works steeped in traditional style and content.

The nature of our collaboration illustrates and represents important themes in folklore: tradition and change, collection and creativity.

We know that culture and its artifacts keep changing. Look at the treatment of Shakespeare's plays over the years. In the same way. Folk performers constantly reinterpret traditional songs in a contemporary style; Just as Peter and I created contemporary songs in a traditional style.



Folklore, like the study of history, is not about re-constructing the past. It is the interplay between the past and the present, collection and creation.

Culture is re-made with every act of collection and performance. And the folklore corpus is constantly incorporating new works.



Peter recognised this. In 2014 he wrote:

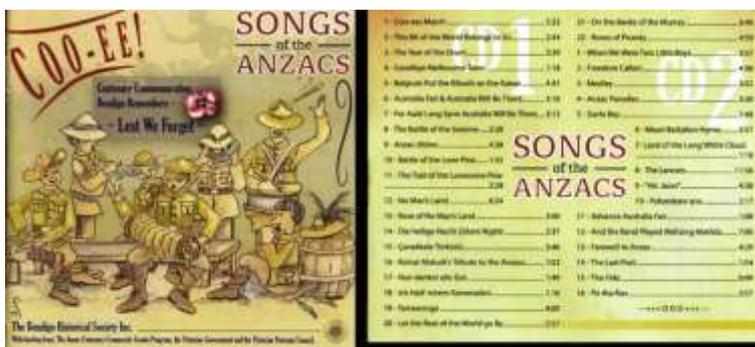
We have to take a broader view of what constitutes 'folk'. ... Anonymity is a key ... (but that) doesn't mean ... the tunes and folk dances weren't 'composed' somewhere along the line. You might not consider ... a choreographed dance such as the Pride of Erin ... as folk, and even the Lancers was an invented ballroom dance. But if you look at the 'folk-life' of an Australian country community you will observe ... these as important social aspects of ...tradition.



So invention and composition fit right into Peter's definition of folk and tradition.

This is consistent with the fact that Peter was curious and fascinated by so many things, and he wanted it ALL. So as well as being a bowerbird collector, on any given project that he undertook, he kept wanting to include more and more shiny things.

So his albums usually ended up as double, or even triple CDs. His last project, *Cooee!* Is typical. This 2-CD collection of Anzac-related material is extremely eclectic. Alongside older items, it includes the work of contemporary singer songwriters such as Eric Bogle, Ted Egan (and Bruce Watson).



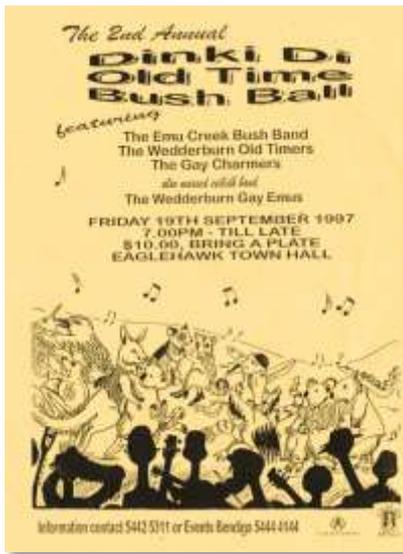
4. Our collaboration



So here's how Peter and I fed on, and in turn fed, the tradition through our collaboration. I will give two main examples and mention some others.

The Old Bush Dance

Our first collaboration began the day Princess Dianna died. We were at a tea dance in Brunswick. The band was Emu Creek, and it was a lovely afternoon, despite us all being shell shocked by the news.



During a break John Williams from the band asked me if I might write a song for that year's Dinky Di ball in Eaglehawk, an annual celebration of traditional dance. John can't recall whose idea it was to ask me, but he knows Peter was in on it.

I think they were expecting a funny song, because that's what I was best known for back then. But after the break, as we slid around the dance floor, I knew it had to be a tribute to this tradition of dancing and I had to use a dance tune.

So what did I do? I went home and ploughed through all three volumes of Peter's *Collectors' Choice*. I narrowed it down to waltzes and picked a couple I particularly loved, and which would welcome lyrics: *The Old Veletta Waltz* and *The Spanish Waltz*.

I nipped and tacked them to suit my purposes. The words were all mine as a contemporary songwriter, but the topic was the value of tradition.



I sent the words and music to Peter and he was delighted. And to my relief he was totally relaxed about me bugging around with the tunes. The song mentions several dances, and Peter's input, typically, was to suggest more dances for me to add to the list. This was not on the basis of how they would fit into the lyrical, rhythmic or narrative structure (my focus as a songwriter) but on the basis of their historical relevance and place in the dance tradition.

After a lengthy correspondence (again typical) I thanked him for his input and exercised my own artistic judgement!

Our expertise and contributions were beautifully complimentary.

I called the song *The Old Bush Dance* and performed it with the band at the Ball, and several other times, and recorded it with them. It has to some extent entered the tradition, particularly in Victoria.



[Click here](#) to see a video of the performance of this song at the conference, with Stuart Simms, Harry Gardner, John Williams and Margaret Hogan .

The Old Bush Dance

*It's Saturday night in a small country town
The women squeeze into their long flowing gowns
The men swap their overalls for a tie and a suit
Round up the kids, and it's off in the ute
At the hall ladies glide through the still summer air
As the young and the old dance away the weeks cares
Chasseeing, swinging and clapping their hands
As they sway to the tunes of the accordion band*

Chorus:

*They played, they played, those fingers danced lightly
The notes cascade, we all danced so sprightly
Those far off days, those Saturday nights
When we danced the Waltz Cotillions and the Polka Quadrille*

Instrumental

*It's "Take your partners, please," says the caller once more
As weary hot couples find their way to the floor
For the Alberts Quadrille and the Waltz Country Dance
A short introduction, then up strikes the band*

*Young couples dance closely, some awkward and shy
As mothers and fathers keep a close watchful eye
The kids weave and dart like a flock of galahs
As the music drifts up through the night to the stars*

Chorus and instrumental

*Now it's karaoke bars and it's poker machines
For some people that's what a good time out means
Not for them the concertina, the banjo and bones
Or the button accordion and the fiddle's sweet tones
Real music is people like you and me here
Not woofers and tweeters and electronic gear
So let's sing and let's dance for the music of old
May it live on and on, may it shine through like gold*

Chorus and instrumental



Other collaboration

Another example of how we worked is when Peter sent me this email in 2005:

Below words for a song Who put the Poo in the Brew, penned by Ross Kurtz of ... Mudgee, in the 1980s when I could have sworn I heard him sing it. But he says no, he's never got round to putting a tune to it. I wondered if you would like to tackle it.

It was always hard to resist these little phrases from Peter ... "I wondered if you would like to tackle it". If I didn't respond, I would eventually get a follow up email (and I quote): "You may recall I mentioned some time back about trying to put a song together about ..."!

So I did. For that one I made up a very simple tune which I deliberately constructed to sound like an Australian folk tune, a bit of a pastiche, really.

Who put the Poo in the Brew ?

The musical score is written in 3/4 time and consists of four staves. The lyrics are: "Who put the poo in the brew? 'Twas worse than roo in the stew. It tasted real strong, With a bit of a pong. Who put the poo in the brew?" The chords are: C, G, C, F, C, Am, C, G, C.

*To the grounds at Cooyal Hall, they invited, 'Come one and all.
Just bring your own mug, a pannican or mug,
For tea will be poured at call'.*

*The fire was lit 'round ten, 'neath a four-gallon kerosene tin.
Then just on ten thirty, with hands charcoal-dirty,
The tea leaves were duly chucked in.*

*Ray Mahon always had the job of brewing tea for the mob.
As hall caretaker, he was a good tea-maker.
No person his station would rob.*

*This night though the tea was polluted 'by some young chaps', they angrily mooted.
A dry cowpat was found. there were plenty around.
The tea was effectively tainted.*

*Oh yes, who put the poo in the brew? T'was worse than roo in the brew.
It tasted real strong, with a bit of a pong.
Who put the poo in the brew?*



There were others I never got around to writing – not yet anyway. He sent me 3,500 words and dozens of photos about a hero of his; field naturalist Sho Takasuka.

He sent me an entire book on Norman Baird, an Aboriginal man from Cape York who served in both world wars and happened to play the Mezon Button accordion.



I'm still working on that song. It's a powerful story.



He also sent me 8,000 words about his beloved FJ Holden with the introduction: "Bruce, I've sent this to you in case you feel inspired to write a song."

I'm not a Toff, I'm Just a Girl from the Bush

My final example is the song that was the focus of Peter's presentation here last year.

We took historical material about music and dance traditions and packaged them into a new song.

Peter wanted to present a slice of social history including that of the dances around Charlton, Victoria a century ago, highlighting the antics, humour and customs in the bush. These were stories Peter grew up with, from his grandmother and her cousin May.

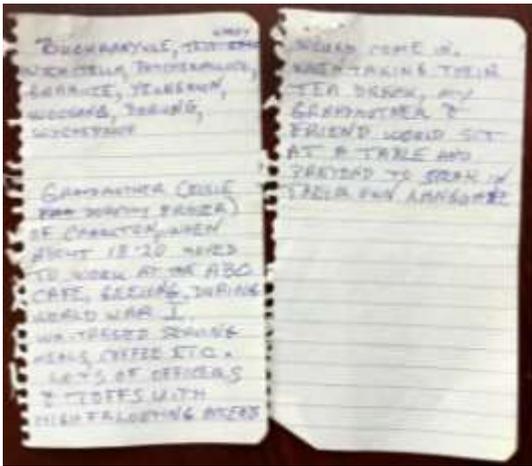
He had the germ of an idea for a song, which he scribbled out on note paper for me. He then proceeded to send me a very long first draft. Peter was brilliant at many things, but editing was not one of them. But the idea was great. I asked him for a little bit more background so I could make sense of some of the references.



Peter's response would have given *War and Peace* a run for its money.

But out of it we got a good song that Peter was very proud of.

You can read the background to the song in the Peter Ellis Archive Blog set up by Graham Seal and Rob Willis (<http://peterellisarchive.blogspot.com.au>). ([Click here](#) to read the paper Peter delivered to the Natinal Fliklore Conference in 2015, including photographs and links to soundgrabs.)



Suffice it to say that the chorus was Peter’s idea, which I just knocked into shape – a list of place names in the Charlton district designed to sound like Aboriginal language. The stories in the song are all true, and the stuff of family legend, recorded on tape by Peter.

Again, my tune drew on traditional dance music. This time *Put Your Little Foot* was my starting point.

So this was typical of our collaboration: the lyrics expressed themes about social history. The tune drew on traditional dance music, but innovated on it.

It is new art drawing on folklore, using material collected by Peter, and written in a traditional form, thereby renewing that form.

[Click here](#) to see a video of the performance of this song at the conference, with Stuart Simms, Harry Gardner, John Williams and Margaret Hogan.

I’m not a Toff, I’m Just a Girl from the Bush

*In the Great War I was working for the ABC café, Geelong
Serving officers in uniform with accents posh and strong
Me and Daisy when we took a break we’d have a bit of fun
From the names of places where we grew up make a language of our own.
Well the officers were snobs, they really spoke plush
But I’m not a toff – just a girl from the bush.*

Chorus:

*Wychitella, Teddywaddy, Buckrabanyule, Nullawil, Patchewallock,
Dooboobetic, Yuengroon, Wooroonook, Barrakee, Quambatook.*

*It was there I met and fell in love and married a German
He was fortunate back in those days that he wasn’t interned.
We moved back to Charlton to start a farm – fire and floods were too much
So my darling Claus fixed sewing machines, ah, he had the magic touch.
His name Otto Carl Constantine Nicolaus von Nolting
But me, I’m not a toff – just a girl from the bush.*

Chorus

*Oh the dances and the Lancers out at Buckra were so fine
When they threw a bantam or a piglet in set things really went wild.
With chortling and snortling as the dancers ran amock
The M C, quite shicker, danced the donkey trot strut.
On floors as slippery as butcher’s prick the dancers all would swoosh
And we were not toffs – just a mob from the bush.*

Chorus



*From the cemetery at Woosang one night Artie said he'd parked
And Wandell said "I bet he's got 'In Loving memory' imprinted on her arse!"
And once home again had to mask the smell all that alcohol she'd sipped
But she fell asleep with an eau de cologne stopper in her lips
And Mrs Flatman greased arse with rancid butter and down Barrakee Hill
she wooshed
Oh we were not toffs – just mugs from the bush.*



Chorus

*From Wycheproof to Wedderburn on pinkie we giggled
And with fancy dress sets we'd win awards as with trays of fruit we jiggled
Well we sashayed and we polka'd and we one stepped the trot
Home Sweet Home Waltz, Auld Lang Syne. last dance, the lot*



*Well me and May and Wandell back then were the Charlton push
Oh we were not toffs – just legends from the bush.*

Chorus



Thanks for the photos and videos to:

Peter Ellis ('I'm Not a Toff' images), John Williams (and stories, too!), Margot Hitchcock, Coral Eden, Steve Bullock, Trev Voake, Harry Gardner, Jill Watson, Bertosvids, Wayne Richmond, Bush Traditions videos, National Library of Australia.

