

**Mark Gregory****Union Songs in Australia: history in song and song in history**

This overview of union songs in Australia is confined to labour movement songs and poems created since World War 2. Many of these were first published in union journals or folk song magazines or on folk song recordings. They number in the hundreds so this overview will only examine a small selection.

In 1946 Dorothy Hewett, a young journalist in Western Australia, wrote a poem called Clancy and Dooley and Don McLeod. The poem resulted from her investigation of a strike that took the form of a coordinated walk off by some 600 Aboriginal workers from stations in the Pilbara in WA on May Day 1946. It was the first strike by Aboriginal people in the nation's history. The strike was well supported by unions, particularly the Seamen's Union of Australia. It surprised and shocked the pastoralists and it took ten years to be resolved. Today it has become known as "the Blackfellas Eureka" and is considered a precursor of the modern Land Rights movement. Dorothy Hewett's poem soon became well known around Australia and many workers learnt it by heart for recitation. After more than fifty years the poem finally found itself a tune courtesy of veteran folk singer Chris Kempster.<sup>1</sup>



Bob Fagan singing ... Sonia Bennett and Denis Kevans seated

Song: CLANCY AND DOOLEY AND DON MCLEOD (Dorothy Hewett, tune Chris Kempster, 2000)

Clancy and Dooley and Don McLeod  
Walked by the wurlies when the wind was loud,  
And their voice was new as the fresh sap running,  
And we keep on fighting and we keep on coming.

Don McLeod beat at a mulga bush

And a lot of queer things came out in a rush.  
Like mongrel dogs with their flattened tail  
They sneaked him off to the Hedland jail.

In the big black jail where the moonlight fell  
Clancy and Dooley sat in the cell.  
In the big white court crammed full with hate  
They said, "We wouldn't scab on a mate."

The poem recounts the story of a struggle as it happened: a poem created to be recited and memorised, as an oral description of events and key participants. However any labour movement songs and poems have history as their subject, providing a warning or an example to follow. Consider the two ballads written by Helen Palmer, *The Ballad of Eureka* and *The Ballad of 1891*, and set to music by her friend Doreen Jacobs. Both were written in 1951.

Song: BALLAD OF EUREKA (Helen Palmer, tune Doreen Jacobs)

"The law is out to get us  
And make us bow in fear.  
They call us foreign rebels  
Who'd plant the Charter here!"  
"They may be right," says Lalor,  
"But if they show their braid,  
We'll stand our ground and hold it  
Behind a bush stockade!"

There's not a flag in Europe  
More lovely to behold,  
Than floats above Eureka  
Where diggers work the gold.  
"There's not a flag in Europe  
More lovely to the eye,  
Than is the blue and silver  
Against a southern sky."<sup>2</sup>

Here in the name of freedom,  
Whatever be our loss,  
We swear to stand together  
Beneath the Southern Cross."  
It is a Sunday morning.  
The miner's camp is still;  
Two hundred flashing redcoats  
Come marching to the hill

Come marching up the gully  
With muskets firing low;  
And diggers wake from dreaming  
To hear the bugle blow.  
The wounded and the dying  
Lie silent in the sun,  
But change will not be halted  
By any redcoats gun.

Helen Palmer wrote these ballads for the Sydney choir Unity Singers whose leader and founder was Doreen Jacobs.<sup>3</sup> Unity Singers was a workers' choir or trade union choir and amongst its members were people destined to become notable singers, folklorists, collectors and songwriters. They included John Meredith, Chris Kempster, Alex Hood and Bill Berry

These two songs were written at time strangely similar to our own, A time when a backward looking federal government was engineering a taxpayer funded attack on the labour movement, an attack that centred around the attempt to outlaw the Communist Party and militant unionists and nobble any institutions that got in the way. Menzies' "Red Bill" was rejected first by the High Court and then by the voters at referendum.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of Helen Palmer's ballads was quite clear at the time: to alert the listener to some lessons from the history of Australian class struggle. If the final lines of *Ballad of 1891*, "where they jail a man for striking/it's a rich man's country yet", point backwards to the shearers' strike, they also point to the contemporaneous 1949 miners' strike (where the leaders were jailed) and to the new penal clauses of Menzies' anti-union legislation.

Song: BALLAD OF 1891 (Helen Palmer, tune Doreen Jacobs)

The price of wool was falling in 1891  
The men who owned the acres saw something must be done  
"We will break the Shearers' Union, and show we're masters still  
And they'll take the terms we give them, or we'll find the ones who will"

"Be damned to your six-shooters, your troopers and police  
The sheep are growing heavy, the burr is in the fleece"  
"Then if Nordenfeldt and Gatling won't bring you to your knees  
We'll find a law," the squatters said, "that's made for times like these"

To trial at Rockhampton the fourteen men were brought  
The judge had got his orders, the squatters owned the court  
But for every one that's sentenced, ten thousand won't forget  
Where they jail someone for striking, it's a rich man's country yet

Two years after they were written, *The Ballad of Eureka*, and *The Ballad of 1891* were selected along with a number of bush ballads and Lawson and Paterson poems to be woven into the musical play *Reedy River*. This play was launched by New Theatre<sup>5</sup> in Melbourne in mid 1953 and in Sydney before Christmas 1953. The title song was Lawson poem put to music by Chris Kempster (in 1949) and was popular in the Eureka Youth League<sup>6</sup> around Australia.

*Reedy River*, a play set in the 1891 shearers' strike, written and performed at the height of the cold war, seems to epitomise a relationship between unions, the left wing movement, the folk song movement, theatre, the arts, and the new interest in labour movement history. Many individuals were active in a number of those spheres and quite often in all of them.

The popularity and long runs of the play *Reedy River* gave the folk movement in Australia an enormous boost. The play's success seems to have led directly to the formation of the Bush Music Club in Sydney (1954) and the Victorian Folk Music Society in Melbourne. (Labour historians Ian Turner and Wendy Lowenstein were among the founders of the latter). These two organizations were established to collect bush songs, publish them and promote them, and over a period of some decades their work helped to reveal that the number of Australian folk songs in existence was not just a dozen or so, but something closer to 500. Folk song clubs and folk festivals<sup>7</sup> and folk recordings<sup>8</sup> and the academic study of folksong and folklore all followed from that work.

The relationship between the labour movement and the nascent folk song movement had a profound effect on the kinds of new songs that songwriters were composing and that folk singers were singing and recording, and scattered among them there was the ongoing creation of new union songs. Indeed, during the 1960s a number of unions<sup>9</sup> were encouraging the composition of songs and poems with campaign records (*Oh Pay Me* (1963), *Basic Wage Dream* (1964) and *Ballad of Women* (1964)). There were song and poetry competitions and even a touring "Four Capitals Folk Festival" (1964), devised to encourage this kind of creative activity, particularly in the younger generation.

Song: WEEVILS IN THE FLOUR (Dorothy Hewett, tune Mike Leyden, 1964)

And just across the river  
Stood the mighty B.H.P.,  
Poured pollution on the waters,  
Poured the lead of misery  
And its smoke was black as Hades  
Rolling hungry to the sea.

In those humpies by the river  
Where we lived on dole and stew,  
While just across the river  
Those greedy smokestacks grew,

And the hunger of the many  
Filled the bellies of the few.

Chorus

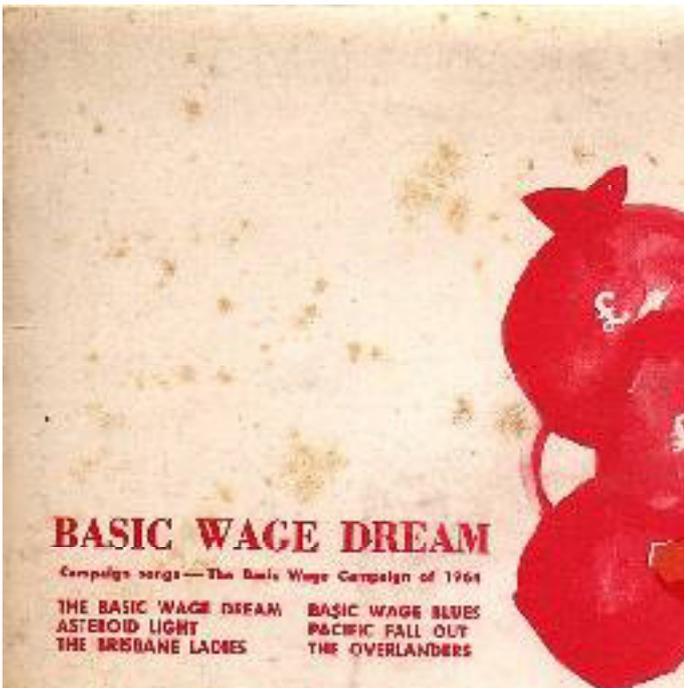
For dole bread is bitter bread  
Bitter bread and sour  
There's grief in the taste of it  
There's weevils in the flour  
There's weevils in the flour

Song: ROAR OF THE CROWD (Denis Kevans, 1962)

I Heard the roar of the wind, boys, in the mighty, green-shirt pines.  
As if the trees were blazing, like a gas-fire in the mines,  
The wind's voice kept on mounting against the midnight's face,  
I felt that roar well up in me, that roar has left its trace.

I heard the roar at the school-gates, when the holidays began,  
When the kids raced out like brumbies, grown men turned and ran,  
They raced down through the playground, and they roared out -  
"We are free!" Ah, the hungry roar of those school kids, still lives inside of me.

And I heard the roar at the Town Hall, when the delegate rose to speak,  
A roar to shake the merciless, a roar to raise the weak,  
To raise the weak and wandering, to give eyes to the blind,  
That was the roar off a tidal wave that was making up its mind.



Song: BASIC WAGE DREAM (Don Henderson 1963)

I dreamed a doctor told a judge from the Arbitration Court  
That he would only live to preside on one more case being fought.  
The judge whose conscience was ill at ease thought if this case will be my last,  
To hand down a fair decision might make up for his unjust past.

The next case that was to come before this very worried sage,  
Was a request to raise by fifty-two bob the weekly basic wage.  
The old chap granted the raise in full and to assure his place in heaven,  
Made the payments retrospective to nineteen hundred and seven.

During the 1964/65 Mount Isa struggle<sup>10</sup>, the Brisbane Trades Hall sent songwriter Don Henderson and militant seamen's union delegate Geoff Wills to the town to perform for the striking miners. Prior to

the dispute there had already been poems written about the conditions at Isa. For instance Merv Lilley published two of his in *What About The People* (1962)

Poem: UNTIL ANOTHER MAN'S KILLED (Merv Lilley 1950s)

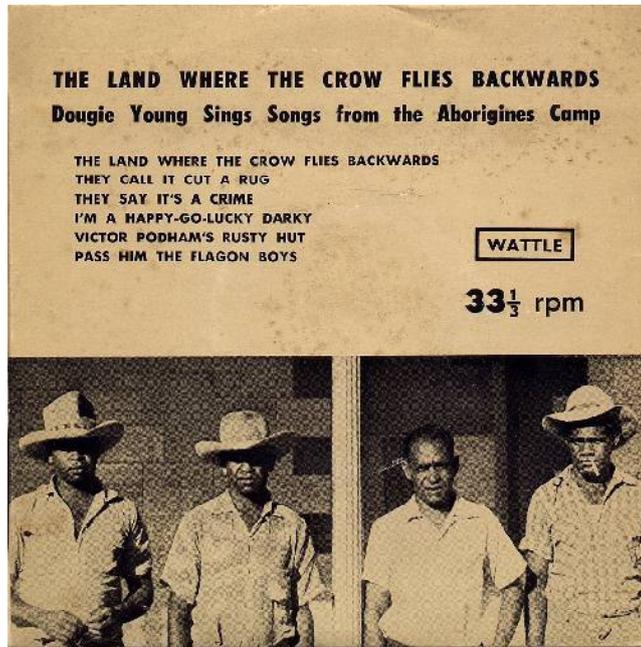
Poem: LEAD BONUS (Merv Lilley 1950s)

Henderson and Wills combines song making and performance when they arrived in Isa in March 1965 found themselves, and their up-to-the-minute songs written about the struggle, in great demand.

Song: ISA (Don Henderson 1965)

Song: TALKING MOUNT ISA (Don Henderson 1965)

Song: IT'S A FREE WORLD (Don Henderson 1965)



The 1960s saw many issues such as Aboriginal rights, feminism and the Vietnam War were being taken up by broad sections of the community.

Anthropologist Jeremy Beckett's field recordings of Aboriginal stockman/songwriter Dougie Young became very influential in the mid 1960s when released on pioneer folk label Wattle Records. Dougie Young songs like *The Land Where The Crow Flies Backwards* and *Cutting a Rug* became popular among folk singers, specifically because they were contemporary Aboriginal songs. As University Students, under the leadership of Charlie Perkins, organised their "Freedom Ride" buses, Gary Shearston's released his influential LP of Australian contemporary songs *Australian Broadside* (1965). The record included Aboriginal poet Kath Walker's (*Oodgeroo Noonuccal*) poem *Son of Mine* along with Dougie Young's *The Land Where The Crow Flies Backwards*. These were among the first recordings of contemporary Aboriginal songs in Australia.

Song: LAND WHERE THE CROW FLIES BACKWARDS (Dogie Young)

Song: NOW IS THE TIME TO BE SINGING (Mike Leyden 1965)

Well I walked into town  
And I looked all around  
What could I see in the land of the free?  
Man against man,  
Hate through the land  
And people all shouting and jeering at me

Chorus

We don't want nobody making a fuss  
And we don't want you if you can't be like us  
So just move along and don't you come back  
Yes it sure is a time to be singing

Well I walked down the street,  
Placard in my hand,  
Policeman came up and he pushed me around,  
Said, "Come on with me,  
I'm moving you on,  
I'm taking you down to the outskirts of town

In 1967, on the 20th anniversary of The WA walk off strike the Northern Territory Wattie Creek sit down strike had begun with support from the Waterside Workers' Federation in Darwin and unions across Australia.

Song: GURINJI BLUES (Ted Egan )

Song: FROM LITTLE THINGS BIG THING GROW (Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody 1992)<sup>11</sup>

Vestey man said "I'll double your wages  
Eighteen quid a week you'll have in your hand"  
Vincent said "uhuh we're not talking about wages  
We're sitting right here till we get our land"

Vestey man roared and Vestey man thundered  
"You don't stand the chance of a cinder in snow"  
Vince said "If we fall others are rising"

From little things big things grow  
From little things big things grow

Then Vincent Lingiari boarded an aeroplane  
Landed in Sydney, big city of lights  
And daily he went round softly speaking his story  
To all kinds of men from all walks of life

And Vincent sat down with big politicians  
"This affair" they told him "Is a matter of state  
Let us sort it out, your people are hungry"  
Vincent said "No thanks, we know how to wait"



The 1960s was also a time for the peace movement was very active. The movement was rallying in opposition to Australia's involvement with what the Vietnamese call "The American War". Many unions were involved in the large demonstrations and opposed the war with industrial action too as in the case of the Jeparit and Boonaroo, freight ships that members of the Seamen's Union of Australia refused to sail because they were carrying munitions for use in Vietnam.

Song: BOONAROO (Don Henderson 1968)

Chorus

Oh, who will man the Boonaroo?  
Who will sail her, be the crew,  
sailing on the Boonaroo?

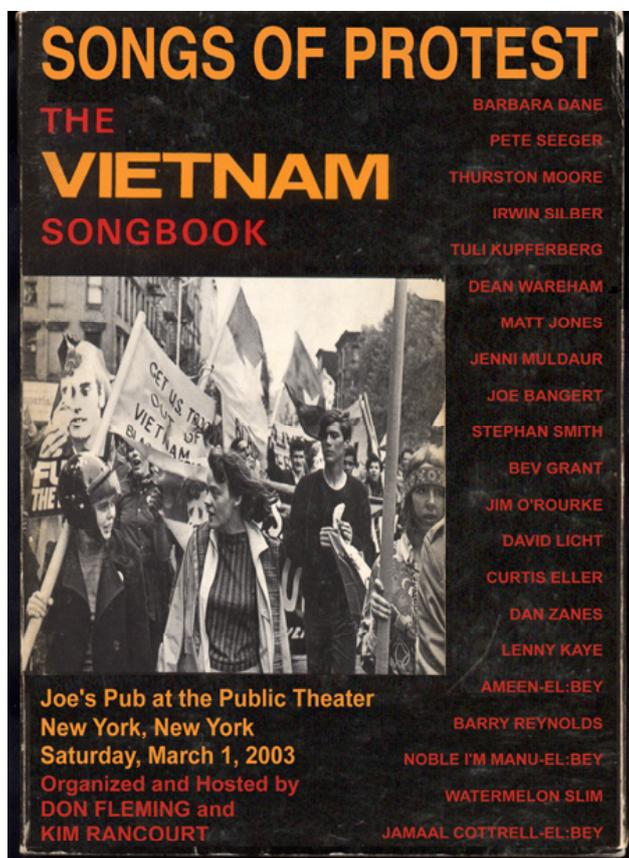
Is there food and is there store  
to feed the hungry, clothe the poor?  
In this world their number isn't few.  
In her cargo would you find  
any way for one mankind,

sailing on the Boonaroo.

Is there bandage by the reel?  
Is there medicine to heal?  
Christ knows, there's healing work to do.  
In her cargo would you find  
any way for one mankind,  
sailing on the Boonaroo?

Would the hull be filled with material to build,  
perhaps a bridge for a world that's split in two?  
In her cargo would you find  
any way for one mankind,  
sailing on the Boonaroo?

Or jam packed in the hold,  
is there grief and death untold  
and asked "Why?" have to answer true.  
In her cargo would you find  
any way for one mankind,  
sailing on the Boonaroo?



Songs were also written about the issue of conscription the most popular being Glen Tomassetti's Ballad of Bill White about a young NSW school teacher who was jailed for refusing to be drafted to fight in Vietnam.

Song: BALLAD OF BILL WHITE (Glen Tomassetti 1968)

The Ballad of Bill White and Boonaroo gained an international as well as national audience by being among eight Australian songs published in the US in the 1969 collection of songs from around the world under the title Vietnam Songbook. Today this songbook now has it's own website!<sup>12</sup>

The issue of equal pay for women had been promoted in song on the 1963 union campaign recording Oh Pay Me with of Denis Kevans' song Equal Pay. However the most successful equal pay song was undoubtedly Don't Be Too Polite Girls written by Glen Tomassetti in 1969 and sung by her on Channel 7 TV News. Glen's song is sung to this day each year on International Women's Day and is regularly

heard on demonstrations.

Poem: ME AND LIL (VBU leaflet 1963)

Song: EQUAL PAY (Denis Kevans tune Chris Kempster (1963)

Song: DON'T BE TOO POLITE GIRLS (Glen Tomasseti 1969)

Chorus

Don't be too polite girls, don't be too polite,  
Show a little fight girls, show a little fight,  
Don't be fearful of offending, in case you get the sack  
Just recognise your value and we won't look back.

Don't be too afraid girls, don't be too afraid,  
We're clearly underpaid girls, clearly underpaid,  
Tho' equal pay in principle is every woman's right  
To turn that into practice, we must show a little fight.

We can't afford to pay you, say the masters in their wrath  
But woman says "Just cut your coat according to the cloth"  
If the economy won't stand then here's the answer boys,  
"Cut out the wild extravagance on the new war toys".

If Aboriginal rights, equal pay and peace were union issues that found their way into song so too was the environment. In the 1970s the members of the Builders Labourers' Federation of NSW (BLF) became famously involved in struggles to protect the environment with their innovative Green Bans. Green Bans prevented the development and destruction of areas and buildings considered of conservation value. The first Green Ban took place in Sydney at the request of and with the support of a group of Hunters Hill residents who wanted to save Kelly's Bush from the developers.

Song: ACROSS THE WESTERN SUBURBS (Seamus Gill and Denis Kevans 1974)

Chorus

Under concrete and glass, Sydney's disappearing fast  
It's all gone for profit and for plunder  
Though we really want to stay they keep driving us away  
Now across the Western Suburbs we must wander

What's happened to the pub, our little local pub  
Where we used to have a drink when we were dry, boys  
Now we can't get in the door for there's carpet on the floor  
And you won't be served a beer without a tie, boys

Now I'm living in a box in the west suburban blocks  
And the place is nearly driving me to tears, boys  
Poorly planned and badly built and it's mortgaged to the hilt  
But they say it will be mine in forty years, boys

Now before the city's wrecked these developers must be checked  
For it's plain to see they do not give a buggler  
And we soon will see the day if these bandits have their way  
We will all be driven out past Wagga Wagga<sup>13</sup>

Song: ROLL ON FRANKLIN (Dave De Hugard)

denis kevens

Song: GREEN BAN FUSILIERS (Denis Kevans)

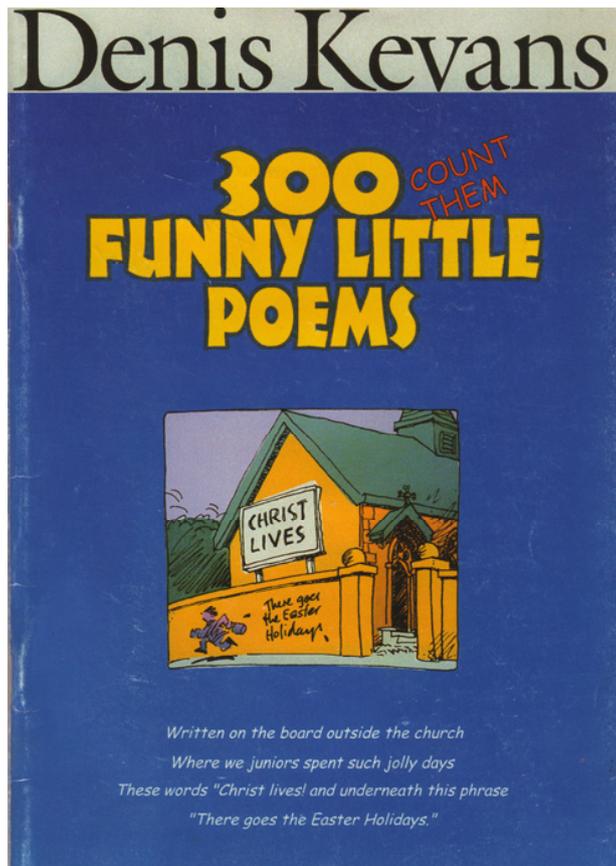
Chorus

Up Broadway to the MBA<sup>14</sup> come the Green Ban Fusiliers.  
They stole the street with their marching feet, placards high above their ears.  
In Sydney town they would not lie down, they gave Martin 's scabs some cheer,  
And it's up Broadway to the MBA come the Green Ban Fusiliers.

Bulldozer blades made a lightning raid, coming in with a great big rush,  
Moving in for the kill up at Hunter's hill, at beautiful Kelly's Bush<sup>15</sup>,  
But the local women lay in the bulldozer's way, to the bucking and the shuddering of the gears,  
When their hands were raised the ones they praised were the Green Ban Fusiliers.

They made a stand for our sunny land at the Rocks and Woolloomooloo.  
On the chimney tops they waltzed with the cops to save a bit of Sydney for you,  
And the finance fleas who made refugees of families who had been pioneers  
Finished on their arse, and they did their brass with the Green Ban Fusiliers.

Through the years and through my tears I can see 'em marching again,  
From the dizzy heights and the concrete sites in sunshine and in rain,  
That patch of green's gettin' a lovely old sheen, no matter how many flow the years,  
And it's up Broadway to the MBA come the Green Ban Fusiliers.



In response to a protracted struggle with the giant mining company Utah in Queensland the Seamen's Union of Australia (urged on by Geoff Wills) issued an LP of new songs in 1979 under the title *Flames of Discontent*. The twelve songs include four written by Don Henderson and the rest by "young boilermakers, shipwrights, carpenters and electricians".

Song: TOO LITTLE TOO LATE (Griff Bignell 1979)

Song: GO TO THE WALL (Peter Cross 1979)

Railway unions have a long history of promoting song and poetry in union journals. In the 1980s Denis Kevans and railway worker Brian Dunnett had brought to light a large number of poems from old railway union journals and campaign pamphlets. A result of this collection was a joint shop stewards committee project called *Trains of Treasure*.<sup>16</sup> This 1985 exhibition of 26 large panels depicting railway history and railway culture from the workers viewpoint travelled in its own carriage around Australia along with recordings of railway songs, poems and stories.

The *Trains of Treasure* and *Railway Voices* cassettes, have been updated and re-issued on CD and are available from the Rail Bus and Tram Union (RBTU). They and an updated exhibition are being used during 2005's 150th anniversary of NSW Railways. The original project has evolved into The Australian Railway Project with its own website<sup>17</sup> to encourage the online collection of new songs and poems.<sup>18</sup> The project also plans to publish a book of railway songs and poems by September 2005 with the assistance of The University of New England Heritage Group

Song: TRAINS OF TREASURE (Denis Kevans 1981)

Tracks of steel I thought weren't used now, tunnels...mushrooms there I thought,  
From the lights of Darling harbour, and Glebe Island, to the port,  
Just a smiling driver, standing with his cap at jockey tilt,  
I knew they carried treasure by the little bit they spilt.

And the shunter's yard exploding in the deepest, darkest night,  
And the trucks, they are unloading, in a light that's brightest white,  
And the coupled trains uncouple, and the shunter's glove is shown,  
And another train of treasure trundles down the iron road.

They are leaving, trains of treasure, without measure, everyday,  
Trains of corn and coal and ore for the countries far away,  
Treasure trains and treasure troves, leaving for the ports and coves,  
Taking loads of gleaming treasure to the countries far away.

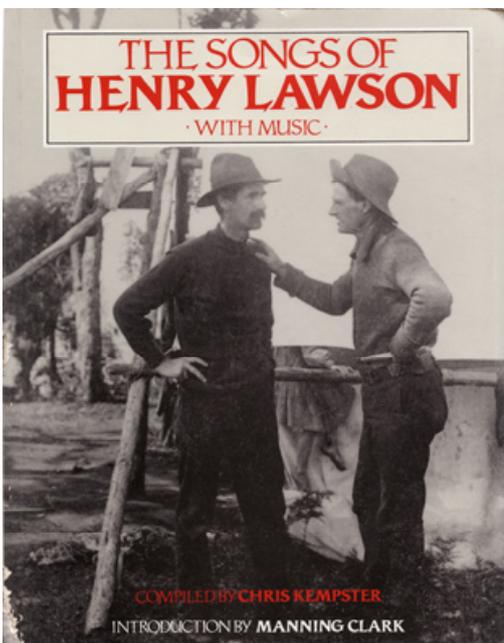
Song: JANET OAKDEN (Pip James 1984)

Song: 3801 (Ray King and Ron Russell 1984)

In the golden age of steam  
There lived a beauty queen  
Roamin' around the countryside  
She was a driver's dream.  
Workin' days and workin' nights  
Up before the sun  
They all tried hard to get aboard  
Thirty-eight o one.

The queen of all the fleet  
The railway's pride and joy  
To ride upon the footplate  
Was the dream of every boy.  
As she went roarin' by  
on another express run  
Everyone would turn their heads for  
Thirty-eight o one.

Ah thirty-eight o one  
You stood the test you're still the best  
You just keep rollin' on.



Historically, Henry Lawson has been accorded a special place in the culture of unions in Australia . He wrote a number of poems specifically for the early labour movement. In 1989, after years of research, Chris Kempster published The Songs of Henry Lawson, a collection of Lawson poems that had been set to music by dozens of composers including himself.<sup>19</sup>

Song: OLD REBEL FLAG IN THE REAR (tune Chris Kempster, 1984)

Song: WAIT HERE SECOND CLASS (tune Tony Miles, 1981)

Union involvement in the funding of The Songs of Henry Lawson was crucial and Chris makes special mention of "Harry Anderson, Judy Driscoll, Yve Bennett, Chris Raper and the Federated Miscellaneous Workers Union" in his acknowledgements. The launch of the book took place at the NSW Teachers Federation, Chris' union headquarters in Sydney.

The long connection between the folk song movement and unions continues today. Each year at the National Folk Festival

in Canberra there is a Union Concert sponsored by the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU). In 1996 the Mining Section of the CFMEU commissioned a CD Union is Strength as part of its Weipa campaign.<sup>20</sup>

The support of unions has encouraged poets and songwriters to continue to write. Many of them have been doing so for decades. Denis Kevans<sup>21</sup> is a good example, and a number of his songs have been cited here. He has written peace songs, equal pay songs, songs about Aboriginal rights, songs about the "Green Bans" and the environment over a period of more than 40 years.

Song: THE WOLLEMI PINE (Denis Kevans/Sonia Bennett 1998, tune Sonia Bennett)

The only clue to your tale,  
Were some leaf prints in the shale,  
And we thought you'd come and gone  
Long years ago, but suddenly what do I see,  
A living Wollemi tree,  
Where the mountain waters pure and sweet do flow

There's a tree that's so rare,  
Grows deep in the gorges out there,  
Deep in my heart I will sing of the Wollemi Pine,  
No preaching words, no angry tones,  
The Wollemi stands all alone,  
One hundred million years of passing time.

Chorus:

Wollemi, Wollemi, Wollemi, look around you.  
There's a tree that's so rare,  
Grows deep in the gorges out there,  
Deep in my heart I will sing of the Wollemi Pine

The widespread take up of new technologies such as email and web sites impacted on the collection and distribution of union songs. In 1998 during the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) "Patrick's Dispute" over 30 songs and poems were collected from songwriters around Australia and added to the Union Songs<sup>22</sup> collection on the web.

In 2000 for May Day the NSW Labour Council organised a competition for a new May Day song through its Wobbly Radio website, a campaign deliberately targeted at young bands and songwriters. Over 100 entries were received and some 20 of which were published as a CD MayDay MayDay,

In 2002, as part of its centenary celebrations, the MUA commissioned a CD With These Arms; songs and poems of the MUA.

Song: WITH THESE ARMS (Tim O'Brien 1998)

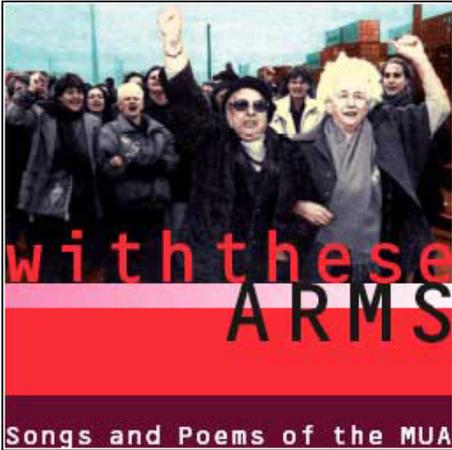
The deal was done behind a coward's door  
they came in darkness, shadows on the shore  
the snarl of dogs sent shivers through the night  
as union men were thrown outside the wire

They locked the gates hanging them in chains  
they gloated seeing working men in pain  
We watched and saw a veil of darkness fall  
with working men and women we heard the call

And with these arms we held the line  
with these arms our strength combined  
and with these arms made our demand  
and with these arms we made a stand  
And with these arms  
- arms that held a baby held the line

Hundreds grew to thousands through those nights  
faces glowed defiant for workers' rights  
Police moved in, building workers moved behind

and mothers, sisters, brothers held the line



Song: BLACK ARMBAND (John Hospodaryk 2002)

Balaclava guards Rottweilers and Alsatians  
Such is the face of your industrial relations  
Anti-union tyranny right across the nation  
On the waterfront and down the mines you're proud of your creation  
You've got the gaul to call it reforms in the workplace  
When waging war on workers is a retrograde disgrace  
You want us cap in hand to crawl you're smug and mean and base  
You want our rights and hard earned gains to sink without a trace

And hey there Johnny this song it is for you  
I see rack and ruin in all the things you do  
You can tell 'cause I'm wearing a black arm band  
For all those stolen generations you can't understand  
Well here's your report card you don't get many marks  
On greenhouse emissions and logging national parks  
At reconciliation you've chained up all our hearts  
You score a zero just a naught you get a buggery of arts  
Of liberty equality fraternity I didn't know  
Ownership of shares is democracy the way to go  
But on a privatised planet I guess it must be so  
Where any soul is bought and sold your marks are very low

Well I know what you stand for will shrivel up and die  
We'll throw it overboard and that wont be a lie  
But until that day I wear a black armband  
In mourning for what you are doing right across the land  
But until that day I wear a black armband  
In mourning for what you are doing right across this  
right across this right across this right across this land

Song: MAYDAY MAYDAY (Swarmy G 2002)

Chorus

MAYDAY MAYDAY - solidarity's the only way  
MAYDAY MAYDAY - It's about time we had our say  
MAYDAY MAYDAY - we won't be held back no way  
MAYDAY MAYDAY - our voices won't fade away  
MAYDAY MAYDAY - solidarity's the only way  
MAYDAY MAYDAY - It's about time we had our say  
MAYDAY MAYDAY - we won't be held back no way  
MAYDAY MAYDAY - our voices won't fade away.

Mayday Mayday - make a stand without malaise  
we come in peace - why can't police come the same way?  
a sad state of affairs our cries met with blank stares

caught by the curly hairs to obey what the bank says  
the fact is if you think it's fine? - you gotta be blind  
Austudy is well below the poverty line  
now the cost of education is a life of debt  
and you wonder why some have turned to crime instead  
just to pay for books let alone pay the rent  
while most these hypocrites have never paid a red cent  
not investing in our future rather spend on defence  
hospitals shut for velodromes just don't make sense  
employees are expensed - intense pressure on those left  
to reach the benchmark set - stressed to an early death  
downsizing a rising trend - redundancies abundant  
casuals see no currency - after all you're just a number  
directors plunder funds until the company goes under  
they're paid more than 10 workers - so really it's no wonder  
let's turn the power of one into one unified power  
to fight in unison and shout in spite of John Howard

The largely informal relationship between unions and songs in Australia begins, with hindsight, to look more like a tradition, a tradition that is alive and well in the 21st century. It may not be the material sought out by broadcasting and recording industry conglomerates but it has its own production and distribution network operating largely through the folk song movement, individual CD production and the unions themselves.

Like other minority music it has taken to the web. The web is used for publicity, for publishing lyrics, selling recordings and for collecting new material. The much faster download times possible with the widespread adoption of broadband and wireless technology has meant web is also used for Internet Radio<sup>23</sup>. Union songs and union news are now streamed around the globe every day to those with access to computers, or for rebroadcast by radio stations. This form of distribution provides songwriters and singers with a unique and inexpensive way to be heard around the world.

## References

- 1 Chris Kempster (1933-2004) was a pioneer of the Australian folk revival and wrote tunes to some 24 poems. Chris was an active unionist and enthusiastic promoter of new songs of the labour movement.
- 2 Raffello Carboni, who published his eyewitness account "The Eureka Stockade" in 1855, wrote: "There is no flag in old Europe half so beautiful as the 'Southern Cross' of the Ballarat miners, first hoisted on the old spot, Bakery-hill."
- 3 Doreen Jacobs had worked with similar choirs in Britain as a member of the Workers Music Association, and had brought her choral enthusiasm back with her.
- 4 Justice Michael Kirby has recently asked the question as to whether today's High Court would support Mabo in the way it did before it got stacked with Howard appointees. We might similarly ask would the present High Court throw out legislation designed to ban or bankrupt a working class political party or a militant trade union?
- 5 New Theatre was founded in 1932 and pioneered the staging of modern Australian plays. It has a long association with the labour movement and the Communist Party and is the oldest continuously running theatre in Australia.
- 6 The Eureka Youth League (EYL) was a very influential and active youth organization essentially the youth arm of the Communist Party of Australia.
- 7 Today there are enough folk festivals to attend a different one each week, some like the Woodford festival are huge (130,000 attended in 2005) and others like the one in Gulgong are quite modest. With hardly any fanfare many hundreds of thousands of all ages go to them each year.
- 8 An online database of such recordings shows the number to be in excess of 1000: (<http://folkstream.com/>)
- 9 The Waterside Workers' Federation (now MUA) had an annual poetry and song competition that ran for many years and is cited in John Manifold's book *Who Wrote The Ballads* (1964)

- 10 Mount Isa is an important mining town in central Queensland. The dispute ran over several months with the miners gaining support from unions across Australia in the face of massive attacks from employers in collusion with the Queensland and Federal Governments.
- 11 From Little Things Big Things Grow was written to commemorate the struggle some 35 years after it began, another example of song writing to reflect on and learn from history.
- 12 On the eve of the Iraq War on Saturday, March 1st, 2003 Joe's Pub at the Public Theatre in New York celebrated the protest-song tradition. Much of the repertoire was drawn from The Vietnam Songbook including Boonaroo.
- 13 When they composed this song Denis Kevans and Seamus Gill were members of the BLF in Sydney.
- 14 MBA: Master Builders Association
- 15 Kelly's Bush in Sydney was the site of the first Green Ban.
- 16 Taking its title from Denis Kevans' song "Trains of Treasure"
- 17 <http://railwaystory.com/>
- 18 This collection now number over 500 items
- 19 In his introduction to the collection Manning Clark wrote, "This book of songs to the words of Henry Lawson is evidence that he is still with us. He wrought a great marvel. The boy from Grenfell became part of the conscience of Australia".
- 20 An ACTU report in 1995 stated "We note that for almost two years the award workers at Weipa have sacrificed considerable income and suffered threats of personal legal action in defence of key union principles: the right to collectively bargain; the right to belong to a union without discrimination; equal pay for work of equal value."
- 21 Denis Kevans: poet, songwriter, historian, journalist, translator. His latest book is "Ted Roach, From Pig Iron Hero to Long Bay Gaol, A Wharfie's Life". Between 1958 and 1962 Denis was Secretary of the Sydney Realist Writers.
- 22 <http://unionsong.com/>
- 23 <http://radio.labourstart.org/>  
Radio LabourStart, which began in February 2004, now has 1000 songs from many nations and in many languages available to a growing audience and with the beginnings of international union support. Half the songs on Radio LabourStart are Australian (including most of those referred to in this paper).